

---

THE FASCIST  
REVOLUTION

---

TOWARD A GENERAL  
THEORY OF FASCISM

---

GEORGE L. MOSSE

HOWARD FERTIG

NEW YORK

---

Copyright © 1999 by George L. Mosse  
All rights reserved under International and Pan-American  
Copyright Conventions. Published by Howard Fertig, Inc.  
80 East 11th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003  
First Edition

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a  
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise  
without permission of Howard Fertig, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Mosse, George L. (George Lachmann), 1918-  
The fascist revolution : toward a general theory of fascism /  
George L. Mosse.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.  
ISBN 0-86527-432-0 (hardcover)  
1. Fascism. 2. National socialism. 3. Racism.  
4. Europe—Intellectual life—20th century. I. Title.  
JC481.M63 1999  
320.53'3—dc21  
98-16770  
CIP

Text design by Albert Burkhardt  
Printed in the United States of America

The following page constitutes an extension  
of the copyright notice.

WILS  
1A5F2641

For permission to reprint copyright material, the author is indebted to the  
following:

1. *Toward a General Theory of Fascism*, reprinted in greatly revised form from *International Fascism, New Thoughts and New Approaches*, ed. George L. Mosse, Sage Publications, London and Beverly Hills, 1979, pp. 1-45.
2. *Fascist Aesthetics and Society*, reprinted from *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 245-252.
3. *Racism and Nationalism*, reprinted from *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1995, pp. 163-73, by permission.
4. *Fascism and the French Revolution*, reprinted by permission of *The Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 224, January 1989, Sage Publications Ltd., London, pp. 5-26.
5. *Fascism and the Intellectuals*, reprinted from *The Nature of Fascism*, Stuart Woolf, ed., Chapter 6 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), The Graduate School of Contemporary European Studies, University of Reading, pp. 205-25.
6. *The Occult Origins of National Socialism*, reprinted from *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, January-March 1961, pp. 81-96.
7. *Fascism and the Avant Garde*, first published as "Faschismus und Avant-Garde" in *Faschismus und Avant-Garde*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, Athenäum Verlag, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1980.
8. *Nazi Polemical Theater: The Kampfbühne*, first published as "Die NS Kampfbühne, in *Geschichte im Gegenwartsdrama*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1976, pp. 24-39.
9. *On Homosexuality and French Fascism*, first published in *Sociétés*, No. 17, March 1988, pp. 14-16, reprinted in revised form.
10. *Nazi Aesthetics: Beauty without Sensuality*, originally published in "Degenerate Art": *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991, pp. 25-32, reprinted by permission.

---

## Contents

Introduction	ix
1. Toward a General Theory of Fascism	1
2. Fascist Aesthetics and Society	45
3. Racism and Nationalism	55
4. Fascism and the French Revolution	69
5. Fascism and the Intellectuals	95
6. The Occult Origins of National Socialism	117
7. Fascism and the Avant Garde	137
8. Nazi Polemical Theater	157
9. On Homosexuality and French Fascism	175
10. Nazi Aesthetics: Beauty Without Sensuality	183
Notes	199
Index	225

---

## Introduction

**M**ODERN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP has made great advances in our understanding of fascism as it existed in its epoch, overturning most older interpretations and reevaluating its consequences.

Historians in the past were prone to look for a single key to unlock the secrets of fascism's existence and success. The development of the social structures or of the economy was most often singled out as the explanation for fascism's rise and triumphs. Social and economic factors were congenial tools of historical analysis, while at the same time fascism was said to lack any coherent political thought or ideology. The structure of valid political thought, regardless of content, was supposed to follow established classical models like that of the ancients, or in modern times that put forward by Karl Marx or Adam Smith. This book hopes to challenge such traditional attitudes towards politics.

Here, as in many analyses of fascism, Germany was simply considered an occupied country, brutally taken over by the Nazis. The optimism about the good and rational nature of "the people" was a heritage of the enlightenment which had long ago informed so-called progressive political thought, and which was not abandoned but

rather reenforced by many analyses of fascism. This held for Germany which was not able to create a true anti-fascist movement in order to redeem the people, but also for Italy which did have an anti-fascist movement tied to the political left which was strong enough to attempt a civil war during the last years of the fascist regime.

However, while in the past historians did make crucial contributions to our understanding of fascism, they could not grapple successfully with a key question which must be answered about the fascist movement: why it could attract so much popular support and govern by consensus for some time after it took power. Economic and social factors certainly played a role, even if fascism can no longer be thought of simply as a movement of the bourgeoisie. We now know about its largely cross-class appeal, and that while it came to power only in two highly developed countries, it also played an important role in undeveloped nations like Romania or Hungary. Class analysis, a favorite of many historians, cannot really capture the essence of fascism. In addition, the accumulation of historical knowledge has meant that different approaches have naturally come into play. This book attempts to point in one such direction which is finding increasing favor with contemporary historians.<sup>1</sup>

Fascism considered as a cultural movement means seeing fascism as it saw itself and as its followers saw it, to attempt to understand the movement on its own terms. Only then, when we have grasped fascism from the inside out, can we truly judge its appeal and its power. For fascism created a political environment which attempted to encompass the entire man or woman, to address, above all, the senses and emotions, and at the same time to make the abstract concrete as something uplifting and familiar which can be seen and touched. That is why, for example, considerations of beauty usually not thought of as an element of politics played such an important role in defining the political liturgy as well as the human stereotypes used as symbols of the movement. Moreover, the *mis-en-scène* was crucial to fascist self-representation, while the visual expression of fascism in architecture, art and city planning played a leading role as expressions of the move-

ment's political thought. The cultural interpretation of fascism opens up a means to penetrate fascist self-understanding, and such empathy is crucial in order to grasp how people saw the movement, something which cannot be ignored or evaluated merely in retrospect.

Culture in our case must not be narrowly defined as a history of ideas, or as confined to popular culture, but instead understood as dealing with life seen as a whole—a totality, as indeed the fascist movement sought to define itself. Cultural history centers above all upon the perceptions of men and women, and how these are shaped and enlisted in politics at a particular place and time. Quite consciously fascism addressed people's perceptions of their situation in life and their hopes for the future, and therefore it is essential to understand how fascist self-representation was so successful in taking up and satisfying these perceptions if we want to gauge the depth of the movement's appeal. To be sure, writing about self-representation has become popular among some scholars of late, but when they address "representation," they are almost always concerned with loose psychological or textual associations, rather than with the specific historical context in which visual self-representation takes place.

This approach to the various fascist movements encompasses other surprisingly neglected and yet crucial aspects of fascism, above all that of fascism seen as an integral element of European nationalism, as well as fascism viewed as a revolutionary movement.

Nationalism is a belief-system which provided the foundation for all fascist movements, it was the bed rock upon which they were built. Racism, of prime importance in Germany, enhanced nationalism and gave it its cutting edge. Finally, fascism must be understood as a nationalist revolution with its own ideology and its own goals. A cultural interpretation takes account of fascism as a system of belief based upon heightened nationalism, as well as of fascism understood as a right-wing revolution. The model of socialist, communist or anarchist revolutions taken as representing the only valid use of the term must be abandoned, as Karl Dietrich Bracher suggested some years ago.<sup>2</sup> A revolution from the political Right is as possible as one

from the political Left, once revolution is defined as the forceful reordering of society in the light of a projected utopia.<sup>3</sup>

Nationalism has been a stepchild of historians, and a renewed interest in nationalism as collective self-understanding through a belief system has surfaced only recently, nearly half a century since the end of the Second World War, in the midst of clear signs that nationalism in Europe was alive and well—not merely a patriotism which tolerated ethnic and national differences, but the integral nationalism which had found its climax in fascism.

Modern nationalism found its fulfillment as a belief-system seeking legitimacy through the construction of a largely mythical past and through easily understood symbols which could serve as rallying points. The national flag, national monuments or national anthems, for example, reenforced by national ceremonies and parades provided such symbols which date back to the beginnings of modern national consciousness. But now, in fascism, the liturgy of nationalism moved to the forefront as people were transformed from spectators to participants.

This liturgy borrowed liberally from that of the Christian churches with its martyrs as well as its hymns, responses, and the confession of faith in which all could join. Adolf Hitler's constant use of a Christian vocabulary in which to sheath his movement is well documented.<sup>4</sup> Christianity was used in order to give fascism a familiar cast, to make it correspond to something people knew well. The structure of one belief-system reenforced another. These borrowings from Christianity were, of course, stripped of their content, and nationalism was substituted instead.

Traditional Christianity was the most important inspiration for the rites and liturgy of fascism, but in German National Socialism the tradition of bourgeois, artisan and workers' festivals must have played its role as well. Bourgeois festivals, for example, during the nineteenth century were not so much exceptional occasions as an integral part of daily life.<sup>5</sup> These were regional and civic festivals which by the end of the nineteenth century had often been subordinated to national

concerns. The connection between this culture of festivals and the political liturgy which is our concern still needs to be investigated.

Nationalism with its symbols, rites and confession of faith became a civic religion in the hands of German National Socialists or Italian fascists and their imitators—they completed a sacralization of politics which had always been latent in modern nationalism. Fascism's expansionist drives were to a large extent fueled by long-standing nationalist ambitions, whether it was to transform the Mediterranean into a *Mare Nostrum*, or the search for living space in eastern Europe.

The three vital elements necessary for the constitution of a nation are said to be collective memory essential to any national consciousness, the belief in the nation's mission and its regenerative power.<sup>6</sup> The heightened nationalism of the fascists added little to this definition but used it as a springboard in order to cement the bonds between the movement and its people, and to give meaning to the activism which it both encouraged and disciplined through giving it a goal and direction. The traditional nationalist myths and slogans, the use of the nationalist liturgy, the constant and unremitting appeals to national solidarity and greatness informed all of fascism, and should have made nationalism's importance obvious—perhaps too obvious to many historians of the movement who have not bothered to analyze nationalism itself as a belief-system. This is certainly a crucial reason why in the past many failed to discuss fascism as a civic religion, and that, for example, it was only in the 1990s that Emilio Gentile gave us the first and masterful analysis of Italian fascism's sacralization of politics. National Socialism had already been analyzed in that context somewhat earlier.<sup>7</sup> The principal difficulty any historian of fascism has to overcome is indeed daunting: how to analyze the irrational rationally is no easy task.

Like nationalism, racism has been on the whole a stepchild of modern historiography. To be sure, not all fascist movements were racist. Jews, for example, were well represented in the Italian fascist party during the first sixteen years of its rule, and even held some important positions. The Rexist movement in Belgium, a fascist party

in a multi-ethnic state, repudiated racism while, to cite another example, the Spanish Falange, the Spanish fascist movement, was not racist. Racism was an integral part of fascism in eastern and central Europe, while in western Europe it became an ingredient in some but not all of fascism. How strong or weak the anti-Semitic tradition within any one nation proved to be determined the alliance of racism and nationalism, and therefore with the fascist party. But even in Italy, which outside the Catholic Church (and perhaps just because of its claim to power) had no very strong anti-Semitic tradition, recent research has shown that a wing of the party which was attracted to racism existed long before fascism in power unleashed its own racism, first against blacks during the Ethiopian war, and then against the Jews through the 1938 racial laws.<sup>8</sup>

Racism became part of that nationalism upon which some of fascism based its principle appeal, it brought out in sharp relief the aggressiveness inherent in much of nationalism, it drove the exclusivity of nationalism to new heights and locked it securely in place. This alliance between nationalism and racism must not obscure the fact that racism itself was a fully-fledged world view which stood on its own two feet, similar in this respect to other world views like liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism, which the nineteenth bequeathed to the twentieth century. Here also, historians have tended to see it as a by-product of other more tangible forces: the ruling class, capitalism or the bourgeoisie. But such a downgrading of racism disguises what it could bring to its alliance with nationalism and how it could, in Germany, for example, become the determining factor in the fascist state.

Racism, originating in the eighteenth century, used new sciences like anthropology, eugenics and a freshly fashioned aesthetic consciousness in order to construct its ideology. All of these played a part in racism's search for roots in order to fulfill a longing for immutability and certainty in a world of rapid change, to help get one's bearing and to prove one's superiority. The appeal to science was important especially at a time when theories of heredity and

evolution were becoming popularized. The racial myths concerning the far-away origins, the triumphs and the hardships of the race, formed a belief-system to which its scientific garb gave added authority.

But racism was more than just a theoretical construction, it sought to provide concrete examples of the superior and inferior races, constructing stereotypes in order to make the inherent explicit.<sup>9</sup> Man must be judged by the shape of his body, his appearance and comportment. The transformation of humans into stereotypes was a prerequisite of racism.

Enemy and friend were clearly distinguished one from another using criteria of judgement which were familiar: a person's beauty or ugliness, his strength or weakness, his control or his lack of control over his passions. The body of a man of the superior race must be harmonious and yet project strength and self-confidence. Surely it is easy to see how racism could give additional substance to nationalism, define the national character clearly and—unlike the traditional symbols of nationalism such as the flag or national anthems—furnish symbols which were concrete and familiar, which could be seen and touched, whether it was the beautiful body of the superior or the distorted body of the inferior race.

The expansionist drive of fascism, fueled by nationalism, which we have already mentioned, was further sharpened: wars now became race wars, whether against external or internal enemies. Racism here joined the apocalyptic strand in fascism and especially in National Socialism whose occult origins will be discussed in a later chapter. Ideas of regeneration, of sacrifice, and a vision of utopia were the staple of all of fascism, as was the need to triumph over ever-present enemies. If a heightened nationalism became a civic religion, then racism for all its scientific pretensions was a belief-system as well.

The race war was always a crusade, a total war which seemed to require a final solution. What other choice was there if the enmity between races was hereditary, locked into place, and the differences between races absolute and total? However, as in the case of nation-

alism, racism was not always extreme, mostly it led to exclusion, discrimination and ghettoization. National Socialism, however, largely with the collaboration of its allies in eastern Europe and in the Baltic pushed the race war to its logical conclusion, the complete eradication of the Jews, supposedly the principal enemy of the race. Here, unlike Italy even after its racist laws, racism actually defined the fascist world view and gave a deadly edge to German nationalism.

Fascism was born in the aftermath of the First World War, and everywhere it claimed to continue the war experience into peacetime, with its male camaraderie and its emphasis upon struggle and triumph. Mussolini talked about that violence which cannot be expelled from history.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing wartime camaraderie meant that fascism everywhere saw itself as a coterie of men, while women were stereotyped not as inferior but as largely passive in their role as wives and mothers. The virile man was considered the driving force of history and one of the principle symbols representing the nation's strength and harmony.<sup>11</sup> The official invitation to the Nazi Party congress of 1934, for example, shows the Nazi Party emblem carried on the hands of half-naked men. The military analogy was never far away from the supposedly disciplined fascist party formations with their hierarchical command structures. Fascism considered itself in a state of permanent war which, in the service of a higher cause, would unleash all the hidden energy of men, foot soldiers of a civic religion.

Fascism needed a supreme leader in order to provide a sharp enough focus, a living symbol of nation and party. As we shall see in the first chapter, fascism nevertheless considered itself a democratic movement even while rejecting representative government. The people were supposed to govern themselves directly through taking part in the liturgy and rites of the new nation as well as in party formations—joining in an activism encouraged and directed by the regime and the party. The leader, the charismatic Führer or Duce, was the living symbol of the people, the embodiment of all its ideals. He could do no wrong, and it is well documented that whenever any German

saw what he considered an injustice committed in the name of the Third Reich, the reaction was often "if only the Führer had known!" And indeed, for many, especially in times of crisis, such a direct democracy seemed more meaningful than the far-away Parliaments, the "talking heads" from which they seemed excluded.

Here, the appearance—the perception of meaningful action—was substituted for reality and the same substitution held when fascists talked about individualism but in reality believed that the individual could only be free as an integral part of a disciplined mass. Fascism always appropriated already existing, familiar, and popular ideas while manipulating them and integrating them into its own world view. Fascism was a new political movement but not a movement which invented anything new; it annexed the long familiar and made it a part of its racism and nationalism. That was some of its real strength: it offered regeneration with security and revolution based on the already familiar.

These themes which grow out of the attempt which cultural history provides to comprehend fascist self-understanding and self-representation will be pursued in the chapters which follow. Fascist movements had their differences but they shared a common approach to politics. The first three chapters further extend this approach, dealing concretely and specifically with fascist movements as they existed in their epoch during the inter-war years. The next chapters investigate aspects of the origins of the movement which have a direct bearing upon its course, while the rest of the book probes various facets of fascism. Here is a kaleidoscope which addresses often-neglected themes, all of which contribute to a general theory of fascism.

Though these essays were written on different occasions and at different times they do present a coherent picture based on the approach to fascism which I have attempted to describe. Redundancies have been eliminated and some chapters—especially the seminal chapter on the General Theory of Fascism—have been extensively revised. The chapter on Homosexuality and Fascism has not been



available in English up to now, but it has also seen extensive change from the original version. Though there exists no single key which will unlock the secrets of fascism, as we stated at the beginning of this introduction, it is hoped that the essays in this volume come close to fascist reality through the various experiences they analyze within the general framework set by the first chapters.

---

## Toward a General Theory of Fascism

**I**N OUR CENTURY two revolutionary movements have made their mark upon Europe: that originally springing from Marxism, and the fascist revolution. The various forms of Marxism have occupied historians and political scientists for many decades, while the study of fascism was late catching up. Even so, because of the war and the fascist record in power, fascism has remained synonymous with oppression and domination; it is alleged that it was without ideas of its own, but merely a reaction against other more progressive movements such as liberalism or socialism. Earlier scholarship concerning fascism has more often than not been used as an occasion to fight contemporary polemical battles.

In a justified reaction against stereotyping, recent scholarship has been suspicious of general theories of fascism. As many local and regional studies show, while on one level fascism may have presented a kaleidoscope of contradictory attitudes, nevertheless these attitudes were based upon some common assumptions. We shall attempt to bring together some of the principal building blocks for such common assumptions—there seem to be enough of them to construct at least a provisional dwelling. Germany and Italy will dominate the discussion, as the experience of European fascism was largely dominated by