

## 10 Behold the Man! The Deceptive Appeal of Power: Hegel, Nietzsche and the Fascists

*Fascism is essentially the doctrine that elevates that part of the human psyche concerned with control over others – power – to a creed. As such, it is different from other political philosophies only in degree. Communism and fascism blur into each other, and in a way National Socialism is, like liberalism, only claiming ‘the centre ground’. Conservatism, socialism and even liberalism are none of them immune from the siren call of the fascist ideology, with its deceptive egotistical promise of fulfilment.*

It seems unfair to associate any one philosophical tradition, let alone any one country, with fascism, yet that is what has happened with Germany, a country which has brought so many cultural and scientific gifts to the world, yet whose name has become historically synonymous with world war and the politics of fascism. In fact, it is unfair, not least because fascism is actually an Italian ideology, echoed in Spain, paralleled in Japan; and Hitler himself was an Austrian. Indeed others, such as Karl Popper in the twentieth century, often concentrating more on the superficial aspects than on the philosophical underpinnings, have seen Plato as the original fascist, with the *Republic* providing a paradigm of totalitarianism. But this would be a misreading – both of Plato, and of the fascist ideology. Rarely has a creed been so swiftly and totally severed from its intellectual base.

Fascism, as an ideology, is not particularly repugnant. It is idealistic and, if its practical incarnations are appalling, it is always open to its adherents to say, as the supporters of communism do of the experiment of the Soviet Union, that ‘true’ fascism has not yet been seen. Nazism bears the same sort of relationship to fascism, as Stalinism does to communism, that is to say, an historical rather

than a logical one. Nor does fascism have much to do with the present-day holders of the name, who are motivated by a mixture of hatreds and resentments – racism, homophobia, xenophobia – which really do not add up to any kind of political philosophy, other than a shared emphasis on conflict and ‘recognition’.

For the political theorist, then, conflict and the desire for recognition are the hallmarks of both fascism, the concept of the state, and Nazism, the practical incarnation, and both are to be found paradigmatically in German thought, starting with the writings of Hegel. That philosophy professor’s dream of a Prussian state run along strictly logical and rational lines does indeed share some characteristics with Plato’s, as does his emphasis on the ‘universe of mind’ existing somewhere apart from the ‘universe of nature’. Unlike Plato, though, Hegel mixed together the two universes, creating, in a very real sense, both fascism and communism out of the ensuing storm.

## Hegel

Fascism’s high water mark is the 1930s, and that is why this chapter is placed where it is here. But its roots are much earlier, with Georg Wilhelm Hegel in the early nineteenth century (1770–1831). Hegel, like so many political theorists, starts with the history of the world.

Drawing heavily on eastern philosophy for many of his ideas, he begins his history with a critical survey of Indian, Persian and Chinese thinkers, claiming that, in those societies, only the ruler himself had any freedom to think rationally, and that therefore their philosophers were suspect. Only in ancient Greece, according to Hegel, could individuals begin to be rational, albeit still carrying too much intellectual baggage from their religious and social traditions.

But it is not until the Protestant Reformation, which allowed each individual the ability to ‘find their own salvation’, that a ‘glorious mental dawn’ occurs. It is then that ‘the consciousness of freedom’ which is the driving force of history, makes possible the first truly rational communities, such as that, Hegel suggests, exemplified by the Prussian monarchy of his own time. (A system proving its rationality by providing his professorial salary and position, as Schopenhauer later scoff.)

Hegel’s new rational society aims to combine both individual desires: for wealth, for power, for justice, with the social values of

the community – a kind of early ‘third way’ politics. But Hegel’s solution also involves reclassifying all desires that are not compatible with the requirements of the social whole as ‘irrational’, hence not what the individual really wants. Instead, the collective will, the *Geist* (similar, it would seem, to Durkheim’s later ‘collective consciousness’ – though Durkheim’s creation does not need any physical form, and Hegel’s does) is given complete power and authority. This is what makes Hegel the founding father of the two totalitarian doctrines: fascism and communism.

Lying behind this totalitarian concept of society is a view of the universe not as a collection of fundamental particles, whether atoms or souls, but as a whole, an organic unity. ‘The True is the Whole’, Hegel writes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is an illusion to think of anything as separate from anything else, and, in as much as we do so, our thinking is flawed. Actually, even ‘the whole’, which replaces all these imagined separate objects, is not essentially one substance, but many, just as an organism, such as the human body, is made up of different parts with their own characteristics and functions. Even that most basic distinction – between space and time – results in us misguidedly splitting up the world and thereby losing touch with reality. (This is also what Einstein was concerned to announce in his theories of the ‘space–time continuum’ and relativity.) Hegel calls reality – this ‘whole’ – ‘The Absolute’, and it is his contention that all that is true of the world can be formally deduced from consideration of the Absolute using logic.

The Absolute is also rather like God (a rather austere kind of God, like Aristotle’s). A quote, from Hegel’s lectures on the *Philosophy of History*, gives the flavour:

That this *Idea or Reason is the True*, the *Eternal*, the absolutely *powerful* essence; that it reveals itself in the world, and that in that world nothing else is revealed but this and its honour and glory – is the thesis which, as we have said, has been proved in philosophy, and is here regarded as demonstrated.

Typically, logic is valued by philosophers as helping people to avoid asserting anything that is self-contradictory, and this type of approach has had a profound influence on Anglo-American philosophy up to the present day, when its limitations (particularly in consideration of political and ethical matters) are better recognised.

But Hegel's notion of logic is different from the usual one. For example, consider a statement like 'the universe is spherical'. For Hegel, this is 'self-contradictory'. It is self-contradictory because the universe is supposed to be infinite, and something cannot be infinite if it is bounded. However, unless the universe is bounded, then it cannot be said to be spherical or indeed to have any shape at all. (While he thought all this certain, mathematicians would disagree.)

This approach illustrates the *dialectic*. The dialectic is a process – here one of reasoning, but it could equally well be of political or economic systems, as it was famously later taken by Marx – which proceeds from one view, the thesis, to pose another opposing view – the antithesis. These then combine to produce a synthesis, dissolving the original view, and destroying themselves. However, the synthesis now becomes the new thesis, which in turn is found to be unsatisfactory, so that the process repeats itself.

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel begins by considering the notion of 'being' as in the proposition 'the Absolute is Pure Being'. But Pure Being without any qualities is nothing, so the Absolute is also not-being or Nothing – the thesis has evoked its own contradiction. The synthesis of this contradiction – the two notions of Pure Being and Nothing – is *Becoming*. (This again is a notion which Hegel has lifted from eastern philosophy.) And again, the synthesis in turn is still unsatisfactory, so the process continues. Each stage of the dialectic contains elements of the previous stages, so that by the end of the process everything is included, and it is this 'everything' that is the Absolute.

The progress of abstract categories in the *Logic* is paralleled, Hegel believes, by the progress of societies. History shows us one form of social organisation gives place to another, always shuffling forwards towards a kind of 'social-absolute'. Again, none of this is particularly original to Hegel, elements are there in both oriental and Greek philosophy, and Hegel was aware of this.

What is more original is that for Hegel, the origin of society is in the first *conflict* between two humans, a 'bloody battle' with each seeking to make the other recognise them as master, and accept the role of 'slave'. (We may suppose that the apparently relevant conflict between male and female, resulting in the subordination of the latter, is less significant. It is not part of Hegel's analysis anyway.) In Hegelianism, it is the fear of death that forces part of mankind to submit to the other, and society is perpetually thereafter divided into the two classes: of slaves and masters. It is not material need that

propels one class to oppress the other – it is a conflict borne solely out of the peculiarly human lust for power over one another. The French Revolution, Hegel thought, was the slaves revolting. But, unlike, say, Thomas Hobbes, he approves of the motivation calling it the ‘desire for recognition’. For many, this risks death, but that is indeed the way towards ‘freedom’.

In fact, Hegel modestly claimed his *Phenomenology of Mind* as achieving the final stage in humanity’s evolution, by making mankind fully conscious of true freedom. But it was still a strange form of freedom – the freedom of following the laws of a monarch or totalitarian state – with Hegel firmly opposed to ‘anti-freedom’, which was being able to do what you like. It could be said here that Hegel is merely espousing the liberal notion of freedom under the ‘Rule of Law’ – allowing maximum choice, subject to the rule of law – but in fact, Hegel does want to go further than this, and replace many of the humanising qualities of liberalism with such things as the ‘German Spirit’ and the purifying process of war. He writes:

The history of the world is the discipline of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a universal principle and conferring subjective freedom... The German Spirit is the spirit of the new world. Its aim is the realisation of absolute truth as the unlimited self determination of freedom – that freedom which has its own absolute form as its purpose.

Individuals, for Hegel, have little intrinsic worth, because value resides only in the whole. He identifies Christianity as both the most socially significant religion, and the worst one, because it embodies the political structures of liberal democracy. Christianity suggests that all people are equal, in that they each have a soul of equal worth, and that they are free, in that they are able to choose to live according to the law of God. But Hegel thinks that, because it says that God created Man, rather than Man creating God, and because it only offers equality in heaven, Christianity is a slave ideology.

Hegel goes on to imply that liberal democracy is also a ‘slave ideology’ as it offers universal recognition of people’s importance, by elevating the Christian edict to ‘treat your neighbour as yourself’ to a practical legal and political stance.

Hegel evoked strong reactions even at the time. One of his most bitter opponents, Schopenhauer, a contemporary, was devoutly opposed to him, ever since he himself had rashly chosen to deliver

an inaugural lecture at a time when the celebrated Professor Hegel, then at the peak of his career, was also pontificating in the building. Schopenhauer so bitterly resented the small audience that attended his own talk, that he vowed never to lecture again.

'The emblem at the head of Hegelian university philosophy', he wrote pithily later, should be a 'cuttlefish creating a cloud of obscurity around itself so that no one sees what it is, with the legend, *mea caligne tutus* (fortified by my own obscurity)'.

## Hegel's Influence

But Hegel was a very dangerous kind of cuttlefish, not just one that squirts ink around itself defensively, but one with sharp teeth. On the one hand his *Volkgeist* ('spirit of the people') philosophy led to Marx and Engels – the neo-Hegelians – adapting the notion of the dialectic and writing the *Communist Manifesto*; on the other hand it contributed to Mussolini and Gentile (another neo-Hegelian) writing the *Dottrina del fascismo*. Both doctrines adopt the Hegelian notion of individual self-consciousness being embodied in the state. Both manifestos led to the untold sufferings of millions of ordinary and extraordinary people, victims of ideologues with Hegelian notions of 'the march of history', and contempt for the sufferings of individuals in the face of it. Both fascism and communism elevated to practical policy an abstract philosophy that would have been better left to go musty in the common rooms and library of Berlin University.

Indeed, as Hegel's writing was, even by the standards of German philosophy, particularly dry and indigestible, inaccessible to ordinary readers and unlikely to have had any repercussions in the world outside academia, that is most likely what would have happened had it not been for the much more exciting writings of Schopenhauer himself, and later Nietzsche, both of whom owed Hegel more of an intellectual debt than they liked to admit.

What is Schopenhauer's role in this story? Let us go back to Germany in 1788 when Arthur Schopenhauer was born – so called by his parents to facilitate a career in business ('Arthur' is a name in several European languages). He went to boarding school in Wimbledon, London, where he developed what one biographer, Christopher Jannaway, describes as 'rather a lonely streak'. Schopenhauer writes at one point that, in his view, 'company is a fire at

which man warms himself at a distance'. He came to conclude that five out of six people are worthy only of contempt.

At university, Schopenhauer studied medicine, but became interested in philosophy, in particular, Plato, Kant and the ancient Hindu *Upanishads* – a poetical work proclaiming the essential unity of all existence. Together these were the three ingredients of Schopenhauer's proto-existentialist (for want of a real word) work: *The World as Will and Representation*.

The vanity of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeing present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration in which life consists. (*On the Vanity of Existence*)

Schopenhauer's main idea, developed early, was that beyond the everyday world of experience is a better world in which the human mind pierces appearance to perceive reality. There is *Vorstellung* (representation) and *Wille* (will), which is, he argues, what the world is, in itself. Schopenhauer represents another side of the German spirit, a more subtle, profound and, in places, compassionate one. And whatever the philosophers at Jena may have thought, he did have one admirer. One who combined both traditions, and became the prophet of the philosophy of power.

### ***Ecce Homo***

Friedrich Nietzsche's first reading of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* was a revelation, which he adapted to his own, recognisably fascistic, ends. Born in the 'Decade of Revolutions', in 1844 (in the Prussian town of Röcken) Nietzsche sees human beings, and indeed all of life, as engaged in a struggle, a struggle to increase their power. As to alternative theories, for example that of Mill and the utilitarians, he puts it succinctly in *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Man does not strive after happiness, only the Englishman does that.'

Nietzsche was a philosopher poet who wrote of Supermen and battles, of 'the will to power', and of magnificent destinies. Yet Nietzsche, the historical man, was a rather less dashing figure,

physically unattractive and prone to ill health, headaches and chronic short sight, along with intestinal problems, all together ensuring that he knew little of those two great human pleasures: good food and sleep. It seems likely that he knew little of the third pleasure, either, as there was little romance in his life, despite a claimed 'voracious sexual appetite' and his eventually contracting syphilis. At least, that was what Freud alleged, saying he had contacted it in a Genoese male brothel, explaining Nietzsche's obsession with his own ego as homosexual and narcissistic. (Nietzsche himself did describe a visit to a brothel which took place in 1865, but claimed to have come away without touching anything 'but a piano', from which he would have been most unlucky to have contacted syphilis.) His own self-diagnosis blames, rather feebly, the weather for making him a 'narrow, withdrawn, grumpy specialist' instead of a significant, brave 'spirit'. Then again, he says that his sickness 'liberated me slowly', by forcing him to give up his teaching and books, and instead to break his habits, and above all, to 'put an end to all bookwormishness'.

At the age of 40, at which point many accept their middle-aged lot, Nietzsche declared himself to be the 'first immoralist' ('proud to possess this word which sets me off against the whole of humanity'), and announced his intention to 'revalue' all values, starting with the unmasking of Christianity (a task already, as we have seen, undertaken by Hegel) before finishing up by, literally, making 'good' 'bad'. Nietzsche, prescribes his own version of morality – the anti-morality. Where conventional teaching, epitomised by Christianity, but also so strongly advanced by Socrates, would have it that people should be good, and through being good will come happiness, Nietzsche argues that this 'slave morality' is born out of guilt, weakness and resentment. Good is only a shadow form of the absence of this resentment, whereas in 'master morality', good is primary, being equivalent to 'nobility' and 'strength', and bad is the derived form, 'low' and 'common', the failure to achieve this. But his task was attempted too late and was never completed. Instead *Ecce Homo*, 'Behold the Man', a semi-blasphemous title in itself, has to stand as his definitive work, for in the spring of 1889 he descended into a twilight world of his own, never emerging from madness.

Dying, certainly unloved, and, no doubt more importantly in his own terms, unnoticed, at the relatively early age of 56, Nietzsche cuts in many ways a tragic furrow in history, the opposite of what he



would have wanted. The end of *Ecce Homo* is supposed to be an ode to his own excellence, but it is more nearly an anthem to the later German fascist creed.

The concept 'God' invented as the antithetical concept in life – everything harmful, noxious, slanderous, the whole mortal enmity against life brought into one terrible unity! The concept 'the Beyond', 'real world' invented so as to deprive of value the only world which exists – so as to leave over no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! The concept 'soul', 'spirit', finally even 'immortal soul', invented so as to despise the body, so as to make it sick – 'holy' – so as to bring all to all the things in life which deserve serious attention, the question of nutriment, residence, cleanliness, weather, a horrifying frivolity!... Finally, it is the most fateful, in the concept of the *good* man common cause made with everything weak, sick, ill-constituted, suffering from itself, all that *which ought to perish* – the law of *selection* crossed, an ideal made of opposition to the proud and well-constituted, to the affirmative man, to the man certain of the future and guaranteeing the future.

It is here that the Nazi policies of eugenics and race found their voice, sitting comfortably alongside Hegel's earlier attempts to recommend the breeding of Prussian characteristics. The fact that Nietzsche's terminal illness was brought on by the sight of a coachman beating his horse in a cruel manner, a spectacle prompting the first immoralist to intervene out of – of all things! – pity, is one of the small ironies of history.

But why did Nietzsche hate Christianity so? Nietzsche's father had been a Lutheran minister, and his mother was the daughter of another. The things are likely connected. Again, his father went mad eventually, and so did Nietzsche, from 1889. Perhaps it is the incipient sense of insanity that makes his writings so distinctive. After his father's death, the young Nietzsche was brought up in Naumburg by his mother, her sisters and, from his father's side, his grandmother and two of her sisters. The experience did not agree with him. Alongside his dislike of the meek, forgiving, caring Christian, Nietzsche's philosophy is characterised by a deep contempt for womankind. The other half of the species are seen as incapable of 'greatness', and his writing is sprinkled liberally with

snide references often of no particular relevance to the philosophical issues under discussion.

Who knows? Perhaps I am the first psychologist of the eternal-womanly. They all love me – an old story: excepting the *abortive* women, the ‘emancipated’ who lack the stuff for children. Happily, I am not prepared to be torn to pieces: the complete woman tears to pieces when she loves... I know these amiable *maenads*... Ah, what a dangerous, creeping, subterranean little beast of prey it is! And so pleasant with it!... A little woman chasing after her revenge would over-run fate itself. The woman is unspeakably more wicked than the man, also cleverer; goodness in a woman is already a form of *degeneration*...

Strangely enough, despite Freud’s theory, Nietzsche spent much time happily with both his sister Elisabeth, who later wrote up his notes, and thereby earned the blame of subsequent philosophers for everything ‘bad’ in his philosophy and the credit for nothing meretricious; as well as with his mother; and indeed wooing ‘Lou’, with whom he posed in a photograph with a cart, Lou holding a whip, and Nietzsche and friend acting as the horses. Some might look for evidence of sexual confusions in the fact that the young Nietzsche had been sent (like Schopenhauer) to a respectable German boarding school at an impressionable age. It was there that he immediately stood out by writing a precocious essay in praise of Hölderlin, a then uncelebrated German poet whose work also had the mark of insanity. This scarcely reassured his teachers, who already (wrongly) considered the young Nietzsche to be physically suspect by virtue of his father’s illness, but Nietzsche eventually did go to university where he studied Theology and Philosophy. His eccentric style impressed others so much that at the scandalously young age of 24 he was made a professor without ever so much as having had to write a ‘serious’ essay. Leipzig conferred a doctorate without thesis or examination, and Nietzsche was free thereafter to concentrate on his bizarre but original work.

Typical of this was what emerged after Nietzsche looked at ancient Greek society. Instead of idolising it as a cultured and rational theatre, source of enlightened ideas and virtues, as other philosophers did, under Nietzsche it becomes a dreadful place, full of the screams and sounds of drunken excess from Dionysian orgies, culminating eventually in (magnificent) tragedy, full of unspeakable

horror. Nietzsche liked the idea of such orgies. Developing his theme in *Of the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874), he wrote (as already noted) that the goal of humanity is not in some supposed general strategy or process, such as the maximisation of happiness, but is rather in the activities of its 'highest specimens'. These are men who 'transcend history', and are bound by no laws other than that of their own pleasure. 'The man who would not belong in the mass needs only to cease being comfortable with himself; he should follow his conscience which shouts at him: "Be yourself!" You are not really all you do, think, and desire now' (*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 1874).

However, the freedom to be yourself is curtailed by what Nietzsche sees as an overriding, almost biological (genetic?) urge – the will to power. In many of his writings, he tries to explain behaviour as power seeking, and even suggests that this is the motivation of the rest of nature too, including plants and rocks.

The roots of this theory of conflict can be seen in Nietzsche's early interest in the ancient Greeks, where life was indeed a series of contests: for the physically strong, in athletics or fighting; for musicians and poets in competitions; and, of course, for philosophers, such as Socrates, in debates. In Nietzsche's eyes, Socrates was, in fact, a very powerful man, although there is an element of definition-bending here, for in his usual sense, Socrates was also weak and indeed was imprisoned and executed by his enemies. In any case, Nietzsche reserves his approval for Heraclitus, the aristocrat from Ephesus with the nickname 'the Dark', whom he allows as a fellow believer in the importance of destruction: '... destruction, the decisive element in Dionysian philosophy, affirmation of antithesis and war, *becoming* with a radical rejection even of the concept of "*being*"...' (And still the Hegelian influence too!)

Like Hegel, Nietzsche applies his theory of power to history, and makes some illuminating new interpretations, all based on power psychology. The Superman – *Übermensch* – (sometimes implausibly translated as the 'Overman', which sounds like a sort of waterproof shoe) is for Nietzsche the logical outcome of his theory, an individual enjoying his (and it must be *his*) power to the full, untrammelled by notions of justice or pity. In 1884, Nietzsche wrote, in *Der Wille zur Macht*, 'One must learn from war to associate death with the interests for which one fights – that makes us proud; [and to] learn to sacrifice many and to take one's cause seriously enough not to spare human lives.'

## Nietzsche's Influence

Hitler read Nietzsche avidly, seeing in the philosopher some sort of fellow spirit, and Nietzsche's philosophy was adopted and quoted by the Nazis as in some sense embodying Nazi values. It is the discussion of the 'master/slave' relationship that is of most historical resonance. But many of Nietzsche's rhetorical flourishes, such as the despising of the weak, the sick and the handicapped, also fed easily and conveniently into the policies of the Nazi state – even if, as was indubitably also the case, Nietzsche himself had no time for theories of racial supremacy and actually admired the Jews for having crucified the Christian prophet. In fact, Nietzsche even rails regularly against his fellow countrymen: 'As far as Germany extends, it ruins culture... the Germans are incapable of any conception of Greatness...'; 'the Germans have no idea whatever how common they are; but that is the superlative of commonness – they are not even ashamed of being German...'.

The Nazi propagandists got around this apparent contradiction by explaining that his writing was merely a criticism of Germany before the Third Reich. And Nietzsche's anti-morality certainly elevated war to the status of being an end in itself. 'Among the decisive preconditions for a Dionysian task is the hardness of the hammer, joy even in destruction.' In the concluding chapter of *Ecce Homo*, 'Why I Am Destiny', Nietzsche says in a passage which appears to both gleefully and uncannily anticipate the Holocaust: 'I know my fate. One day, there will be associated with my name the recollection of something frightful – of a crisis like no other before on earth, of the profoundest collision of conscience, of a decision evoked against everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man, I am dynamite.'

Perhaps Nietzsche's writings were twisted and distorted through the lens of his sister, the only source for his actual writings (and certainly herself later active with the Nazis). Whether or not this is true, the writings have their own life. Hitler certainly saw himself as a kind of 'philosophical despot and artist tyrant' as imagined by the philosopher. In one of his works, Nietzsche explains how such despots will

... mould men as an artist would... to achieve that universal energy of greatness, to mould the future man by breeding and, at the same time, by destroying millions of bungled humans, we will not

be deterred by the suffering we create, the equal of which has never been seen!

Nietzsche's writings are not really terribly good literature – but the philosophers think they are. And they are not really terribly good philosophy – but the literary critics think they are. Both are impressed by his rejection of 'rationality' (Socrates' 'great mistake') and by his 'deliberate contradictions'. In this way, he has been able to retain a largely undeserved reputation for profundity and originality.

Philosophically, Nietzsche's point is that there is no meaning to life except that which individuals can create for themselves. As fascism is largely about the state, not the individual, seeking to subsume the individual need for 'recognition' into the pomp, power and ceremony of the state, the two theories are in some ways at opposite logical poles. Yet, in both theories, the only way out of this futility and meaninglessness for the individual is through action and creation – and the purest form of these is through the exercise of power. In practice, the Nazi state offered individuals a chance to have power over others, and to enjoy it, untrammelled, as Nietzsche said, by 'notions of justice or pity'.

Nietzsche's legacy is not so much a philosophical justification for anti-morality, as a philosophical precedent for it. He offers legitimacy to those seeking to explain why fundamental offences against common morality are not important. The chain of ideas that led from Hegel through Schopenhauer to Nietzsche was now ready to be taken to its fateful conclusion by the new political ideologues.

## Italian Fascism

Fascism, although widely bandied about as a term for any regime that people disapprove of, is correctly identified as the ideology of the Italian fascists in the first half of the twentieth century under Benito Mussolini. And Mussolini actually started his career as a socialist, gradually developing extreme syndicalist notions centred around an all-powerful state. The manifesto of his party can be said to be *La dottrina del fascismo* written by Mussolini and the former liberal, Giovanni Gentile, a respected 'neo-Hegelian' philosopher.

These days, the term fascism is most closely associated with Adolf Hitler, who admired Mussolini and adopted the doctrine as the ideology of the German National Socialists. For that reason alone,

fascism must be treated as a serious historical theory. But in a sense, Hitler's Nazis were barely 'fascists' – in the same way that they were barely 'socialists', national or otherwise. Mussolini and Gentile's doctrine was rather more subtle and persuasive.

Gentile gave fascism an idealistic and spiritual aspect. Where liberalism and socialism sought to benefit each individual, fascism sought to benefit the nation. As President Kennedy put it once, people were not to ask what the state could do for them, but only ask what they could do for the state. The well-being of the nation provided a high moral purpose for each individual, a purpose that took precedence over the squabbles of workers and unions on the one hand, and of capitalists and libertarians on the other. The original fascists felt that the philosophies both of socialism and of individualism served only to divide the nation and weaken it. Hence, instead of trade unions and private enterprise, fascists created a single unifying force, capable of ensuring that companies and workers alike worked in the interests of the state. This force was to be the fascist party, united behind a charismatic leader. The fascists created Weber's ideal of the bureaucracy under the charismatic leader.

But Gentile's language in describing the benefits of this approach went further too. Fascism, he wrote, echoing Hegel, would restore the patriotic morality of 'service, sacrifice and indeed death'.

Fascism was not just an economic theory, or a quasi-legal structure of rights, but much more – a way to live and a way to attain fulfilment. It was not enough to do what the fascist government said – the fascist citizen also had to *want* to do it, and to believe in doing it. That is why one of the most potent images of the fascist state is of massive parades lined with enthusiastically waving crowds.

Mussolini added to this his own notion of fascism as an 'action theory' – and the highest form of action was violence. Echoing Nietzsche, it was only through violence that individual fascists could truly fulfil themselves and it was only through wars that the fascist state could maintain its ideological purity. When Mussolini used violence to seize power in Italy in 1922, the process was part of the new way of governing – not just a necessary prerequisite. In many people's eyes, the courage of the fascists in fighting for power conferred nobility on the movement and cleansed it of the impurities of the shambling democratic state.

Like Hitler, but certainly not like Nietzsche, Mussolini also stressed nationalism. For Mussolini, Bismarck was a great figure, who had succeeded in binding together the various elements of Germany into

a powerful nation, and he also admired Machiavelli for what he saw as Machiavelli's endorsement of power, especially military power – ignoring or missing the earlier Italian's emphasis on justice.

However, Mussolini's nationalism should not be confused with the German brand, which identified nationality with 'race'. Crucially, for Mussolini, it was the role of the state to create a people out of what in reality would be a mix of very different races. It was the failure of Hitler to understand this that led German fascism to the most grotesque irony of bureaucratic rules and structures, all aiming to make logical a doctrine of racial purity created out of irrational hatred and prejudice. Mussolini himself, the father of fascism, even wrote at one point explicitly that *a people is not a race*, instead it is a group united by an idea perpetuating itself. In this way, if Marx was not a 'Marxist', as he complained, certainly Mussolini was not a 'fascist'. However, he was not a very strong leader either, and steadily over the period of the Second World War, Italian fascism too adopted the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis, even if these were never implemented with any enthusiasm by the Italians, despite increasing German pressure for action as the Nazi officers gradually took control of the region.

Likewise, although Mussolini built up a fairly efficient party machine, and installed party members in key jobs, it was left to Hitler on the right, and Stalin on the left, to really create the conditions of fear and total control that the fascist philosophy suggested. Mussolini banned strikes and nationalised key industries, but Italy's economic performance remained stuck at the same levels. The claim that Mussolini at least 'made the trains run on time' is probably the greatest thing that can be said of that fascist society, and this claim is largely apocryphal.

For, indeed, Italy proved infertile soil for its new seed. The most extreme symbol of Italian fascism – the Abyssinian exploit, in which the Italian army annexed their former colony – was barely achieved, shocking though it was as an example of a sophisticated modern army attacking simple villagers with planes and bombs. (Nowadays, such wickedness is a commonplace. Even the most liberal democrats scarcely hesitate to order the use of such force.) It was also evident to all that the fascists had little more than self-aggrandisement and defiance of the League of Nations as their aims.

The Italian people had as much appreciation of grand displays as anyone, but they also had a well-developed distrust and cynicism about the motives of their leaders, and the fascists were no

exception. Unlike the German SS, the Italian army was made up of conscripts who were disinclined to fight for a political party, and perhaps also reluctant to abandon their humanity for an ideology. Ordinary Italians largely refused to go down the path of atrocity that others were to explore so eagerly.

## Key Ideas

For fascism,

- all life is a striving after *power*, with human beings important only as the means to the ends of the exercise of this power;
- the state should be organised rationally, with individuals complying with and fitting in to its requirements.

In some ways, Nietzsche had a rather naïve notion of the power of an individual, whereas Mussolini and Gentile were essentially investing power in the state, under, of course, a charismatic leader. In the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War, there is little explicit political appetite for the Hegelian doctrine of unfettered state power, although many regimes contain elements of the philosophy in practice. It seems, too, that the Weberian cult of the charismatic national leader has run its course.

Adam Smith too thought liberalism and the free market could offer people a route to satisfy their desire for 'recognition', through the accumulation of material goods. These are not 'necessities of nature', but 'superfluities'. As Smith puts it in *The Moral Sentiments*, 'The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world... the poor man, on the contrary, is ashamed of his poverty.'

If we recall, with Smith, that 'wealth, as Mr Hobbes says, is power', and that money is power in tangible, exchangeable form, then there are parallels between the more radical doctrines of materialism and fascism. It can be argued that the philosophical appeal of life as the pursuit of power goes deeper than just an historical stage, apparently now passed through.

## Key Text

Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1908)