

## The actuality of fascism in Umberto Eco's thoughts

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*Karl Schurster<sup>I</sup>*

In 1988, the Royaumont colloquium brought together important intellectuals to discuss what they called “the uses of forgetfulness”<sup>II</sup>. The central debate raised by the present researchers was to point out that forgetfulness is not opposition to memory; on the contrary, it ends up being as foundational as memory is. It is in this sphere that we will deal with the essay written by Umberto Eco, *Eternal Fascism*.

Even the text being a result of some University conferences and was first published in 1997, the essay has a new edition, by Record editorial. Now, it is an autonomous book and no longer an integrated part of the book “Five moral writings”.

The current global situation brought the fascism topic for discussion at several levels of society and State. There is no doubt that the growth of the “radical right” in countries like Poland, Hungary, United States, Brazil, Chile and others, strongly raised the research about the fascisms, getting the term to be among the most searched on “Google” in 2018.

Eco, who needs no introduction, as he is a prominent writer and linguist on the international scene, starts his writing presenting how his memory has been marked by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's speeches. He reports that living a war permanently was the condition of a young man and that his childhood had not been otherwise. As he expressed: “freedom of words means breaking free from rhetoric<sup>III</sup>”, maybe, that statement is a thought with a new meaning given by years of combating fascism and showing other possibilities to resist in a world as it was back in that time, of a strong and broad collaboration with the exception regimes.

He highlights the resistance as a European phenomenon, not with the intention to consider that most of the European population resisted to governments and fascist movements, but to avoid speeches and narratives that diminish the fight of those who dedicated their lives to fight against these politics practice. Yet today, it is common both in Italy and Germany, and even in Brazil, to hear that the resistance to exception regimes used to be nothing more than a “communist myth”.

In many segments of the essay, Eco recovers concepts coming from psychoanalysis to deal with the fascism memories and the reminder of these “terrible years”. He affirms that the repression of traumas like this past one causes “neurosis”, clearly, in the words of Freud, a disease that has as a symbol psychic conflicts<sup>IV</sup>. According to him, in dealing with the need for “national reconciliation”, there is no defending the idea of forgetting the traumatic past, as if moving forward would necessarily erase the experience of pain lived in times of limitations.

Eco's text is filled with a broad linguistic-psychoanalytic approach, but above all, it is filled with the memories of an eyewitness from the time of a world where fascism was more than a political movement, but a ruling State. In this regard, it takes up central discussions in a didactic and objective way to define the characteristics of Mussolini's fascism, furthermore, what he means by “totalitarian regimes”:

- I. Fascism of Mussolini: charisma, corporatism, utopia about national destiny, imperialist will, expansion, exacerbated nationalism, national uniformity, refusal of parliamentary democracy and anti-Semitism;
- II. Totalitarian regimes are those in which they subordinate any individual act to the state and its ideology. Therefore, according to him, Nazism and Stalinism would fit within this classification.

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Even with this questionable definition about totalitarian regimes, he argues that fascism, even classified as a dictatorship, cannot be understood as completely totalitarian, taking into account its great "philosophical weakness of its ideology"<sup>V</sup>. He considers that Italian fascism had no ideology of its own. It was based on the theorist Giovanni Gentile and on a Hegelian view of an "absolute ethical" state. Hence, it points out that the structure of the Italian regime did not have a clear philosophy, only a strong rhetoric. Eco, looking for support in the classical literature about the Italian fascism affirms that it was the first right dictatorship that ruled a European country and that, then, all the other similar movements found a kind of analogous archetype common to the Mussolini regime<sup>VI</sup>. We have no doubt that for a long time intellectuals and historiography were strongly influenced by the theory of 'totalitarian dictatorship'. One of the great problems raised by this current was to read these regimes, which he called "totalitarian" as something really "revolutionary", giving less importance to what Hans Mommsen defined as "elements of continuity with previous politics"<sup>VII</sup>. The idea that Italian Fascism has turned into a synecdoche for all other "totalitarian movements" is in fact an influence of Weber's theory of the ideal-type concept, as if the local example was responsible for the construct of a common minimum to be experienced in its singularities from each local reality.

The Italian fascism convinced, according to Eco, many liberal European leaders that the new regime was performing interesting social reforms, able to provide an alternative moderately revolutionary to the communist threat. There are two concepts that are explored in the book that seem to be arranged much more in complementary form than separately: Fuzzy Fascism and Ur-Fascism. The Italian author understands fascism as an adaptable regime, however, at the same time confusing, inaccurate or unfocused. Thus, fascism presents itself more as a "collage of diverse political and philosophical ideas" than as a "monolithic ideology" or a "fuzzy totalitarianism"<sup>VIII</sup>. Historians spent much of their time trapped within the very idea that fascisms represented regimes of total immobility and only continuous practice of violence. That is related to the post-war memory that constituted these governments rather than the events themselves. As much as violence was extreme, it was not fully publicized and propagated to the population, at least until the war reached Berlin. This was much discussed in the recent book by Professor Florent Brayard as he resumed discussions about how far the German population and even senior officers had access to collective extermination plans and policy<sup>IX</sup>.

It is common in the history of fascism and especially of National Socialism to find deep contradictions. We are not dealing with a movement, system, regime or even government where political proposals are defined in an organized and even organic way to the point of forming an ideology. If fascism, and here we can clearly say that Nazism was its most radical experience, had some ideological proposal, that was the collective extermination of the Jews and all those who were considered asozy. We emphasize the importance of new studies, as well as the resumption of Umberto Eco's text, especially the new work of the German psychologist Arno Gruen, who seeks to problematize the origins of hatred and violence between individuals and society in general<sup>X</sup>. According to Gruen, Nazism – but we can extend this characteristic also to the other types of fascism – build a pattern of "excessive adaptation" and "latent rebellion" using various sociological phenomena (here dialogues with Eco by the symbolic pattern) and psychological (strongly resumes Erich Fromm).

It is in this aspect that Umberto Eco's text and the second concept discussed in the book, the Ur-Fascism, strongly dialogues with the work by Arno Gruen. To Gruen, the

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Nazism led the individuals to a renunciation of their "true and autonomous self" dehumanizing the being and thereby impregnating societies in the present time. Eco claims that fascism makes thinking a form of "castration". With this, they identify everything that is culture as something suspicious because it is identified as something capable of arousing critical attitudes. Perhaps this is the main feature of what Umberto Eco called Eternal Fascism or Ur-Fascism. He still uses the example of Joseph Goebbels' speech when he stated "when he heard about culture, he would get the gun right away<sup>XI</sup>". The fascists used "empty" terms, yet capable of placing the intellectual world under suspicion. Terms such as "intellectual pigs," "hollow heads," "radical snobs," or "Universities are a nest of communists," have always been present in fascist rhetoric and these contemporary uses corroborate the "eternity of fascism."

We believe that the classic fascisms may be compared to contemporary political phenomenon. When we classify governments such as Trump's in the USA, Bolsonaro's in Brazil or Viktor Órban's in Hungry, as fascism we are making a conceptual and timeless reduction, uncritical, and that way we present the "fuzzy" side of these phenomena more than we explain their nature. It is quite evident that these governments have characteristics in common. Some of them directly refer to those of the fascists presented by Umberto Eco, such as: fear of difference, individual frustration, nationalism, life for the struggle, permanent war, each individual as a national hero, elitism, intolerance, populism and the construction of a language of its own with an obviously poor lexicon are marks that confuse this contemporary political phenomenon with the classic of the 30s and 40s of the last century.

This essay of the Italian writing warns that regimes with these characteristics turn issues such as "pacifism" into a constant conflict with a forged enemy. They create an image that individuals should have their rights through a "common will." They approve projects and laws modifying the structure of the State using emotive mechanisms and selecting groups that would act as spokespersons for an entire society. Through a foul, low, impoverished language, it limits the thinking tools of individuals by not allowing them to be able to stranger their condition in the world around them. The warning in the text is to say that this type of Ur-Fascism is always around us, and does not appear in military outfits but is mostly made up of civilian clothing. For this reason, he ends up arguing that "liberty and liberation" are tasks that have no validity, they never end.

## Notas:

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<sup>I</sup>Professor of the University of Pernambuco. Permanent Professor of the Graduate Program in Education and Coordinator of the Professional Master's Degree in History of the same institution. He is currently Director of International Relations of UPE and Scientific Director of EDUPE. In 2014, Schurster was the winner of the Jabuti Prize and has several works related to the studies of the Holocaust and the Nazi phenomenon.

<sup>II</sup> MOMMSEN, 2017

<sup>III</sup> ECO, 2018

<sup>IV</sup> ROUDINESCO & PLON, 1998

<sup>V</sup> ECO, 2018

<sup>VI</sup> ECO, 2018

<sup>VII</sup> MOMMSEN, 2017

<sup>VIII</sup> ECO, 2018

<sup>IX</sup> BRAYARD, 2019

<sup>X</sup> GRUEN, 2019

<sup>XI</sup> ECO, 2018

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