

READINGS OF FASCISM – THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE

Entrevista com o historiador Roger Griffin

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On the 100th anniversary of the March on Rome, and in the current context of the growth of the far-right (when the concept of fascism has again been under strong scrutiny), some hypotheses being discussed, such as ultra-right, neo-fascism, post-fascism, among others – it is worth reflecting on this key event in twentieth-century history. In this context, it is important to listen to the historian Roger Griffin.

Roger Griffin is an emeritus Professor at Oxford Brooks University. He is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading experts on the socio-historical and ideological dynamics of fascism, as well as on the relationship between modernity and forms of violence stemming from a different expression of political or religious fanaticism, and in particular contemporary terrorism. His theory of fascism as a revolutionary form of ultra-nationalism driven by a 'palingenetic' myth has had a major impact on comparative fascist studies since the mid-1990s. He is the author of the books *The Nature of Fascism* (1993), *Fascism, Totalitarianism, and Political Religion* (2005), and *Modernism and Fascism* (2007), among others. He was also the co-founder of the renowned journal *Fascism*. In 2018 Roger Griffin was in Coimbra, having participated in the conference "Obras Públicas no Estado Novo", organised by Joana Brites and Luís Miguel Correia, which resulted in a book with the same title (2020). In 2022, also in Coimbra, he gave the lecture *Readings of Fascism*.

Biblos: Karl Marx once wrote – that over-quoted sentence – about how history repeats itself, first as a tragedy, then as a farce. Do you agree, since so many people compare our age with 1914, 1918, the Crimea War, the Spanish Civil War, Czechoslovakia in 1938, the Winter War, and so on?

Roger Griffin: As I see it, if any of those wars were to repeat themselves now there would be nothing farcical about them. You only have to see the crimes against humanity, civilian and military, being committed daily in Ukraine or remember the Russian destruction in Chechnya and Syria to realize how devastating a modern war can be even when not fought on a similar scale to that of the Spanish Civil War, let alone the Second World War. But I do not believe history repeats itself at the level of current events.

The constants in modern history are broadly repeated patterns in the organized acts of inhumanity discernible in wars of conquest and the mass violence targeted at civilian populations; in the way psychotic, sociopathic leaders seal themselves off from reason, surround themselves with morally ideological fanatics, bankrupt opportunists and yes-men, terrorize their own populations through state oppression and propaganda to silence and persecute opposition; and in the behaviour of leaders and elites embodying secular or religious faiths and who pervert these faiths, even mystical creeds such as Buddhism (e.g. in Sri Lanka and Myanmar), and the original utopian idealism of communism (e.g. in Pol Pot's Cambodia or North Korea) to justify mass murder and persecution. But these patterns are never identical, and for forensic historical understanding, the devil is always in the detail. The human capacity for "othering" (dehumanising) segments of a population or entire ethnic groups and so withdrawing empathy for the suffering of fellow human beings, is, it seems, a constant of human behaviour and human history. But obviously the power of the political elite and the destructive power of the military have "progressed" since the simultaneous rise of modern technology, communications and the modern centralized state to create even more efficiency in techniques of surveillance and repression and means to inflict suffering and shorten or ruin lives. There is little farce to detect, even if in their way all paranoid leaders end up being the star of their own lethal, black farces. Though for a glorious example of how artists can wring humor out of horror I recommend the film *The Death of Stalin* (2017).

Biblos: I attended the premiere of *Fight Club* (1999). I do know that you have analysed this movie in one of your books. I realise it's possible to find some influences in the work of Sorel and Nietzsche (often cited as influences on historical fascism) and some kind of transition from an anarchist/nihilistic group towards fascism. Do you think we can make this assumption or are you talking about different patterns?

Roger Griffin: I think we have to be careful about jumping to conclusions about influences on individual authors or international political

“isms” such as fascism. I doubt whether Chuck Palahniuk actually read Sorel, though there is a reference to Nietzsche in one scene. It is probably more fruitful to see the novel/film as a product of a modern culture awash with millions of extreme images, ideas and states of mind which are experienced uniquely by each individual and which intellectuals can relate back to the ideas of artists and philosophers. An entire essay or academic article could be written about how the mood and imagery of a song such as Bob Dylan’s *Desolation Road* resonates with scores of “modern” artists and thinkers drawing on psychoanalysis and existentialism, some cited in the lyrics, but artists are magpies collecting shiny objects from art and experience which have an epiphanic value and then creating original expressions of archetypal insights.

As for a fascistic element in *Fight Club*, in terms of the actual narrative, Project Mayhem in as far as it contains a coherent theory, evolves into a terroristic fantasy to destroy buildings symbolizing the mindless, existentially vacuous consumerism of late capitalism (which we can now see more than Palahniuk could when he wrote is largely responsible for the murder of the ecosystem and biosphere). The project is formulated ambiguously in fragments of rationalization which move between idealism about liberating human consciousness from the tyranny of materialism and sheer destructive nihilism. (If you Google “Griffin Putin Mayhem” you can see I gave a talk about Putin’s politics in May 2021, i.e. before the Ukraine’s war which related his world view to the psychotic nihilism of *Fight Club*). What is clear is that even if there may be an element of “palingenetic” myth in the narrator’s desperation to find meaning that sparks his doubling and creation of an evil twin Tyler Durden, there is absolutely no ultranationalist, racist vision of a new order. Hence there is, in my terms, no fascism, though the film does evoke brilliantly some of the nihilistic destructiveness of fascism’s war against “the other”, the “enemy” in practical terms.

Biblos: You mentioned in a lecture the famous essay from Umberto Eco about Ur-Fascism (1995). Do you agree with this concept, namely, a sort of eternal fascism underlying democracies?

Roger Griffin: In my book *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (2018) I specifically criticize Eco's famous article. It is a shopping list of general traits of authoritarian movements and regimes none of which are historically specific or unique to actually existing fascist movements or regimes. As such it is no more than an eye-catching piece of journalism by a famous author who has clearly read nothing that was being produced at the time by specialist researchers. It thus has minimal heuristic value, except to illustrate the state of confusion and amateur speculation about fascism in non-Marxist circles before it developed into a mature field of interdisciplinary research, which to be fair had only just started when Eco wrote the article. The practical result is that if you asked a student to judge whether the politics or states of Franco, Dollfuss, Antonescu, Salazar, the Brexit party, Trump, Putin were/are fascist he/she would have absolutely no possibility of answering with any forensic precision. Eco, like other self-proclaimed pundits – Madeleine Albright (2018), Jason Stanley (2018), Joseph Goldberg (2007) – assumes there is no such thing as fascist studies and, as we say in English, shoots his mouth off.

Biblos: Regarding the theme of violence, how do you understand its role in the far-right today

Roger Griffin: Violence is a latent possibility in all hegemonic systems of power and in all ideologies critical of the status quo. Furthermore, violence is actively deployed by all authoritarian state systems to maintain the status quo, and liberal democracies use various types of violence to enforce liberal principles of law and order, from imprisonment to full-scale war. As I have pointed out, the fanatics of even theoretically peaceful ideologies, such as Buddhism, can breed state violence and terrorism, while states based on the Abrahamic religions have had no scruples about massacring innocents and using extreme violence against individuals in the past and have sanctioned wars, colonization and slavery (and in the case of Christianity: genocide).

What is special about violence in the context not of the radical right but the extreme right, both secular (e.g. neo-Nazis) and religious (e.g. Islamist) is

the cult of violence: pacifism is generally seen by extremists as soft/decadence, war and the production of martyrs who sacrifice themselves to “the cause” are normalized, and conflict is seen as both inevitable and a way civilization progresses. The fascist celebration of war, revolution and – in the case of some fascisms (Romanian, Croatian and German) the physical elimination of decadent, dysgenic human beings are consistent with the patriarchal, psychotic element of all extremist ideologies and movements, all of which convince themselves that violence and murder can be “purging”, “cathartic”, the prelude to the rebirth of a new age.

Biblos: At some point in your work, you also discussed the “march theme”, regarding the so-called March on Rome, by Mussolini. In fact, that’s a common theme in different ideologies, such as religious traditions or those marches inspired by leaders such as Mao Zedong or even Gandhi.

Roger Griffin: Indeed, I dedicated a slide to suggesting that in certain contexts of “regime change”, revolution and protest, the march becomes a concrete symbolic expression of a communal resistance to the status quo of many different creeds, even pacifist ones. Leading Fascists seem to have instinctively understood in 1922 when the movement was losing momentum that a march by the *squadristi*, or even just the threat of a march, could provoke a crisis which would create political change for the movement and the gamble paid off, even if the astute use of the March as a marketing tool owed little to historical fact. There could be a good book written (if it does not yet exist) on “Great Marches”. But the march has no specific ideological weight and can be used by any ideological faction to advertise its cause and put pressure on the status quo.

Biblos: One of the key concepts of your studies is palingenesis. Could you summarise why it is so important when discussing fascism?

Roger Griffin: I have written many thousands of words on this, so a few lines will have to suffice. I believe that any scholars studying fascism comparatively who actually read lots of primary sources by fascists themselves will

become as aware as I became of the recurrence of the motif of the decadence of the present and the need for total cultural-political rebirth, or palingenesis. When I was constructing a new ideal type of fascism as a taxonomic term, I thus presented fascism as a hybrid of organic ultranationalism/racism with the rebirth myth. The rebirth myth is an archetype found all over the world in different forms. It only becomes “fascist” when combined with extreme, revolutionary ultranationalism. From this, it is clear that palingenetic myth is only important to someone who is convinced of its significance as a definitional component of fascism when combined with racist nationalism. Its use by many hundreds of scholars all over the world demonstrates its heuristic value to those scholars and it is now integral to comparative fascist studies. But its “success” as a concept does not prove that my theory of fascism is “true”, only that some find it useful. It will only continue to be useful if it is used critically and if some people challenge it with modifications or counter-theories of their own so that the theory can be tested, refined and applied to more and more “putative” specimens of fascism.

Biblos: Of course, we could also argue that other political ideologies or even art, take for instance a symphony, could have a palingenetic approach.

Roger Griffin: As I have said, palingenetic myth is encountered throughout the history of culture, religion, mysticism, ritual, philosophy, art, poetry, and individual psychology. It only becomes relevant to fascist studies as a myth with affective power when, like a chemical product, it forms a compound with another myth, that of the nation understood as a racial, organic, illiberal entity.

Biblos: I have to say that I found the palingenetic motive in some Portuguese post-First World War literature (2021). Do you think that this fact, by itself, makes a case for fascism in Portugal?

Roger Griffin: The catastrophe of the First World War served as a powerful accelerator and intensifier of palingenetic myth in all the arts

and in politics throughout the Europeanized world, a theme I explore in my *Modernism and Fascism* (2007). Interwar Portugal has no shortage of artistic or aesthetic modernists and also programmatic modernists in the areas of urban renewal, architecture, economics, and social theory. It also has a significant but small political modernist movement in Rolão Preto's Blue Shirts who developed a form of Portuguese fascism. *Salazarismo* also drew on the modernist, palingenetic interwar mood of renewal, but the *Estado Novo*, despite its palingenetic title, never developed a sufficiently radical vision of renewal and the unleashing of populist energies through a mobilizing movement to qualify as fascist. Indeed, Salazar is careful to disband the Blue Shirts because their programme challenged his conservative modernizing concept of change. Palingenetic themes are not in themselves a sign of fascism, and you can see a modernist such as Fernando Pessoa carefully distancing himself from political movement.

Biblos: As you probably have noticed, the question that I really wanted to ask is if you think the *Estado Novo* regime was fascist. I mean, of course, a fascist regime with its own idiosyncrasies. As you know, some Portuguese scholars call *Estado Novo*, in the same way as Unamuno did, "Academic Fascism", that is, a regime constructed *from above* without a movement. On the other hand, other scholars, such as António Costa Pinto (1994), argue that the "true" fascists were the movement of the Blue Shirts.

Roger Griffin: And this is where I have to nail my colours to the mast. The Salazar regime was not fascist precisely because, like the regime of Primo de Rivera (see Shlomo Ben-Ami, 1983). Salazar, like other "top-down" authoritarians (Dolfuss, Horthy, Pilsudski, Metaxas, Antonescu, Tiso, Vargas) wanted to construct a revitalized, modernized regime *from above*, and were wary of unleashing the sort of radical, populist, demagogic and ultimately *pagan* energies seen in Mussolini's Italy and above all in The Third Reich. In my own work I use the term "parafascist" for such regimes, because they create the façade of fascism to show they belong to the fascist era and not the communist one, but actually create a hybrid of various degrees of conservative nation-

alism supported by the state religion (Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity) with external elements of fascist style and organization. Contrast the *Estado Novo* in Portugal and Brazil with Pavelić's *Ustasha* state (also supported by the Catholic Church), or the *Falange* with Franco and the difference soon becomes obvious. But once again, my answer is conditioned by the ideal type of fascism I am using. There is no objective approach to this issue. If you apply a Marxist lens to fascism then you see not the contrast with Italian fascism, for example, but the same war on socialism, the poor, the workers, the peasantry and the same defence of existing religious, economic and political elites. The core point of conflict between Marxists and myself is that I insist that fascism was fully revolutionary *in its own terms* on a par with Communism, and that it was anti-reactionary, ideologically different, supported by some capitalist interests but in no way allied to them or working for them, and *modernist*. I am sure readers of this interview can form their own opinion.

Biblos: Dear Professor Roger Griffin, many thanks for your time.

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