There was never a truly, fully developed theory of fascism

Theodor W. Adorno, 'Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism' (2020)

How Should We Approach the Understanding of Fascism?

A critical analysis of its definitions

Théo Boucknooghe, Université de Lille

Abstract

With the resurgence of fascism on a global scale came the need for renewed theorization of this phenomenon. The feeling of necessity and urgency of conceptualizing fascism is common to all, yet many approach this task from divergent, and at times contradictory, theoretical frameworks. This article aims to contribute to the development of a comprehensive theory of fascism by critically examining various dominant approaches. Through comparative analysis, I assess the strengths and limitations of each perspective, highlighting how they diverge but also mutually inform one another. While this study aims to clarify the theoretical landscape of fascism, it ultimately doesn't provide a definitive synthesis of these approaches, leaving open the question of how best to articulate the historical manifestations of fascism, its economic determinants, and its psychological underpinnings.

Introduction

The question of how to understand fascism is a complex one. No singular or universally accepted definition exists, and the debate surrounding its conceptualization remains a contentious issue among scholars. The intensity of this debate reflects the profound political stakes involved in defining fascism, as different interpretations often reveal more about the ideological commitments of those producing them than about the phenomenon itself. Indeed, the definition of fascism is inseparable from the dynamics of class struggle that shaped the historical movement of societies. For example, the collective imaginaries often represent the struggle against Nazism as a unified front, but this appearance of unity is sustained by the conceptual vagueness surrounding fascism itself. Indeed, although Churchill and the partisans both appeared to be resisting Nazi Germany, their goals and motivations were vastly different, as they had completely different understandings of fascism. Also, the failure to dismantle fascism's structural foundations after the war stems in part from the marginalization of materialist analyses at the time in favor of a more moral approach to fascism. Its downfall occurred largely on the terms of the liberal bourgeoisie. As a result, the capitalist, colonial, and imperialist infrastructures that nourished fascist regimes remained largely intact. This underscores the urgent need for a rigorous theory of fascism, one capable not only of diagnosing its reappearances but of confronting its underlying conditions and ensuring its thorough eradication.

Furthermore, definitions of fascism are frequently shaped by affective investments and political strategies, which in turn generate accusations of conceptual overreach or, contrarily, reductivism. On the one hand, some argue that the term has been misapplied, leading to an inflationary use that risks diluting its historical and theoretical significance. On the other hand, overly rigid definitions may obscure how fascism operates in different contexts, preventing scholars from recognizing its contemporary manifestations. Theodor Adorno argued that there has never been a coherent theory of fascism because he understood fascism to be a 'conceptless praxis' and an 'unconditional domination', a movement lacking consistent ideological content and theoretical foundations[1]. Its ideological inconsistency renders it resistant to systematic theorization. That is because fascism is never pure; it is always historically and geographically situated. Its historical form can adapt to the state of the society in which it appears. Yet, despite these challenges, the need for a rigorous understanding of fascism remains pressing. Any attempt to develop a theory of fascism must first engage with the fundamental questions of methodological approach. Various disciplines have tackled the question of fascism; it is important to cross-reference them in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding. This paper aims to provide a critical overview of the principal, though not exhaustive, approaches to understanding fascism, tracing their historical development and critically evaluating their respective strengths and limitations. By doing so, I hope to bring greater clarity to the discourse on fascism and to assist others in navigating the complexities involved in theorizing this phenomenon.

I. The *a priori* and *a posteriori* approaches to fascism

Influential historians such as Gilbert Allardyce and Ernst Nolte have questioned the legitimacy of theorizing fascism. In his essay *What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept,* Allardyce questions the analytical relevance of the concept of fascism[2]. In contemporary societies, fascism is often

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 16.
2 Gilbert Allardyce, "What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept" *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

considered an accident of history, that the world has moved on, and that this question isn't relevant anymore. Allardyce's skepticism is grounded in two key points: first, the overuse of the term has led to dilution of its meaning; second, the difficulty in isolating a "fascist minimum", a core set of traits common to all fascist movements, casts doubt on the concept's coherence. This issue is aggravated by historical fascisms, dealing with core internal contradictions themselves. Can fascism even be theorized, or is it merely an arbitrary concept retrospectively imposed on heterogeneous historical phenomena? Nolte, commenting on Allardyce's essay, defends the importance of maintaining a general conceptualization of fascism. He concedes its polemical usages but maintains its potential analytical value if conceptualized correctly. He suggests that the internal contradictions of fascism can be one of the elements that define it, as a form of paradoxical concept. Despite his doubts, Allardyce cautiously suggests the possibility of a core definition, calling fascism:

> An international movement, a phenomenon that found purest expression in Italy and Germany, but also appeared in a wide number of other countries. When stripped of national trappings, it is commonly believed, all of these movements had a common characteristic that was the essence of fascism itself.[3]

Allardyce's search for a fascist minimum parallels Roger Griffin's approach, who defined fascism in *The Nature of Fascism* as "palingenetic ultranationalism"[4]. However, we need to distinguish between Nolte's fascist minimum and Griffin's theory of generic fascism. The former seeks the essence of fascism found in all fascist movements, while the latter refers to a broader category, encompassing a variety of movements sharing certain traits, though varying by context. The attempt to define fascism, whether through a minimal essence or a broader typology, inevitably raises the question of how we come to know fascism at all. This leads us to the disciplinary crossroads where fascist theory emerges: the intersection of empirical history and philosophical abstraction. On one side, the historian's task is constrained by fact rigor and source analysis, resulting in a precise but materially limited understanding. On the other hand, philosophical critique aims to reveal underlying structures that transcend empirical data. As Allardyce noted: "The more we know in detail, the less we know in general"[5]. This tension illustrates both the difficulty and necessity of constructing an interdisciplinary theory of fascism. These theoretical challenges may seem discouraging or unnecessary. Some might argue that the already broadly shared understanding of fascism is sufficient for contemporary resistance. However, I argue the opposite: misidentifying fascism, either by seeing it everywhere or failing to see it at all, can lead to serious errors. More critically, analyzing only its surface expressions, rather than its core logic, is deeply insufficient. For instance, focusing solely on the racism and violence of the far-right might obscure fascism's deeper connection to the crisis of capitalism in its imperial stage and the colonial heritage that it still relies on today.

To continue our analysis of the different approaches to the definition of fascism, some historians restrict the definition of fascism to 20th century regimes, especially Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany. This minimalist approach has the benefit of avoiding abusive comparisons with other authoritarian regimes like Stalin's USSR or Latin American dictatorships. Yet, even within this narrow framework, debates persist: should the Franco or Salazar regimes be included in the fascist regimes? This difficulty lies partially in fascist regimes' self-descriptions: often contradictory or disconnected from their actual political practices, these discourses cannot alone resolve the question of classification. Consequently, any attempt to define fascism inevitably relies on criteria that are arbitrary or context dependent. Detaching the definition of fascism from its self-representations, however arbitrary the external criteria may seem, helps dispel persistent misconceptions in contemporary debates. While this may never fully prevent the spread of erroneous narratives about fascist regimes, as is often seen in mainstream media, developing a robust, academically grounded theory that does not rely on fascist self-description, and instead situates fascism in its role of preserving the capitalist system of domination and exploitation, is essential to countering such narratives. Just as Holocaust denial persists today, the vast quantity of historical evidence for that event renders such denial increasingly untenable; anyone expressing even a doubt about the Holocaust is, in good faith, automatically regarded as a denier. Similarly, any discourse, such as the still common claim that Nazi Germany was socialist, would be recognized as contradicting the academically accepted theory and as a fascist sympathizer. Educating a broader audience to fascist studies would also hopefully put an end to the ridiculous parallels between fascist movements and antifascist resistances.

In contrast, broader interpretations conceive fascism not as a closed historical phenomenon but as an ongoing *process of fascisation*, capable of manifesting beyond its "original" contexts. This perspective

3 Ibid, 367.
4 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 26.
5 Gilbert Allardyce, "What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept", *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 368.

invites us to scrutinize the persistence of fascist logics within ostensibly democratic societies and to regard fascism as a latent potentiality embedded in modern political life. These theoretical tensions reflect a deeper divide between what we could call *a posteriori* and *a priori* approaches to fascism.

The *a posteriori* method defines fascism retrospectively, grounded in historical case studies of known fascist regimes. While valuable for understanding fascism's empirical reality, this approach risks confining it to a past epoch, limiting its applicability to contemporary or emergent forms. The other way around, an *a priori* approach seeks to identify the structural invariants of fascism, its essential features independent of historical circumstance. It assumes that although fascism may appear differently across periods, it is driven by constant underlying dynamics that can be theorized as general laws. Thus, the issue is not merely definitional; it raises broader philosophical questions about the conditions of possibility for fascism in history and the need for a conceptual framework capable of accounting for its transformations. From this standpoint, we will explore the respective contributions and limitations of both *a posteriori* and *a priori* theories of fascism.

A posteriori theories of fascism often rest on historical reconstructions aimed at identifying patterns in its emergence. Angelo Tasca, historian and co-founder with Antonio Gramsci of the Italian Communist Party, declared that "our way of defining fascism is to write its history"[6]. While this approach situates fascism within its historical context, it risks confining contemporary analysis to analogies with the past. Yet historical conditions and power relations evolve, making it essential to move beyond static patterns. Furthermore, for a definition to be relevant and useful, it must account for fascism's past, present, and potential future manifestations. This need has led to a relative consensus among contemporary historians favoring definitions that transcend specific historical periods. Conceptualizations by Roger Griffin and Ernst Nolte, for instance, approach fascism as a transhistorical phenomenon. Griffin defines it as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism"[7] emphasising its regenerative and mythological structure. Although critical of the term's overuse in political discourse, blaming primarily Marxist currents for revisionist inflation, Griffin acknowledges Marxism's key contributions, especially in analysing fascism's structural ties to capitalism. Still, he rejects the rigid interpretative frameworks of the Comintern, whose early readings of fascist agitation in Europe were overly political and mechanistic. This led to an underestimation of fascism's scope, as Sebastian Budgen notes in *Période*:

> Many [Marxists] viewed fascist bands as mere extensions of White counter-revolutionary militias funded by capital. They believed these groups were tools of the capitalist class against the working class. As a result, Marxists were politically unprepared when Mussolini came to power.[8]

Left-wing circles often simplify the definition of fascism, and understandably so; it enables the creation of clear, accessible messages that don't require deep theoretical knowledge and can be conveyed in concise slogans. While the common idea that fascism is a tool of the bourgeoisie to reestablish order is not entirely incorrect, it overlooks crucial aspects of the complex role fascism plays in the political economy of capital. Such simplification can undermine the development of precise and effective resistance by obscuring the actual target.

In opposition to the Comintern, Griffin instead turns to historically grounded Marxist analyses, like those of August Thalheimer and Otto Bauer on Bonapartism, or Lenin's study of the development of capitalism in Russia. Griffin illustrates how definitions of fascism can be biased by ideologies, quoting a 1985 report by the European Economic Community, which defined fascism as:

> A nationalistic attitude essentially hostile to the principles of democracy, to the rule of law and to the fundamental rights and freedoms, as well as the irrational exaltation of a particular community, in relation to which people outside it are systematically excluded.[9]

Griffin sees this definition as revealing more about the liberal ideology of the EEC than about fascism itself. Similarly, the Comintern's theory of "social fascism" reflected less a rigorous analysis than a political strategy aimed at opposing social democrats. While reformist movements may have contributed to fascism's rise, labeling them "social-fascist" was more tactical than analytical. Hence, the boundaries of fascism's theorization emerge as a political battlefield where competing intellectual traditions and worldviews clash. Every definition carries ideological weight. This should not be underestimated: ideology reflects and serves as a battleground for class struggle. If dominant ideas in society reflect those of the ruling class, then the prevailing definition of

6 Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism* (London: Methuen, 1938) ix.
7 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 26.
8 Sebastian Budgen, *Les fascismes* (Revue Période). Décembre 2017. http://revueperiode.net/guide-de-lecture-sur-les-fascismes/.
9 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 8.

fascism will likely be shaped by bourgeois interests. The bourgeoisie will not endorse a definition that implicates its own role in the emergence or support of fascism. Hence, the necessity for resistance to develop a robust theoretical alternative capable of challenging the ideological state apparatus.

While a historical reading of fascism risks rigidity, discarding it entirely undermines theoretical relevance. The Comintern's theorization, though rigid and doctrinaire, attempted, during congresses, to refine its theory of fascism through historiographical analysis. Yet Stalin's ideological control stifled these efforts. August Thalheimer's case is telling. He rejected the "social fascism" theory and returned to Marx and Engels to refine fascism's understanding, drawing on *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and Engels's preface to *The Civil War in France*. He observed structural parallels, though not equivalent, between Bonapartism and fascism:

> The best starting point for an investigation of fascism is, in my opinion, the analysis of Bonapartism (Louis Bonaparte) by Marx and Engels. It should be taken for granted that I do not equate fascism and Bonapartism. But they are related phenomena, having both common and divergent features, both of which require elaboration.[10]

Quoting Marx, he adds:

> The bourgeoisie is thus one of the social foundations of Bonapartism, but in order to save its social existence in a specific historical situation it abandons its political power – it subordinates itself to the 'executive authority which has made itself an independent power'.[11]

This insight, later echoed by Umberto Eco, reveals that fascism arises not merely from an authoritarian coup d'Etat, but from broader socio-economic dynamics. It represents a structural reconfiguration wherein a third power consolidates one class's domination over another. As Eco notes, fascism emerges at the intersection of bourgeois self-preservation and its readiness to surrender political autonomy when its dominance is threatened, ironically endorsing a regime that restricts its own liberties. This is perfectly reflected in fascism's ability to transform classes into masses while simultaneously preserving the class contradictions necessary for capital accumulation and reproduction. This dynamic is described by Ken Kawashima as follows:

> What we could call fascist eclecticism is nothing but a hodge-podge of theory that blurs the boundaries between class contradictions and mass non-contradictions, and that 'seduce[s] social strata whose aspirations and interests are fundamentally antagonistic.' Fascism thus neutralises (class) antagonisms through a mass-based seduction of attraction and repulsion.[12]

Despite Thalheimer's theoretical rigor and status within the German Communist Party (KPD), his views were marginalized. Only with Georgi Dimitrov's Popular Front strategy in 1935 did some of his ideas gain implicit recognition, but by then, Thalheimer was already exiled in France, fleeing Stalinist purges. Even with its determinist framework, the Comintern's view of fascism as fundamentally anti-communist retains some relevance. Non-Marxist historians like Stanley Payne also emphasize fascism's "negative dimension"[13]. According to Payne, fascism is defined as much by what it rejects, liberalism, socialism, and communism, as by what it affirms. This oppositional stance underpins its reactionary identity. Thus, while retrospective analyses can become overly rigid when confined to specific past regimes, they can also yield valuable insights when they engage broader dynamics and long-term structural logics. Only by adopting such a lens can we move beyond chronicling the past to interrogating the persistent conditions enabling fascism's resurgence.

An *a priori* theory of fascism seeks to identify the phenomenon's structural and invariant elements, its essential characteristics independent of specific historical contexts. While shaped by historical and social conditions, fascism is not reducible to them. Its concrete forms vary, but the underlying logic remains governed by stable principles. These may be theorized as general laws. In this light, Umberto Eco's work is especially relevant. He proposes a list of characteristic signs of fascism, arguing that while their combinations vary historically, the theoretical "knots" connecting them reveal deeper structures. Identifying such invariants provides a framework for a conceptualization of fascism that traces the stable core of fascism while accounting for contextual variation. This method integrates *a posteriori* insights within a broader transhistorical understanding, enabling us to grasp fascism's potential contemporary and future forms. Indeed, fascism is too fluid and volatile to be reduced to a list of fixed traits, a point Eco demonstrates convincingly. Drawing from his direct experience under Mussolini, Eco formulates the idea of *Ur-Fascism*, a primal and eternal form transcending historical context[14]. Rather than a rigid definition, he identifies fourteen features a fascist regime

10 August Thalheimer, "On Fascism," *Telos*, no. 40 (1979): 95.
11 Ibid, 95.
12 Ken Kawashima, "Fascism is a Reaction to Capitalist Crisis in the Stage of Imperialism," *Historical Materialism*, March 31, 2021, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/fascism-is-a-reaction-to-capitalist-crisis-in-the-stage-of-imperialism/.
13 Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).
14 Umberto Eco, *How to Spot a Fascist* (London: Harvill Secker, 2020).

might exhibit. Crucially, not all must be present for a regime to be recognizably fascist. As Eco observes:

> Fascism became an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist. Take away imperialism from fascism and you still have Franco and Salazar. Take away colonialism and you still have the Balkan fascism of the Ustashes. Add to the Italian fascism a radical anti-capitalism (which never much fascinated Mussolini) and you have Ezra Pound. Add a cult of Celtic mythology and the Grail mysticism (completely alien to official fascism) and you have one of the most respected fascist gurus, Julius Evola.[15]

Eco's formulation has a key advantage: it avoids historicist reduction and portrays fascism as polymorphic and insidious, capable of reemerging in novel guises without identical socio-economic conditions. His fourteen signs serve not as rigid criteria, but as warning signals. Eco argues that fascism is defined less by the sum of its features, which may even contradict each other, but more by structural "knots", deeper points of coherence between elements that allow the phenomenon to reconfigure and persist. This aspect of Eco's work is often overlooked in contemporary debates. People tend to reference his list of fourteen traits to either label something as fascist based on how many traits it exhibits or to reject the label due to the absence of certain features. Yet the core of Eco's argument lies not in counting characteristics, but in identifying the structural "knots" that link them together. Michael A. Peters echoes this perspective. Drawing on Brad Evans and Julian Reid, he contends:

> The problem of fascism today cannot simply be addressed as that of the potential or variable return and reconstitution of fascism, as if fascism had ever, or could ever, 'disappear', only to return and be made again, like some spectral figure from the past. The problem of fascism cannot, we believe, be represented or understood as that of an historically constituted regime, particular system of power relations, or incipient ideology. Fascism, we believe, is as diffuse as the phenomenon of power itself.[16]

Thus, a purely historical lens risks overlooking contemporary forms that deviate from past archetypes. A more dynamic methodology is needed to apprehend fascism's substructures. As Nicolas Lebourg notes regarding France:

> There is thus a methodological trap in the debate on French fascism: arguing over the quantitative aspect of groups or the presence or absence of a leader amounts to trying to align the French case with those where fascism led to a mass movement and, subsequently, to a state. This assumes that only this form—the victorious fascism—is the one that historically exists. But do we require other political movements to succeed in seizing power in order to acknowledge their existence?[17]

By detaching fascism from a strictly historical framework, one opens the possibility of apprehending it as an autonomous phenomenon, governed by its own logic or rationality, rather than merely as a product of contingent historical circumstances. This methodological shift allows for a richer analysis of fascism, including dimensions that have remained invisible within strictly historical definitions.

II. The deflation of the concept

Gilbert Allardyce highlighted the dangers of an inflationary use of the concept of fascism. He argued that the proliferation of theories of fascism largely stems from conflating fascism with the broader far-right movement. While fascism belongs to the far-right ideological family, it is a mistake to equate all far-right expressions with fascism. Such conflation undermines analytical clarity and, according to Allardyce's call for conceptual deflation, the term needs to be restricted to precise historical configurations to preserve its theoretical relevance. This demand for a strict definition also appears among rigorous Marxist-Leninist theorists who, adhering to historical materialism, define fascism as capital's specific response to an organic crisis. A regime is deemed fascist only if it represents an authoritarian reorganization of the bourgeois state in reaction to a real or perceived threat to the established order, the bourgeoisie's domination. Fascism is thus not an arbitrary tightening of power, but a strategic bourgeois reaction to an intensified class struggle, driven by capital's declining rate of profit. As long as the class balance remains favourable to the bourgeoisie, any authoritarian shifts are seen as marginal adjustments of capitalist order, not genuinely fascist dynamics. According to Lenin, under capitalism in its imperial stage, the political system becomes increasingly reactionary and repressive. However, this alone does not fully explain the fascist transformation of society. To identify the rise of fascism, we must look beyond the deterioration of democracy and examine the symptoms of a crisis of capitalism in its imperialist phase.

From this perspective, even authoritarian or quasi-totalitarian forms taken by liberal democracies

15 Ibid, 10.

16 Michael A. Peters, "'The Fascism in Our Heads': Reich, Fromm, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari – The Social Pathology of Fascism in the 21st Century," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 9 (2022): 1278.

17 Nicolas Lebourg, «Interpréter le fascisme : débats et perspectives,» in *Fascismes ibériques ? Sources, définitions, pratiques,* ed. Christine Lavail and Manuelle Peloille (Nanterre: Presses de l'Université Paris Ouest, 2014), 25. Translation by the author.

under specific conditions cannot be equated with fascism. Political violence, frequently cited as a fascist characteristic, is likewise insufficient to define fascism. For advocates of a strict Marxist definition of fascism, such violence, whether state-led or by far-right paramilitaries, remains an ordinary instrument of class domination. Therefore, none of the empirical features typically associated with far-right movements: violence, extreme nationalism, or authoritarianism, is sufficient on its own to define fascism. Rather, fascism must be understood as a historically specific form of authoritarian capitalist reorganization in times of hegemonic crisis. A central issue for Marxist traditions is the constitutive link between fascism and bourgeois democracy. Instead of viewing them as radically opposed regimes, fascism should be conceived as an immanent potential of the liberal-capitalist order, not merely its negation. Liberal democracy functions as a legitimation process for bourgeois domination but also as a means of bringing fascist regimes to power, as shown by the historian Johann Chapoutot[18].

Fascism must thus be approached from its historical function: an authoritarian restructuring of society when class domination shatters due to crises of legitimacy or rising subversive forces. Reducing fascism to its institutional manifestations (party, regime) falsely assumes the political coherence it lacks. To grasp fascism as a political phenomenon is to confront its radical nature, its capacity to dissolve classical political categories. Though it may rise through democratic mechanisms, its political practice exceeds liberal governmentality. Fascism is characterized by its ability to suspend the traditional political framework when it hinders its goals. Understanding fascism through conventional political categories misses its essence: a constellation of discursive, affective, and symbolic practices aimed at violently reshaping the social order. This is why Theodor W. Adorno's analyses remain relevant. For him, fascism is not a negation of modern society's values but its product, an expression of instrumental reason turned into a tool of domination. A rationalised form of barbarism, where reason ceases to liberate and instead subjugates. Fascism's ideological contradictions and doctrinal shifts are not theoretical weaknesses but signs of strategic performativity. Fascism is not coherent, but it is effective. It mobilizes not through convincing arguments but through affect, catalyses nationalism, and channels collective impulses. This makes it deeply dangerous. Stanley G. Payne similarly stresses fascism's doctrinal indeterminacy, noting how Italian attempts to create a fascist International failed due to the lack of a coherent ideology or unified doctrine. This difficulty reflects the disjunction between theory and practice in Italian fascism, the absence of foundational texts, and profound divergences. The only common feature between interwar European fascisms was radical nationalism, though variably defined. Thus, fascism resists stable characterization and is better understood in terms of its function within the crisis of capitalism. In sum, fascism cannot be treated as a traditional political current, for it escapes the usual framework of political thought. It lacks a stable institutional or ideological form. Fascism arises from specific political crises and pursues a specific goal; these are its only constant features. Its mode of operation exceeds politics in the narrow sense. Fascism tends to erase traditional divides between state and society, public and private. As such, it cannot be analysed within conventional political science frameworks but must be approached as a project of radical social reengineering.

The notion of fascism as a "third way" between Marxism and liberalism has served as an attempt to account for its political incoherence. It is presented as a synthesis of revolutionary aspirations and authoritarian, reactionary reflexes, a dual movement aimed both at a "new order" and the restoration of a mythical past. Zeev Sternhell belongs to this "third way" theory. He insists that fascism must be traced back to deep intellectual and cultural roots, extending as far as the French Revolution. As he writes:

> The search for a third way between liberalism and Marxism dates back to the second half of the 19th century and is part of a major revolt against the modernist legacy of the Enlightenment. It is then that the idea takes form that both liberalism and Marxist socialism are symptoms of the same decline. The rejection of decadence merges with the rejection of modernity and the invention of an alternative.[19]

Fascism thus appears as an ideological response to the failed promises of modernity. The Dreyfus Affair already revealed fissures in republican universalism and the rule of law, accompanied by nationalist resurgence, antisemitism, and paramilitary mobilization, a proto-fascist moment driven by fear of pluralism and desire for organic unity. World War I further shattered Enlightenment ideals, through its rationalized use of mass violence and subsequent moral collapse. In this civilizational crisis, Mussolini's fascism arose as an attempt to reimpose social order. The Great Depression gave the final blow to liberal modernity, with mass unemployment, social instability, and institutional discrediting paving the way for Hitler's rise in 1933. Fascism then emerges

18 Johann Chapoutot, *Les irresponsables. Qui a porté Hitler au pouvoir ?* (Paris : Gallimard, 2025).

19 Zeev Sternhell, « La troisième voie fasciste ou la recherche d'une culture politique alternative », dans *Ni gauche, ni droite*. (Pessac : Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 1995), 17. Translation by the author.

as a form of counter-modernity: authoritarian, mythic, and radically anti-universalist. Yet it would be reductive to cast fascism as purely anti-modern. While it denounces Enlightenment ideals and democratic universalism, fascism preserves and intensifies core features of modernity: its technocratic rationalism, its myth of progress, and its cult of efficiency. These are instrumentalised by fascism, as seen in Nazi propaganda, which glorifies science and technological innovation while subordinating them to totalitarian ends, monumental architecture, militarized economy, and the "medicalisation" of racism. This is what Horkheimer and Adorno call instrumental reason: rationality stripped of emancipatory content and employed as a tool of oppression. Moreover, fascism invents new myths: race, homogeneous eternal people, charismatic leaders. These myths do not necessarily oppose modernity *per se,* they rather represent a perverted and mythologised form of it. Thus, fascism appears less as an anti-modern movement than as an alternative or corrupted form of modernity, drawing upon pre-modern, mythic, and even esoteric imaginaries. The Nazi regime developed a mystique of blood and race, infused with pagan rites and symbolisms from a mythologized Germanic past. As Emilio Gentile argues, fascism constitutes a "political religion," aiming to spiritually transform the individual via racial, national, or imperial transcendence[20]. In reaction to modern individualism and disenchantment, fascism reclaims a lost spiritual unity. This recourse to the irrational is not a negation of modernity but an attempt to fill the void left by its decline. Georges Valois captured this dual heritage when he linked fascism to both Jacobinism and the existential rupture of World War I[21]. It is, in this sense, a modernity in crisis that produces its own sacral forms and political myths. Sternhell's reading of fascism as a dissident modernity does not fundamentally contradict the Marxist thesis: that fascism arises as a political response to structural crises of capitalism, itself a product of modernity. As Sternhell states:

> The search for a third way is a natural response to the crisis of liberalism and Marxism. A deep conviction that liberal values and institutions lead to decadence is accompanied by an equally strong belief in the harmfulness of Marxism—not just as political systems, but as failed cultural futures.[22]

From this angle, fascism emerges not merely against communism, but from the breakdown of hegemonies, liberal or revolutionary, within a capitalism rendered unstable by its internal contradictions. Fascism, like capitalism, contains inherent contradictions, like tension between modernity and anti-modernity as outlined above. It is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a complex formation shaped by antagonistic social relations. A failure to critically engage with this tension risks misleading antifascist resistance. Consequently, antifascist praxis cannot be reduced to merely opposing fascism's manifest expressions, it must also target the imperialist roots of capitalism, particularly its colonial dimensions, in order to prevent any recurrence of fascism.

The 20th century saw this instability deepen, with neither bourgeois nor proletarian forces able to stabilize the social order. Into this vacuum, fascism entered, violently reasserting social control without altering the foundations of capitalist domination. As Sternhell notes, fascism is "a political revolution that claims to be a moral and spiritual revolution, but one that never entails economic or social structural changes"[23]. Thus, the "third way" is not a true alternative to capitalism or Marxism, but a mode of capitalist reproduction during systemic paralysis. It offers symbolic and affective reordering without challenging material hierarchies. Fascism must therefore be understood as a hybrid formation, modern and anti-modern, revolutionary in appearance, yet ultimately preserving the conditions of capitalist continuity.

III. The contribution of Marxism

Marxism has often been criticised for its deterministic interpretations of fascism, particularly in Comintern discourses during the Stalinist era, which portrayed fascism as an inevitable stage in capitalism's collapse toward communism. This teleological reading served Stalin's ideological ends, presenting the USSR as both the shield against fascism and the liberator from capitalist exploitation. However, this mechanistic and linear view reduces Marx's original dialectical method. While Marx did highlight capitalism's authoritarian tendencies in times of crisis, he never theorized fascism as a necessary phase toward communism. In fact, as pointed out by Ken Kawashima, fascism can actually delay the collapse of capitalism in its final stage as fascism emerges not merely as a response to crisis, but as a mechanism to manage, displace, and prolong that crisis by neutralizing class antagonisms.[24] A break from this deter-

20 Emilio Gentile, *La religion fasciste : La sacralisation de la politique dans l'Italie fasciste*, trad. Julien Gayrard (Paris : Perrin, 2002).
21 Georges Valois, *Le fascisme* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1927).
22 Zeev Sternhell, « La troisième voie fasciste ou la recherche d'une culture politique alternative », dans *Ni gauche, ni droite*. (Pessac : Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 1995), 29. Translation by the author.
23 Ibid, 18.
24 Ken Kawashima, "Fascism is a Reaction to Capitalist Crisis in the Stage of Imperialism," *Historical Materialism,*

minism invites a more contextual approach. By detaching fascism from a strict historical framework, it becomes possible to conceptualize it as a relatively autonomous phenomenon. The challenge is thus to transcend economic reductionism and assess fascism's autonomy as a philosophical object. Angelo Tasca observed:

> The true originality (of fascism) lies in the determining and relatively autonomous function of tactics at the expense of a program [...] Fascism fights more a battle of positions than one of principles.[25]

Fascism, then, is less defined by ideological coherence than by its strategic exploitation of crises in bourgeois democracy, functioning as a conquering movement. The autonomy of fascism is not absolute nor detached from any context. Fascism is a form of contingent potentiality. This potentiality can be enabled, yet not systematically, by structural crises. It is one possible, but never inevitable, outcome of capitalism's contradictions. Fascism must thus be seen as a structural possibility within capitalism, a form of "becoming-fascist", but not its necessary product. It is neither capitalism's direct outcome nor simply an instrument of the bourgeoisie. Capitalism creates the conditions for fascism through its crises without determining the time of its emergence or form. The crisis generated by class antagonisms, rooted in the capital–labour relation, manifests itself through an intensification of the contradictions inherent to the capitalist mode of production. The proletariat is thus subjected to a dual pressure: on the one hand, the increasingly violent mechanisms of surplus value extraction; on the other, the rise of fascist tendencies as a repressive response to systemic crisis. In such a conjuncture, the proletariat experiences a deepening of its material and ideological subjugation. However, this intensification of antagonisms also reinforces the conditions for the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity. In this sense, resistance to fascism cannot be separated from the struggle against the alienating conditions of capitalist accumulation and extraction of surplus value from material, intellectual, and reproductive labour.

This view that fascism is a historically situated autonomous force departs from the deterministic readings of the Third International, such as Georgi Dimitrov's, which presented fascism as the tool of the monopolistic bourgeoisie in times of crisis. Nicos Poulantzas, in *Fascisme et dictature* (1974), argues instead that fascism is not an inevitable response to capitalist crisis, but one possible configuration within imperialist capitalism[26]. For Poulantzas, fascism is a specific form of the state of exception: "Fascism is a form of state and regime at the extreme 'limit' of the capitalist state."[27]. Thus, fascism lies at one end of the continuum of capitalist domination, alongside other authoritarian forms that are not necessarily fascist. In later work, Poulantzas further distinguishes fascism from what he calls "authoritarian statism", a centralization of state power and an erosion of the remaining democratic mechanisms:

> The emergence of authoritarian statism cannot be identified with either a new fascism or a process of fascisation. This state is neither a new form of exceptional state nor a transitional phase: it represents the new 'democratic' form of the bourgeois republic in its current phase.[28]

Hence, the increasing authoritarianism of today's capitalist state must be interpreted within the democratic framework, without leaning necessarily into the fascist paradigm. This distinction helps avoid diluting the specificity of fascism in an overly broad authoritarian category. Early Marxist interpretations posited that the bourgeoisie, under proletarian pressure, makes a rational cost-benefit calculation in delegating power to fascism, a tactical surrender to preserve capitalist order. In this view, the bourgeoisie remains the historical subject in the process of fascisation of society. In contrast, Trotsky saw fascism as an autonomous mass movement, constituted primarily of the petty bourgeoisie and segments of the proletariat. This composition explains its contradictions:

> Fascism, as a plebeian movement, can express anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, and anti-plutocratic criticisms. It is the expression of a class trapped between capital and the proletariat, articulating contradictory policies.[29]

Thus, fascism is not simply an elite tool but a political force, exploiting systemic crises. It asserts itself as an independent actor in power struggles. Consequently, liberal authoritarian drift cannot be equated with a fascist trajectory. Rather, authoritarianism may be a bourgeois reaction to contain rising fascist pressure, not just from below (the proletariat), but also from an autonomous fascist surge. It is crucial, then, to distinguish between two dynamics: the state's

March 31, 2021, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/fascism-is-a-reaction-to-capitalist-crisis-in-the-stage-of-imperialism/.

25 Collectif, *Fascismes, un siècle mis en abîme* (Paris : Syllepse, 2000), 31. Article extrait de *Contre le fascisme* (Genève, 1970). Translation by the author.

26 Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascisme et dictature. La Troisième Internationale face au fascisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

27 Ibid, 63. Translation by the author.

28 Nicos Poulantzas, *L'État, le pouvoir, le socialisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1978), 231-232. Translation by the author.

29 Sebastian Budgen, *Les fascismes* (Revue Période). Décembre 2017. Translation by the author

authoritarian hardening as crisis management, and the fascist drive for hegemony. Fascism emerges as a contingent possibility, not a historical necessity, shaped by the specific balance of forces within capitalism. In a capitalist crisis, three main dynamics typically arise: (1) a class-conscious workers' movement advancing a revolutionary project; (2) a fascist surge seeking power through structural ruptures; and (3) a bourgeoisie adapting its governing mechanisms under pressure from both previously mentioned. Rather than presupposing fascism as the default outcome, the most likely structural tendency in deep crisis may be the emergence of some form of dictatorship aimed at stabilization. This can take three distinct forms:

1. Proletarian dictatorship: a transitional form seeking to reorganize production towards communism.

2.Bourgeois dictatorship: an authoritarian radicalization preserving class society through permanent exception.

3.Fascist dictatorship: an autonomous form seeking total control over all life forms and a restructured social order.

Fascism is thus neither a restoration of bourgeois order nor a socialist revolution, but an authoritarian recomposition of the socio-economic structures grounded in an anti-liberal and anti-Marxist synthesis. This hybrid nature merits deeper analysis. Rather than a mere defence of existing interests, fascism involves an active transformation of the state apparatus. It begins as a power-seeking movement and, once in control, pursues the total reorganization of society. This distinguishes it theoretically from other revolutionary models: the communist revolution aims to transform production relations, the liberal revolution to adjust legal-political structures, but the fascist revolution seeks to reshape the human being itself. While Marx focused on economic structures as determining human subjectivity within the capital-labour relation, fascism pursues a deeper alienation, psychic, emotional, and symbolic. It aims to integrate the individual into collective representations that reshape instincts, desires, and affections. As Zeev Sternhell explains:

> Whereas liberalism and Marxism see fundamental problems as economic, fascism sees them as psychological and cultural [...] The fascist revolution is a political one that claims to be spiritual and moral, without implying economic or social structural change.[30]

Fascism's goal is not the birth of a new society through changes in social relations of production, but of a new community, and above all, a new individual, conceived as a social animal within an organic whole. This echoes Roger Griffin's notion of fascism as *palingenetic ultranationalism*, a mythic national rebirth through moral and cultural purification. If fascism seeks to transform the human being beyond economic determinism, classical Marxist analysis appears partially disarmed. As Wilhelm Reich noted in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism:* "The province of mass psychology, then, begins precisely at the point where the immediate socio-economic explanation fails."[31]. Thus, a complete understanding of fascism requires a framework that transcends, but does not discard, economism, incorporating affective, psychological, and symbolic dimensions of domination.

To further understand fascism, we must pause to examine a central concept: ideology, which, depending on its definition, can significantly shape the interpretation of fascism. Two main conceptions emerge. First, in the classical sense, ideology refers to a set of representations, beliefs, and values characteristic of an individual, group, or society. It structures how people relate to the world and their conditions of existence. If fascism aims to transform the human being, emotionally, morally, and existentially, it can indeed be seen as an ideology: a totalising system carrying an anthropological project. Gramsci sees fascism as a passive revolution, a top-down restructuring enabled by the failure of progressive forces to build a counter-hegemony. Fascism unifies ideology around strong symbols: nation, order, virility, spirituality, forming a new historical bloc subordinating the interests of dominated classes to a supposed national unity. Gramsci writes: "The great popular masses have detached themselves from traditional ideologies [...] but have not yet created their own. This vacuum allows dominant ideologies to reorganize."[32] Fascism fills this void not with programmatic clarity, but through mythical politics, mobilizing collective imagination around identity and imaginary enemies.

Second, from Marx's perspective, ideology is structural: a system of beliefs and practices legitimizing and reproducing domination, particularly capitalist production. For Marx, ideology is false consciousness, a veil obscuring material social relations. As he states: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."[33] Thus, dominant

30 Zeev Sternhell, « La troisième voie fasciste ou la recherche d'une culture politique alternative », dans *Ni gauche, ni droite*. (Pessac : Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 1995), 18. Translation by the author.
31 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 16.
32 Antonio Gramsci, *Cahiers de prison. Anthologie*, éd. Jean-Yves Frétigné et Jean-Claude Zancarini (Paris : Gallimard, 2021). Translation by the author.
33 Karl Marx, *Contribution à la critique de l'économie politique (1859), «Avant-propos»*, trad. G. Fondu et J. Quétier (Paris :

ideology reflects the ruling class's interests, rooted in economic structures. A central contradiction arises: if fascism claims to transform the human subject fundamentally, Marxist logic demands a transformation of production relations, the material base of subjectivity. Yet, fascist regimes maintained capitalist structures, merely overlaying them with authoritarianism and nationalism. This paradox is noted by Gilbert Allardyce, who challenges the unity of the concept "fascism," asserting:

> Only individual things are real; everything abstracted from them, whether concepts or universals, exists solely in the mind. There is no such thing as fascism. There are only the men and movements that we call by that name.[34]

Ideas cannot be divorced from their material base, implying that a total ideological project demands a transformation of production relations. Thus, we must confront a key paradox: can fascism claim a total transformation of man and society while preserving bourgeois-capitalist economic foundations? To address this, we must refine our concept of fascist ideology. Roger Griffin warns against reducing fascism to a traditional ideology. First, this ignores the material conditions that made its emergence possible, disconnecting it from history and social context. He writes:

> To search for a minimal definition of fascism based on its ideology is to lose sight of the material socio-economic conditions and objective political context which formed the preconditions for the genesis and structure of its particular manifestations.[35]

Second, fascism lacks a stable doctrine or canonical thinkers. It is intellectually eclectic, "a rag-bag of third-hand ideas", says Griffin. Imposing coherence on it risks misrepresenting its irrational core. Third, viewing fascism ideologically risks moral and methodological failure by abstracting from its violent outcomes (war, purges, genocide, ...). As Griffin notes:

> It detracts attention from concrete events which constitute the real 'nature of fascism' and moreover euphemizes the immense human suffering caused when nebulous fascist ideals and policies become translated into gruesome political realities.[36]

Fascism, then, is less an ideology than a performative politics, a conjunctural dynamic, an affective mobilization, and a reaction to capitalist crisis. It operates as mythic rhetoric, not doctrinal coherence, a technology of power grounded in violence, authority, and nationalist regeneration. Its "revolution" is existential, not ideological.

IV. Psychoanalysis in fascist theory

To address the paradox: how can fascism claim to transform humanity while preserving capitalist class structures? We turn back to Wilhelm Reich, who critiqued traditional Marxism's limitations whilst keeping a Marxist framework. Alongside Erich Fromm, Reich explores how fascism triggers psychological needs, not just economic interests. Fromm, in *Fear of Freedom*, argues that Hitler became a symbol of "Germany", making dissent a form of existential exclusion. Fear of isolation, combined with weak moral principles, explains popular loyalty to fascism[37]. For Reich, orthodox Marxism mistakenly idealizes class consciousness as purely rational. The Comintern, for instance, failed to account for why large segments of the proletariat supported fascism despite their high level of class consciousness. Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc notes that by making the correlation between the political capacity of the masses and their 'awareness' of their 'interests' and 'conditions of existence' the traditional Marxist approach:

> identifies those conditions themselves with a social relation conceived as a pure structure of production and exchange, ultimately reducing the ideological factor to a mere reflection or presupposition of this structure.[38]

Before adding that:

> the key issue is to understand that ideology is not merely the expression of economic rationality, nor the direct expression of political interests and groupings determined by this rationality, but rather its irrational other, as Reich puts it—precisely that which class struggle operates upon and seeks to rationalize, though never fully or evenly succeeds in doing so.[39]

Reich reframes ideology as an autonomous material force, embedded in the collective unconscious and affective structures. It shapes subjectivity at the level of desire, not just rational recognition. He writes:

> There is an important relationship between

Les Éditions sociales, 2014), 63–64.

34 Gilbert Allardyce, "What Fascism Is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept," *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, April 1979), 368.

35 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 14.

36 Ibid, 14.

37 Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1942).

38 Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, "A Scientia Sexualis to Confront the Fascist Mystique," in *Psychoanalysis, the Other Materialism, Actuel Marx* 59, no. 1 (2016): 54-55.

39 Ibid, 54-55.

> the economic structure of a society and the mass-psychological structure of its members. It is not merely that the ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class. What is more important for the solution of practical problems is the fact that the contradictions in the economic structure of a society are also anchored in the mass-psychological structure of its members. Otherwise, the fact could not be understood that the economic laws of a society can have practical effects only through the activity of the masses who are subject to them.[40]

Fascism, for Reich, is not merely political domination, it is a *Weltanschauung*, a worldview shaping perceptions of love, labour, and human relations: "Fascism is not a political party but a specific Weltanschauung and a specific attitude toward people, toward love and work."[41] This view sees ideology not just as mystification, but as a productive force. Power not only represses, but it also creates social reality. The appeal of fascism lies in how it captures and mobilises libidinal investments, integrating psychology into material analysis. Other thinkers followed similar paths. Bataille, for example, combined Freudian mass psychology with classical sociology[42]. Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, argues that:

> The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.[43]

Fascism expresses the masses' desire for change, but diverts it through symbolic channels, preserving capitalist property relations. Likewise, Sigmund Freud's 1922 essay *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the "I"*[44], alongside Theodor Adorno's 1951 essay *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*[45], further developed the theoretical groundwork for understanding the psycho-social dimensions of fascism. The Frankfurt School, through its transdisciplinary approach, profoundly reshaped Marxism, revealing how fascism merges economic contradictions with affective structures. As Jean-Marie Brohm notes, its value lies in fusing philosophical analysis with empirical research[46]. Freudo-Marxist thought evolved further with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, notably in *Anti-Oedipus*[47] and *A Thousand Plateaus*[48]. They reject Freud and Marx's orthodoxies, proposing a radically original theory of fascist desire. In the preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, entitled "Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life", Michel Foucault encapsulates the critique made against the historical approaches to understanding fascism. He also summarises the central argument proposed by Deleuze and Guattari regarding the desire for fascism, which addresses the paradox of the German working class in the 1930s. Foucault writes:

> The major enemy, the strategic adversary, is fascism (whereas Anti-Oedipus' opposition to the others is more of a tactical engagement). And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilise and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.[49]

Here, Foucault touches upon a central concern of the Freudo-Marxist tradition, which Guattari also developed in his essay *Everybody wants to be a fascist*[50]*:* the internalization of fascist desire, a desire that is not solely constructed through external historical forces but that also manifests the subject's inner relationship to power, authority, and self-dominance. This conceptualisation of fascism not only deepens the understanding of the mechanisms behind the fascist phenomenon but also raises broader questions about the complexities of desire and human agency

40 Wilhelm Reich, The Mass Psychology of Fascism, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 18.
41 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 19.
42 Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," *New German Critique*, no. 16 (Winter 1979).
43 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 19.
44 Sigmund Freud, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings,* trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2004).
45 Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," in *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences*, vol. 3, ed. G. Róheim (New York: International Universities Press, 1951).
46 Jean-Marie Brohm, «Sur la psychologie de masse du fascisme,» *Mauvais temps*, no. 6/7 (March 2000).
47 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).
48 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
49 Michel Foucault, "Preface," to *Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), XIII.
50 Félix Guattari, «Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist,» in *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

within political and social life. Deleuze and Guattari start by acknowledging the influence of the early Freudo-Marxists, such as Reich, on the study of fascism as something that is not imposed passively on the masses but something that the masses actively want: Deleuze and Guattari emphasise Wilhelm Reich's crucial contribution: that the masses actively desired fascism. They quote:

> Reich is at his profoundest as a thinker when he refuses to accept ignorance or illusion on the part of the masses as an explanation of fascism, and demands an explanation that will take their desires into account, an explanation formulated in terms of desire: no, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for.[51]

Yet, they critique Reich for reintroducing a rational/irrational binary, assigning irrational desire to psychoanalysis while treating production as rational. Instead, they propose a non-fascist life, where desire is liberated from domination. Fascism is not an error, but a product of how desire, power, and social production intertwine. It must be understood not as illusion or coercion alone, but as a libidinal economy that seduces the masses into their own domination. This overview of various Freudo-Marxist theories reveals that this approach to fascism is often neglected in contemporary debates. While psychoanalysis has a documented history of problematic practices, as criticized by thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, their contributions went further: they sought to displace the dysfunctional Freudian framework with a more materialist understanding of the psyche. Despite this, the radical left has frequently overlooked the psychological dimensions of fascism, limiting its analysis to purely economic or structural factors. However, fascism cannot be fully understood without accounting for its libidinal investments and affective mobilisations that a critical psychoanalytic perspective can illuminate.

Conclusion

The path toward a general theory of fascism remains fraught with challenges, notably due to the rapidly evolving nature of capitalist economies. As capitalism advances in its final, imperialist stage, the intensification of its internal contradictions gives rise to unforeseen crises, crises that are likely to shape the conditions for the resurgence of fascism. Fascism is therefore not a stable concept and is highly sensitive to structural changes, which makes its study more challenging. Nevertheless, developing a shared methodological framework is essential. This requires disentangling ideological biases, striking a careful balance between historical specificity and philosophical abstraction, and avoiding both definitional inflation and reductive minimalism. Fascism remains a notoriously elusive and paradoxical concept; one whose misinterpretation carries profound political risks. A rigorous, interdisciplinary approach is thus not merely desirable, but necessary.

51 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 38.

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