



RECENSÃO

*Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach
to Fascism and its Era, 1919-1945,*
de David. D. Roberts,
por Carlos Manuel Martins

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ROBERTS, David D.

Fascist Interactions:

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Carlos Manuel Martins

In recent years several authors writing about fascism have called into question previous approaches that focused mainly on defining fascism as a somewhat stable political phenomenon that was clearly distinct from other ideologies and political organizations of the same period. David D. Roberts wrote his *Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach to Fascism and its Era, 1919-1945* in the wake of these criticisms seeking to propose new ways of grasping fascist fluidity and the interactions between fascism and other ideologies.

In the first part Roberts acknowledges that while the understanding of specific national varieties of fascism seems to be progressing, “it is especially when we seek to go beyond to address the aggregate that we find ourselves frustrated, dissatisfied” (2016, p. 4). The main resitiveness of contemporary studies is, therefore, related to the uncertainty about how to grasp the wider historical framework within which all variants of fascism were inserted (the “Aggregate”). Addressing the most recent proposals for new approaches, Roberts is aware that most of them reject the type of essentialist and teleological thinking that

characterized the search for a generic fascism in the 1990s. Thus, agreeing with these recent views, the author acknowledges that fascism was a contested phenomenon that at its time could have had several different outcomes, and for this reason he intends to approach it “less in terms of some *a priori* essence, or some determinate direction in light of outcomes, and correspondingly more in terms of an uncertain, contingent, opened-ended trajectory” (p.53).

Likewise, even if not denying the importance of Nazism and Italian Fascism, Roberts seems willing to adopt a more equalitarian approach that does not focus only on Germany and Italy and takes into account less known variants of fascism from other countries. He also wants to use a “braided dynamic” approach to grasp the interactions between fascism and other organizations and regimes. This approach stems from the recognition that it is necessary for researchers to focus on the historical framework in which fascism emerged, that is, an historical framework of “unanticipated experiment and novelty on what is conventionally called the Right” (p. 5). This assertion means that

during the interwar years the non-fascist political Right was increasingly turning toward anti-parliamentarianism and was being influenced by fascism, and in this way experimenting novel forms of political organization that in many aspects seemed to resemble those of fascist German regimes. By focusing on interactions and interchangeabilities, Roberts aims at grasping this ideological hybridity and fluidity of the Right in that historical period, leaving aside approaches that focus on fascism and other Radical Right ideologies as fixed products.

After this first part Roberts analyzes the interactions that took place at a domestic level between fascism and the establishment of several countries (conservative elites, the church, business, etc.). He concluded that there was no single outcome to these interactions and that their dynamism could lead, among other results, to the moderation of fascist movements, but also to synergy and synthesis between ideologies. In the cases in which Conservatives eliminated fascist organizations and adopted some of their trappings, it is not easy to assess the real importance of fascism, since it is difficult to conclude “whether fascism was being blunted or was helping to produce fascistization” (p. 118).

Then, the author deals with the interactions that took place at a transnational level, which could encompass positive interactions (based on attraction, as it happened when Salazar’s regime influenced Metaxas’ Greece and Pál Teleki’s Hungary) and negative interactions (based on dislike and eventually leading

to a quest for alternatives, as it happened when the Romanian Iron Guard sought to distinguish itself from their German and Italian counterparts). Some of the interactions, however, could display characteristics of both of these two types or neither of them. The two other patterns relate to the interactions between fascism and liberal democracy (they were based on the idea that fascism was “leapfrogging” parliamentary democracies), and the interactions across the Left-Right divide, which could happen whenever fascists tried to surpass the distinctions between left and right and when they interacted with the Soviet Union.

Lastly, drawing some final conclusions, Roberts asserts that the best form of approaching the interwar Right is not through a dichotomy that opposes fascism to the non-fascist right, but rather to conceive fascist organizations as a part (even if an important one) of the “Aggregate”. Fascism thus played into a “wider contingent interaction” and displayed a trajectory that “fed into the wider interaction that helped to constitute the new universe on the Right” (p. 232). However, since it is still important to have an idea of what “differentiates fascism within the new universe [of the Right]” (p. 233), Roberts proposes using “Totalitarianism” as the category that is most indicated to distinguish fascism, rather than “Palingenesis” or “Political Religion”. According to him, the choice of departing toward a totalitarian direction was the main feature that characterized fascism at a time when the Right

was divided on the lines of the binary authoritarianism-totalitarianism.

As we saw, *Fascist Interactions* by David D. Roberts is a valuable book in which its author displays a solid knowledge about the most recent contributions to the field of studies on fascism. Furthermore, the book succeeds in making a valuable contribution while trying to solve some of the issues related to the new “restiveness” about the “aggregate” and the best way to approach it. Thus, by focusing on the multiple possible interactions, Roberts provides us with a new dynamic form of approaching the trajectories and outcomes that fascism and other ideologies could go through in the interwar period. Seen through Roberts’ lens, fascism is not an idealized and abstract product, but rather a dynamic ideology that was a part of a wider universe and interacted with other political organizations with uncertain outcomes.

Most importantly, Roberts’ book is a valuable attempt to meet some of the concerns recently brought up by other authors. In an influential essay, Dobry had stated that the process of ideological definition takes place in the context of a struggle for meaning that occurs in “competitive social spaces” and that, for this reason, ideologies are fluid and can vary according to context and to the political positions that one’s competitors embraced (Dobry, 2011, p. 75). Thus, Roberts is clearly following in Dobry’s wake when he analyzes the “aggregate” as if this were a “social competitive place” in which struggles for ideological meaning took place. As to Pinto and Kallis

(2014), they analyzed the interactions between fascism and other authoritarian regimes using an approach that revolves around hybridization. The interactions that Roberts deals with are also a form of deepening our understanding of the said ideological hybridization that Pinto and Kallis talk about.

However, Roberts’ point seems to be weaker when he tries to find a feature to differentiate fascism, and this may even seem out of place in a study dealing mainly with fluidity. Furthermore, his focus on “Totalitarianism” (which in itself is a very contested concept among researchers of fascism) as the defining feature of the ideology is not up to par with earlier studies that have already characterized fascism in a more complex and detailed way, focusing on a more diverse set of features. To mention but a few of these studies, we can refer to Griffin (1991), Eatwell (1992), and Payne (1995).

To sum up, we can conclude that Roberts’ work is a valuable one since it deals with fluidity in a rigorous manner, thus providing the researchers on fascism with new important insights to understand the epoch of fascism. However, Roberts’ attempt to define the phenomenon of fascism, in our view, is not so successful and his point seems to be weaker. For this reason, we argue that future studies should try to find new approaches to grasp both fluidity and fixity in fascist ideology, thus dealing with interactions and opened trajectories at the same time that they recognize a set of well-defined features that

distinguish fascism from other ideologies. Such studies should be influenced by authors who have focused on both of these aspects, and Roberts' work will for certain be an important source of information when it comes to fluidity.

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