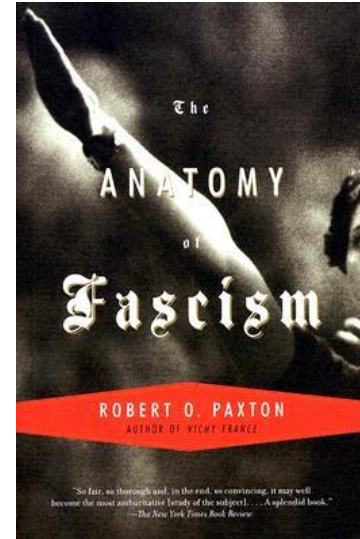


**Fascism Today in Light of
its Historical Complexity**

a review of

**The Anatomy
of Fascism**

By Robert Paxton (2004)



This book gives an excellent survey of diverse fascist movements and regimes as they played out historically. Professor Paxton's point is that there is no overriding ideology, rather there are certain characteristics that manifest themselves differently, depending on the historical circumstances and cultures.

Only in Germany and Italy did fascist movements achieve full governing power, transforming themselves accordingly, whereas fascism appeared, but failed, in most Western countries in the 1930s and often again two generations later. Today, after the writing of this book, fascism is again threatening, or even succeeding. Paxton asks, Why? – What circumstances give rise to widespread fascist movements, and how can they be suppressed, avoiding monumental damage?

At the end of the book, Paxton gives this one paragraph description, as a summary of what he learned: “Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” (p 218).

In particular, purely dictatorial rule, such as Franco's Spain, or totalitarian rule, such as Stalin's Russia, are not considered fascist. Both lack the "parallel party structures", which rule in tandem with the traditional society. Franco deliberately made his party weak while Stalin made his so strong that the traditional civil society was crushed.

In Nazi Germany the party structures, especially its paramilitary and police (SA, Gestapo), became very powerful but a good portion of civil society survived by being intimidated into compliance. In Italy, civil society remained far stronger, especially the Catholic church, which put a check on brute force. But both Hitler and Mussolini relied on charisma and exhortations to strength, while demonizing Communists (dreaded after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia) and other scapegoated groups, such as Jews, but dealing shrewdly with indispensable business and worker interests.

The backdrop in post WW I Europe, was the huge shock of the war, especially for Germany, combined with the shock of the Great Depression. Thus Paxton sees large scale socio-economics disruption as the precondition for fascism, but not as determinative. In addition, industrialization for Germany and Italy was late and rapid, hence more disruptive than for England and France. Also, militarism and imperialism were still in full swing and would not be dampened until after WW II.

And it's not like the US was innocent. The US could have done more to prevent the humiliation of Germany after WW I and to prevent the Great Depression. Paxton points out that it was the failure of the traditional power structures that drove so many worldwide to consider fascism as the most palatable alternative; that is, better than Communism.

Henry Ford was not the only fascist sympathizer in the 1930s. Often this governmental failure was interpreted as the failure of liberal

democracy itself, rather than as its historical immaturity confronting unprecedented circumstances.

So what does all this say about today? Well, again, we are confronted with rapid socio-economic change, this time due to corporate globalization. The result has been a dramatic escalation of economic inequality inside many countries, especially the US (a typical worker should be earning twice as much, instead it's gone to the rich), even as inequality has declined between nations. Meanwhile the economic powers-that-be continue to dominate politics (both major parties in the US), cultivating cultural wars to cement political gridlock. Thus the stage is set for fascist-type uprisings.

In the US Trump took full advantage of this situation, drawing on several fascist tactics, gaining Stage 2 power in Paxton's terminology, but failing to advance to full fascist state power (subversion of law and liberty). Trump's charisma and ability to exploit the media are obvious features of fascism. He also understood the humiliation of the working class, promising to "Make America Great Again".

Trump also promoted an energetic nationalism, even attempting to downscale trade agreements (Trans-Pacific Partnership), military alliances (NATO), and foreign wars (Afghanistan), deviating from the expansionism of Hitler and Mussolini. Meanwhile, despite gestures toward reviving US industrial jobs, Trump's collaboration with traditional elites was very conspicuous (\$1.5 trillion tax cut).

Trump flaunted ethical transgression, with a vast multitude of lies, but only at the very end did he go all out to breakdown constitutional law (the Jan 6 insurrection and voter fraud conspiracy theory). Fortunately, the checks and balance of the founding fathers beat back this assault. Yet the underlying preconditions for fascism are now (early 2022) being addressed only inadvertently, via labor shortages, as the economy revives from the pandemic shutdowns. The stage is set for a new politics but it is yet to emerge.

In addition, fascist tendencies and tactics extend far beyond national politics into ideological extremes on both the Left and the Right. Trump's rhetoric brought out latent racism and white supremacy on the Right, along with more militancy on traditional right wing causes (voting restrictions, immigrants, abortion, etc.). Meanwhile many on the Left responded by throwing fuel on the fires of cultural wars (cancel culture, defund the police, critical race theory, queer theory, etc).

Both extremes in the US promote authoritarian, illiberal ideologies, fears, and practices, but with social media and balkanized media playing increasingly dominant roles versus charismatic leaders. Physical violence is still present, such as after the death of George Floyd, but verbal violence has become the dominant weapon. Both extremes have a legitimate sense of victimhood due to the debasement of the working class and the strong competition for good middle class jobs.

Paxton's key point is that fascism "reconfigured relations between the individual and the collective, so that an individual had no rights outside community interest". In particular, "It changed the practice of citizenship from the enjoyment of constitutional rights and duties to mass ceremonies of affirmation and conformity" and "unleashed aggressive emotions" (p 11). Much like identity politics today.