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COMMENTARY

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Michael Mann's *Fascists* (2004) is a welcome return from the best traditions of comparative historical sociology toward the analysis of fascism and its role in the crises and collapse of democracy. The comparative study of fascism has increasingly centered on its ideological and cultural dimensions, at times becoming 'ideology-centered'. We could even say that the analysis of so-called 'generic fascism' has moved from a 'sociological' to a more 'political' perspective, giving both ideology and culture much more importance than previously.¹ This book restores 'society and politics' to the center of the study of fascism. Deviating slightly from his major work, *The Sources of Social Power* (1986, 1993), Mann utilizes the vast academic literature on fascism to provide an analysis of both the phenomenon and the conditions for its success. This book asks the classic questions: who were the fascists, how did they grow and who supported them, and what are the conditions most conducive to their taking power? Through an examination of six cases in which fascist movements were important in overthrowing the liberal democratic order, and where they obtained power as either the dominant political

1 With some exceptions that are connected to studies of the crises and fall of democratic regimes, as in the case of D. Berg-Schlosser and J. Mitchell (2000; 2003); Bermeo (2003). See also Capoccia (2005) and Riley (2010).

force or as a junior partner, Mann attempts to construct a dynamic model that is not merely a taxonomy of fascism.²

Mann begins his book with a definition of 'fascism in terms of [the] key values, actions and power organizations of fascists. Most concisely, *'fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through para-militarism'* (p. 13). The five key terms, some with internal tensions, are nationalism, statism, transcendence, cleansing, and paramilitarism. This definition represent the anchor of a sophisticated set of hypotheses concerning the success or failure of fascism, although not too far from other definitions of fascism, such as Stanley G. Payne's 'typological description'. There are some points common to both definitions, with the first being the trilogy: ideology/collective action/organizational forms. In different ways, they both criticise the 'cultural-linguistic turn'. In his explicit criticism of Roger Griffin, the author of the influential book, *The Nature of Fascism*³, Mann claims that 'without power organisations, ideas cannot actually do anything', meaning that we must therefore add 'programs, actions and organisations' to its values (p. 12).

In the past, some historiographic polemics about the relative importance of ideology were significant, particularly on the rejection by some Marxist historians of the importance of ideas in Italian fascism, for example, or on the relative strength of French fascism. Some of these discussions, such as the debates regarding the concept of totalitarianism or about 'fascism versus authoritarianism' as the characterization of the right-wing dictatorships of the period, were more general in nature. Almost all of these debates had an ideological component, although the majority of the most noted historians of fascist ideology developed definitions of fascism that also included the type of party and form of regime. Developing a synthesis of these debates in 1995, Payne noted that the 'complexity of fascism cannot be adequately described without recourse to a relatively complex typology, however laudable the principle of parsimony may be'. More consensually, and in agreement with many historians, Mann considers fascism, to use Roger Eatwell's expression, as being 'European-epochal', and a variant of authoritarian reactions in the context of crises.⁴

Mann looks at where authoritarianism emerged victorious, where fascism emerged as a variant of authoritarianism, and where it played an important

2 For a more detailed analysis of *Fascists* and another important book on the topic – Paxton (2004) – see chapter 3 of our book (Costa Pinto, 2012, pp. 47-78).

3 Griffin (1991). See also his review of *Fascists*, in which he states that Mann 'adds nothing substantially new to the sociological comparative approach of Juan Linz nearly three decades ago' (Griffin, 2004, p. 78).

4 Eatwell (1996). See also Michael Mann's chapter 'The Fascist alternative, 1918-1945' in his *The Sources of Social Power* (Mann, 2012).

part in the downfall of democracy. The strength of fascism-as-a-movement was greater in Germany, Hungary, Austria, and Italy, where fascists arrived in power with varying degrees of social and political support. Spain, on the other hand, was chosen to exemplify a case in which 'fascism remained the subordinate member of the authoritarian family' (p. 30). Mann also examines macro-theories concerning the crises of democracy and the rise of the dictatorships, seeking those that are also operatives for fascism. He successively tests the hypotheses related to the economy, politics, and ideology.

There are a great many studies correlating dictatorships with the degree of economic development. In empirical terms, and with Germany as the exception, it would seem that 'the rise of authoritarianism was mainly a problem for the less-developed countries of inter-war Europe', although 'the largest fascist movements were found at all levels of development'. It would seem, therefore, that fascism is unrelated to levels of economic development (p. 51).

The relationship between fascism and class conflict has led to the publication of a profusion of academic studies. For Mann, it 'is less profit than the defence of property that motivates the capitalist class', and 'property was associated in the ideology of the time with two fundamental desirable social values: order and security' (p. 63). Perhaps 'because of the role that ideology plays in defining 'interests' more broadly than rational-choice theory suggests' (p. 63), Mann finds five reasons for the overreaction of the capitalist class. These are all well-known: the 'security dilemma'; the vulnerability of the property rights of agrarian landlords; the threat to the 'caste-like autonomy' of the military by the left; the reaction of the churches to the secularism of the left; and, finally, 'geopolitics also marked the problem of order' (p. 356). In the military arena, which is often underestimated in the social sciences, Mann notes that some of the links are with the First World War; yet here the most operative dimension is the 'link between military and ideological power, that is, on the rise of paramilitary values' (*ibid.*).

Mann frames the growth of fascism around four crises that are associated with the four sources of power: 'war between mass citizens' armies; severe class conflict exacerbated by the Great Depression; the political crises arising from the attempts of many countries at a rapid transition toward a democratic nation-state; and a cultural sense of civilizational contradiction and decay' (p. 23). While all four crises weakened the ability of elites to continue leading, fascism offered solutions for them. Despite having different causes in each country, fascism 'was strongest where we find distinct combinations of all four' (p. 23). Mann then concentrates on the three core 'fascist constituencies' (favoring paramilitarism, transcendence, and nation-statism), including the fascist values and organizations identified earlier and which resonated most

strongly, and therefore came to ‘organize actual fascist movements’ (p. 26). Here Mann includes the broad category of ‘followers’ – both fascist militants and the electorate.

It is within this framework that Mann analyzes the national cases. In the Italian case, it was ‘intense class struggle, post-war para-militarism, and a weakened old regime’. In the German case, paramilitarism was again important; class conflict, though relevant, was not dominant. Unlike Italian Fascism, Nazism was also a popular electoral movement, ‘thus Nazi transcendent nation-statism was sufficiently popular to bring it to the brink of power’ (p. 362). Austrian fascism was divided between two rival fascist movements: ‘[t]he paramilitaries of both parties attempted coups, but got into power only with the help from the military power of the state’ (ibid.). Hungarian and Romanian fascism only emerged during the mid-1930s, well after the threat from the left, ‘thus fascists had no capitalist bias; indeed they became rather proletarian in their composition. In both cases paramilitarism was used more as an electoral tool than to repress rivals or to seize power’. In the end the military triumphed over paramilitary power, and radicalizing authoritarians triumphed over fascists. ‘Only the chaos of the final years of the war allowed the fascists a brief, doomed victory’ (p. 363). In the Spanish case the ‘old regime experienced the least disruption among all the case studies, and so conservative authoritarians, not fascists, dominated’ (ibid.).

While the explanation for each case requires local factors, are there ‘common factors determining the power of fascists’? One of the least important factors was the ‘threat of the working class’. In relation to the strength of fascism, the main attraction for militants was centered on its ability to trap young single men within fraternal, hierarchical and violent ‘cages’. Fascism also attracted substantial electoral support that was based on a combination of the first three of Mann’s fascist characteristics: statism, nationalism, and class transcendence. In the end ‘the popularity of fascism was greatly affected by the political strength and stability of old regime conservatism, which, more than liberal or social democracy, was fascism’s main rival’ (p. 364). In conclusion, ‘fascism resulted from the process of *democratization* amid profound war-induced crises’ (p. 365).

In recent years the social science literature has returned to the question of the factors leading to the survival or downfall of the dictatorships and dictators: the construction of legitimacy, the regimes’ capacity to distribute resources, divisions within the power coalitions, the political institutions of the dictatorships, their capacity for survival, and the cost-benefit analysis of rebellion.⁵

5 Gandhi (2008); Frantz and Ezrow (2011); Costa Pinto (2012).

On the other hand, the survival (and appearance) of several dictatorships after the end of the Cold War and, particularly, the increasing complexity of their institutions, has led to a new field of study into the hybrid nature of many contemporary political regimes that were already present in the political landscape of the ‘era of Fascism’. Michael Mann gave an excellent contribution to the analysis of the conditions that led to the growth of fascist movements and the processes that were involved in their seizure of power.

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