

Five Facts About Fascism

This past Saturday was the 100th anniversary of the forming of the Fascist movement in Milan, Italy in 1919. Here are five facts you should know about fascism:

1. Benito Mussolini coined the term "[fascism](#)" in 1919 to describe his political movement, the black-shirted members the *Fasci di combattimento* ("combat groups"), who seized power in Italy in 1922. Mussolini's party adopted the fasces, a bundle of rods with an ax among them, as a symbol of the Italian people united and obedient to the single authority of the state. Although the English word fascist was first used for members of Mussolini's movement, the term has since been used to refer to a broader set of similar beliefs.

2. Scholars have long noted the difficulty in defining what constitutes fascism. As George Orwell lamented in his essay "[What is Fascism?](#)" (1944), "almost any English person would accept 'bully' as a synonym for 'Fascist'. That is about as near to a definition as this much-abused word has come." The [BBC Magazine also noted](#) in 2009 that, "Broadly speaking, in political discourse, it is a 'boo word', a term used more for purposes of condemnation than precise categorisation." "As of now," [adds Lachlan Montague](#), an Australian-based researcher of fascism, "the term 'fascist' has been used as an insult so much [that] it has diluted the meaning, and in particular the evil nature the word carries."

3. Despite the misuse of the term, there are clear attributes associated with fascism. Robert O. Paxton, a professor emeritus of history at Columbia University who is often dubbed the father of fascism studies, defines fascism as both a political movement and political practice. As a form of political practice, fascism arouses popular enthusiasm by sophisticated propaganda techniques for an anti-liberal, anti-socialist, violently exclusionary, expansionist nationalist

agenda. As a mass nationalist movement fascism is intended to restore a country that's been damaged or is in decline, by expansion, by violent attacks on enemies, internal as well as external enemies, and measures of authority, the replacement of democracy by an authoritarian dictatorship.

4. Fascism is based more on feelings than philosophical ideas, notes Paxton. In his essay "[The Five Stages of Fascism](#)," published in 1998 in the Journal of Modern History, he defined seven feelings that act as "mobilizing passions" for fascist regimes. As Paxton says, the following mobilizing passions are present in fascisms, though they may sometimes be articulated only implicitly:

- The primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual.
- The belief that one's group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the group's enemies, internal as well as external.
- Dread of the group's decadence under the corrosive effect of individualistic and cosmopolitan liberalism.
- Closer integration of the community within a brotherhood (*fascia*) whose unity and purity are forged by common conviction, if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary.
- An enhanced sense of identity and belonging, in which the grandeur of the group reinforces individual self-esteem.
- Authority of natural leaders (always male) throughout society, culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group's destiny.
- The beauty of violence and of will, when they are devoted to the group's success in a Darwinian struggle.

5. A primary stated goal of fascist governments is autarky, or

national self-sufficiency. But as an economic system, [says Sheldon Richman](#), fascism is socialism with a capitalist veneer:

Where socialism sought totalitarian control of a society's economic processes through direct state operation of the means of production, fascism sought that control indirectly, through domination of nominally private owners. Where socialism nationalized property explicitly, fascism did so implicitly, by requiring owners to use their property in the "national interest"—that is, as the autocratic authority conceived it. (Nevertheless, a few industries were operated by the state.) Where socialism abolished all market relations outright, fascism left the appearance of market relations while planning all economic activities. Where socialism abolished money and prices, fascism controlled the monetary system and set all prices and wages politically.

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