# **What exactly is fascism?**

by [Julia Layton](http://people.howstuffworks.com/fascism.htm/about-author.htm#layton)

Introduction to what exactly is Fascism?

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| fascism-1 Photo courtesy [U.S. NARA](http://www.howstuffworks.com/framed.htm?parent=fascism.htm&url=http://www.archives.gov) **Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini (left) and Adolph Hitler, 1940** |

In recent years, some have found a new word to characterize Islamic fundamentalists: fascists. The "War on Terror" has quietly become the "war against Islamic fascism," and the term "Islamo-fascism" has its own entry in Wikipedia. Then again, so does "Christian fascism." The word "fascism" is thrown around these days with abandon, often used to describe seemingly opposing philosophies. So what exactly is it?

The word "fascists" (or *fascisti*) as used in the 1930s by Benito Mussolini, the leader of the first Fascist movement and the Fascist dictator of Italy before and during World War II, most likely comes from the Italian word *fascis* and the Latin word *fasces*. *Fascis* means something along the lines of "bundle" or "unit." *Fasces* was a symbol of authority in ancient Rome, an axe surrounded by rods. These two roots offer a good glimpse into the basic tenets of fascism: unity and power.

Part of the reason why fascism seems to apply to so many different social and political viewpoints is that it is notoriously difficult to define. Mussolini's brand of Fascism is not exactly like Hitler's brand of Fascism, which is not the same as Francisco Franco's Fascism (in Spain) nor the neofascist (post-WWII) movements characterized by groups like the Skinheads. Still, there are some basic principles that can identify a Fascist movement:

* **Absolute power of the State**: The Fascist state is a glorious, living entity that is more important than any individual. All individuals are part of the State, but the State is greater than the sum of its parts. All individuals must set aside their own needs and supplicate themselves to the needs of the State. There is no law or other power that can limit the authority of the State.
* **Survival of the fittest**: A Fascist state is only as glorious and powerful as its ability to wage wars and win them. Peace is viewed as weakness, aggression as strength. Strength is the ultimate good and ensures the survival of the State.
* **Strict social order**: Social classes are strictly maintained in order to avoid "mob rule" or any hint of chaos. Chaos is a threat to the State. The State's absolute power and greatness depends on the maintenance of a class system in which every individual has a specific place, and that place cannot be altered.
* **Authoritarian leadership**: To maintain the power and greatness of the State requires a single, charismatic leader with absolute authority. This all-powerful, heroic leader maintains the unity and unquestioning submission required by the Fascist state. The authoritarian leader is often viewed as a symbol of the State.

Some people use "fascist" to describe any authoritarian person or government. But as you can see, authoritarianism is only part of the philosophy. Communism under Stalin was an authoritarian political philosophy, too; but Fascism is directly opposed to Communism (along with democracy, liberalism, humanism and rationalism). Aside from the above principles, a Fascist state also typically promotes a private economy that submits to government regulation; immediate (and often violent) submission of any opposing views; the ethnic dominance of its own people and the lower status of outsiders.

While politicians and Conservative pundits seem more than willing to make a connection between a socio-political philosophy like fascism and a religion-based philosophy like Islamic fundamentalism, scholars are much less quick to cross that bridge. "Religious fascism," sometimes called "clerical fascism," has been a subject of debate since the latter term was coined to describe what some viewed as the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Mussolini regime. Some people saw the Church as a supporter of Fascism in Italy. Since religion can be so closely tied to ethnicity, many scholars have found philosophical similarities between political fascism and religious fundamentalism. On the other hand, the word is not exactly morally neutral in its contemporary usage. "Fascist" has become a common slur -- a blanket term used to mean "really bad guy." Making a connection between a particular religion and fascism can be a dangerous undertaking considering fascism's current connotation and the inherent difficulty in defining any singular fascist philosophy.

For more information on fascism and related topics, check out the following links:

* [How the ACLU Works](http://people.howstuffworks.com/aclu.htm)
* [How Cults Work](http://www.howstuffworks.com/cult.htm)
* [How Fear Works](http://www.howstuffworks.com/fear.htm)
* [How Police Interrogation Works](http://www.howstuffworks.com/police-interrogation.htm)
* [Modern History Sourcebook: Benito Mussolini: What is Fascism, 1932](http://www.howstuffworks.com/framed.htm?parent=fascism.htm&url=http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/mussolini-fascism.html)
* [Economic Fascism](http://www.howstuffworks.com/framed.htm?parent=fascism.htm&url=http://www.banned-books.com/truth-seeker/1994archive/121_3/ts213l.html), by Thomas J. DiLorenzo

**“What Exactly is Fascism?” Questions**

**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Block: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Directions: Please answer the questions based upon your knowledge and that of what you read.**

**1. Where was the term fascist first used in the modern world? By whom?**

**2. What does the term “*Fascis”* mean? What is its origin?**

**3. What are the two basic roots of Fascism?**

**4. What are the basic units that make up a Fascist unit?**

**5. What groups does Fascists not like?**

**6. What does a Fascist government promote? Why?**

**7. The term Fascist has become mistakenly a term meaning what? Why is this not true?**