

The Essence of Fascism

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By Michael Brenner

Fascism is back. Not just as a political expletive thrown at opponents. But as a doctrine, as a movement, and -- above all -- as a set of feelings. It has been easy to view fascism as a freak historical phenomenon of the inter-war period that was embodied by Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and one or two other minor characters. We assumed that the end of WW II relegated it to the history books. It ceased to be studied and was barely remembered.

In truth, Fascism was a far more formidable phenomenon. It swept much of Central and Eastern Europe with off-shoots in Japan and South America. It had organized supporters in democratic Western Europe as well. More than a movement that mobilized mass discontents, it drew from deeper grievances and anxieties endemic to modernizing societies. A look at the literature that it engendered makes that perfectly clear.

Fascism was a political ideology that transcended religious and cultural boundaries. The Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria were of this order -- wholly secular and explicitly anti-religious. None of Saddam's crimes was committed in the name of Islam; he and Osama bin-Laden hated each other (Dick Cheney's self-serving fantasies notwithstanding). Then there are the hybrids that meld nationalism, Fascism and religion. The Spanish *Falange* stands out. World War II saw atrocities committed by the Hungarian *Arrow Cross*, the Romanian *Iron Guard*, the Croatian *Ustashi*, the Slovak *Hlinka Guard*, and the [Ukrainian Insurgent Army](#) (UPA)-- today, recrudescence as *Fatherland* and associated neo-Nazi para-militaries (*Azov* and *Donbass* battalions). The Iron Guard was Orthodox. The others were all fiercely Catholic - the Slovak President, Joseph Tiso, was a Catholic who defied the Pope in his eagerness to deport Jews to the death camps. So, too, for the Lebanese *Falangists*.'

Against this historical backdrop, it should not be a complete surprise that due to the troubled state of the industrial West, across Europe and even in America, we should see recrudescence of the attitudes, the rhetoric and the inspirations that marked Fascism's rise 80 or 90 years ago. Some ingredients are recognizable: racist hate; scapegoating of the alien "other;" mounting feelings of insecurity -- economic, status, national; frustrated feelings of lost prowess; the scorning of elected democratic leaders condemned at once as "weak" and overbearing. In Europe, the potent brew is being stirred by mass immigration from the Muslim world which has created a sense of lost control and crisis. It most intoxicating effects are registering in the former Communist lands to the East where the multiple traumas



of an historic transition have left psychic wounds that have yet to heal fully.

These multifarious phenomena are not exact matches to the Fascism of an earlier era. They do bear some important similarities, though, that clarify their sources, their dynamic and their possible implications. So, it is worth noting the extraordinary essay by *Umberto Eco* (recently deceased) who composed a concise disquisition that presents the distilled essence of Fascism. Informed mainly by the Mussolini regime which he experienced personally, it has universal applicability.* (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1856>) *Eco* identifies the eleven defining features of Fascism:

1. A mythologizing of tradition that glories innate virtues and heroic deeds
2. A rejection of Enlightenment ideals with their emphasis on rationality, individualism and the pleasure principle
3. The exalting of action for action's sake -- especially physical action with a penchant for violence
4. Intolerance for criticism from any source -- domestic or foreign
5. A stress on mystic unity that subordinates all particularisms
6. An articulation and amplification of the grievances and frustrations of those social strata who lack power and collective vehicles for effective political action
7. A cultivated sense of status denial or threat from combined internal and external sources
8. A doctrine built on the idea that "life is a struggle" whereby only the strong and resolute prevail
9. Contempt for the weak stigmatized as life's losers and nature's failures
10. Conveying strength and will and superiority in sexual terms personified by the Hero/Leader
11. Elaboration of a special vocabulary build around cultish code words and symbols Any resemblance between this portrait of Ur-Fascism and current phenomena is not coincidental.