

ATLANTIC MONTHLY

November, 1933

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

BY MAX ASCOLI

I

IN certain quarters it is asserted that Mr. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' is nothing other than the first stage of an American movement toward Fascism. It is said that, although the United States has not yet adopted the political structure of Italy and Germany, the economic structure of the country is rapidly being moulded upon the Fascist pattern. It is commonly assumed that every social and political change that occurs in our time must catapult us in the direction either of Bolshevism or of Fascism: since the New Deal is patently not a lapse into Bolshevism, it must, then, be a resort to Fascism.

So runs the argument, and those who advance it find it useful to draw upon Marx for a bit of class theory. It would obviously be difficult to show that the driving force of the Administration stems from the political pressure of the proletariat, so it is said that Mr. Roosevelt's programme represents the interests of the middle class. Thus the American 'forgotten man,' crushed by technology and capitalism, is identified as the brother of those white-collar workers and petty ex-army officers who staged the Fascist revolutions in Italy and in Germany.

This careless use of a label would be amusing if Fascism were not a shocking reality in two of the greatest countries of Europe. To imply that Mr. Roosevelt is a disciple of Mussolini not only

OldMagazineArticles.com

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

does the President a grave disservice but leads to muddled thinking, for it is only too evident that those who make such assertions do not know what Fascism is. Since Hitler's rise to power, the notion that Fascism is a revolution of the lower middle class has gained wide currency, and has been accepted so literally that it has lost some of its elements of truth. More and more, people are coming to think of Fascism as a movement of men who chose to wear black shirts or brown because they could not afford to keep their white collars clean. It is not as simple as that.

The only way to find out what Fascism is is to look at the two Fascist countries. The experiences of Italy and Germany integrate each other very usefully in giving us an understanding of the elements common to both.

In Italy, Fascism was quick in reaching power, but slow in developing its policies as a régime; in Germany, the process was reversed, so that Germany offers a complete analytical picture of the constituent parts that go into the making of Fascism before it comes to power. By tracing the development of the political movements in both nations and by observing the nature of the governments set up in each, we can sift out those unifying elements which may be regarded as the peculiar characteristics of Fascism.

II

(1) Fascism depends, in the first instance, upon certain self-appointed leaders who emerge from the lower strata of the middle class. In both Italy and Germany these leaders were by-products of the war. They were men of little education, and they came out of the war having learned only one lesson — the art of mastering and regimenting

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

crowds. In time of peace this art becomes almost useless, or it is practised only by a few professional politicians; but these young men did not know any other craft, and they wanted to act. Moreover, they knew something that political theorists and even many politicians ignore: they knew what was behind such generalizations as 'proletarian class,' 'socialism,' 'patriotism,' and 'liberalism.' In the army they had seen the so-called radical mellowing his sharp class feeling in the companionship of a well-bred boy, the anarchist marching happily in step with the regiment's band, the professional patriot terror-stricken by the idea of imminent danger. Even though they had no college degrees, their knowledge of human nature was greater than any to be gleaned from books. They *had* to lead because they did not know how to do anything else, and their zeal was inflamed by the certainty that if they failed their future would be marked by the slavery of some lowly clerical job or of manual labor.

These small bourgeois desperadoes were not immediately recognized as leaders by the middle class. Soon, however, they began to enlist the sympathies of small capitalists, especially the agrarians, who did not want to be driven to a proletarian life either by political revolution or by economic pressure. And, naturally, the reaction against an imagined political revolution was more fiery, as well as more easily stirred up, than any which could have been brought about against economic pressure.

The natural leadership bred by the war was supplemented by aid from a second set of men — the professionals of the socialist or labor organizations who had seceded from their movements because of the heresies which are always

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

threatening the orthodoxy of the left-wing churches. These men also knew how to handle crowds, and they, too, were longing for action. A socialist or laborite organization of workers, powerful and on a national scale, is, then, one of the necessary prerequisites of Fascism, because it creates in the masses the habit of discipline and of regimentation, and it educates a set of technicians who know how the workers' units can be formed, conquered, or gagged. If American industrialists have leanings toward Fascism, as is sometimes said, it is unfortunate for them that they should so long have championed anti-union policies and the open shop.

(2) If the kind of leadership which I have just described was the leaven of Fascism, the lump itself was made ready by the post-war youth movement. This not only accounts for the rank and file who were shortly to acclaim the self-appointed leaders, but it also constitutes the best moral justification of Fascism.

In the natural course of events, there is a day-by-day infiltration of young people into civil life; they acquire their education and adopt their political ideals in the social environment of their parents. All this was absolutely stopped in the greatest nations of Europe during the more than four years of the war. A whole generation was blocked. Young men who were just at the beginning of their business or professional careers performed the terrible task of protecting their countries, but at the same time they lost contact with their countries.

During the cataclysm, every nation learned to fight and had its heroes, but not every nation was prepared to suffer the shock that followed upon the secession of a generation. This did not

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

depend so much upon the strength of the democratic institutions in the several countries as upon the historical training which each country had had in adjusting itself to similar disruptions in the past. Such training was almost nonexistent in the two European nations which were the last to arrive at national unity and which had just fought their first national war. They were consumed entirely in the fires of war, and no historical tradition, no underlying wisdom of the race, was strong enough to recapture the lost generation.

In Italy, under the energetic direction of people who could do nothing but lead, the war generation swept onward like an avalanche. The mass of young veterans were more responsive to new emotional ideas voiced by sly leaders than to the tradition of the Risorgimento. In Germany the avalanche was even more sweeping, carrying the post-war generation along with the ex-soldiers, because the gap between old and young Germany that had been opened by the war became a chasm during and after the period of inflation.

(3) The conjoined movement of the middle class against the proletariat and of the young generation against the old was sentimental and incoherent, inspired by a will to believe more than by beliefs. But once the Fascists seized control of the state, they had to have a programme, and they found it in the state itself. Suddenly they realized that there was a deep kinship between the intransigence of a party sprung from the loins of war and the character—leviathan-like, mechanical, omnipresent—of the modern state. The more familiar they became with the machinery of the state, the more fanatical they grew in their enthusiasm for it. So it came about that they

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

were soon advocating the use of every instrument of government to solve economic or religious problems.

Fascists like to travel at full speed ahead. Their most important concern is to get things done, and done quickly; so with the hot blood of youth they set on to destroy every check and balance which the prudence of older generations had framed to minimize the dangers of running the machine. If Fascism in Italy and Germany is uncompromising and oppressive, it is because such is the nature of the state itself when every check upon its power has been removed. In Germany, the Nazi idea of nationality is bloody and forbidding, and it is bound to be so when the state loses the control of reason and is materialized in an irresponsible political or legal machine. At times, Fascism appears to be a kind of political Fordism, centring every human interest at the feet of a mechanical god.

In both Italy and Germany the Fascist state intervenes in economic life: hence the general belief that Fascism tends toward some form of state socialism or state capitalism. There is no more dangerous illusion, for governmental control can be superimposed upon any kind of economic system. State control may be used to protect the hunting grounds of big business by establishing a private partnership in profits between businessmen and governmental or party officials; it may tend toward bureaucracy, with plenty of jobs for the middle class; it may be the instrument for carrying out a policy of outright confiscation. Anything is possible. As yet, there is no clear sign that the Fascists have made a choice. Last October, in a speech celebrating the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, Mussolini said: 'If the crisis is of the system,

which is the capitalistic system, it would be ruinous to attempt to solve it by aggravating its terms; wherever private capitalism has been extended to form state capitalism, poverty has been absolutely dreadful.'

(4) 'Everything within the state' is Mussolini's slogan. But the machinery of the state exists as an instrument for executing the purposes of government; its use may suggest a method, but not a programme. So the fourth characteristic of Fascism derives from the effort that had to be made to discover a really revolutionary goal, and it was a goal which the Italian Fascists did not fully formulate until about four years after they came to power — a drastic prohibition of politics. This is by far the greatest originality of Fascism, as well as its source of strongest appeal to the intolerant and reckless spirit of the new generation.

Now politics is such a pivotal element in the social organization that the Fascists were obliged to invent a most complicated system to suppress it. Political ferment may be stimulated by ideas, so the Fascists take charge of education; politics may grow out of the clash of opposite interests, so the Fascists watch both the capitalists and the proletarians. Thus the state syndicates in Italy are governed by the same criteria as are the universities and the press. In these efforts to sterilize all the seeds of politics and to substitute in their place new-fangled sentiments and symbols, one cannot find any mark of class interests. Fascism is simply a party organization which demands for itself a monopoly of politics in order to prevent autonomous expression in other forms.

From the prohibition of politics flow some of the most striking and distinguishing manifestations of the

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

Fascist spirit: the substitution of unanimity for dissent; the formulation of myths, symbols, and ceremonies to make articulate the life of the masses; the persecution of individuals in time of peace by some of the people who lost their individualities in time of war.

(5) The prohibition of politics leads to a system under which all decisions are accepted from above, a rigid hierarchy being set up and crowned at the top by an all-powerful, irresponsible leader. Here Fascist politics transforms itself into a kind of religion. The ordinary human being, kept as a more or less voluntary prisoner of the state and forbidden to translate his sentiments and interests into political terms, is offered, both as compensation and as relaxation, the worship of the only man who is free, uncontrolled, and above the laws. It is a very strange form of religion, with an indissoluble trinity of Nation, State, and Party embodied in a living god.

(6) The last element to be noted as a common denominator of Fascism in both Italy and Germany is a peculiar kind of intellectual disintegration. It shows itself in a corrosive and debauching criticism of fundamental moral and political beliefs, in a nihilism that brushes reason aside and insists that the only realities are 'cold facts and successful deeds,' in a despairing and disparaging view of ordinary human nature and an absolute faith in the impersonal forces of history. At the same time, Fascist leaders poison the minds of the masses with high-powered injections of rhetoric, their soap-box oratory fostering an uncritical popular belief in any nostrum that may seem momentarily expedient, whether it be nationalism, Marxism, or anti-Semitism.

If it is true that these six elements are the prime characteristics of Fascism, we see that the phenomenon is one of remarkable magnitude. In the chaotic whirl of events that followed the war, both in Italy and in Germany, a few small bourgeois desperadoes were thrown up to the surface of public life, youth revolted against age, the state was set up as an object of idolatry, political activity was prohibited, human gods were offered for worship, and, finally, the exhausted thought of two nations meekly accepted its own suppression. These several manifestations of unrest reënforced one another, and, blending together, produced that monstrous new thing under the sun which we call Fascism.

Now if this is what Fascism is, can there be any justification for the assertion, frequently and glibly made, that Mr. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' is an American experiment in Fascism? Let us see.

Of the six elements here outlined as necessary conditions of Fascism, only the last can be found in the United States in any noticeable measure. The others are present, to be sure, but in a more or less homeopathic form — just enough of each to enable Americans to understand the foreign disease. It is a peculiarity of this country to harbor the germs of every illness to which the body politic is subject, so that the United States has lived through its history in a state of chronic indisposition so slight that it is almost good health, thanks to the process of spontaneous immunization. This need not inspire one with blind confidence that America's good luck will last forever, but it is enough to make one skeptical about such things as the much-publicized distrust of Congress, the agitation of veterans, and the

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

crash of financial empires. More specifically, if the crisis of the middle class is acute in this country, there is as yet no sign of a ruthless, autonomous leadership arising among dispossessed small landowners or jobless white-collar workers.

Our age has witnessed strange attempts to suppress or reform some of the most fundamental attitudes of mankind. Russia is trying to destroy the classical 'economic man.' Italy and Germany want to cripple the 'political animal' of Aristotle. America, too, has been touched by this mania, but in the luckiest way, as an effort to exterminate the drinking animal — and the results are known. Is it reasonable to suppose, as some would have us believe, that this country is now going to substitute for the Eighteenth Amendment the more drastic prohibition of politics in the Fascist manner?

It seems to me demonstrable that, as a result of the tremendous experiments which President Roosevelt has launched, the political current in the United States will flow in precisely the opposite direction. While the Fascists prohibit politics, America is already witnessing a marked revival of interest in political activities. President Roosevelt has brought business under the control of the Administration, which means that it will henceforth be impossible for any sensible citizen to think of politics as being the exclusive concern of politicians now that political action has a direct and immediate influence upon his pocket. Moreover, Mr. Roosevelt's adventures in this field will result in the accumulation of so much experience and of so many concrete cases of one kind or another that Congress will be provided with material for careful and ordered legislation through many years to

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

legislation through many years to come. A country with a federal structure, with deep economic and political prejudices, with a common law system and the supervision of a Supreme Court, cannot embark upon a programme of fundamental legislative changes without a preliminary period of experimentation. This Mr. Roosevelt is supplying, and, whatever be the outcome of his work, we can be sure that a prohibition of politics will not be included among his methods.

The idea of economic planning, it should be added, is not Fascist. There are two kinds of planning — administrative planning conducted by an all-powerful state with every detail of economic and political activity in charge of a special department, and coördinative planning that tries to harmonize different organizations each of which is independent and capable of self-directed action. The first may seem the more efficient, but it must fight at every step against the inertia and confusion created by the tremendous multiplication of its activities, as well as against such plotting and wire-pulling as must inevitably result from the lack of external control. The second can work only through persuasion, moral pressure, and compromise. This may not appear to be efficient, but when one recalls how slowly and uncertainly Italy has moved under her dictator, one is tempted to predict that, relying on public opinion, General Johnson and Mr. Peck will do more for the cause of planning in six months than the omnipotent Fascist state did in six years.

The current experience of the United States will show, I suspect, that Fascism is not the inevitable form which a non-Bolshevist society must take, but rather that it is abnormal and

FASCISM IN THE MAKING

pathological. Philosophically, Fascism is a movement whose leaders are civilians in riding boots. Politically, it is an entirely new type of tyranny, both personal and demagogic — a tyranny which for the first time in history exploits the mob spirit in an era of universal suffrage and gives to the supreme leaders irresponsible power as limitless as that of the modern state. In contrast to this picture, we now see in America a leader who has never played the rôle of hero or savior, and whose greatest ambition appears to be to look like a common human being, a member of the middle class by voluntary affiliation. Without frowning or putting on a mask of ferocity, he has taken on his shoulders the heaviest burden that any President ever assumed; he does not shirk the responsibility, and he stands ready to give an account of his stewardship when the time comes.

In spite of the novelty of Mr. Roosevelt's experiments, perhaps the most appropriate term for this new American way of grappling with social and economic unrest is still the good old word 'democracy.'

OldMagazineArticles.com