

Roger Griffin, *Fascism: A Quick Immersion* (New York: Tibidabo Publishing, 2020), ISBN 978-1-949845-12-9

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For many years scholars were reluctant to study fascism and its ideology, preferring to place it in a quarantine box marked 'conundrum'. Slowly, but thankfully, this has changed. However, unravelling the ideas that underpin fascism has remained one of the most difficult challenges for historians and political scientists in recent decades and, as Roger Griffin notes, 'Fascism' is evidently a contested and complex topic even today. Griffin's new study seeks to unpack the complexities of rightwing ultra-nationalism for a wider audience, although specialists in the field will also find much of value in the book.

Ever since his ground-breaking study *The Nature of Fascism* (1991) appeared, Griffin has devoted countless hours and much energy to the close analysis of rightwing extremism in all its forms and, in particular, to constructing a working definition of generic fascism, around which a fresh generation of scholars could find a new consensus. Famously, Griffin's succinct formulation in 1991 stated: 'Fascism is a political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism'. Much of his subsequent work provided further insights into this definition, and undoubtedly stimulated much scholarly debate - both for and against - which has continued to influence new academic research.

Griffin's latest publication, as he aptly notes, is a little book 'but one dense with compressed arguments, theories and information'. Indeed, this publication is part of the 'Quick Immersions' series, a new initiative which seeks to provide 'accurate and straightforward language' to offer a good introduction or deeper knowledge on diverse issues in the social sciences and humanities. Griffin's contribution more than succeeds in meeting these objectives, and also revisits his extensive work on rightwing extremism over the years. He explains and dissects his original definition and its subsequent evolution over time in a satisfyingly clear-cut fashion.

The book is structured into four main chapters, together with a 'Post-scripture' and a brief but helpful guide to further reading. Griffin commences by responding to George Orwell's well-known article 'What is Fascism?', published in 1944, which had expressed pessimism over whether a clear and generally accepted definition would ever emerge. Griffin counters this by arguing that there is now 'good news' - enormous strides have been made, he contends, 'to provide a practical, generally agreed, *working* definition of fascism for use by historians and political scientists in their research' (Griffin's emphasis). In fact, as Griffin persuasively argues, his working definition has proved to be an 'increasingly productive tool' for investigating both the 'classical' (interwar) versions of fascism and the many post-1945 permutations.

Throughout the book there is a welcome emphasis on employing precision in terminology when discussing fascism. In chapter 2, for example, Griffin returns back

to his original 1991 definition and restates key points concerning the then unfamiliar word 'palingenetic'. One aspect of the 'ineliminable core' (Michael Freeden's term, as used by Griffin) at the heart of most fascisms was the vision of a reborn nation, conceived in 'ultranationalist' and 'racist (but not necessarily biological) terms'. Fascism's demand for 'revolutionary change' to bring about a 'new order' and 'new men' (and women) consisted of a fusion of two sub-myths: one is the myth of the 'ultra-nation', an imagined community embracing the nation's largely mythicized history and its future (and which, like a living organism, can decline and 'die'), and the other is the myth of 'palingenesis' - the 'rebirth' of the nation from decadence and decline, to be realized by the enforced removal of obstacles to or 'enemies' of the nation's renewal, a process led by the fascist elite, movement, party or group.

Importantly, Griffin maintains that the specific elements that make up each fascist myth of rebirth consist of different blends of such elements. Thus, one version of fascism may embrace anti-Semitism, while another may want to experiment with corporatist economics, while another may seek to woo mass popular support. Others, as is the case with various post-1945 examples, may choose the strategy of 'leaderless resistance' and pursue a groupuscular, terroristic path. Even within the same movement, as Griffin points out, some ideologues may extol the 'eternal' values of the agricultural countryside, while others 'the heroic productivity of a technologically advanced metropolis'. The result is the 'extraordinary variety' of interwar and post-war fascist ideas in terms of specific content, while at the same time sharing the 'same' belief in 'the nation's imminent or postponed rebirth from decadence which gives them their generic fascist identity'.

In chapter 4, Griffin maps how the latter point has exhibited itself in 'Post-war and contemporary fascisms', and he explores a number of examples to illustrate this, sometimes with direct primary source quotations from extreme right texts. One such is the anti-Semite and Holocaust denier Richard Verrall, who penned articles for the National Front journal *Spearhead* in the 1970s. As far as Griffin is concerned, Verrall's language on 'decadent' art, which echoed strongly the interwar Nazi perspective on culture, illustrated one of the most influential forms assumed by post-1945 fascism - that of 'neo' or 'Universal Nazism'. More recent examples of this 'internationalization' of fascism, and the synthesis of interwar fascist ideas with post-1945 neo-fascist components, were the terrorist attacks carried out by Anders Breivik in Norway in 2011 and, in turn, the crimes perpetrated by Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand in 2019. The 'manifestos' of both men represented hybrids of fascist and neo-fascist ideological elements.

Significantly, taking both its interwar and post-war permutations together, although many types of post-1945 fascism have tended to adopt either a pseudo-democratic party or a smaller 'groupuscular' organizational form, what strikes Griffin especially is how fascism over the course of the last one hundred years has 'displayed considerable ingenuity' in generating such a wide variety of fresh diagnoses of the decadence of the nation. Although one drawback to the book is the lack of an index, it nevertheless offers an excellent doorway into Griffin's highly regarded research on fascism since the 1990s, delivered in a very accessible short read form.

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