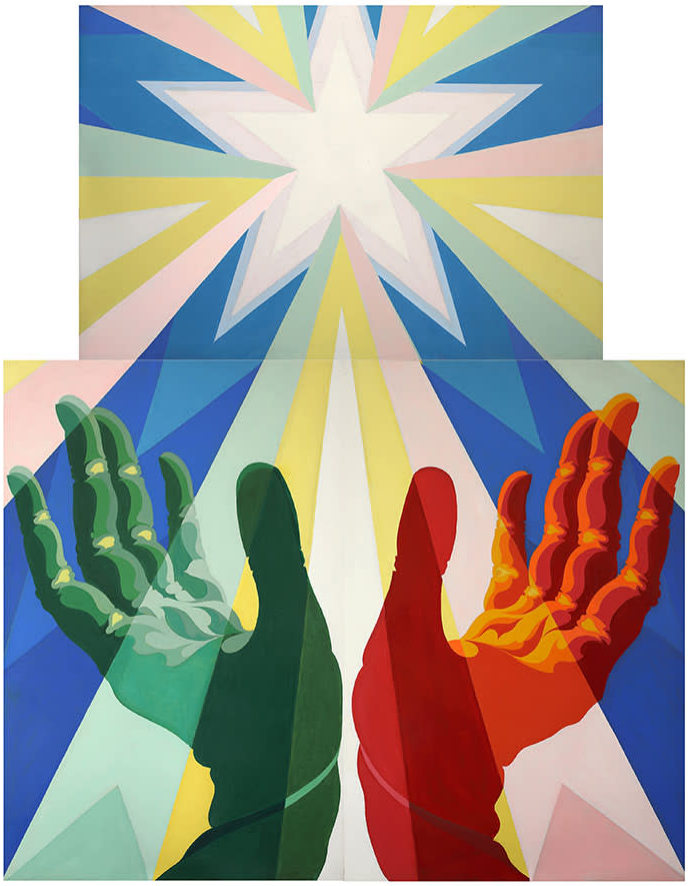

FASCISM AND ITS HISTORIOGRAPHY: SOME REFLECTIONS

Posted on April 1, 2021 by Stanley G. Payne

Through the kind courtesy of Damien Serieyx, Director of L'Artilleur-Toucan, we are so very delighted to publish this piece by Stanley G. Payne, which forms the "Introduction" to Paul Gottfried's Fascisme. Histoire d'un concept, which is the forthcoming French translation of his Fascism: The Career of a Concept.

Well over half a century after the end of the fascist era in 1945, fascism remains in common use as a term, if not as a coherent concept. Never in history has a completely obliterated political phenomenon remained so alive in the imagination of its would-be adversaries. For more than seventy years, journalists and political commentators have searched assiduously to identify the emergence of some form of neofascism; eventually professional historians began to join in this perpetually disappointing endeavor.

The most recent major excitement was generated by the American presidential campaign of 2016 and 2020, when journalists bedeviled academic specialists, including this writer, with the repeated query "Is Donald Trump a fascist?" The results of this persistent search for a new fascism have been uniformly negative. When a new political phenomenon of some importance is identified, it turns out not to be genuinely fascist. If the novel entity does bear some sort of genuine resemblance to historical fascism, it turns out—partly for that reason—to be totally marginalized and doomed to insignificance. A splendid analysis of such exercises as applied to the case of contemporary Italy may be found in the very recent volume, *Chi è fascista* (2019), by Emilio Gentile, that country's leading historian of fascism.

From its origins in 1919, fascism has been hard to understand. This is not because of its radicalism and violence, since at that time radical and violent new political phenomena were rampant in Europe, led by the nascent Soviet regime. Fascism, however, was like communism in its violence and authoritarianism, but otherwise unique in its complex combination of features, neither clearly of the left nor the right. It was the only genuinely new kind of political movement to emerge from the wreckage of World War I and had no clear predecessor. It persistently confused observers, but in its analogous German form briefly rose to world-historical prominence, unleashing the most destructive single conflict history had ever seen. Even after it concluded, as an historical phenomenon and as a concept fascism, broadly defined, continued to be difficult to grasp. For two decades after 1945, study of fascism was limited to national histories and monographic work on individual movements.

The true "fascism debate" did not develop until nearly a generation had passed, initiated by Ernst Nolte's *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, the first major comparative study, and Eugen Weber's brief *Varieties of Fascism*, both of which appeared in 1964. Both agreed that there was such a thing as a "generic fascism" (of which Nolte provided a brief philosophical definition), but also that it was an extremely pluriform phenomenon, with quite different manifestations in various countries. Nolte, particularly, concluded that it had defined an entire era, the "era of fascism," which ended in 1945; that it had been dependent on historical forces peculiar to that period; and that historic fascism was not likely to reappear in the future. Rather than constituting a recurrent form or concept, such as democracy or socialism, it was characteristic only of one specific historical era.

The fascism debate continued into the 1990s and seemed to wane briefly, until further important work appeared after the turn of the century. The debate concerned specific fascist movements and regimes, as well as the dilemma regarding an adequate "generic" concept. The understanding and interpretation of fascism matured in the process, with increasing agreement that fascism, or its constituent movements, did indeed have a specific ideology; that it occupied its own autonomous political space (not merely as the "agent" of some other force); that it was not necessarily "anti-modern" and that it constituted a revolutionary interclass movement.

In a new anthology that he published in 1998 (International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus), Roger Griffin, one of the best of the younger scholars to emerge during this discussion, could confidently present a "new consensus," though not everyone agreed. In the new century, the debate was renewed by others, with such notable books as Michael Mann's *Fascists* (2004), the best work of political sociology in the field, Griffin's highly original *Modernism and Fascism* (2007), and Constantin Iordachi's anthology, *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives* (2010). With the assistance of Matthew Feldman, Griffin also published *Fascism* in five volumes (2004), a massive collection of key texts, studies and interpretations. The case of France has been treated anew in the outstanding set of studies edited by Michel Winock and Serge Berstein, *Fascisme français: La controverse* (2014).

Paul Gottfried's new book is the best broadly interpretative study on fascism to have appeared in this century's second decade. It undertakes a fresh analysis from the critical perspective of someone with a deep background in major aspects of modern political thought, concerned first with the perpetually vexing problem of the definition of the term. It then addresses the concept or understanding of fascism by followers of the fascist movements themselves. The use and abuse of the concept of fascism is the

major focus of this study, especially the way that it has been understood and employed by self-proclaimed anti-fascists. In reality, Gottfried finds that amid contemporary political discourse and popular historical reference, most of historical fascism has disappeared from view, so that when fascism is mentioned, the term almost always refers to Nazism, always the most popular "other" in twenty-first-century discourse and entertainment. Islamic Jihadis work diligently to achieve equal status, but have not gained equivalent eminence.

In the broadest sense, of course, "fascist" is simply the most popular term of denunciation, its usage only indicating that whatever is referred to "displeases" the speaker, as Gottfried says. Hence the frequency with which journalists and commentators have applied the term to Donald Trump, though they sometimes admit they do not really know what it might actually mean. At the most common level of leftist discourse, "fascism" often merely implies "failing to keep up with social changes introduced long after the Second World War." The trivialization is absurd, with the result that the term fascism has become what linguists call an "empty signifier" into which any kind of meaning may be injected.

Gottfried accepts the categorization of "generic fascism" only at a very high level of abstraction, but, more fundamentally, concludes that National Socialism was so different from Italian Fascism and other fascisms in its character, doctrine and historical significance that to include them all in the same taxonomic category involves a good deal of distortion. In this he agrees with Nolte, the pioneer of comparative fascist studies, and, for that matter, with German historians generally. For Nolte, National Socialism was unique both in its prime characteristics and in its radicalism and destructiveness, remaining "borderline" in its relation to generic fascism. German historians generally have tended to view it as relatively unique, and since the early achievements of Nolte have made only somewhat limited contributions to comparative fascist studies.

Nazism was of primary historical importance to Europe and the world, while fascism in general was quite secondary in significance, to the extent that, absent Nazism, there could hardly have been a "fascist era." Gottfried prefers to employ the term to refer to most of the other movements (that rarely were regimes), though without insisting on any tight definition. He agrees with other scholars for whom fascism was strictly an epochal phenomenon, confined largely to interwar Europe, after which conditions became so drastically altered as to make impossible the development of any subsequent movement with the same characteristics, particularly in Europe. This is not to deny the occasional existence of tiny groups and cults, which have existed and will continue to exist in diverse venues.

Gottfried also concurs that fascism was a revolutionary movement but does not agree with those who judge that this quality carried it beyond the left-right spectrum. The dividing line between left and right nominally rests on the issues of egalitarianism and hierarchy, and the acceptance or rejection of the myth of progress. For Gottfried, the fascist position on these key issues reveals fascism to be a peculiar form of the right, the only sector of the right that was "revolutionary," and here one might add revolutionary as distinct from merely being radical or extremist. There were numerous expressions of a radical right during the era of fascism, but they all sought either to preserve or revive traditional institutions, and always fell short of the revolutionary characteristics of fascism. This is a reasonably convincing conclusion, though it fails to resolve such issues altogether, since subsequently the left would strongly embrace its own forms of nationalism, elitism, hierarchy, particularity and identitarian politics. Thus, in the broader view, fascism might still be seen as a unique type of revolutionism, beyond both the left and right in their classic forms.

Yet, though fascism has been confused with the conservative or even radical right, its revolutionary thrust was so great that in its final conflagration it not merely destroyed itself but also brought nearly the entire nationalist hard-right wing of Western politics down with it. Gottfried observes accurately that since 1945 the political life of the Western world has tended almost exclusively toward the left. What passes even for "conservatism," much less the hard right, is simply a conservative or moderate form of liberalism, even of part of social democracy, and all the efforts to revive the right as a significant and separate force have failed, political contests taking place almost exclusively between forms of moderate liberalism and a more "advanced" left.

Though he takes issue with aspects of the quasi-consensus developed in fascist studies, a significant part of Gottfried's book is devoted to the "career" of the concept since 1945 and the role of the idea of fascism in a post-fascist world. The initial concept was defined for political purposes by the Comintern in 1923, the first non-Italian political organization to raise a categorical banner of "anti-fascism," subsequently deliberately conflating all manner of other phenomena with fascism as a calculated propaganda device. Only after 1945 would this Comintern practice pass into more general usage in other political sectors. It should be remembered, however, that genuine anti-fascists were much more numerous than fascists, or, for that matter, even those more vaguely fascistophile, even in the heyday of the "fascist era." It is a mistake to confuse the potency of Nazi Germany with any notion of an extremely widely diffused attraction to fascism that in fact never existed.

It was the political triumph of Hitler in Germany in 1933 that considerably increased the appeal of

fascism in other countries, yet the initial enthusiasm did not last in the great majority of European polities; in general, the growth of anti-fascism was considerably greater. On the left it produced a sharp shift in Communist tactics toward the Popular Front, and elsewhere encouraged increasing imitation of the Comintern line that conflated a wide variety of political forces with fascism. In Spain, beginning in the final months of 1933, the left termed everything from the center-right and beyond simply "fascist." By 1935, both Soviet policy and that of the Comintern had wrapped themselves in the banner of anti-fascism; this was fundamental to the Communist line from that point forward, except for the biennium of 1939 to 1941.

During those two brief years Stalin was an ally of Hitler and, in propaganda theory, exempted National Socialism from the category of fascism. From 1941 to the very end of the Soviet system, anti-fascism, almost as much as Marxism-Leninism, was the propagandistic bedrock of Sovietism. It was always useful in winning support for Sovietism among anti-fascist moderates that otherwise would probably never have been forthcoming. François Furet analyzed this phenomenon with great skill. Moreover, from 1941 to 1945 anti-fascism in the broad sense was the bedrock for the most powerful international military alliance in world history, yet anti-fascism either as a genuine force or as a propagandistic argument has received much less attention in historiography than has fascism. This is the more surprising given the prominence of anti-fascism in political doctrine and propaganda since 1945.

Gottfried's thirty-page chapter "Fascism as the Unconquered Past" addresses the place of fascism in leftist theory and propaganda. He grounds this not in Comintern propaganda, which was always opportunist, but in the intellectually most serious leftist cluster of the 1930s, the Frankfurt School. These émigré German philosophers, psychologists and social thinkers transformed the concept of fascism from that of a political force or forces in contemporary Europe into a permanent "psychic condition" or temptation of all Western culture. This intellectual sleight of hand enormously magnified the potential or latent state of fascism even beyond the political conflation generated by Comintern propaganda. Ideologues of the Frankfurt School created their "Critical Theory" for the analysis of all Western history, culture, institutions, society and politics. It relied not on Marxist economics but on the adaptation of Freudian psychology, pushing the latter "in a visionary direction that Freud himself would have never recognized" by offering cultural analysis in the guise of social and political criticism. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer then adapted Marxism to their "negative dialectic" "by which existing social and cultural institutions were exposed to critical assault" on a continuing basis.

Fundamental to this critique was the danger of "fascism," for which they invented a particular typology,

creating an arbitrary “F scale” to measure something that they termed “The Authoritarian Personality” (TAP). This purported to assess the extent to which literally anyone might be prone to “fascism,” claiming to identify dangerous proclivities lurking almost everywhere. According to the Frankfurt theorists, these could be overcome only by doing away with advanced capitalism, so long as that could be achieved simultaneously with complete sexual liberation. Their theory contended that fascism was based not merely on capitalism but on sexual repression (a concept that would have astounded Mussolini). As quasi- or pseudo-Freudians, they generally ignored the basic Freudian injunction “that the repression and redirection of primal urges was necessary for human civilization.” It was characteristic of the Frankfurt theorists that the TAP critique was especially aimed not at fascist or post-fascist societies but “at an American society that was believed to be suffering from a democracy deficit.” Immediately after achieving the total destruction of European fascism, American society and culture were held to be generating their own “fascism.” Such notions have been broadly expressed and elaborated in the discourse and politics of the left throughout the Western world during the past half century, directed not merely against American society and culture, but also against those of democratic Western Europe.

Nowhere has radical anti-fascism held sway so fully as in Germany, briefly the homeland of the most radical fascism. The “hermeneutics of suspicion” created by critical theories of anti-fascism has de-legitimized invocation of German patriotism and has dominated cultural and political life in the Federal Republic of Germany, while in the German Democratic Republic anti-fascism came to enjoy an even more predominant place. After the public discrediting of Stalinism in 1956, anti-fascism tended increasingly to take the place of Marxism-Leninism in legitimating the regime’s ideology and practice.

Thus, the existence of fascism was not at all necessary in order to generate the most intense anti-fascism. It could be artificially but dramatically recreated as an ever-present danger that lurked perpetually. Rather than being directed against fascism, anti-fascism was a concept and a propaganda banner that in some ways became more useful and intense in its application the farther that any given society moved away from fascism, an ultimate symbol for the left long after the traditional social classes, classic Marxism or fascism itself had disappeared. In Europe a prime example may be found in Spain, where the left declared itself more “*antifranquista*” in 2016, after living memory of *franquismo* had virtually disappeared, than in 1980 or 1985, when *franquismo* had been a recent reality. Emilio Gentile has examined the same phenomena in Italy.

More broadly, the specious scientism of these theorists provided the background for what ultimately

developed into the very broad leftist "pathologizing of dissent" in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Under this rubric, the first really dangerous neofascism was discovered in the United States in the 1950s. From that point, this standard hermeneutics of suspicion has gone on to find neofascists under every bed, even though every single case has turned out to be a false alarm. Stigmatization seems indispensable to political polemics, and no other form is so intrinsically appealing as "fascist." No other adjective, not even "Stalinist," has acquired such totally pejorative connotations, while the very vagueness of the term, together with its uniquely sinister phonetic qualities, stimulates protean usage.

Gottfried's book is thus unique in the way that it addresses both sides of the fascist phenomenon—history and historical meaning on the one hand, and the long history of pejorative polemics on the other. No other book in the recent scholarly literature treats these problems so comprehensively. It elucidates both a major historical problem and a major feature of contemporary debate, and is the most useful book on fascism to have been published during the last decade.

The featured image shows, "The Hands of the Italian People," by Giacomo Balla, painted in 1925.