

Towards an Ideal Type of Fascism*

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Abstract

Fascism is best approached from the perspective of Max Weber's sociology of parties, which classifies parties according to three dimensions: by the objectives for whose attainment they strive for political power, by the organization they adopt for this purpose, and by the means they prefer to employ. Although the fascist party does not relinquish legal means, it does distinguish itself from most other parties by the extent to which it resorts to violence. Although it organizes its staff and members by means of bureaucratic methods, the latter are nevertheless subordinated to charismatic leadership. And although it addresses the interests of various classes and opens itself up for different worldviews, the fascist party does not commit itself to any one of them, instead integrating the forces flowing into it only through relatively abstract shared convictions and via the interest in patronage.

Keywords: charisma, fascism, fascist parties, Hitler, Max Weber, Mussolini, National Socialism, patronage, political sociology.

The need to propose a new definition of fascism does not require elaborate justification.¹ The 'new consensus' proclaimed only a short time ago did not last for long, the level of disagreement is today as great as ever.² What *does* call for justification, however, is why one should turn to Max Weber in doing so. Decisive for this are not the aspects which are most frequently associated in the English-speaking

* Translated by John Blazek.

1. The following considerations are a revised version of my two earlier approaches to the theme: 'Max Webers Parteisozologie und das Problem des Faschismus', in Gert Albert *et al.* (eds.), *Das Weber-Paradigma* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 352-70; *Nationalismus und Faschismus. Frankreich, Italien und Deutschland im Vergleich* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), pp. 39-60.

2. Cf. Roger Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies', *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002), pp. 21-43 as well as the discussion of Griffin's concept in *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* 15.3 (2004).

world with the term 'Weberian', as a perspective which highlights the anti-modern, preindustrial-reactionary aspects of fascism.³ Conceptions of this kind can, of course, invoke Weber, but they by no means exhaust the interpretive potential offered in particular by his party sociology. The same is true for the emphasis on charismatic authority widely associated with Weber. Although a Weberian interpretation can hardly afford to ignore charismatic authority, it must nevertheless be careful not to understand the concept too one-sidedly. This is a danger which was not entirely avoided by (for example) Hans-Ulrich Wehler's impressive synthesis, which tied the charisma concept too closely to that of political religion and thus led in the direction of an essentialist interpretation.⁴ The relevance of Max Weber, as Roger Griffin very clearly recognizes, lies in the way he surmounts essentialism with the ideal-typical method,⁵ whose strength however lies in the fact that it proceeds from the assumption of a chaotic, contradiction-laden reality, which it attempts to make comprehensible with the aid of deliberately constructed 'limiting cases' that are themselves internally free of contradictions.⁶ In this sense, Weberian would be a method which does not work to make historical phenomena identical by subsuming them under a generic concept, but rather, on the contrary, conceives them as polysemous, as phenomena which (for example) can be represented both as communal *and* as associative relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung*), as charismatic *and* as rational-bureaucratic authority, as the articulation of immaterial as well as material interests, and so on, naturally not in the sense of an arbitrary 'on the one hand, on the other', but rather in a controlled manner which carefully weighs the significance of the various factors. Since each of these aspects taken individually tends to be well-researched, the achievement of a Weberian conception lies in a dimension which one can denote (with Luhmann) as 'super-theory':⁷ a theory which (contrary to its immodest title) does

3. Cf. Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 17.

4. Cf. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. IV. 1914–1949 (Munich: Beck 2003), pp. 542ff., 600ff.

5. Cf. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), pp. 8ff.

6. Cf. Hans Henrik Bruun, *Science, Values and Politics in Max Weber's Methodology* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1972), p. 211.

7. Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 'Soziologie der Moral', in Niklas Luhmann and Stephan H. Pförtner (eds.), *Theorietechnik und Moral* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 8–116 (9).

not claim to offer new, exclusive insights, but rather strives to present a coordinating, highly abstract conceptuality.

To keep the text within the customary dimensions for journals, in the following I will refrain from presenting Max Weber's foundations in great detail; such an exposition, in a manner specially tailored to the *thema probandum*, can be found elsewhere.⁸ A further reduction of complexity is achieved by restricting the empirical-historical references to National Socialism and Italian fascism; admittedly a narrow basis, certainly the narrowest possible for any attempt to formulate a generic concept. On the other hand, one can say that any conception which already falls short at this level can be confidently laid to rest. However, if it successfully identifies a minimum set of criteria for these two cases, there is a good chance that it can be usefully applied more generally. After all, Italy and Germany constitute the acid test for any typology of fascism.

1. *Movement or party?*

Ideal types are mental constructs which are formed

by a one-sided accentuation of one or several perspectives, and through the synthesis of a variety of diffuse, discrete, individual phenomena, present sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes not at all; subsumed by such one-sided, emphatic viewpoints so that they form a uniform construction in thought.⁹

As one such central perspective in the discussion of fascism one encounters the concept of the 'movement', both among contemporaries of the phenomenon itself and in the recent research. While the socialist Mussolini saw in the party the indispensable instrument of modern mass politics, with his turn away from the PSI he embraced a new form of political decision-making aimed against both the parties and parliamentarianism: the movement (*movimento*). He declared the *Fasci d'azione rivoluzionaria* initiated by the *Popolo d'Italia* in January 1915, to

8. Cf. Stefan Breuer, 'Soziologie des Vereins- und Parteiwesens', in Stefan Breuer, *Max Webers tragische Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 92-111.

9. Max Weber, 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy', in Sam Whimster (ed.), *The Essential Weber: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 359-404 (387-88); cf. 'Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis', in Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (ed. Johannes Winckelmann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 4th edn, 1973), p. 191.