

# Fascism

## A conceptual characterization



Since the interwar period, thousands of books, articles and pamphlets have been written about different fascist movements. However, it is still difficult to find a comprehensive definition that embraces all fascist variants, including those different from Italian Fascism and German National Socialism, such as the Central and Eastern European samples. In 1984, professor **Enric Ucelay Da Cal**<sup>1</sup> (currently at the Universidad Pompeu Fabra –UPF–, Barcelona) proposed a description, which can work as a theoretical and methodological skeleton for a research agenda centred on new and historical Fascism. This proposal covers different dimensions of this political form. Firstly, it tackles this phenomenon from the ideological approach, based on the considerations of Palmiro Togliatti:<sup>2</sup>

"I warn you against the tendency to regard fascist ideology as something that is solidly formed, complete, homogeneous. Nothing more closely resembles a chameleon than fascist ideology. *Don't look at fascist ideology without considering the objectives which fascism proposes to reach at a given moment with a given ideology.*"

---

<sup>1</sup> "Fascismo y nacionalismo en Catalunya, 1919-1936," Public Conference, University of Barcelona, October 26, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Then member of the Secretariat of the Communist International: *Lecciones sobre el fascismo* (Ediciones de Cultura Popular, México D.F., 1977), 33-34. The text was originally published in Italian in 1970, based on a cycle of conferences of the Communist International in 1935. Available in English: *Lectures on Fascism* (International Publishers, New York, 1976).

**1.-** Hence, fascist discourse – not only speeches, but also symbols and gestures – can be **chameleon-like, amoebic, even protean**. On this bases, it would be inappropriate to speak about sorts of *religious fascism, labour fascism, leftist fascism*, etc. The fascist discourse can take different shapes or adopt different nuances at different times, mostly for tactical reasons, in a given social circumstance.

**2.-** Secondly, it may happen that a political party defines itself as fascist from the moment it is created. However, it has not been the matter in most of the cases. Fascism can infiltrate or dye any political party or movement at concrete moments and with different intensities. Thus, fascism can be (and usually is) a **temporary option** for a previously formed party movement or other ideological tendencies.

Considering these assumptions, fascism can be defined considering three features.

**A.-** Ideologically, fascism is a form of **exalted nationalism**, eminently understood from a restrictive approach. This means that self-assertion of patriotic feelings excludes the rest of political parties, and even entire sectors of the population. This form of nationalism is portrayed through a fighting component in **symbols and rituals**, which play an important role in the self-affirmation of the group.

**B.-** Secondly, fascism leans towards militarism, both at organizational and tactical levels. **Fascism seeks military-looking and authoritarian solutions for political problems**. This trend has a concrete consequence if the fascist movement manages to take over institutional power. Thus, Poulantzas' features the state apparatus' drift during the emergence of a fascism as the progressive reinforcement of executive over the rest of state branches<sup>3</sup>.

**C.-** Finally, the fascist discourse always contains **the need to destroy a hypothetical inside enemy**, which threatens the national group's survival. This feature may be accompanied by tendencies towards external expansionism; but it is generally characterised by the exaltation of the community of origin. Thus, fascist movements lead middle class resentment in critical periods against the enemies of the nation, the fifth column.

---

<sup>3</sup> Within executive bureaucracies, the political police is on the top of the hierarchy. Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (Verso, London, 1979), 333.