

CĂLIN GOINA

Michael Mann: *Fascists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

F*ascists* is the first part of a dyad: like Tweedldum and Tweedledee, what it says (and what it doesn't) is completed by its younger twin *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*.¹ Both books originate in a projected chapter over fascism in Michael Mann's long waited third volume of *The Sources of Social Power* from 1914 until the present day.² According to Mann, the manuscript ended up having "nearly 1000 pages, which perhaps few would read, -and which no publisher would publish³." Consequently, the projected 'chapter' turned out as two books: while *Fascists* addresses the rise of classical early twentieth century political movements such as the Nazis in Germany and the Fascists in Italy, *The Dark Side of Democracy* is dealing with a larger array of movements sharing a family resemblance with the them, such as Arkan's Tigers, Croatian *ustashi*, or the Cambodian Angka.

One of the major practitioners of macro-sociology, alongside with Charles Tilly or Theda Skocpol, Michael Mann offers in this book a brilliant display of scholarship. *Fascists* is at the same time sociology and history at their best. The volume covers a wide array of cases over time and space, in its attempt to isolate the distinctive features of the researched phenomenon. It analyses, compares and contrasts six cases of European inter-war fascist movements (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania and Spain) and concludes with a compelling explanation for the historical roots and causes of fascism, as well as with an original definition and portrait of it.

¹ See Mann, Michael: *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

² Matt Welch quoting interview with Michael Mann in "The Providential scholar," *UCLA Magazine*, Summer 2004.

³ Mann, Michael: *Fascists*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Preface, x.

Mann starts from several key statements concerning his subject matter: he sees fascism as an “essential if undesirable part of modernity,” as its answer to the political and societal problems focuses on the nation state, through hyper nationalism and hyper statism. Thus, Mann’s definition of fascism sees it as the pursuit of *transcendent and cleansing national-statism through paramilitarism*. He sees fascists as organic nationalists, with very low tolerance for ethnic diversity, worshipping an authoritarian, nation-state. Fascist ideology promises that a strong, purely national, corporatist state would be able to ‘transcend’ social conflict, by incorporating all the classes and pressure groups within state institutions. The way to put this ideology in practice involves the recourse to violence, cleansing the nation of its enemies, be they political foes or ethnic minorities. Last but not least, in order to be called fascist, the violence is to be perpetrated through the ‘bottom-up,’ ‘popular’ form of paramilitary troops. Thus, for Mann, the necessary ingredients for any authentic fascist recipe are: organic nationalism, authoritarian corporate statism, ethnic and political cleansing, a transcendent ideology and paramilitarism.

In order to account for the causes that brought about fascism, Mann notices that while authoritarian regimes spread all over Central and South Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War I only a small minority of the states in the Northwest of the continent chose that path. This is not to say that political movements sharing fascist goals and values did not exist everywhere. Yet, they managed to rise to power and reach mass audiences in some states, while in others were to remain insignificant, tough vocal political minorities. The geographical puzzle outlined by Mann allows him to reject general explanations for the roots of fascism, such as the impact of the Great Depression, or the crisis of liberal democracy, as their effects were felt all over Europe, and indeed all over the world.

In line with his theoretical model⁴, and as a result of his macro-comparative analysis, Mann emphasizes four major crises that can be seen as the major causes of fascism: military, political, economic and ideological. These are: the consequences of the world war, a political crisis provoked by a rapid transition toward the nation-state, severe class conflict accentuated by the Great Depression and a cultural sense of civilization contradiction and decay.

Facing these crises, Mann argues, the state ruling elites, particularly of the ‘old-regimes’ and property-owning classes had an irrational “hysteric

⁴ Mann, Michael: *The Sources of Social Power, vol. II, The Rise of Classes and Nation-States*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

over-reaction” favoring authoritarian, repressive, sometimes fascist regimes. The key of understanding fascism lays in finding the causes and the explanations for this irrational reaction.

The fact that the northwestern part of Europe, more stable and established democratic traditions, did not follow in the turn toward authoritarian right allows Mann to reject theories equating the rise of fascism with a crisis of democracy. As we have seen, liberal democracies survived and mastered the same tectonic historic changes that in other political context did breed a Hitler or a Mussolini. Mann suggests that, quite on the contrary, fascism was due to a specific post World War I “sudden, half-baked attempt at liberalization amid social crises.” which brought about the irrational reaction of the dominant classes.

One of the crucial differences that accounts for the existence of ‘two Europes’ is the different political tools that were available for the conservative, propertied classes. While the northwestern states were characterized by parliamentary democracies, characterized by free elections, most of the Central and South Eastern region were “double states” where the elected parliament had to share power with non-elect executives, who were usually able to manipulate the elections in order to obtain favorable parliamentary majorities. Consequently, these executives and the groups behind them were perfectly able to resort to repression in order to solve the crisis, and put an end to free elections and to the power of parliaments.

Yet, not even these states did turn toward this extreme form of nationalism and statism, although they all moved toward authoritarianism. Within the authoritarian family of regimes, the fascist political parties made it to the top in some specific cases, while in other were ‘stolen’ their rhetoric and clothes by authoritarian or militaristic regimes who managed to stay in power.

But who were the fascists? Mann rejects the theory that makes the disappointed and impoverished little bourgeoisie the core fascist constituency. His comparative analysis indicates that people from all classes were involved in fascist movements, and that, especially in the Hungarian and Romanian cases, the movement had powerful proletarian overtones. In line with his model, Mann argues that he identified three types of fascist constituencies:

a) constituencies favoring paramilitarism: chiefly young men, initially the war veterans and the subsequent generations coming of age between World War I and the late 1930’s.

b) constituencies favoring transcendence: people coming from sectors that had not been in the first line of organized class struggle.

c) constituencies favoring nation-state: soldiers and veterans, civil servants, teachers, public sector manual workers are to be found in similar positions in all the cases. Of course, from country to country other groups can be added: regional groups, specific sectors, religion can act as separators indicating those who would tend to back the nation-state, and thus to be inclined towards fascism.

It is the comparative breath and the intellectual acumen of the book that marks it as a landmark in the study of fascism. Mann elegantly demolishes several well-entrenched stereotypes about fascism, such as its supposed class character, its roots in a supposed inability of liberal democracy to cope with the situation, its supposedly aberrant and unrepeatable occurrence. In fact, Mann's conclusions are not an act of pure scholarly interest. If we agree with his generalizations on what fascism consists of, we must fear his prognoses. And Michael Mann is not afraid to play Cassandra, on more educated-guess grounds. For him fascism is far from belonging to the dustbin of history. Quite on the contrary: "there is a chance that something like it, though almost certainly under another name will play an important role in the twenty-first century."