

# On Fascism and its Translations, and its Many Unhappy Returns in the ‘New Normal’

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## *Abstract*

This essay attempts to chart the ways that the current political, cultural, linguistic and environmental climate appears to be characterised by what one might call a complex and open set of viral transcultural subparticles, always on the verge of recurrent outbreak. While these may seem novel to us, others among us may swear that they have seen some of them somewhere before. In this context, what does it mean to once again begin defining, if not overtly translating and interpreting, the signs and symbols of what can only be defined as a form of resurgent or incipient fascism? Where have these signs been sighted or reported before, and how might each of us arrive at a workable meaning and concrete academic response to them?

*Key-words:* viral fascism, Italodiasporic thought, New Normal.

Italian fascism was the first right-wing dictatorship that took over a European country, and all similar movements later found a sort of archetype in Mussolini's regime. Italian fascism was the first to establish a military liturgy, a folklore, even a way of dressing – far more influential, with its black shirts, than Armani, Benetton, or Versace would ever be.

Umberto Eco, “Ur-Fascism” (1995)

Death adapts, like a viral agent.

Don de Lillo, *White Noise* (1984)

## **1. Towards a working definition of fascism for the ‘New Normal’**

How difficult is it to translate a single word? Perhaps at first glance, not very. For those of us charged with continually revisiting and

teaching them, however, the task may reveal itself as substantially more complex. Whether through an institutionalised pedagogy of courses that comprise a first- or second-language education, each introducing with them a grammar, a related vocabulary, or other recognised commonplaces of national culture, if not actual exercises and practice in translation, interpretation and other forms of intercultural mediation, the words in question may either confirm or complicate a sense of linguistic community.

Yes, the word to be defined for translation here is, once again, 'Fascism/fascism'<sup>1</sup>; how that abstract term is understood, both in the context of its culturally specific cultural origins (upper-case

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<sup>1</sup> Where each of us looks first for a definition of fascism may actually tell us something about where one looks for authority; I for one wanted to get a fair amount of reading done from, say Adorno and Arendt, before I began to collect those only more commonly found definitions, not even from any available dictionary or encyclopedia that we may consider an authoritative source of reference. That, for us if we are honest with ourselves, and if not, at least to some extent through our students, at least, usually includes Wikipedia: once maligned by academics and others as an unacceptable source for academic references, and now almost universally accepted as a source for academic research and reference. All it takes is one glance at the names that invariably arise in discussions of extreme right-wing ideology and thus have come to condition our understanding, but also the memes and other strings of viral and vital cultural information that reproduce, multiply and circulate around them, supplementing and complicating them as they also become primary points of reference. (In the field of translation studies, Andrew Chesterman is the scholar who first drew my attention to the theoretical concept of memes when I met him at my first-ever translation studies conference in the summer of 1995. As should be evident here, his work remains influential.) As readers and interpreters of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian literature, how many of us would probably expect Umberto Eco's 1995 essay to appear among the prime reference points of how we come to understand Fascism and its translations, especially in his list of fourteen features of Ur-Fascism? Most of us, if not all of us, one would hope, were it not that any unquestionable unanimity, be it in the context of academic opinion on authoritative sources or elsewhere, cannot but assume its own set of perhaps unexpectedly undesirable qualities that it may not have elsewhere: e.g. whether we as academics still consider fascism to be harmful to commonly and still dearly held academic freedom of expression, or with regard to the intrinsic worth of all human beings. But what about Silone or Vittorini? Pavese or Morante? Primo Levi? The Frankfurt School? How about Slavoj Žižek? Can we really establish a definitive canonical sequence of texts that are central to a critical discussion of Fascism? And if so, what of the irony in the fact that any omission seems almost as criminal as the expectation that everyone should operate according to the same set of canonical reference points?

F), as well as in the countless ways it has come to be understood in practical terms and concrete lived experience across the globe (lower-case F): both by those who allowed the term to define them, or by the millions of others involuntarily subjected to its violence.

That is the problem with translating a term used to refer to a form of oppressive and potentially violent political ideology, its definition often considered most useful when kept in a controlled environment, to be translated by obedient people, or perhaps even the machines that early Fascists like Marinetti used to love so much, its signifiers and signified perhaps encased in the same rigid Classical or medieval armor to hold them together, while catching and reflecting the eternal sunlight of the ages in such a way so as to give it a seemingly unchanging glow of courage and valor, in what is only the latest of a recurrent series of valiant crusades. Or perhaps what simply appears to be a full metal outfit of more modern fashioning, one that, as Eco reminds us, may be just another deceptive piece of fabric.

Is it not these kinds of terms, unchanging in their definition, permanent in their presence and authority, even when they are not articulated or displayed in ways that all those subjected to its rarified meanings are considered entitled to know or understand what they mean in no uncertain terms, both in theory and in practice, that are at issue here? These are the terms, after all, apparently clear both in intent and implication, that Fascists seem to like so much, especially when such immutable definitions serve to ensure their claims of superiority in relation to others, even if others that will most likely be counted among its victims are usually the ones kept in the dark as to the possible consequences of that meaning?

At the same time that the Fascist leader and his followers may be in thrall to the promise of a present and future world in which the definitions of the past that they thought defined them, now and forever, would somehow be rendered permanent in their particular case, by virtue of this same claimed entitlement to definition, both of self and of world, this insistence on their own permanently and exclusively held right of definition of the terms that govern political life, not only their own, but that of virtually everyone. A Fascist is by definition someone who is unwilling to disavow this exclusive claim to definition to others, whether they share his zealous urgency in guarding it for himself or not.

By this token, to speak of Fascism, not only of its meaning as defined by ‘authoritative sources,’ but its ‘real’ meaning in the thin space or textual buffer zone between parentheses, shock quotes, bullhorns or dog whistles, to say nothing of speaking of it with those Fascists themselves, already holding some measure of power, would imply not only that the Fascist is never entirely in control of this unequal dynamic, that defines the terms, but also that the actual intentions behind this term must be denied or kept secret, even when their intention is so transparent despite all claims to the contrary.

This shameless act of deception through language is thus also an intrinsic part of any definition of fascism, which now extends to the question of who or what can be considered a Fascist, a racial supremacist, or any other form of far-right extremist who relies on legalizing socially normalizing violence to maintain relations of systemic inequality over a long but well-known list of scapegoats.

As for those other cultural and linguistic spaces that import, adapt or otherwise rely on translated Fascist symbols, strategies, or its violent and oppressive models of institutional totalitarianism as a point of departure for their own beliefs and political objectives, usually reductive in some shape or form from the outset, yet usually accompanied by the same deceptive claims of originality and superiority as practically every other variant of Fascist ideology and practice: followers of Franco or Salazar, Getúlio Vargas or Juan Domingo Perón, except for perhaps the most absurdist and marginal of cultural varieties (Mexican or Brazilian Nazis? Hindu fascists?) just a few far-flung examples of some of the more unexpected reported sightings of this fugitive suspect, as he continues to travel the world semi-incognito, as he tests the local terrain for yet another potential eruption of the all-too-familiar cycles of resentment and violence.

It is here that we begin to discern the first signs of the constant, if intermittent, reappearance of non-factual information, be it as part of national myth or popular misconception. From the subsequent politics of “mass deception” – perhaps the same kind that the critical theorists and other *Mitreisenden* of the Frankfurt School were so adroit at identifying and analyzing, even while they found themselves powerless to hold out against it, much less stop it – emerges the distinction often made to illustrate the difference

between Fascism as a conscious rejection of political or social justice by a small minority of economic elites as its principal defining feature, and the often-questionable potential benefit to those who, for whatever reason, have answered the call to protect both the pre-existing economic and societal hierarchies that all-too-often pay increasingly dwindling and ultimately unhappy returns.

So if Walter Benjamin's contention still holds true, that translation is a form or mode (Benjamin 1977: 50), how might we continue to imagine projects of multilingualism and translation by way of an extended and mechanically interconnected ensemble of social and political phenomena as expressed in language, and perhaps even as a mode of post-nationalist resistance and dismantling of fascist linguistic and political structures through revisiting fundamental terms that continue to gather an arguably broader range of meaning as they re-emerge to circulate in new and different cultural contexts, and undergo the attendant readjustments of definition that unavoidably emanate from the present day, in particular, that of the current 'new normal'?

## **2. The changing fortunes of resurgent fascism: complex outbreaks of viral information and oppositional discourse in the 'New Normal'**

In light of this, how important really are the cultural and historical specifics when speaking of fascisms in the plural? Well, consider the ship of state in its current condition, pillaged by corporate pirates, badly in need of structural repair, its crew and passengers deeply divided, frequently misinformed, as it enters the uncharted waters of the present. On the horizon, the perfect storm made up of a series of interconnected global crises approaches and has already begun to batter the vessel from all sides.

How we arrive at a working meaning of fascist thought and action today now might appear remarkably similar in many ways to what Giorgio Agamben described in *Homo sacer* (1995) in his analyses of Classical and medieval understandings of sovereign power: as a "state of exception," reserved for the rulers, who both make the laws that govern society from above them and the laws they make, but not of them and certainly not subject to them. Like the Roman emperor or the medieval Christian king and crusader they

have often nostalgically idolized to “make Italy great again”, fascists almost always govern as a minority, aided by the disaffected, the disenfranchised, the resentful, the uninformed and the indifferent.

So while I or any other public intellectual or academic employed by an increasingly redirected neoliberal public university, one administered almost entirely for the benefit of private enterprise: i.e. teaching to develop a workforce responsive to their every need, research that corroborates and enables their endlessly repeated claim that only capitalism can solve our global problems and for the indisputable reason, the extremes in inequality, climate change, economic degradation and systematic and institutionalized politics of control, violence and extermination of others—what Agamben called “thanatopolitics,” and what decolonial scholar Achille Mbembe terms “necropolitics”.

Antifascist resistance may well include initiatives by such well-known scholars and others to decolonize the university, producing a body of academic research to reassign meaning to terms like colonialism, racism and fascism, for use especially in those societies that originate in the enslavement and extermination of other peoples. These actions may serve to define and document, perhaps condemn or disable, the practical and symbolic ways that academic *institutions* are allowed to continue indulging the fantasy that their socially exclusive *institutions* have ever been sufficient to seriously challenge their self-anointed economic and social elite.

Is this the law and order you were talking about, as articulated in academic terms? Or is there another term for this kind of regime of dehumanization? Is it fascism? It is only offensive or criminal to be antifascist when those in power are fascist yet deny it, all the while acting in ways that are identifiably fascist by any standard definition. And they are aggrieved, they have apparently been wrongly accused, they call foul. They take offense at being called fascist, because as anyone who studies World War II in school knows, “fascists are bad”.

That is the truly surprising development in the resurgence of far-right ideology in nominally democratic societies, in the West and beyond. Ultimately nothing of what you or I consider to matter ideologically or politically matters one bit when it comes to Covid-19. Any claims of its ideologically manufactured nature, even if they were true, would not ensure that this novel virus in humans could

be commandeered to serve a clear and unequivocal ideological aim or target a single sector of society; it's airborne. So strategists on the far right, whether Italian neo-Fascists or US American white supremacists and other far-right political movements, now suddenly find themselves with a formidable obstacle to their goal of turning mass deception and misinformation as a means of installing their opinions, or "alternative facts," as they call them, into generally accepted factual reality. While coronavirus is not exactly a living organism, just fragments of genetic information, this information and the information that has been gathered and made public or even what was learned, then intentionally suppressed and withheld, the virus is also an informational disruption.

So the virus has perhaps succeeded in doing, and perhaps even more effectively, in breaking down in immediate and visible ways the alternate reality of a far-right administration, one whose message is finally held in check by experts, before an ideologically diverse audience of viewers, in stark contrast to early 2017, where professional specialists were socially distanced from positions of authority in favor of rich campaign donors, most with few or no credentials, that is, aside from a loyalty to the new official party line. When whatever a "Dear Leader" believes or says to be true *is* true a priori until further notice; with official press secretaries and their favored news and entertainment channels going into action, further blurring the lines between government and the nonstop barrage of (mis)information technology deployed in daily 24-hour news cycles and social media to fabricate the alternative facts that "make it so". The virus doesn't have to make anyone right; it's a free agent.

So the coronavirus operates and spreads according to the dangerous scientific principle that just happens to run counter to the main current of Fascist thought and action: that all human beings are from a single biological species, have essentially the same bodily organs, immune and reproductive systems, blood, saliva and other body fluid that can transmit disease from one human to another: that we are, at some basic level, all the same. That simple scientific fact is why scientific knowledge of actual facts is so potentially dangerous in political terms, especially for those who govern through division, scapegoating and gaslighting of those who know the truth, or those who are to this day intentionally denied access to information that is real or true to spread more of the same kind of mass confusion

and fear that usually play some role in bringing fascists to power in the first place.

### 3. Another look at fascism: critical approaches out of “Little Italy”

So how do we arrive at a field of meaning that is true for us: culturally, personally, experientially, politically? One culturally relevant example: those who know their own local regions or cities perhaps already see or understand the larger-nation state, also called Italy, that makes most sense to them when employing this name: within it, it includes a vast range of linguistic and cultural realities that depart radically from the limited relief of the composite image that serves as a map of Italy the nation-state. These local particularities may appear to be a perhaps uncanny sort of Italy, one that is most comfortable when it is speaking a language other than Italian.

By this I mean that Italy or other Italies that have migrated across oceans and continents, either to later “return home” (if that is even possible) or still live on in any number of overseas immigrant communities, in places all over the US or Canada, Argentina or Brazil. One example: I visited *La Petite Italie* in Montréal last year, shortly before the Covid-19 lockdown made US–Canada and all other border crossings impossible. I miss these in-between transcultural spaces mostly, because they are one of the main ways that I envision my own cultural identity: with no single language, literature or uniform tradition, but one that emerges more from those indistinct spaces that Agamben identified in his work by way of the term “gray zones” (“zone d’indistinzione”).

I was struck then, as I usually am, by the startlingly uniform, reduced and simplified gamut of signs and symbols, much like those found in any other Little Italy: soccer jerseys, espresso, *cucina italiana*, “pizza and pasta” (this last dish, especially, as Franco La Cecla encourages us to do, was not simply accepted ‘as is’ and consumed, but critically examined, and at times even politely refused). Words from Italian are no longer *italicised*, but have been transferred into English, or in this case, French.

Are the symbolic and semic traces of Fascism somehow present here in these languages as well, hidden within these familiar Italodiasporic commonplaces? That is what I hope I do not have to



point[...] out as Eco's echo continues to remind and exhort us to do. I can see what is written and translated on the signs I am finding here: a supermarket called Milano? A sporting goods store named Evangelista, like Linda, the Italo-Canadian supermodel of the same name?

And after this uncanny experience of *La Petite Italie* in another language, where is the 'Italy' in Little Italies, whether the one I find here on the Boulevard St. Laurent, or the ones that both I and others born about the same time in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century grew up with? Is it still a place on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, with those horribly enormous oval plates of Pasta Alfredo I never could finish or even stomach in the first place, or just the name of a chain of tiny Manhattan pizza parlors, including the one on 33<sup>rd</sup> St., just off Fifth Avenue, where just one slice of cheese pizza is usually enough to feel Italian again?

Or is it just a stage set from an Italian-American film, a largely consumer area with only a few Italians scattered, the three generations of Italian-Americans I was born into and grew up with already either dead and gone, or living in a surrounding largely white town, where any visible expression of ethnic identity often feels like it is part of the most widespread stereotypes paraded about in mainstream culture. Or maybe it means its most cherished signs and symbols, most not even found in a large enough area to be considered an appropriate iteration of a shared national culture.

Is it a scene in a film directed or acted out by other Italian-Americans, or it is the recurrent stereotype of "people like us," a Travolta or Stallone, playing dumb and looking cute? Or is it the return of "Giuliani time," that dubious populist politics of pre-9/11 police terror on young men of color, now played out on a global stage as part of a more generalized authoritarian politics of violence, lies and deceit?

Or is each of us who considers ourselves Italian in some way, also a sort of Little Italy? Like Madonna, perhaps in that t-shirt reading "Italians Do It Better" (with perhaps that in itself the consummate Fascist claim, in all its categorical simplicity)? Or is Little Italy perhaps just you and me, trying between the two of us to make some sense of these signs and symbols, now scattered across a transcontinental semantic field?

So while it may appear an absurd leap of logic, was not fashion one of Eco's prime examples of what fascism is, of how it is already sewn into our social, political, and cultural fabric and style? Out on the runway that we may still be working and working on, walking the walk, if not talking the talk, by calling it "our own" language, national heritage or culture, what is our mode, what is our fashion, and who are our models, our "Evangelistas"? Are we walking the runway, or is the runway walking us?

Or might we find it in what we still call Italian-American literature, maybe in the work of Don de Lillo, an author who most Italian-Americans have still probably never even heard of? Is it just pure coincidence that I find his 1985 novel *White Noise* so timely, so prescient, not only in its portrayal of the control of US systems of consumerism and misinformation, its "airborne toxic event," but also in the satirical portrayal of the passive US academics who on the one hand dedicate their lives to the study of Hitler and yet have no answers as yet another toxic black cloud looms on the horizon, or its insistence that *déjà vu*—that uncanny and unsettling mix of vague memory and amnesia—is in fact the one common symptom of this increasingly pervasive present moment, which is surprisingly similar to the satirical scenario set up in de Lillo's novel, whose apocalyptic and dystopian threat emerges precisely at the point of convergence of chemical, environmental, political, linguistic and viral cultural narratives?

The fact that at least as far as Italian-American literature is concerned, we are no strangers to narrative of planetary collapse, particularly one that the authorities prove themselves to be either too incompetent or too indifferent to devise a solution for. Literature can be part of this solution, preparing us for a wide range of unimaginable scenarios in fictional form, at least until life imitates art so closely that, by late 2020, it is increasingly difficult to read this novel entirely as a work of fiction anymore.

And how does this discussion of political and cultural models, both at home and in translation, impact the lived experiences of, say, queer people, those women whose class or ethnic background cannot mitigate the level of violence they are subjected to, or people of color, the racialized migrants or "sud-alterni," the indigenous and colonized peoples, and the ethnically different people of any number of faiths, cultural traditions and seemingly foreign languages, who

seem, almost invariably, to raise the ire of the nationalists more than anyone and who are still, and all too often, its most vulnerable targets for violence and repression, if not outright extermination?

Adrift in this sea of dubious meaning, do we look to any self-styled “Capitano,” regardless of proven rank or experience, or to the dreadlocked female German ship captain Carola Rackete, arrested and threatened with prison for saving the lives of African migrants to Italy from drowning in the Mediterranean? Can we still see Italy in the plural, and if so, is that plurality still a possible space for an antifascist Italy to continue to unfold? Is there any other possible antifascist space, in which social engagement, whether as a nurse, a professor, or an international aid worker, are all interconnected dimensions of what can now be seen within a more all-inclusive, overarching and ongoing global human crisis? Migrant crises are always a symptom of sorts of a broader set of global problems, concentrated in instances of human trial and suffering.

#### **4. Conclusion: So now that we know...**

So what can be learned here about Fascism and its translations from this uncommon set of all-too-often historical, culturally specific, cross-cultural, academic and personal examples? Well, first off, we must, as we say in my ‘nice’ Italian-American family, ‘wake up and smell the coffee’: i.e. stop pretending not to see what is right in front of our eyes, and let’s ask ourselves honestly what our own personal understandings and continuing investments alongside those of others actually are, be it in relation to ethnic identities, both national and transnational, cultural and transcultural, linguistically specific and multilingual, especially in a historical moment in which these counterfactual authoritarian models are once again not only on the rise, but usurping power globally at an alarming rate and choosing a surprisingly familiar set of ethnic and racialized scapegoats.

Umberto Eco’s answer, however tentative or incomplete it may appear at this point, seems deceptively simple: “We must keep alert, so that the sense of these words will not be forgotten again. Ur-Fascism is still around us, sometimes in plainclothes. It would be so much easier, for us, if there appeared on the world scene somebody saying, ‘I want to reopen Auschwitz, I want the Black Shirts to parade again in the Italian squares.’ Life is not that simple.

Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances – every day, in every part of the world” (Eco 1995: 8-9).

But is that really enough? Because to stay vigilant, much less to unmask and point one’s finger in the face of yet another incipient fascism, you more likely than not cannot act alone, at least not while retaining any degree of illusion that one can always stay safe after doing so. You will most likely have to seek out untiringly and identify in much the same way, and approach and communicate with, a much larger and diverse set of others, often very different from oneself, that affirm that there are, in fact, still many others.

And then, out of the conversation that each of you can manage with others, in spite of what differences may arise or whatever you may think of yourself, you, and those you find, both to assist and to assist you, are going to have to acknowledge that it is precisely this diversity, this multiplicity, that can never be understood or translated, that is precisely the most effective not-so-secret weapon. In fact, in the case of a reconstituted Fascism, increasingly re-scrambled and retranslated over controlled networks and airwaves, it might even be our only hope.

Because whatever you or I believe, whatever we value culturally or linguistically, and whatever we imagine ourselves to be or deserve politically on the basis of that, it may well be that none of it on its own will ever be enough to defeat Fascism and its by-now countless translations. And that is because, any solitary subjectivity, left alone to face its own inherent ethical flaws, ethnic prejudices and fears for survival, can all-too-easily become yet another translation of fascism, all by itself. Alone, inside ourselves and subject to no one but ourselves, we may already be, as Eco suggests, some subliminal iteration of fascism, however subtle it may be in its own pose of self-deception. And that is where that constant vigilance and resistance must invariably begin.

And if that moment of truth comes when we find ourselves compelled to depart, alone or together, for the sake of some impossible ideal, like saving our world, healing the sick from a deadly disease, or defeating fascism, perhaps all that really does matter is how we have prepared and immunized ourselves, medically and ideologically, so that we really will, as so many have so optimistically

imagined, ‘know it when we see it’ – or if we do not, at least hear its echo, reverberating or retranslated.

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