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## Why Fascism is on the Rise the World Over

By: Kaushik Jayaram

*Fascist parties have gained support the world over, even in European nations where they were once disavowed. A 'New Despotism' has emerged, which uses the trappings of democracy to cultivate a mass psychology similar to and yet different from fascism.*

Exactly a hundred years after the Fascists acquired power in Italy, their lineal neo-fascist descendant has come to power at the head of a coalition of three right-wing parties. In 1922, the king of Italy capitulated to Benito Mussolini and his threat of a march to Rome. This time the transition is peaceful, democratic, and a legitimate exercise in electoral politics.

The social coalition backing the Italian neo-fascists remains broadly the same: the middle class, broad sections of the urban working class, and the farmers. Only the class of large landowners is missing, being a largely extinct species in Europe.

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In Europe, as elsewhere globally, there has been a steady drift towards majoritarianism and rejection of liberal democratic values. Proto-fascist ideas masquerading as Populism have gained widespread support. Hungary and Poland have proto-fascist forces well entrenched in government. In Sweden, France, and Germany, far-right parties have made substantial gains in electoral politics.

Who would have imagined that in [Italy after Mussolini](#), France after Vichy, and even in Germany, proto-fascist parties would not merely survive but thrive? But fascist ideas strike deep roots in the collective psyche and persist even in societies where they were once utterly disavowed.

### The endurance of fascism

Fascist ideas are mostly abstract and intangible, appealing to emotion rather than to the intellect. A cult of tradition or calling on the past does not require an examination of history or if such a past ever existed. Similarly, fascism readily embraces technology and glorifies it, while simultaneously rejecting modernism or the spirit of scientific enquiry. It harks back to some mythical past, and evokes national pride and historic grievances. It appeals to a majoritarian identity, which must find an antagonist, foreign or domestic, to project as an existential threat to that identity.

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These ideas have little to do with the daily life and experience of the broad mass of people but serve to deflect and distract. Indeed, fascism may have become an all-purpose term precisely because of its fuzzy nature. (The Italian scholar [Umberto Eco](#) viewed “fascism” as the archetype of right-wing authoritarian movements, which might share some features with each other but differ in a variety of ways.)

### Inherent tendencies

William Reich was among the first to consider the inherent conditions in society as the basis for the growth of fascism. His central insight was that widespread support for fascist movements arose from the “mass psychology of fascism.” This innate tendency which inclines people towards an authoritarian ideology came from the authoritarian and patriarchal roots of a society, he argued.

Reich’s pioneering study was first published in 1933, when the Nazi regime had just acquired state power in Germany. The revised edition, published in 1942, amplified his point with a greater understanding of the Nazi regime.

“Fascist mentality is the mentality of the subjugated “little man” who craves authority and rebels against it at the same time. It is not an accident that all fascist dictators stem from the milieu of the little reactionary man.” (Reich 1942: 11)

|| [Honour and duty] while important to their moral compass were not necessarily required in actual practice.

The social milieu he described was that of a class of petty traders, independent craftsmen, and the petty bourgeoisie in Germany in the aftermath of the First World War. This class had come of age in an authoritarian monarchy which was conservative and intensely patriarchal.

They venerated morality, honour, and duty towards the nation and society. While these phrases are a staple of fascist propaganda, the masses saw them not as propaganda but as an expression of their own values.

This class was also amoral. Minor dishonesty in business or trade was a part of everyday life. Abstract ideals, while important to their moral compass, were not necessarily required in actual practice.

For Reich, it was precisely these contradictions which were at the heart of the mass psychology of fascism.

## Us and them

The social and economic conditions in the early 21st century are vastly different from the stratified and rigid society of early 20th century Europe. Nevertheless, there are striking similarities in attitudes and group psychology. Could Reich be relevant to understand the present context?

An individual in present-day society is apparently not that different from the “subjugated little man” of Wilhelm Reich, at once subservient and rebellious. The similarity surfaces in everyday populist attitudes, which are decidedly proto-fascist in outlook.

Populist attitudes amongst people – as distinguished from politics of populism – is a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6).

Amongst the common utterances emblematic of this attitude are: “I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by an experienced politician”, or “people, not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions”. “The elite capture of politics does not represent the will of the people.” “What people call ‘compromise’ in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.”

An authoritarian figure who promises simple solutions to sweep away all the social evils is seen as the one who understands and reflects the people’s values and fears. Contemporary politics has seen the mass adulation of self-proclaimed strong leaders – a Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Bolsonaro or Modi – an adulation which is quite independent of the character of the personalities themselves. An imagined golden age is sought in the past: as in India in the period before Muslim rule; in the case of Poland, during the reign of Casimir the Great in the 14th century; or even the 1950s and 1960s in Sweden, when there was little or no immigration by black and brown people.

## Cutting across class

[Surveys](#) and [reports](#) have documented the rapid of spread populism in Europe from the turn of the century to the present.

These populist attitudes are not antithetical to democracy, indeed quite the reverse. They could be seen as expressions of basic tenets of democracy but also a sense of disillusionment with the institutions of democracy.

|| Difficult choices and compromises inherent in a democratic society lose out when confronted with populist solutions.

Modern societies face a number of problems, and more importantly, involve choices. Constitutionalism entails compromises. Equity demands due share for all in equal measure. However, the difficult choices and compromises inherent in a democratic society lose out when confronted with populist solutions that could cut through the tangled mess of constitutionalism. Corruption and failure of the political elite contribute in no small measure. There is also considerable evidence that increased representation of members of the [traditional minority](#) is experienced by dominant groups as threatening in various ways. (Stanley 2020: 94-95)

Although inequality in income and wealth may have increased substantially, support for right-wing movements is spread across a wide spectrum of society. A shared value system transcends contradictory and, even conflicting, class interests. Society seems to be divided in terms of value systems which are nominally and somewhat lazily categorised as conservative or liberal.

That there could be intrinsic conditions in the collective psyche resonates to a surprising extent in the current context. When we explore the underlying causes or drivers as it were, it boils down to two key elements: the politics of identity and the politics of resentment.

## A new despotism

Are we seeing a return of classical fascism or the emergence of a new form of authoritarianism?

While the past offers its lessons, the present needs to be understood in its own context.

Italian fascism was the first right-wing totalitarian movement in Europe. It was followed by several such movements over the next two decades with varying degrees of success. While these movements differed in their particular forms, they shared some common characteristics: a leadership cult, a semi-militaristic organisation, an ideology of hypernationalism, and exclusion.

What distinguishes the New Despotism is the use of the constitutional system and legal structure [and] democratic tools.

Fascist regimes systematically undermined the rule of law, and the institutions of liberal democracy and replaced them with repression and arbitrary rules. State power became an instrument of violence to perpetuate power and to crush ‘the enemy’.

While some of these characteristics can be seen in contemporary authoritarian regimes, the similarities with classical fascism end there. What distinguishes the New Despotism (Kean 2020) is the use of the constitutional system and legal structure, democratic tools, laws, and mass media to bend society towards its ideology.

The ‘new despots’ do not dispense of democratic trappings, but, seek to legitimise their actions through popular sanction. For them, it is not sufficient that the people acquiesce or tolerate their policies or actions, they must enthusiastically endorse and rejoice in them. The more brazen the lies and deception, the greater must be the mass support and the denial of objective reality.

It is not so easy to maintain the illusion that fascism dies when democracy matures.

In other words, the politics of mass fascism are deliberately nurtured. Its people cannot be victims, but must be willing participants in the process. The supporters of the regime are not merely content to support it but also actively demonise and attack the real or imagined enemies of the regime. That is undoubtedly the fascism of the masses.

## Does this ever end?

In thrall to this mass psychology, there is a little Oskar Matzerath in everybody, a metaphorical proto-fascist from Gunter Grass’s picaresque novel, *The Tin Drum*. Little Oskar refuses to grow, or is incapable of it. His silent scream is at once a cry of agony and a potent weapon that can shatter the glass house of democracy. When Oskar eventually grows up, he regains his voice but loses his destructive ability.

Unlike in the story, however, it is not so easy to maintain the illusion that fascism dies when democracy matures. Instead, as Grass, who after a lifetime of anti-fascism, shamefacedly confessed to his own part in the movement – the taint endures.

*Kaushik Jayaram is a former central banker who worked for many years in an international financial organisation.*

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