Will the Real Fascists Please Stand Up?

August 17, 2022

On an early morning in September 1919, a group of some four-hundred armed Italian irregulars gathered on a hillside outside Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia). Some wore black shirts and came as members of organized *fasci* bands. Others wore motley military uniforms. Gabrielle D’Annunzio, a sometime poet, novelist, and air force veteran, with a dashing up-turned mustache and one false eye, strode up. He was dressed in a garish uniform of his own design, with a plumage-laden hat. An assistant called the men to order. D’Annunzio made some brief remarks, read a poem, and then exclaimed, “We shall now proceed to create a fascist society.” With that, he saluted with his right arm straight forward. He then drew his sword, pointed towards the center of the city, and commanded “Avanti!” D’Annunzio’s men marched into the city unopposed. Italian army units and most of the civilian population cheered. The Allied military command occupying the city in advance of the planned turnover to the newly minted Yugoslavia, withdrew. D’Annunzio’s little army occupied the *municipio*: the independent Regency of Carnaro was declared.

The D’Annunzio cadre quickly moved to create a government. His comrades included Alceste De Ambris, who had written the Fascist Manifesto for Mussolini’s pre-party formation, the *Fasci die Combattimento*, the previous June. The Fascists’ program was rolled out in the form of the *Carta del Carnaro* in September 1920, co-authored by De Ambris and D’Annunzio. Their new government Charter created a bicameral legislature, composed of ten “corporations” representing various economic groups (industrial and agricultural workers, technicians, teachers and students, civil servants, lawyers and doctors, and, important to note, some owners). This “New State” would be “the authentic expression of a unified, homogeneous community of producers,” with the charismatic D’Annunzio as its authoritarian leader. This was as unadulterated a fascist regime as one is likely to encounter, but it had almost nothing in common with Hitler’s Nazi movement, which was barely visible as yet.

A popular view is that fascism implies a dictatorial single-party state, led by a demagogue, who promises to fundamentally transform society. It is believed to oppose the multi-party system and be hostile to critical views, liberalism, the left, and independent trade unions; it supports the use of violence against opponents and flies the flag of extreme nationalism. Like all populists it attacks traditional oligarchs. There have been many movements that incorporate some or all of these elements, but their transformative views are usually limited to glorification of “the people” and promises to make the nation great again and rid the country of immoral elements (including “unproductive” people from street layabouts to finance capitalists). In fascism, there is a lot of
rhetoric about spiritual, sometimes religious, renewal. The problem is that fascism has become a kind of sponge word, absorbing movements and leaders as diverse as Hitler, Argentina’s Perón, Cuba’s Batista, Chile’s Pinochet, and today’s favorite of the international right, Viktor Orbán. In the United States, former Presidents as far apart as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Donald Trump have been called the “F” word on occasion. Scholars have spent lifetimes studying fascism. Historian Roger Griffin underlines the importance to fascism of a “coherent ideology (and) political strategy of the sort needed for structural change” which is, in his view, beyond Trump’s capacity. “In a way, to call Trump a fascist is an insult to fascism.” Almost needless to say, this is not a unanimous opinion.

Fascism was originally the twisted offspring of Italian socialism, syndicalism, and nationalism all fused together by the Great War. In other Latin countries “corporatism” played a major role, as did “integralism,” the idea that Catholicism should be integral to state policy. We might consider corporatism the “right-wing” of fascism, with “national syndicalism” the “left.”

The socialists’ and syndicalists’ political expression was the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), founded in 1892. It had several wings: reformist or what we would call social-democratic; Marxian, or revolutionary; and syndicalist. These wings would struggle for control of the PSI for decades. The syndicalists and the Marxists saw themselves as revolutionary, seeking the transformation of society rather than reform. The leaders of these factions were serious intellectuals whose debates about theory and strategy are reminiscent of similar ideological struggles going on at that same historical moment among Russian revolutionaries. The PSI social-democratic majority supported “bourgeois” governments in the early 1900s, as well as other parties’ reform programs. In 1907 most syndicalists dropped out, seeing the PSI as hopeless.

After the Italian government seized Libya from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, against the half-hearted opposition of the PSI leadership and much of the population, the revolutionary faction seized the Party’s reins and installed Benito Mussolini as editor of the Party publication, Avanti. “Mussolini seemed the bright young face of the Socialist Party, and some [syndicalists] thought he might be the leader who could revitalize Italian socialism.” This was not to be. Visible preparations for a new war were apparent and the now radicalized PSI was strongly opposed. The syndicalists were split but many saw war as an instrument that would remove feudal obstacles to a proletarian revolution. They thought a German victory would compromise the prospects for all of European socialism. Mussolini joined this “revolutionary interventionist” movement. In October 1914, pro-war syndicalists decided to form a revolutionary fascio for intervention. A month later, Mussolini came out for intervention in Avanti and was promptly fired from his post as editor and expelled from the Socialist Party. Italy joined the war in the following May and Mussolini was soon conscripted and in uniform.

Italy was on the winning side in the Great War, but it didn’t feel that way. There was the memory of the Caporetto military disaster in October-November 1917. The demobilization of 3.5 million soldiers led to a dramatic increase in unemployment. The economy was in ruins. There were food riots, land occupations, general strikes, even an army mutiny. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 Italy’s claim to Fiume was rejected. Nationalist elements were incensed at this betrayal and geared up for trouble. The government coalition was shaky. This was the scene leading up to the D’Annunzio episode. That ended when the Navy ousted D’Annunzio and his legion. After Mussolini took power, he gave D’Annunzio a fancy title and a castle on Lake Garda, and that was that.

The syndicalists who favored intervention would be responsible for the more populist elements of Mussolini’s agenda. Their program: nation, patriotism, and anti-oligarchism. It was Mussolini who “coined the term fascismo to describe the mood of the little band of nationalistic ex-soldiers and pro-war syndicalist revolutionaries that he was gathering around himself.” Mussolini had his own publication, Il Popolo d’Italia, which published, on June 6, 1919, Il Manifesto dei Fasci di Combattimento, (the Manifesto of the Fascist Combat Units). Soon, allied squadristi (action squads)
were attacking leftists, especially unions’ headquarters, with brutal force. These fascists were able physically to oust several municipal governments held by Socialist and other parties.

On Nov. 7, 1921 the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) was founded. Then came Mussolini’s “March on Rome” on Oct. 28, 1922. Mussolini entered Rome by sleeping car on Oct. 30 and met with King Victor Emmanuel III. Faced with using a dubiously loyal army to disperse the Blackshirts who had managed to infiltrate into Rome, plus a real threat of a “Red” uprising, the King and his conservative allies decided to appoint Mussolini Prime Minister. It was only after his appointment that the Blackshirts were allowed a token “march” into Rome.

The PNF was a mélange of hard-core fascists with syndicalist histories, opportunist business elements, and some professionals who saw fascism as the road to modernization. Mussolini, caught between the provincial *squadrini* and the reality that he had to share power with several conservative parties, moved decisively to the right. Historian Alexander De Grand says “The first measures of the Mussolini government were designed to please industry.”

What was Mussolini after? One goal had been achieved. Mussolini’s Blackshirts had effectively eliminated (in most unpleasant ways) leftist parties and unions, or simply driven them underground. But perhaps equally important, he shared the agenda of a professional and technical stratum of the Party, to modernize what was a backward country so that Italy could take its place in the firmament of advanced countries. Thus, the well-worn apologias, “he made the trains run on time,” and “he drained the Pontine Marshes.” His imperialist adventures in Africa were part of that ambition.

After the first goal had been achieved, the national syndicalists’ role was reduced to cheer-leading. Yet Italian fascism, syndicalism, and its twin corporatism, would have a large impact on the fascisms of Iberia and Latin America. In the 1919 *Manifesto*, Mussolini advocated a planning structure that is a clear departure from conventional capitalist parliamentary rule: a national council of experts for the different sectors of the economy that included workers’ participation and making labor unions (syndicates) equal to industry executives and civil servants. This would be fleshed out in the PNF Program in 1921. Mussolini declared Italy to be a “full-blown corporative state” in 1926. This was a lie, because in 1923 Mussolini had already dropped any serious moves in the direction of PNF’s orthodox corporatism, much less syndicalism. D’Annunzio’s version of fascism was history.

Just as the world’s attention was focused on the growth of Nazism and the rise of Il Duce, a military coup overthrew Spain’s parliament. The new regime, installed in 1923, was headed by General Miguel Primo de Rivera, “who was probably the first to replace parliamentarianism with a unicameral system based on corporatism.” Because of the strength of the landed aristocracy and a reactionary Church, he was unable to deal with rapidly developing economic troubles. In the face of widespread dissatisfaction, he resigned in 1930. Numerous political parties had appeared and significant elections were held. In the April, 1931 municipal elections, republican parties (from anti-monarchist to Socialist and Communist) scored major victories, and the Bourbon King, Alfonso XIII, chose exile. Parliament declared Spain to be a republic the day he left the country: April 14, 1931.

Spanish national syndicalists were of little significance at this point. Under the leadership of Ramiro Ledesma Ramos, this bunch of petty-bourgeois intellectuals had no base among peasants or industrial workers, but then neither had the forerunners of Italian fascism. Ledesma, as editor of a short-lived paper advocating both nationalism and collectivism, had gathered about him a clique that founded, in October 1931, the *Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista*. They became known as JONistas. At the same time some of the forces of the traditional monarchist right were organizing armed units. By the end of 1933 a group of younger Army officers had determined that the only way to avoid the chaos of republicanism was to overthrow the government and restore “order.” Most of the Spanish bourgeoisie, however, simply wanted “a guarantee against any future agitation by the
lower classes..., and an assurance that the political revolution of 1931 would not become an economic revolution in 1933 or 1934.”

It was at this juncture that José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the son of the former dictator and a friend of Ledesma, jumped into the fray. He ran for election to the Cortes, initially to defend his father’s dubious legacy. He lost, but in socialist Madrid he didn’t do badly. He believed in radical reform by authoritarian rule, which separated him from rightist groups. On March 16, 1933, shortly after Hitler became German Chancellor, a paper called El Fascio, edited by Ledesma, appeared. One of the essays was contributed by José Antonio. In a letter to a monarchist paper that had critiqued El Fascio, he took a clearly national syndicalist line: “If anything truly deserves to be called a workers’ state, it is the fascist state. Therefore, in the fascist state...the workers’ syndicates are directly elevated to the dignity of organs of the state.” The republican government, in a state of anxiety following the Nazi takeover, banned the paper immediately.

New elections were called in October, 1933. José Antonio and his coterie decided to establish their own party, the Falange Española (Phalanx, from the Roman military formation). Antonio’s launching speech, long and flowing with grandiose rhetoric about national unity, sacrifice, destiny, and eternal values, lacked any specifics, indeed it made the argument that programs were unimportant: the poetry of national feeling was more important, a theme that had historically been part of the fascist appeal especially to young students. There was nothing about syndicates. Although the Falange was viewed as fascist, few members had any idea of what that might mean. By contrast, the JONistas had actually set up syndicates among some students and taxi drivers. They also organized combat units for street battles. A year later, in October, 1934, the two fascist groups merged into the Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista, (F.E. de las J.O.N.S. for short), using as their emblem the yoke and crossed arrows, designed by Ledesma, that would be incorporated into the emblem of the Spanish regime until the death of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Ledesma soon developed a twenty-seven-point program that made clear a commitment to a totalitarian nationalist syndicalism. In point nine of the program, Ledesma declared that Spain, in the economic realm, would be organized through a system of top-down syndicates, and in point ten he repudiated the capitalist system as dehumanizing and immiserating. Antonio was elected National Chief.

The 1934 election had brought a right-center coalition to power. Although the coalition seemed confident of continuing in power, the February 1936 elections turned the tables. A new Popular Front, including republican parties, Socialists, Communists, and anarcho-syndicalists, was elected. Despite a relatively “safe,” or non-revolutionary coalition government, there were calls by the right-wing press to overthrow it. Conspiracies against the Republic began to come together. In June, General Emilio Mola became the effective leader of the plot, but most of his colleagues were still indecisive, seeking only to push the Republic back further in a traditionalist direction. The Falange wanted nothing to do with such a perspective. But it was growing in numbers and was active in street fighting in nearly every major city.

The Popular Front government reacted by outlawing the Falange, forcing it underground. Its leaders, including Antonio, were jailed. By June the Falange had lost some seventy men. Strikes and shootings continued; the situation becoming more frightening by the hour. On July 12, a leftist government guard who had fired on and shot some Falangists was murdered by military gunmen. The following night a leading figure of the right was assassinated in revenge. “This lit the fuse,” as historian Stanley Payne tells us.

The uprising against the Popular Front government began on July 17, 1936, in Morocco. Soon civil war enveloped the entire country. The German government decided that General Franco would be their man, and in August sent the first installment of aircraft to assist the rebellion. The Italians
quickly jumped in. The rest is very tragic history.

What of the Falange? On November 13, 1936, Antonio was arraigned before a Republican People’s Court. The charge was helping to prepare for the revolt. His brother and sister were also put on trial. He was sentenced to death and shot on November 20, with four other political prisoners. His one-time comrade, Ramiro Ledesma, had been executed on October 29. It was hardly the end of the FE de las JONS, however. José Antonio’s execution turned him into a martyr. He would remain a rallying point for Franco’s regime for many years, even as his ideas were discarded. The Falange militias, meanwhile, maintained some independence from the Army as the civil war continued. Many of its members hoped to influence Franco’s policies after the Republic was defeated. But Franco had other ideas. In mid-December, he decreed that all militias were to be unified under Army discipline. In April 1937, Franco declared a hodge-podge Falangist coalition, which called itself the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista. A number of the real national syndicalists, the “left” of the Falange, dissented from this “betrayal” and were arrested, but eventually sent to the front or otherwise side-lined. One fled the country and headed for Italy.

Franco’s military Junta needed to retain and expand public support for the rebellion and for the new regime after the defeat of the Republic. This was the job of the merged party. In 1940, both employers and workers were integrated into twenty seven “syndicates,” organized by economic sector. This structure was controlled by the Falangists. Yet, “Despite the fascist rhetoric accompanying the corporatist system...the party’s influence was to diminish” and the syndicates were restructured “with employers and workers being represented in separate sections.”

Neighboring Portugal experienced a somewhat parallel set of developments up to a point. On October 5, 1910, the parliament declared Portugal a Republic and the King, Manuel II, was exiled. In the following decade prime ministers came and went almost every six months. By the mid-1920s, it had become evident that the parliament, representing the various sectors of Portugal’s ruling circles, was as incapable of dealing with basic economic problems as any of the other pre-“fascist” governments. On May 28, 1925, the government was overthrown by a military coup supported by rightist officers. Three years later, the Junta appointed one Dr. Antonio de Oliviera Salazar to the office of finance minister, where he would balance the country’s budget and try to cope with the problems of the Depression. In July 1932 they installed him as Prime Minister. This distinctly non-charismatic dictator proceeded to create a “permanent new system of institutionalized moderate authoritarianism.”

Fascism in Portugal, in the form of the Movimento Nacional-sindicalista (MNS), with its Blue Shirt militia, had an even shorter life than the Spanish Falange. The MNS, like the Italian PNF, was also a hybrid. There were those bent on restoring the Monarchy, then a group of nationalists whose goal was to reconquer Portugal’s “lost” empire, plus serious corporatists with Falangist and Italian Fascist sympathies, who greeted each other with the fascist salute. These factions were anti-oligarchy and anti-capitalist. It was rumored that Salazar called them “national communists.” They were all united in their disdain for parliamentary chaos. The MNS was dissolved by Salazar on July 29, 1934, and went underground. Following a failed coup in September 1935, its leaders were exiled. Once again, corporatism was watered down and syndicalism suppressed, as was anything hinting of opposition to the regime. Portugal would not become a republic again until 1974.

Moving to the New World, we encounter Getúlio Vargas, who ruled Brazil as dictator from 1937 to
1945 and again from 1950 to 1954. Vargas was the civilian leader of Brazil’s shaky 1930 revolution against a parliamentary regime dominated by large-scale landowners. His goal was to “destroy the political oligarchs and to establish representation by class rather than through the old system of individual representation.” In 1934, a constitutional assembly approved a new constitution incorporating some of the basic ideas of corporatism. The Vargas-led government faced not only the usual economic crises but also two movements at opposite ends of the political spectrum: the fascists of the AIB (Brazilian Integralist Action) with its green shirt militia, and a Communist-supported coalition. The AIB was “The closest thing to an indigenous mass fascist party in Latin America” according to Robert Paxton. Following a failed Communist insurrection in November 1935, Vargas declared a “state of siege.” After several extensions, Parliament called for it to end. Under the law Vargas could not be re-elected. Inventing a communist conspiracy, he decreed the Estado Novo dictatorship on November 10, 1937. All parties were banned but the AIB, which had supported the coup. But soon it saw that the new political structure would not promote its radical syndicalist goals, leading it to attack the Presidential Palace in May 1938. The coup failed and the AIB was forced underground.

Vargas created a National Economic Council in which workers and employers were to be equally represented. Independent unions were replaced by state-controlled industry-wide syndicates. Modeled after Italian and Portuguese fascism, Vargas set up an Information and Propaganda Department that included a censorship apparatus. During May Day celebrations, Vargas celebrated the new official unions and posed as a champion of the working class. In 1940 his populism took the form of decreeing a minimum wage and a year later labor courts. He allowed union elections and tolerated some strikes. As the Allies began to turn the tide of the European war, Vargas repressed what was left of Brazil’s fascists and became the only Latin American leader to declare war on the Axis, even sending troops. He was rewarded with 70 percent of all U.S. aid to Latin America in the war years.

Vargas presided over rapid industrialization supported by foreign investments. By 1940 foreign capital accounted for half of Brazil’s stock holdings. Nevertheless, Vargas’ continuing populist message, including threats to expropriate foreign entities, disturbed not only investors but also the U.S. government. Ambassador Adolph A. Berle Jr. wanted to end the Estado Novo dictatorship and return Brazil to a parliamentary democracy. On October 29, 1945, Vargas was ousted by a military Junta. The Junta set up a parliamentary system and in the subsequent election, General Eurico Dutra, the Junta’s leader, was somehow elected President. He served until 1951. The United States was now in the midst of the Cold War and anti-Communist hysteria. Brazil dutifully severed relations with the Soviet Union, outlawed the Communist Party and purged leftists from unions. U.S. investments tripled by 1951.

Vargas was not finished, however. In a surprising comeback, he won the 1950 elections under the banner of the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB). His government established a national bank, a state oil company, Petrobas, and began moves to expropriate large estates and promote an agrarian reform program. This was too much. On August 24, 1954, the military told Vargas to resign or be deposed. Vargas, seventy-two, shot himself instead. The PTB nevertheless won the election in 1955, albeit under the military’s supervision. In 1961, João Goulart was elected president under the PTB’s banner. He was the biggest threat to business interests so far. In a by now familiar pattern throughout Latin America, CIA advice and money poured in to support forces opposed to Goulart. The Kennedy-Johnson administration’s intention was to overthrow not only the Cuban revolution, but all leftist and reform regimes in the hemisphere. The generals indeed organized a coup (supported by the U.S. Ambassador) which took over the government on April 1, 1964. Goulart fled into exile. The new regime, operating with the charade of two front parties, began a reign of terror, including “death squads” to destroy all opposition, especially on the left. Once again syndicalism lost out. It
was the end of democracy in Brazil for twenty-one years.

True fascism, by the austere definition used in this essay, involves programs advocating a restructuring of societies along corporatist or syndicalist lines. This means, first of all, the abolition of parliamentary structures in which squabbling political parties contest for the votes of individual citizens. In the interwar period, many European multi-party parliaments were headed by unstable coalition governments that were unable to enact coherent policies dealing with urgent issues, unemployment in particular. Instead of this chaos, under fascism, political and economic participation would be based on individuals' functional positions in the economy. This would take the form of membership in syndicates (or unions) or “corporations.” Under the leadership (and supervision) of a single party, theoretically representing the entire national community regardless of class (but not always regardless of race), these units would be coordinated by the state. The state would decree policies reflecting the interests of the national community rather than particular interest groups. Fascist programs would severely limit the property rights of large capital by, among other measures, imposing some version of state supervised codetermination, corporatism in the flesh. One can readily see how fascism would attract segments of the population fed up with disorder and suffering from economic insecurity. The charismatic leader, the disciplined ranks of uniformed men that were the public face of fascism, and the plan for a New Society, all could provide confidence that chaos could be overcome, security restored, and one could have pride in the national community once more.

In every case these fascisms were co-opted, pushed aside, even purged (physically) by sectors of the existing power structures who feared this extremism almost as much as Communism. Yet over the years these movements have been overlooked or treated as unimportant asides. They warrant a closer look because their programs were seen by supporters as a radical alternative to the left that could and did recruit from the working class and capture votes.

Today’s organized left, certainly in the United States, appears stuck in or near the Democratic Party, hustling to elect progressives, but also active in what is termed “street socialism,” working locally on the grubby reforms of day-to-day politics. Both strategies are the building blocks of gradual social change in a social-democratic direction. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. But what is missing is our own transformative vision, one that might capture the imagination and allegiance of the tired, the indifferent, the “Doomers,” and those who are enamored of the false patriotism and narrow identities promoted on the Right. All power to the imagination!

Notes

1. Fasci, the plural of Fascio, comes from sheaf, as in a sheaf of wheat, binding an ax; it was used ceremonially in Roman times. It is the Italian fascist emblem. Fascio is translated variously as legion, unit, band.

2. The term Fascism was not yet widely used, so it’s not clear that he actually used it. It was not in the Carta, which used the term Syndicalist. But the Carta is, strictly speaking, Corporatist because it includes employers.


5. Syndicalism is related to libertarian tendencies within the socialist movement. It opposes parliamentary systems in favor of representation by workers in their roles as producers, sometimes in the form of trade unions (syndicates). It is anti-capitalist.

6. Roberts, 98.

7. This “see-saw campaign,” from October 24 to November 19, 1917, involved a counter-attack by Austro-Hungarian troops after an Italian incursion. German troops were then sent to assist. The campaign ended with massive Italian casualties and Germany and Austria-Hungary occupying Italian territory.


12. Payne, 32

13. Payne quotes extensively from the speech (38-41).


17. Paxton, 192.

