

The Fascist Century

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Writing about fascism can get one in trouble. "Fascist" is used to describe every nasty person—from Mussolini and his henchmen to ill-tempered policemen and professors who expect their students to complete assignments. No wonder that anyone using the term to analyze politics in the Third World is immediately suspected of being in the pay of the Israelis—or worse. (The present author can state categorically that he is in the pay of no government, Alas!) Nevertheless, many political scientists have concluded that fascism models are useful for coming to grips with the tumultuous politics of the underdeveloped world. This article explores some of the reasons for and implications of that conclusion.

It is necessary to explain what is meant by fascism, but also avoid asphyxiating the reader by one of those Saharan disquisitions on ideological nuance so dear to the academic heart. Fascists I define as those who, like the rulers of Italy after 1922, approach political life with certain, fundamental ideas. *First*, politics is preeminently a dangerous competition among nations; the strong may survive, the weak will be subjugated. *Second*, and consequently, the productive power of one's country must be raised to the utmost; in this struggle for production (and survival) there is room for neither capitalist egoism nor Marxist class struggle, but only for class collaboration under state supervision. (Loosely, this is fascist "corporatism," seen as a middle way between the individualist Scylla and the collectivist Charybdis.) *Third*, ensuring these goals in a perilous world requires not constitutional restraints, parliamentary palaver, or partisan divisions, but unlimited authority wielded by a sagacious and acknowledged élite: "Nothing above the State, nothing against the State."

Fascist *policies* will vary from state to state and from time to time. Above all fascism does not require the

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"racial" campaigns of the Nazis. It is basic *beliefs* that make fascism what it is. Similarly, such diverse societies as Costa Rica, Finland, and the United States are "democratic," while Mao's China, Tito's Yugoslavia, Castro's Cuba, and Stalin's Russia, however contrasting their policies and styles, are generally described as "Communist."

Fascism in a non-European context is not new: One recalls Peronist Argentina and prewar Japan. What is new is that Third World fascism is no longer an isolated oddity, but nearly a commonplace.

There are many more independent countries, most of them in bad shape, than even a scant twenty years ago. Everywhere the bright expectations of preindependence days have been profoundly disappointed. Independence was going to usher in the millennium; severe problems in education, transportation, agriculture, and ethnic relations were going to be attacked simultaneously and solved speedily. A running start would be made on catching up with the industrialized world.

Instead political institutions (modeled on those of the imperial power) did not work; economic development did not take place. Patriotism, progress, and justice dissolved into tribalism, civil war, and repression. Out of a maelstrom of frustration, corruption, and violence has emerged the archetypal institution of the Third World, from Indonesia to Ghana to Peru: the dictatorship. Whether of the single party or the military variety, whether from conviction or necessity, they enunciate ideas characteristic of this century: The nation, united under enlightened leaders, must build its strength to vindicate its claims in an unjust world. These regimes have been called national populist, Kemalist, Nasserist, Nkrumahist, etc., etc.—all circumlocutions for fascist.

Why are circumlocutions necessary? Because fascism is a term of opprobrium? But any political, religious, or racial term can be—and is—used in that way. The basic reasons why even specialists in the areas concerned avoid the term fascism are more interesting. *First*, regimes like those of Nasser or Nkrumah or Velasquez are felt to be somehow

“modernizing” and “progressive.” However ill-conceived or ill-executed, their programs aim in the approved direction. In contrast, fascism is “rightist.” How can progressive regimes be rightist?

Why is fascism rightist? Because Mussolini, along his march to Rome, picked up conservative allies: crown, church, army, business. What does this prove but that he needed to placate key groups to get to power? (Lenin and Mao made their revolutions in countries in which the state had been wrecked by years of war; this was not the situation facing Mussolini.) More important, fascism is rightist because two generations of Marxist propaganda have drummed this into our heads. Any regime not run by the spokesmen of the proletariat is by definition exploitive (“rightist”). Worse, the renegade socialist Mussolini preached class collaboration; in the Marxist rhetoric this means collaboration between capitalist wolf and proletarian flock, a thoroughly unprogressive state of affairs.

Further, in Communist dogma Italian fascism resulted from a vast capitalist conspiracy. This explanation was rarely troubled by inconvenient and unprogressive questions such as “who, specifically, conspired with whom to do what when, and how do you know?” But if fascism was “the highest and last state of capitalism,” why did it appear in backward Italy and not in the United States or Britain? If fascism was merely the highest stage of a “weak and retarded” capitalism, how could such a capitalism pull off such a stroke and get away with it for so long?

These little problems arise quite apart from the support given Mussolini before and after the March on Rome by numerous veterans, landowners, working men, and so on, which perhaps renders any conspiracy theory superfluous. The Marxist explanation was, of course, a single-factor account of a complex phenomenon. All politics is class struggle, all is explicable in terms of that struggle. But the inadequacy of such ideas had become apparent to the whole world in 1914. Vaunted international socialist solidarity crumbled like a rusted hammer and sickle as French and Belgian socialists and proletarians rushed to arms against German socialists and proletarians. This triumph of nation over class, this impossible occurrence, scandalized Lenin, shocked Mussolini, split world socialism, and produced the Bolshevik and Fascist revolutions. (Lenin, of course, had abandoned ideas of class determinism years before, when he founded his party of professional revolutionaries; but he was still appalled at the zest with which fraternal Marxists flew at one another.)

In its own self-image Italian fascism was a moderating movement, not a “rightist” one. Mussolini promised that “in ten years, you will not recognize this Italy.” Such aspirations were largely realized; the foundations of the “economic miracle” of the 1950’s were laid down between 1922 and 1938. Even Communist scholars, drawing away from the Stalinist standard version (where permitted), have declared that fascism’s “historic mission” in Italy was to break age-old bottlenecks to industrialization.

Finally, if fascism is the extreme Right and communism the extreme Left, whatever is typically found in

the one should be completely absent in the other. The denial of elementary civil rights under fascism must mean that any Communist state is a libertarian’s paradise, yes? The terms Left and Right have become a substitute for thought, obscuring the meaning of fascism, especially in developing countries.

The *second*, more elemental, reason why we cannot bear to describe the powerful current sweeping across the Third World as fascism is this: We don’t like Mussolini. Not because he was a tyrant; tyrants fascinate us, the bloodier the better, as the endless stream of scholarly and popular works about Hitler and Stalin attest. What we don’t like is the image of the defeated *Duce’s* corpse hanging upside down, dripping blood and spittle, mutilated by a howling rabble. Such total failure is in dreadful taste. Fascism was thoroughly defeated, hence thoroughly discredited. Popular biographies, therefore, treat extensively of Mussolini’s amours, while scholars often display such a cavalier attitude toward the historical record that they would be branded incompetents in any other context. Fascism was silly, Mussolini was a clown. Mussolini is dead, fascism is dead, and that’s that.

The dangerous, not to say grotesque, failure of understanding involved here is shown by the thundering contrast between our present attitudes toward the founder of fascism and that of his contemporaries. By his own admission Churchill would have taken Mussolini as an ally as late as 1942. Pius XI called Mussolini “a man sent to us by God.” Sigmund Freud addressed him as “the hero of culture.” For Gandhi he was “the saviour of Italy and, I hope, of the world.” And so it went. What seduced all manner of men once can do so again—and does.

All of this aside, the point of this article is that fascism is reappearing in the developing world. The following brief sketches—of Egypt, Ghana, and Brazil—will perhaps suggest the empirical base for such a position.

In 1952 the Egyptian army seized power and dethroned the egregious King Farouk. Out of these events Colonel Nasser eventually emerged as head of a reawakened Egypt and claimant to the leadership of the whole Arab world. In the Egypt of those days a desperately poor and ignorant peasantry was ruled by a cosmopolitan élite headed by a corrupt monarch. Army officers seethed with resentment against the British, who had long dominated in the Middle East and especially Suez. The Egyptian humiliation in the 1948 Palestine war eventually produced the coup against Farouk.

The army rulers wanted a revived Egypt, nucleus of a rejuvenated Arab world that would revenge itself against the oppressive Westerners and their Israeli tools. Domestic reforms would be the prelude. Many great estates were broken up and divided among landless peasants, labor unions were organized by the government. Symmetrically, the Communist party was badly mauled and driven underground. Islam and Egyptian nationalism were the fonts of the regime. Officers declared their adherence to the ageless principles of the Koran; patriots were urged to join the single party run by

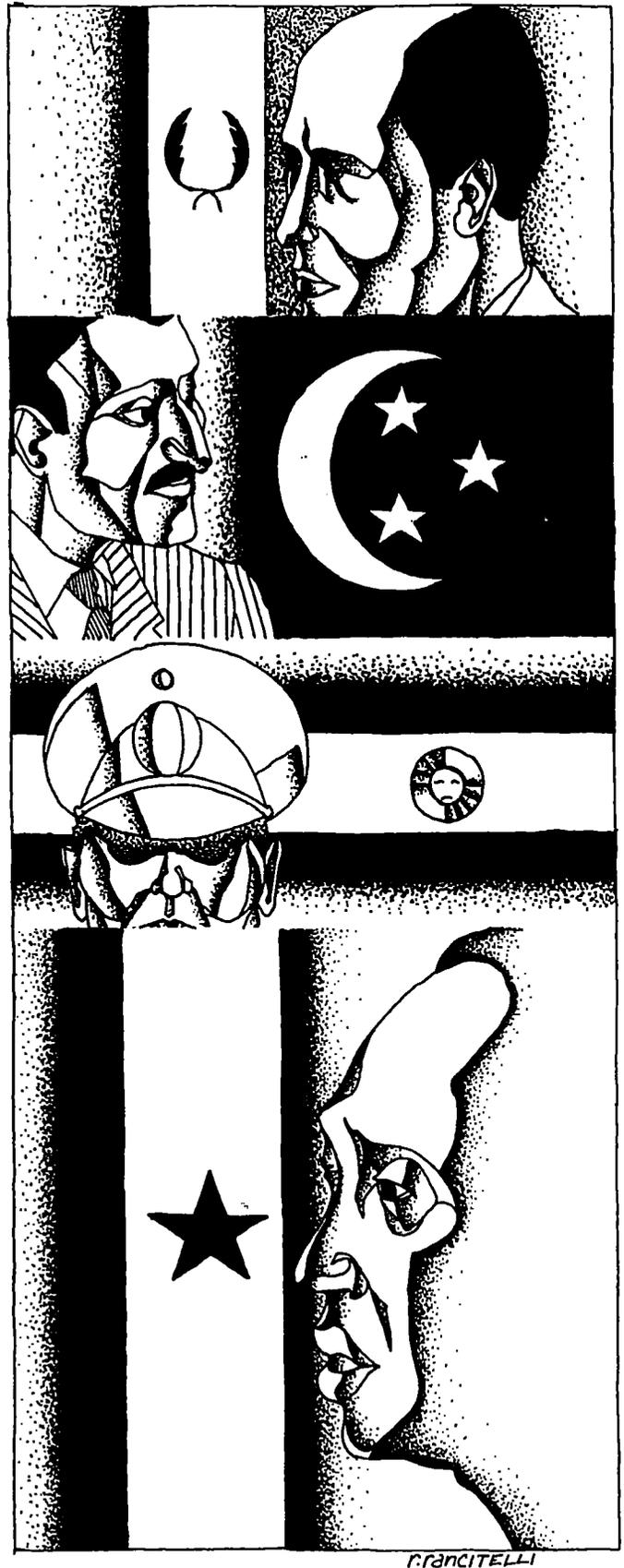
the army, which was by nature “removed from the conflict between classes,” as Nasser’s *Philosophy of the Revolution* stated.

In later years Egypt’s main world role would be as opponent of Israel. This ought not to obscure the internal character of the system, run on frankly authoritarian lines by a militarized élite seeking territorial expansion and the creation of an industrial economy “free from the exploiting aspects of capitalism and the stifling effects of socialism”—the classic Fascist formula.

Kwame Nkrumah, founder of Ghana, ruled his country from before its 1956 independence to his ouster in 1966. Mussolini proclaimed Italy the center of a new Roman Empire; Nkrumah, with crashingly unsubtle symbolism, named his new country after a large and powerful kingdom of West African antiquity. For him Ghana was to be the fundament of a much grander edifice.

Nkrumah’s grandiose plans faced grave internal opposition. Intellectuals of the coastal cities preferred continued rule by Britain to rule by Nkrumah and begged London not to hand over power to him. The intellectuals themselves were not much of a threat, but they could provide ideology and strategy to a much more important opposition group. These were the tribalists, strongest in the central (Ashanti) areas of Ghana, bitterly opposed to Nkrumah and his modernization schemes, and determined to break apart the new country into its ethnic elements. Many acts of violence against members of Nkrumah’s Convention People’s party (CPP) occurred in Ashanti, and after these had been put down with vigor, Nkrumah himself became the object of assassination attempts. Nkrumah’s weapons against what he saw as the destructive disloyalty of the professors and the chiefs were the party and the parliament. The CPP sought to enroll in its ranks all men and women “of good will,” despite ethnic or class diversity. In 1958 parliament passed the Preventive Detention Act, enabling Nkrumah to imprison anyone suspected of planning a treasonable act. The latter brought much foreign criticism but effectively curbed domestic violence.

In a celebrated passage in his autobiography Nkrumah lists among those whose writings influenced him the name of Mussolini. Aside from an ideology common in essentials, both had a taste for vast public works projects and for outward legality. Between 1922 and 1940 only a relative handful of Italians lost their lives for political crimes; under Nkrumah there were no political executions whatever. Both men, personally indifferent to wealth, permitted and even encouraged corruption among subordinates. This pervasive graft eventually produced profound cynicism in both countries, reducing the later CPP, like the Italian Fascist party before it, to a shadow of the original. Thus, when each dictator was faced at last with military revolt, few citizens raised a voice, let alone a sword, in defense of the regime. Like Mussolini’s, the fall of Nkrumah was swift, unexpected, and uncontested. Like Mussolini, Nkrumah sought succor from an admiring dictator in another country. Like Mussolini, Nkrumah became after his fall the scapegoat for all the ills and shortcomings of his people.



*Mussolini, Nasser, Peron, Nkrumah:
“Fascism in a non-European context
is not new.”*

Brazil, in many ways unique among nations, has had the unique experience of two distinct fascist regimes. Getulio Vargas, gaúcho politician from Rio Grande do Sul, presided over the first of these from 1930 to 1945. Architect of a corporatist "New State," Vargas used authoritarian style and administrative centralization to bind his sprawling country closer together. He achieved a notable measure of industrial development and laid down the basis for urban social welfare. Despite widespread support, he was politely ousted by the generals in 1945. With the victory of the Allies, fascism had clearly gone out of fashion.

After 1945, from the army viewpoint, things did not go well. The Vargas coalition won the presidential elections in 1950 behind Vargas himself, and in 1955 behind his protégé Kubitschek. Along with dynamic economic growth (symbolized by the construction of Brasilia) went an Amazonian flow of graft and the rise to high office of woeful incompetents. The climax came with the administration of Getulio's most flamboyant lieutenant, "Jango" Goulart (1961-64). Nothing revealed the inadequacies of the inexperienced Goulart more than his connection with efforts to spread disaffection in the lower ranks of the armed forces. Out he went. The army had learned a lesson from the events after 1945; this time there would be no return of "civilian demagogues." The tradition belief in the army was that it had the right to intervene in politics. By 1964 civilian incompetence had convinced the army that it also had the ability to rule the country directly. Brazil must be cleaned up, the army could and would do the job. Thus Vargas-style fascism was replaced by military fascism.

As Alfred Stepan notes in *The Military in Politics* (1971), the new rulers interpreted national security in terms with which we are all now familiar: "rationally maximizing the output of the economy and minimizing all sources of cleavage and disunity within the country. Consequently great stress was put on the need for strong government and planning."

Authoritarian, élitist, and nationalist by definition, the Brazilian military dictatorship has sought legitimacy by providing economic growth through political stability. Undeniable strides have been taken: Since 1964 Brazil's annual growth rate has been among the world's highest. The military is gambling that economic abundance will alleviate the need for and memory of repression. Whether or not this gamble succeeds, commentators of the next century may well observe that the period from the late 1960's to the early 1980's laid the foundations for Brazil's emergence as a world power. Meanwhile a serious maldistribution of wealth, and certain of the methods employed in pursuit of stability, have called forth pointed criticisms (and more) from such diverse entities as the Vatican and the White House. Not unpredictably the Brazilian Government has reacted to such outside interference with signal irritability.

Some political scientists would object to including Brazil in the fascist category because there are still competitive elections and it lacks a "charismatic leader." As to the first, these contests take place between carefully vetted and tame parties that take care not to offend the military rulers. If, nevertheless, there

would be some unfortunate slip-up, the army can; and does, annul the election. It's all very neat.

As for the absence of charismatic leadership, this stems from deliberate decisions by top army leaders in 1964-65 to deemphasize personality in the interest of corporate military unity. Lack of such a leader may have handicapped the regime somewhat, but this fact alone hardly disqualifies it from inclusion in the ranks of fascism. In this particular as in others the Brazilian set-up resembles that of prewar Japan.

Besides, nobody said that Third World fascisms are carbon copies of Mussolini's, only that they reproduce attitudes and forms typical of classical fascism: the urgent duty of an enlightened élite, above petty class or regional loyalties, to cast aside ineffective traditional or democratic institutions to mobilize the country's resources in the face of internal and external threats to national integrity.

As A.J. Gregor of the University of California has written in *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (1974): "Fascism [in Italy] was the first systematic and radical attempt to resolve the problems of status-deprived nations in the twentieth century." Now "national status-deprivation" is another way of saying "wounded *amour-propre*." If the group I belong to is despised, I am despised, and this is intolerable. Causes of status-deprivation in the Third World are not hard to find: the humiliation of being part of somebody else's colonial empire; the erosion of traditional sources of status; the prevalence of secessionism and all manner of disorder; a poverty, a squalor, that surpasses human understanding. Not that fascism is about economics; rather, poverty is an affront to national pride. Economic life must be accelerated *in order that* the nation may assert itself, demand respect, a place in the sun ("productionism"). Fascism is about *politics*. The inability to grasp the essentially political character of fascism explains why the more mechanistic Marxist accounts of fascism have been so wrong for so long.

Because status-deprivation is so typical of underdeveloped countries, and because fascist responses to it are so easy to grasp and seem so sensible, fascism finds a heterogeneous audience, from the university lecture hall and the officers' mess to the grimmest slum and dustiest village. This relationship between status-deprivation and fascism is clear in the three cases discussed above: the Egyptian army routed by infant Israel; the Ghanaians having their obscure destinies decided in London; the Brazilians forever debarred by incompetent and provincial politicians from the great-power status their numbers and resources entitle them to. But this relationship helps explain fascist-type responses in other contexts, typically with the army, a militarized élite, playing the role of the fascist party:

● In Libya, where Colonel Qaddafi provides the world's best example of how injured pride turns into fanatical and destructive nationalism. Mussolini was a student of Sorel, with his concept of the Great Myth as an instrument of mobilizing energies and loyalties. Musso-

lini knew what he was doing when he told the Italians that they would rebuild the Roman Empire. Qaddafi has his myth also—the restoration of Islamic unity and grandeur. He employs the temporary riches of his backward country to support terrorist groups all over the world, thus helping settle age-old scores with the West, which defeated Islam and sneered at the Arabs.

●In Zaire, the former Belgian Congo, whose bloody history is a biting indictment of the worst aspects of colonialism. Zaire is a textbook example of the artificiality of many Third World countries. Its present boundaries were drawn by a handful of nineteenth-century imperial statesmen in the chanceries of Europe, men who knew little and cared nothing for the ethnic, religious, and economic complexities of the areas they were carving up. Suppose that in the last century some extraterrestrial force had suddenly scooped Germany, France, and Spain into one colonial dominion and by naked power kept the peace there for several decades. The sudden withdrawal of that power force would unleash furious centrifugal energies. Such was the fate of the Congo. The present regime of General Mobutu is an attempt, after years of sanguinary regional and tribal conflicts, to hold the country together by arms and the glorification of the leader. This is the latest example of a state trying to create its own nation. Mobutu's is perhaps not the most successful or enchanting government on earth, but no acceptable alternative seems in sight.

●In Peru, where the army, for generations a reliable prop of the existing order, took power in 1968 for largely selfish and limited reasons but soon found itself driven step by step to enunciating and achieving goals that any Fascist of the 1920's would have understood and approved. The ruling political-economic class had not only failed to rectify Peru's position as one of the more backward states on a backward continent, it positively embraced it. The dignity of the nation (read: the army) required that the country be cleaned up, and this in turn required that the parasitic wealthy class be dethroned. The hostility of the military to the unprogressive, dependent Peruvian upper class—in the good old Peronist tradition—underlines the antiestablishment, antibourgeois tendencies within fascism, an aspect often ignored by present-day commentators. Exceptions are Roland Sarti's *Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy* (1971), which analyzes the always touchy, often hostile relations between the Mussolini government and Italian capitalism, and Eugen Weber's *Varieties of Fascism* (1964), which skillfully illuminates the often decisive collectivist implications of nationalism.

●In the Philippines, where political institutions modeled on the United States failed to resolve the country's serious social and economic problems or even to produce a dignified politics. Instead the decades after independence were marked by gross corruption and widespread electoral mayhem. All this culminated in ethnic-religious civil war. In the Philippines, as in Zaire, fascist-type dictatorship came to the fore only after the failure of normal civil politics to cope with problems had become something of an international scandal.

One cannot escape saying something about Idi Amin, who is intimately associated in the public mind with the

concept of Third World fascism, one reason the term is still one of opprobrium rather than of analysis. It is by no means clear, however, that Amin belongs in this category. Every bloodsoaked psychopath does not qualify as a fascist. Under that rubric Stalin would have been the granddaddy of them all. Amin serves more as an example of what is wrong in Third World countries than as an attempted solution. His replacement by a Mussolini or a Nkrumah actually would be a big improvement for Uganda. Amin appears more a representative, however third rate, of a much older tradition of politics, stretching back to Herod.

Cast aside for a minute any doubts that this is true, that regimes resembling classical fascism in key particulars are mushrooming in the developing world. So what?

First of all, the prospects for American relations with these fascist states are somber. Their nationalist supersensitivity will certainly impede the creation of anything like a more rational world economic order. Besides, Peronist Argentina once sought to challenge U.S. hegemony in South America, and Brazil may soon do likewise. As Mussolini's government quickly established relations with Lenin's, so from the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact to Nasser and Nkrumah, the superpatriots and the superracists have always been able to find a sympathetic ear at the Kremlin.

Contemplation of these patterns in Third World politics reminds us of Bertrand Russell's observation that "equal cooperation is so much more difficult than despotism, and so much less in line with instinct" (*Power*, 1938). Democratic government demands much—compromise, patience, the suspicion that one is not infallible, the ability to find fulfillment in private and personal channels—and authoritarian, élitist, collectivist solutions like fascism often seem more congruent with the experiences of most peoples, much more "natural."

These gloomy reflections should lend no support to any silly racist delusions about the civic superiority of Caucasians. One would be hard pressed to find peoples who have more ferociously mangled their opportunities for liberty than the Latins, the Teutons, and the Slavs. On the contrary, the growth of Third World fascisms reminds us of the continuity of the human experience, of the limits of human choice and imagination, and that citizens of those parts are not as exotic as we might fear (or prefer). Indeed, for those who still believe in popular self-government, the most resounding triumph in decades took place last year in, of all places, India—overpopulated, underfed, ignorant, pitied, scorned, and incorrigibly determined to live in liberty, another thunderous and delightful refutation of the rigid Newtonian pretensions of a certain type of "social science."

But however heartening these Indian events, they do seem to stand in contradiction to a general trend. Democracy is a rare and tenuous plant. Those of us who live where it still survives may want to take better care of this endangered species.