

THE NATURE OF FASCISM
REVISITED

ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO

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SOCIAL SCIENCE MONOGRAPHS, BOULDER
DISTRIBUTED BY COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK

2012

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ISBN 978-0-88033-666-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009939128

Printed in the United States of America

For my son Filipe

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2 | The origins of fascist ideology: The Sternhell debate

With *Ni droite ni gauche: L'idéologie du fascisme en France*, published in 1983, the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell completed a stage in his research on fascist ideology and its origins, thus finishing the work begun with *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français*, followed in 1978 by *La droite révolutionnaire (1885–1914): Les origines françaises du fascisme*. Although it is this latter work that defines Sternhell's theoretical and methodological premises, it was *Ni droite ni gauche* that unleashed a polemic that was both rich and far-reaching.¹

The debate began, naturally, in France, where it went beyond the academic world, became politicized, got into the press, and eventually reached the courts. A certain person who objected to the role given him by the historian took the relatively unprecedented step by taking Sternhell to court, with such well-known intellectuals as Raymond Aron becoming involved.² The most important contributions to the polemic were published in 1983 and 1984 in publications such as *L'Esprit*, *Le Débat*, *Annales (Économie, Sociétés, Civilisations)* and *Vingtième Siècle*,³ and were mainly hyper-critical of

- 1 Z. Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: L'idéologie du fascisme en France*, Paris, 1983; Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français, Paris, 1972; *La droite révolutionnaire (1885–1914): Les origines françaises du fascisme*, Paris, 1978.
- 2 Bertrand de Jouvenel took Sternhell to court. Raymond Aron, one of his main witnesses, died soon after returning from one of the court sessions. The decision of the court was not entirely favourable to Sternhell. Amongst others, Ernst Nolte, François Furet, Maurice Agulhon, René Rémond, Eugen Weber, Stanley Payne, and George Mosse were witnesses on behalf of the Israeli historian. For this trial see P. Assouline, 'Enquête sur un historien condamné pour difamation', *L'Histoire* 68, June 1984, pp. 98–101. For Aron's opinion on Sternhell's work see *L'Express*, 11 February 1983, pp. 22–4.
- 3 In this review the following works of Sternhell are considered: *La droite révolutionnaire; Ni droite ni gauche*, and the following articles participating in the polemic (published up to June 1985), presented in chronological order: M. Winock, 'Fascisme à la française ou fascisme introuvable?', *Le Débat* 25, May 1983, pp. 35–44; S. Sand, 'L'idéologie fasciste en France', *L'Esprit*, August/September 1983, pp. 149–60; J.-M. Domenach, 'Corre-

Sternhell's theses. Although the debate was less heated in the Anglo-Saxon world, something was added to it in Italy. This should not be considered surprising, for it is here that similar interpretations have been developed. Sternhell responded to this first wave of criticism at the end of 1984, specifying his position,⁴ and the argument shows every sign of continuing. In spite of this it is possible to conduct an initial evaluation of the polemic.

The importance of Sternhell's work lies both in his exhaustive empirical research on French fascism and, especially (and it is this viewpoint that is of interest to us), in his expressing an overall theory of the nature of fascist ideology and of its formative process. This dimension has dominated a large part of the research on this theme in the last few years, and the Israeli historian raised the old problem of its composite origin from a new standpoint.

Some analysts, mainly contemporaries of fascism, deny it has even a minimally structured and coherent ideological dimension: more than a few scholars took as their own the words of Samuel Barnes:

Some totalitarian mobilization systems arise in reaction to the mobilization structures of others. They are in fact largely negative rather than ideological, and though they often have a formal pseudo-ideology, it is not a guide to action and is taken seriously primarily by the young, the ignorant, and the academic.⁵

Sternhell is directly opposed to this position. His fascism, along with liberalism or communism, possesses a perfectly structured conceptual framework. Although one recognizes the inherent difficulties in defining the concept, they are no different from those posed by other ideological systems from the same period – the first half of the 20th century. 'Like liberalism, socialism, and communism', claims Sternhell, 'fascism constitutes a universal

spondance', *L'Esprit*, August/September 1983, pp. 176–9; S. Bernstein, 'La France des années trente allergique au fascisme: A propos d'un livre de Zeev Sternhell', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire* 2, April 1984, pp. 84–94; J. Julliard, 'Sur un fascisme imaginaire: À propos d'un livre de Zeev Sternhell', *Annales: ESC*, July/August 1984, pp. 849–61; L. Rapone, 'Fascismo né destra né sinistra?', *Studi Storici* 3, July/September 1984, pp. 799–820; P. Burrin, 'La France dans le champs magnetique des fascismes', *Le Débat* 32, November 1984, pp. 52–72; Z. Sternhell, 'Sur le fascisme et sa variante française', *Le Débat* 32, November 1984, pp. 28–51; S. Romano, 'Sternhell lu d'Italie', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire* 6, April/June 1985, pp. 75–81; D. Cofrancesco, 'Re-censionioni', *Storia Contemporanea* 2, April 1985, pp. 353–71.

4 This first reply from Sternhell refers only to Winock 'Fascisme à la française'.

5 M. V. Cabral, 'Portuguese fascism in comparative perspective', paper presented at the *12th International Political Science Association World Congress*, Rio de Janeiro, August 1982, p. 1.

category with its own variants'.⁶ Up to this point he is not alone in the historiographical work on this subject.⁷

Since the 1960s, one of the central debates has developed around the definition of a fascist minimum, which would characterize a generic fascism and typify its national variants. Of the three levels on which it is presented historically (that is, ideology, movement, and regime) it is only the first that is of interest to Sternhell, and his choice of the French case is not without forethought. The fact that in France fascism has never been a unified and significant party or political regime is advantageous in that 'the nature of an ideology is always clearer in its aspirations than in its application',⁸ and here it has never had to compromise, remaining closer to the ideal type.⁹ The interest in the ideological level is also of more value as 'the era of fascism is, firstly, that of an ideology and of the movements that are associated to it rather than an era of a certain type of regimes'.¹⁰ At this point he still has a significant, but somewhat smaller group of co-thinkers.

After the first wave of work on regimes within this group, the most novel ideas produced on the subject are in the field of the study of fascism as an ideology and a movement. However, on breaking away from those who underestimated the ideological factor in fascism, Sternhell represents perhaps the most extreme position. We shall discuss this later, but it is worth noting at this point that one of his well-publicized central hypotheses is that the study of the ideological dimension allows us to observe how fascism deeply impregnated European political culture between the two world wars in a much vaster movement, which in the French case went beyond the world of the small parties that arose from it.¹¹

6 Z. Sternhell, 'Sur le fascisme', p. 30.

7 For a bibliographic view of this theme see an article by the author of the theses under debate, Zeev Sternhell, 'Fascist ideology,' in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A reader's guide – analyses, interpretations, bibliography*, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 325–406. The most recent bibliography is found in a work considered by Sternhell himself as the best synthesis, S. G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and definition*, Madison, WI, 1980. Several authors discussed in the works cited above have already debated the theme of a generic fascist ideology, as in the case of Juan Linz, George L. Mosse, and Renzo di Felice. See Mosse's position in M. A. Leeden, ed., *Intervista sul nazismo*, Rome and Bari, 1977. Renzo di Felice does not hold the same position, see M. A. Leeden, ed., *Intervista sul fascismo*, Rome and Bari, 1975.

8 Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, p. 15.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 293.

10 Sternhell, 'Sur le fascisme', p. 30.

11 Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, p. 21

The subject of the ideological origins of fascism has mobilized a considerable number of historians. After some pioneer research, a substantial number of works on the subject from both a national and a comparative perspective have been published in the last few years. Some of these anticipated the theses systematized by Sternhell. His work, however, is part of a specific interpretative approach that tends to focus on the contributions of ideological families not traditionally associated with fascism, as in the case of socialism or revolutionary syndicalism. These authors tend to consider there to be a strict separation between fascism and the conservative right, and they focus on the revolutionary character of its ideology and political practice as well as its left-wing origin. But even within this current of thought we find a vast spectrum of positions, among which the provocative theses under debate are individualized.

Taken as a whole, Sternhell's work represents an important contribution to the study of what I prefer to call the cultural origins of European fascism. Here we shall not attempt to discuss all his hypotheses, but rather will focus only on those that have given rise to greater polemic.

Fascism as an ideology is the product of a synthesis. Elements of various ideological groups contribute to it. Compared with other systems, such as socialism or communism, fascism 'does not have a single source like Marxism.'¹² Sternhell's hypothesis refers to Georges Valois' famous formula: nationalism plus socialism equals fascism. For him, fascism is the product of the synthesis of a new type of nationalism and a certain form of socialism, in which in fact Mussolini, Gentile, or Mosley always recognized the essence of the phenomenon.¹³ It is a revolutionary ideology that combines a new organic nationalism with a socialism that, abandoning Marxism, remains revolutionary: 'new left and new right in symbiosis forge this rebellious, seductive, and brilliant ideology that the researcher defines as a fascist ideology, even though its followers may never wear brown shirts.'¹⁴

In order to study its creation it is necessary to go back to the end of the 19th century, a period of social and political change without which fascism would not have appeared. It is here that we shall have to begin since, from the point of view of the history of ideas, the First World War does not show the complete break that is attributed to it in so many other areas. Fascism belongs not only to the postwar period, but also to the period that began with the modernization process of the European continent at the end of the 19th century. The crisis of liberalism at the time of the eruption of the masses

12 Sternhell, 'Sur le fascisme', p. 29.

13 Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, p. 21.

14 Ibid., p. 311.

into political life produced fascism as an ideology. The name did not yet exist, but its corpus was already formed. The First World War created the social conditions for the emergence of fascism as a movement but did not add to its ideology.

The formative synthesis of fascist ideology can be historically verified earlier in France than in Italy or Germany. All Sternhell's work is aimed at proving, with excellent erudition, this double genealogy through the study of the contributions made by its various agents.

A new revolutionary right emerged early in France, representing something very different from a mere continuity of counter-revolutionary, legitimist and anti-liberal thought. Like other movements, it was the product of the same phenomenon: industrialization and urbanization causing a crisis of the adaptation of liberalism to the new mass society. In Boulangism, for the first time 'the crisis of the liberal order encountered its expression in the politics of the masses.'¹⁵ This new right – nationalist, populist, and anti-democratic – gave political expression to a whole process of intellectual revolution and to the social changes of the end of the century. It was far from being a bayonet looking for an ideology. Constructed from social Darwinism, which gave it its conceptual framework, the ideology of the new right was a synthesis of anti-rationalism and anti-positivism, of racism and nationalism.¹⁶ It had a point in common with Marxism: determinism – but this was biological and racial. It was revolutionary because 'in a bourgeois society which practiced liberal democracy, an ideology conceived as the antithesis of liberalism and individualism, that had the cult of violence and activist minorities, was a revolutionary ideology.'¹⁷

The generation of 1890 – Barrès, Sorel, and Le Bon – expressed this intellectual rebellion against the rationalist individualism of liberal society and the new industrial society very well by exalting the nation. This revolt found legitimacy in the scientific and cultural climate. If before then science and liberal ideology appeared to go hand-in-hand, the panorama changed at the end of the century. The new human and social sciences – Darwin's biology, Taine's history, Le Bon's social psychology, and the Italian school of the political sociology of Pareto and Mosca – 'rose up against the postulates upon which liberalism and democracy were based,'¹⁸ Elitism, racism, nationalism, and the unconscious versus reason were all an integral part of

15 Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire*, p. 26.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

this revolutionary new-right ideology. Sternhell describes how this cultural change was rapidly translated in the political world. It legitimized and gave respectability to the violent downfall of the liberal order, as well as supplying the conceptual framework for the take-off of fascism. He also shows how this new right manifested itself in the organizational field through the *Jaune* and *Action Française*, movements of the prewar period that anticipated many of the postwar fascist movements. It used modern methods of organization, propaganda, and street action, assuming the role of a mass mobilizing movement.¹⁹

With the Dreyfus case, French socialism, responding to nationalist and anti-Semitic agitation from the radical-right, proclaimed itself the guardian of liberal democracy. In taking this decision the French working-class movement ceased to be a revolutionary factor and integrated itself in the democratic consensus. Those on the extreme left who remained opposed to this progressive integration would meet up with those from the other side who also rejected democracy.²⁰

The contributions of the left date from the crisis of Marxist socialism at the end of the 19th century: a period during which one detects an ideological revisionism that is an integral part of its genealogy. Without this revolt of socialist origin fascist ideology is unintelligible.

Out of this crisis of Marxism and the loss of confidence in the proletarian revolution, two solutions appeared. The first gave rise to liberal revisionism of the type of Bernstein and Jaurès, which incorporated democracy and integrated itself in the established order. The second, represented in pre-First World War leftism, led to an ethical and spiritual revision of Marxism, while maintaining a position of frontal rejection of democracy and not abandoning the revolutionary principle. This current of thought 'represented not only a total denial of the established order, of its social and political structures, but also constituted a revolt against its moral values, against the type of civilization that the bourgeois world represented.'²¹

The revolutionary syndicalists were the first at the beginning of the century 'to rise up against materialism, against all materialism, not only liberal

19 Sternhell shows the difference between the nationalist revolutionary character of *Action Française* in the pre-First World War period and its conservative authoritarian character in the 1930s. The early use of fascist political tactics by the *Action Française* has already been mentioned by E. Nolte, *Three faces of fascism*, New York, 1964. But the majority of scholars on this theme contest this association of Sternhell's. See, for example, E. Weber, *L'Action Française*, Paris, 1962, and R. Rémond, *Les droites en France*, Paris, 1982, pp. 169-80.

20 Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire*, p. 27.

21 Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche*, p. 81.

and bourgeois, but also Marxist and proletarian'.²² While hardly anything of Marxism remained in these men coming from the left and far left, the revolutionary principle survived. The conceptual framework of the revolution was nevertheless profoundly altered. Sorel, Lagardelle, Roberto Michels, and the revolutionary syndicalists started on an ideological route that was a forerunner, with great similarities, of the route to fascism taken by others in the period between the wars: the socialist Marcel Déat, for example, or Henri De Man, leader of the Belgian workers' party. A large part of Sternhell's work is devoted to an attempt to prove the existence of this movement. He summarizes it thus:

Sorel, Michels, and Berth, like the *planistes* and the neo-socialists, rejected historical materialism and replaced it with an explanation of a psychological nature. They eventually reached a socialism that no longer required a relationship with the proletariat. Thus, from the beginning of the century, socialism began to expand, to become a socialism for all, a socialism for the whole community, a socialism that launched an attack on capitalism using not just one social class but the whole community.²³

This route is exemplary in Sorel, leading him to reject Marxism and theorise about a socialism that had little to do with the rationalist tradition of the 18th century. His theory of myths assumed a central role that led him in the political field to foster the *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon*, uniting revolutionary syndicalists and neo-nationalists of the Action Française before the First World War.

In Sorel's writing, the idea of a class struggle now covered an ideology in which vitalism, intuition, pessimism and activism, the cults of energy, heroism, and proletarian violence, replaced Marxist rationalism. The nation and tradition were to emerge as the sole moral creative forces, the only ones able to prevent decadence. All that remained was 'to replace the conceptual framework of Marxism, replacing the concept of proletariat by that of nation'.²⁴ A similar route led Roberto Michels and Labriola to work with Enrico Corradini and the nationalists in *La Lupa*.

The rejection of historical materialism and the role of the proletariat made this anti-liberal socialism a natural ally of neo-nationalism. We thus obtain a national socialism without the proletariat, producing a 'conjugation based on the nationalist anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois right on the one hand, and

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 295.

24 Ibid., p. 96.

the socialist and socializing left on the other, all equally determined to smash liberal democracy.²⁵

The *planiste* and corporatist options, political and economic anti-liberalism, nationalism, and anti-communism, were to be unifying points of this natural synthesis between the new socialism and the young radical nationalism that also rose up against the old conservative world, against the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Together they were to form a war machine against capitalism without precedent:

Corporatism and the strong state, controlling all the instruments to command the economy, freed once and for all from ties of universal suffrage, parliamentarianism, committees, and parties, constituted the means for this attack on the capitalist citadel, on society divided into antagonistic classes, on the decadence of the nation, on the decline of a whole civilization.²⁶

The men who contributed towards this synthesis were by no means just the 'official' fascists. Their fate might be different when Vichy and the Nazi occupation arrived, but their struggle against the weaknesses of the system and the very foundations of the liberal system were to contribute decisively to the downfall of the legitimacy of democracy and of a certain vision of the world associated with the heritage of the Enlightenment and the principles of 1789.

In the period between the two world wars it was not only Bucard, Do-riot, or Marcel Déat who followed routes comparable to those of the pre-war generation. Intellectuals like Bertrand de Jouvenel, Brasillach, and Maulnier participated in this fascist impregnation of French society during the 1930s, looking for a third way between capitalism and socialism. 'Never had any ideology fed to such an extent on the ambiguity and lack of clarity that prevailed between the two wars.'²⁷ Fascism in that era, Sternhell notes, constituted a political ideology like any other; a legitimate political option far beyond the restricted circles of those who openly adopted it, thus allowing a large number of intellectuals 'to be fascists without knowing it.'²⁸ It was not until the end of the war (though some would never get that far) that the latter recognized that to combine political and economic liberalism, the so-called bourgeois

25 Ibid., p. 10.

26 Ibid., p. 295.

27 Ibid., p. 312.

28 Ibid., p. 311.

liberties, democracy, and disorder in the same condemnation 'meant opening the doors to fascism.'²⁹

Sternhell's theories unleashed a very rich polemic, which we hope to outline here, indicating the points that tend to support the central hypotheses under debate.

The majority of Sternhell's critics tend to reject his analysis totally. Shlomo Sand, Michel Winock, Serge Berstein, Jacques Julliard, and Leonardo Rapone are unanimous in considering his thesis unacceptable, particularly that part relating to the definition (sometimes imprecise) of fascist ideology and its formative process. A second rejection – which is also fundamental – concerns the actual historiographic genre and the methodology practiced. Other contributions support some points, as with Philip Burrin, or at least refrain from flatly rejecting his theses, as in the cases of Sergio Romano and Dino Cofrancesco. Sternhell's first reply reaffirmed his positions and made them more precise, and he has continued to publish articles complementary to *Ni droite ni gauche*.³⁰

I shall start with what seems to me to be Winock's and Julliard's central contribution to the debate: a kind of theoretical and methodological introduction. For them, Sternhell's error derives from his reliance upon a deceptive history of ideologies: he ignores, they insist, the advances of historical science and the tendencies of modern historiography, and produces a history of ideas without a sociological dimension, artificially separating the ideological world from political and social practice. Julliard points out that while modern historiography tends to prefer practice rather than theory, Sternhell falls into the trap of a 'somewhat traditional philosophical and historical idealism that does not incorporate the acquisitions of social history':³¹ that is to say, 'when the history of ideas is not accompanied by an evaluation of its social importance it leads to a distorted view.'³²

A similar position is defended by Leonardo Rapone, who shows his perplexity at this Sternhellian view of history 'exclusively through the filter of ideas' based on a literal interpretation of texts that does not take into consideration any contribution of social and political history.³³ Julliard is peremptory in his conclusion, considering the work symptomatic of the return of the

29 Ibid., p. 312.

30 See Z. Sternhell, 'Emmanuel Mounier et la contestation de la démocratie libérale dans la France des années trente', *Revue Française de Science Politique* 6, December 1984, pp. 1141–80.

31 Julliard, 'Fascisme imaginaire', p. 850.

32 Ibid., p. 853.

33 L. Rapone, 'Fascismo né destra', p. 820.

ideological *refoulé* that takes the form of revenge against economic and social history and of a return to the old history of ideas, which contents itself with its internal arrangement, ancestry, and affiliation, but does not consider its temporal and environmental integration.³⁴

Without negating the hypothesis that fascism may usefully be analyzed as an ideology, Sand, Winock, and Julliard deny its structured character and tend to give support to its pragmatism. For Sand, fascism, 'more than any other social movement of the 20th century, is based principally on its practices. Fascism is a pragmatic movement, whose theoretical elements constantly change.'³⁵ Not even when unified in a movement, as in Italy, do we find this 'solid conceptual framework' of fascist ideology. Here Winock notes, quoting Sergio Romano, Fascism – more so than in Germany – presents itself as 'a system conditioned by events.'³⁶

Sternhell, however, goes further, for one of his hypotheses is that of the existence of a structured fascist ideology before the appearance of the name and of the movements themselves. Here we enter into the complex problem of origins. According to Sternhell, if it is true that it was the First World War that provoked the appearance of fascist movements, this does not constitute a milestone in fascist ideology which was already structured before the outbreak of the war. What is seen by his critics as no more than an a posteriori construction of diverse and heterogeneous elements is for Sternhell an existing solid conceptual framework. Where Sternhell sees a fascist ideology already perfectly structured, his critics more cautiously see a somewhat eclectic pre-fascist culture 'that only has any meaning *par* retrodiction.'³⁷ Separating fascist ideology from actual fascism artificially, Sternhell loses the fundamental reference points of his arguments. The definition of fascist ideology as a synthesis of right and left, which has also been rejected, does not stand up to questioning either, for 'a little, even superficial, attention to the only fascism of interest to the historian – that is, that which exists – would have convinced Sternhell the main forces of fascism were to the right and not the left, and that its main adversaries were on the left and not on the right.'³⁸ When Sternhell analyses the role of revolutionary syndicalism or socialist revisionism, he quotes names unrepresentative of the respective currents and movements, and whose impact on these movements was nil.

34 Julliard, 'Fascisme imaginaire', p. 858.

35 Sand, 'L'idéologie fasciste', p. 151.

36 Winock, 'Fascisme à la française', p. 40.

37 Ibid., p. 40.

38 Julliard, 'Fascisme imaginaire', p. 859.

But there is still a methodological criticism, referring to the way Sternhell applies his concept of fascist ideology to the authors he analyses. In Serge Berstein's view, Sternhell successively isolates some parts that could be included in a purely phenomenological description of fascism (nationalism, corporatism, anti-democratism, *planisme*, etc.) without giving the phenomenon a definition that presents its components as a whole. From there he gives an overall classification to each contributor included in one of the isolated parts. To prove this he uses and abuses the so-called false identity syllogism. Sand explains that one separates one or more aspects of a group and uses this to identify another group: de Gaulle equals anti-communist, Hitler equals anti-communist, therefore de Gaulle equals Hitler.³⁹ Sternhell does not give an alternative to the ideological world under analysis: refuting Marxism without accepting democracy is equal to fascism and so on. On the other hand, teleology runs throughout his work. The actors parade with an unrivalled coherence, without interruption, from socialism to Vichy. Julliard is surprised at this religion of origins in which each period is reviewed on the ideological level as a remake of the preceding one.⁴⁰

Here we enter into Sternhell's own concept of fascist ideology. In fact, if all his critics accuse him of being diffuse or even lacking in concept, only some of them draw near to him in the polemic. Serge Berstein makes this absence the axis of his contribution. He defines some of the fundamental and non-dissociable criteria that characterize fascism. In the first place, he says, it arises as a direct result of the eruption of the masses into the political field and the resultant crisis of integration. In the second place, it was the First World War that acted as the founder event of this phenomenon. Fascism thus derives, like other movements and ideologies (socialism or revolutionary syndicalism), from this crisis of the integration of the masses into the political system. Its political program is part of what Berstein called third-way ideologies that try to find an intermediate solution between liberalism and socialism and which are strictly associated with the aspirations of the urban and rural middle classes.

But fascism is a variant of this ideological constellation, as is, for example, Christian democracy or radicalism. Even though these last two were born before the First World War, this was not the case with fascism. There are obviously some common links between them, such as, for example, state economic intervention of a more-or-less planned nature, various corporatisms, and antagonism towards democracy. Sternhell solves the problem by considering them all as fascists, and ignores Berstein's fourth criterion –

39 Sand, 'L'idéologie fasciste', p. 153.

40 Julliard, 'Fascisme imaginaire', p. 852.

totalitarianism – since ‘fascism is inseparable from its practice – totalitarianism.’⁴¹ This is tendentially found in the ideology of fascist movements and is put into practice after the seizure of power. The Sternhellian confusion of fascist ideology and the family of national reunification ideologies forms the basis of Philip Burrin’s critical contribution. Both of these have common themes such as anti-liberalism and the refusal to accept ‘conflict and division as fundamental parts of all society.’⁴² Nevertheless, there are still important differences, and for Burrin fascist impregnation is an imported phenomenon in France.

Dino Cofrancesco stands apart from the rhetoric of complexity of Sternhell’s critics. He rejects Sternhell’s ‘ideolo-centrism,’ that underestimation that limits the value of his research, of analyses of institutions of political power, and of the actual national make-up. He also rejects the solid conceptual framework of the ideology under analysis. But he opposes Sternhell’s critics on the grounds that the analysis itself remains valid, particularly in regard to the different degrees of contribution to fascist ideology by authors of diverse origins. In the formation of the theory of the enemy brothers that associated liberalism and Marxist socialism in the same rejection and constituted the ‘ideal humus of fascism,’ the contributions during the period between the two wars were many and varied.⁴³

In his reply Sternhell systematizes what for him constitutes the fascist minimum: a denial of individualism, capitalism, liberalism, Marxist determinism and its social democratic variant, and their replacement with a ‘conception of man as a social animal, an integral part of an organic whole.’⁴⁴ But he adds something about the nature of the Vichy regime, which was the deposit of the whole process of ‘fascistization’ within French society. Unlike those who accentuate the difference between Vichy and fascism, Sternhell stresses the revolutionary and not merely conservative, authoritarian character of the new regime, underlining its similarities with Nazism and Italian fascism.⁴⁵

41 Berstein, ‘La France des années trente’, p. 88.

42 Burrin, ‘Le champs magnétique’, p. 53.

43 Cofrancesco, ‘Recensioni’, p. 366.

44 Sternhell, ‘Sur le fascisme’, p. 36.

45 Ibid., pp. 50-1. This position, defended in the debate, is different from the implied description of the Vichy regime as conservative authoritarian present in the work being analysed. This evolution seems to be natural given a large part of the Sternhellian description of fascist ideology is assumed by the Pétain regime. Sternhell’s initial contradiction is also noted by R. Austin, ‘Propaganda and public opinion in Vichy France: The department of Hérault’, *European Studies Review* 13, no 4, 1983, pp. 503-5.

While basically in agreement with some of the criticisms mentioned above, at this point I would like to highlight the merit of Sternhell's work: it supplies an impressive analytical picture of the cultural origins of fascism. His research seems to me to be decisive in its definition of a generic cultural matrix of this cultural and political phenomenon that can be applied to its national variants. All ideology appears in society with an articulated set of negations, and with great perspicacity Sternhell characterizes the cultural field that produces one of the central negative points of fascism: democracy as an ideology and a political system. Sternhell correctly attributes the origins of fascism to the cultural changes occurring at the turn of the century, placing them with precision in the liberal crisis at the time of the emergence of the masses in the political field under the impact of the industrialization and urbanization processes. Unless we take into account how much fascism owed to these processes, we will be unable to analyse the ideology, political practice, and social basis of the postwar movements. This is the link that his critics fail to mention, and which is considered incontrovertible by the majority of scholars working in this area.⁴⁶

Sternhell's framework of references, however, is not entirely original. Pareto and Mosca's theories of elitism, Vacher de Lapouge's racist anthropology, Gustave le Bon's social psychology, social Darwinism, and Sorel's theory of myths (to mention only some of Sternhell's favorite themes), have been included in the debate on the cultural origins of fascism since the 1960s. In the case of France, Ernst Nolte and Eugen Weber may be considered Sternhell's predecessors,⁴⁷ and in that of Germany, George L. Mosse.⁴⁸ In short, the Sternhellian analysis of this process of cultural change that legitimates a genuine attack on the ideological foundations of liberalism and democracy seems to me to be fundamental. I nevertheless do not believe the authors just mentioned support Sternhell's hypotheses regarding fascist ideology itself.

Another merit of Sternhell's work (which I shall not discuss here) is his analysis of the political and social reflection of this process of change, characterized by the appearance in France of movements that anticipated, in ideology and political action, many of the characteristics of postwar fascist-type parties.

46 Consult the bibliography in Payne, *Fascism*, pp. 34–41.

47 And a substantial group of more recent monographs. A review of some of them may be found in E. Weber, 'Fascism(s) and some harbingers', *Journal of Modern History* 4, December 1982, pp. 746–65.

48 G. L. Mosse, *The crisis of German ideology: Intellectual origins of the Third Reich*, New York, 1964; *The nationalization of the masses*, New York, 1975. For a comparative perspective, see G. L. Mosse, 'Toward a general theory of fascism', *International fascism: New thoughts and new approaches*, London, 1979, pp. 1–38.

To underestimate the ideological dimension of fascism seems to me, on the other hand, to be an error opposite to Sternhell's. Some of his critics seem to make this mistake – Shlomo Sand, for example, considers fascism to be 'a pragmatic movement the theoretical elements of which constantly change.' To react to Sternhell's ideologism by choosing pragmatism as the central dimension of fascism leads to the disappearance of one of its typifying criteria, which differentiate it from other movements and similar regimes. It is dangerous to confuse the compromises of fascism once in power with actual pragmatism: fascism was never pragmatic and in power acted in conformity with the spirit of its ideology.⁴⁹

However, entering into the area analyzed by Sternhell, I find some of his theses unacceptable. His ambiguity arises largely from conceptual and methodological problems. The first of these manifests itself in the confusion of culture with ideology. Sternhell associates all traces of an emerging anti-democratic and irrationalist culture at the beginning of the 20th century with fascist ideology, and he classifies all its contributors according to this criterion. It is this confusion that leads me to conclude that if his work is a useful tool for understanding cultural origins, it is less valuable regarding what seems to be his objective: defining fascist ideology itself. The problem is complex because in the case of fascism it is difficult to distinguish between these two areas of emphasis, the themes that make up its central nucleus having been available on the ideological market since the beginning of the last century.

All Sternhell's ambiguity arise from here. Encompassing all those elements within fascist ideology that belong, albeit never in a structured form, to the cultural magma in which fascism is included, Sternhell classifies as fascist all those that at any moment are included in one of the elements considered. This is only possible because he never applies his definition of fascist ideology in its totality to each one of the authors under analysis. Taken to the extreme, Sternhell's work reminds one of a religious procession in which each participant takes his offering to the protecting saint of fascism: one brings corporatism, one *planisme*, another antiliberalism, yet another brings

49 What I wish to point out is that pragmatism cannot constitute an individualizing characteristic of fascism. The fascist dictatorships appear in fact highly ideologized if we compare them with other political regimes. On the importance of ideology in fascism, contrast the positions of two differing authors, Juan Linz and Mihaly Vajda. As the latter points out, it is important not to confuse ideology with the programs of fascist parties: 'fascism never hesitated in radically modifying its declared program and even changed it completely if the interests of power required such a tactic. But it never renounced its ideology.' See M. Vajda, *Fascisme et mouvement de masses*, Paris, 1979, p. 17. See also J. J. Linz, 'Some notes toward a comparative study of fascism in sociological historical perspective', in Laqueur, *Fascism*, pp. 25–6.

anti-capitalism. To apply the classification to them with any rigour, each one should bring an overall sample.

Sternhell begins his study without a structured concept of fascist ideology and does not rigorously define all the concepts he uses: revolution, socialism, and capitalism all appear throughout his work without clear definitions. He starts without any means of interpreting the ideological text and propaganda, and accepts as absolute truth, with no discussion, his anti-capitalism or socialism. Here we shall have to do justice to his critics. His ambiguity is related to the historiographical genre: a mere history of the ideological *événement*. Only the total separation of ideology and social practice allows him to accept the fascist rhetoric. But considering that the basic cultural themes of fascist ideology have been available since the beginning of the past century, what seems to me to be needed is a sociological study of its formative process, which might explain the specific manner in which it was formed after the First World War. In this field Sternhell is of little use to us.

All this becomes even more complicated when Sternhell tries not only to cover the specific case of France but also to analyze the universals of a generic fascist ideology. The contributions to fascism of a certain socialist revisionism and revolutionary syndicalism have been pointed out by various scholars. For historians like A. James Gregor, for example, fascism is fundamentally an heir of socialism, a kind of Marxist heresy.⁵⁰ Some of Sternhell's theses concerning the approximation between Action Française and revolutionary syndicalism in the Cercle Proudhon had already been presented by Paul Mazgaj.⁵¹ But if in the specific French case we have to include the route of a certain anti-Marxist revisionism towards fascism, mirrored in the theories of national socialism, this movement cannot be included in a generic definition of the phenomenon.

The anti-capitalist component of fascist ideology resulted from its negation of economic liberalism in the strictest sense. Arising in an era of crisis,

50 Cited in E. Weber, 'Fascism(s)', p. 757. A. James Gregor represents in the Italian case the thesis that takes the left ideological roots of fascism further, considering them as the product of 'a long intellectual tradition that has its origins in the ambiguous legacy given to revolutionaries by the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels'; A. J. Gregor, *Italian Fascism and developmental dictatorship*, Princeton, NJ, 1979, p. 121 and *Young Mussolini and the intellectual origins of Italian Fascism*, Berkeley, CA, 1979. One is tempted to try to follow the ideological routes of various personalities from Marxist socialism, or even communism, to fascism (Doriot, for example). What seems to be necessary is to distinguish where apostasy starts and heresy finishes, as Martin Blinkhorn and Eugen Weber note.

51 P. Mazgaj, *The Action Française and revolutionary syndicalism*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1979, pp. 170–222. Positively reviewed by M. Launay, *Le Mouvement Social* 121, October/December 1982, pp. 125–9. For Sorel and his relations with fascism see J. R. Roth, *The cult of violence: Sorel and the Sorelians*, Berkeley, CA, 1980, pp. 89–143, 180–211.

fascism presented itself as the defender of economic nationalism and of the more-or-less planned intervention of the state, as did social Catholicism and social democracy. But there is no reason for Sternhell to characterize its goals as anti-capitalist. Even though some such movements initially included anti-capitalist proposals in their programs, this is one of the characteristics that, owing to its great rarity, ought not to be included in a generic definition of fascist ideology.⁵²

However, this does not apply to anti-individualism and anti-liberalism. The negation of political liberalism and of democracy without doubt constitutes a fascist universal. Here I consider Sternhell's work crucial, demonstrating as it does fascism's position as the main inheritor of an anti-liberal culture that refuses to have anything to do with democracy and denies the institutionalization of conflict. The vision of society as an organic whole, as a national and integrated community in which conflict disappears, represents a universal characteristic of fascist ideology.⁵³

The usefulness of the Sternhellian concept of fascism is limited in two connected ways. It is simultaneously so restrictive (socialism plus nationalism) that hardly anyone can get in, and so vast (anti-liberalism) that there is room for all the enemies of democracy. I do not believe that it is feasible to introduce a double genealogy of right and left into the generic concept of fascist ideology, since in the majority of national variants of the phenomenon this is simply not verifiable. Sternhell rigorously analyses the conjunctural confluence bringing together revolutionary syndicalism and the revolutionary right in fascism, yet this confluence remains an essentially negative one, based upon a denial of democracy.

I do not question that fascism absorbed cultural themes that were originally produced on the left of the early 20th-century European political spectrum. These cannot, however, be considered proto-fascist per se. As Emilio Gentile notes in reference to the Italian case, 'fascism combines in a new synthesis the themes of national radicalism, but these were not per se proto-fascist forerunners, in that they can be put together in various ways, giving

52 The theme of the anti-capitalism of fascist ideology obviously deserves more detailed discussion. Effectively, certain movements and ideologies – and even regimes – present projects that, in a very restricted sense, can be considered anti-capitalist. Returning to the conceptual imprecision of Sternhell – if we adopt any minimum commonly accepted to define capitalism as a historical, economic and social phenomenon, it would be very difficult to include anti-capitalism as a universal of fascist ideology. J. J. Linz in Laqueur, *Fascism*, pp. 34–9.

53 Philippe Burrin considers that 'the fascist project is that of a compact and tense (not calm, harmonious and organic) society.' I do not feel fascism's tendency towards a totalitarian character eclipses this integrative organic and non-conflictive model of its ideology and political practice.

results which are different from, and antithetical to, those derived from the fascist synthesis.⁵⁴ Thus we return to the ambiguity that runs throughout Sternhell's work: while it is a fact fascism took and synthesized diverse existing themes, it does not seem to me legitimate to speak of its ideology before it became a political movement, for it is here that there that ideological synthesis that stimulates political practice is produced. Its character as a latecomer helps to explain, as Juan Linz notes, the negations of its ideology and appeal, 'transforming existing elements into other ideologies and movements.'⁵⁵ The various 'anti(s)' of fascism served to define its identity in relation to other parties (some of which were already using identical ideological themes) and to enable it to appeal to its backers on the basis of greater militancy and effectiveness against its enemies.⁵⁶ This is why it seems to me to be wrong to speak of structured fascist ideology before the appearance of the movements themselves.

These limitations do not, however, invalidate the exhaustive analysis of the relationship between anti-liberal ideology and fascism. What Sternhell did, as Dino Cofrancesco notes, was to place various essential components of fascist ideology together in a continuum in order to test, by analyzing individual cases, degrees of approximation.⁵⁷ While a more rigorous conceptual framework may be required, some of his hypotheses nonetheless remain operative and could be tested in cases other than that of France.

Sternhell's work contributes in an unprecedented way towards a redefinition of the cultural origins of fascism and its ideology. In the French case, he demonstrates how fascism permeated French society and its intellectual elites, far beyond those groups most closely attached to it. His analysis of the evolutionary process towards fascism, of men and of currents flowing from revolutionary syndicalism and from socialism, seems to me to be decisive. But one central theme stands out in his work: the connection between the production of an ideology seeking the destruction of democratic legitimacy and the corresponding process of fascist impregnation, a movement that is difficult to dissociate from the first half of the 20th century in Europe.

54 E. Gentile, *Il mito dello stato nuovo dall'antigiolittismo al fascismo*, Roma and Bari, 1982, p. 26. Gentile covers the theme of the impact of the new mass society on \Italian political culture and the ideological origins of fascism in various short works. See also R. Vivarelli, *Il fallimento del liberalismo studi sulle origine del fascismo*, Bologna, 1981, pp. 25-76.

55 Linz in Laqueur, *Fascism*, p. 15.

56 Ibid.

57 D. Cofrancesco, 'Recensioni', p. 369.