

Editorial Introduction

Mussolini famously prophesied that the advent of his regime would portend the onset of a 'Fascist century'.¹ As he argued in a laudatory preface to *The Universal Aspects of Fascism*, the latter penned by the fascist internationalist James Strachey Barnes, 'the fact that Fascism possesses a specific and original Italian stamp, does not prevent its principles having an application in other countries'. It was, Mussolini continued, his 'proud prophecy that Fascism will come to fill the present century with itself even as Liberalism filled the nineteenth century'.² In retrospect, the opening salvo of the 'Short Twentieth Century', namely the period from the close of the First World War to the ruinous end of the Second, may be branded as the 'Fascist Epoch'. This phrasing dates to at least Ernst Nolte's *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, and it is one that scholars have subsequently deployed.³

At the risk of oversimplification, the Fascist Epoch was a historical juncture marked by the rise of fascist and para-fascist movements and regimes across vast swathes of the globe,⁴ culminating in the eventual fall or otherwise hollowing-out of democracy across much of 'peacetime' Europe. The epoch was thus accompanied by a concomitant 'crisis of democracy', to borrow the phrasing of one contemporary.⁵ This democratic retrenchment was to shortly thereafter reach an acme under force of arms during the fleeting albeit cataclysmic Nazi-led New European Order.⁶ Yet the resultant defeat of the Axis powers held profound repercussions for erstwhile fascists and other fellow travellers of the far right. As Jens Steffek and Francesca Antonini note: 'Fascist and national-socialist political doctrines became intellectual pariahs after the defeat of the Axis powers... and as the full dimensions of the Holocaust and the war crimes committed in their names became clear'.⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, Mussolini's aforementioned prediction was, true to his bombastic form, wildly optimistic. The 'Short Twentieth Century' would certainly be an age of extremes,⁸ but the length of time that may be ascribed to the Fascist Epoch fell leaps and bounds short of a 'Fascist century'.

Moving forward some eight decades, however, the alarming resurgence of, and political in-roads made by, radical and extreme right-wing forces throughout the world is readily apparent. Even Roger Griffin, the doyen of comparative fascist studies and a scholar who is admirably cautious about haphazardly applying the fascist label, remarked that Mussolini was certainly 'wrong about the future... [of the twentieth century] However, in a way he could not have foreseen, he may be less wrong about the rising hegemony [of] the "right" in the widest sense'.⁹ Against this backdrop, a raft of serious commenta-

tors and scholars alike have increasingly made recourse, whether for analytical purposes or rhetorical effect, to the historical spectre of fascism.

Indeed, there is no shortage of comparisons, some sounder than others. Acclaimed historian Federico Finchelstein, for one, has recently published on the so-called 'Wannabe Fascists' striding on the proverbial stage.¹⁰ Some scholars have deployed the term 'post-fascism' to helpfully designate specific manifestations of the right and their relationship to (and divergence from) the past,¹¹ while others have appealed to, among other adjectivised concepts, the notion of 'digital fascism'¹² or a temporally-bounded 'twenty-first century fascism'.¹³ None of this is to mention the perennial, and understandably evolving, debate over whether Donald Trump is a fascist (or more accurately, whether it is useful to apply such a label).¹⁴ It is this dual backdrop, namely a resurgent far right and the attendant recourse amongst observers to the ominous spectre of interwar fascism, which serves as the point of departure for this theme section.

Ascribing the fascist label in any form begs a raft of questions about the relationship between the Fascist Epoch of a bygone century and the contemporary rise of what one recent study has dubbed the 'global Right'.¹⁵ What sort of challenges are posed by the contemporary far right to liberal democracy and international order alike, and how may these differ from historical fascism? Amongst self-professed neo-Nazis, the ideological linkages between past and present are readily discernible, even self-evident. Yet to what extent can other factions of the far right, such as the European New Right, paleoconservatism, and the alt-right (and its successors), be productively understood through the lens of fascism? During the interwar period too, the pre-eminent technological mediums of the age, the printing press and radio, were central to the propagation of fascist beliefs and the legitimisation of the Italian and German regimes. How have today's technological equivalents, arguably social media and the Internet more broadly, contributed to the diffusion of extreme right or fascistic views? Underlying all such questions is a more rudimentary, yet fundamental, one. To what extent is the F-word even a heuristically useful concept applicable to the present? After all, many historians and social scientists are quite circumspect about applying the 'fascist' label, even when appended with qualifying adjectives.

Echoing this last question, then, it is important to acknowledge before proceeding that resurrecting the spectre of the fascist past in the context of ongoing political developments inevitably gives rise to thorny terminological questions. There is an inherent risk that, in simultaneously grappling with two periods divorced by shy of a century, one may butcher the historical specificities of the subject matter (much to the irritation of historians), distort present political phenomena, or commit both such sins. After all, fascism is already a somewhat nebulous term, one variously defined by scholars and all-too-often bandied about in political discourse. The famed writer and left-wing anti-fascist George Orwell aptly captured this ambiguity in 1944: "I have heard it applied to... Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else".¹⁶ Recent examples of the use and, more often, abuse of the term abound. Before her later lurch towards conspiracy theories, the journalist and feminist author Naomi Wolf once argued that the Bush administration was trotting down the so-called '10 steps' towards which fascism lay.¹⁷

She was not alone in this categorisation of the Bush presidency. The criminologists Herman and Julia Schwendinger published a book pithily entitled *Homeland Fascism*, while the cultural critic Henry A. Giroux speculated about an emergent 'proto-fascism'.¹⁸ Conversely, one may point to the by-and-large unfortunate popularisation of the 'Islamofascism' label during the heyday of the War on Terror.¹⁹ Alternatively, while some conservatives have remarked that the instinctual use of the 'fascist' pejorative is a hallmark of the left (as one such commentary suggested, 'Fascism Lives Rent-Free in the Minds of the Left'),²⁰ this rhetorical move is obviously not the sole preserve of those situated left of centre. Indeed, one of the most high-profile, yet historically egregious, (mis)uses of the fascist label in recent political discourse is to be located in conservative commentator Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism*, a polemical pseudo-history which strives to taint liberal progressivism by linking it, however tangentially and problematically, to the interwar experiments in fascist totalitarianism.²¹

None of this is to mention the lack of terminological exactitude amongst politicians, protesters, and the average Facebook user, for whom fascism serves as a readily graspable and normatively loaded rhetorical tool against which to swipe at their opponents. In writing about the return of 'fascism', and thus offering some comparison to the interwar period, one should therefore be careful in haphazardly deploying the term, lest the reader is to be stranded offshore in conceptual deep waters, endeavouring to navigate the contemporary far right with all but a shoddy compass which is unable to discern North from South.

With that said, the ensuing contributions, while attentive to the overuse of the fascist label, are not necessarily uniform in their own use of the term. In this sense, this theme section does not endeavour to impose a conceptual straitjacket over its authors, but rather embraces the multiplicity of interpretations. After all, whether it is a Marxist rendition or one grounded in the 'cultural turn' of comparative fascist studies, any definition of fascism is, in the end, a heuristic device. While some interpretations may certainly be sounder than others, each seeks to illuminate some aspect of current political phenomena. The contributions to this section may be understood in a similar vein, each espousing different and occasionally overlapping interpretations of the contemporary far right and its commonalities with, or deviations from, the ideological landscape of the Fascist Epoch.

Alongside the multiplicity in understandings of the 'fascist' category, the articles featured in this section transcend disciplinary confines. The subject of the far right has increasingly moved into the scholarly spotlight of International Relations (IR) as a discipline. In exploring the ideas, constitution, and implications of a resurgent right, IR scholars have fortunately not had to begin their enquiries from scratch. Recent scholarship has utilised insights from, among a diverse range of other fields, affect studies, transnational history, sociology, and fascist studies.²² In a similar fashion, the contributions to this theme section are inherently cross- and inter-disciplinary. This theme section, in turn, endeavours to contribute not only to emergent scholarship on the far right amongst an IR audience, but to ongoing efforts in cognate fields to grapple with modern incarnations of the radical and extreme right.

In this vein, the first contribution to this special issue, penned by Dr Joseph Patrick McAulay, analyses the QAnon movement as a contemporary manifestation of what is dubbed – building on the scholarship of Frank P. Mitz, Jeffrey Bale, Catherine Wessinger, and Stephen D. O’Leary – conspiracist millennialism. In turn, McAulay positions the belief system of QAnon followers within a broader constellation of far-right conspiracist millennialist thought, revealing how this type of ‘ideological tradition’ performs a critical galvanising function for contemporary far-right actors, as comparable millennialist and conspiratorial myths once did for interwar fascists. While revealing points of continuity with the past, McAulay also remains attentive to how the ideologically flexible, improvisational, and digitally diffuse QAnon movement diverges and innovates relative to previous iterations of far-right conspiracist millennialism.

The subsequent article by Harrison Pates foregrounds his study in the literature on ‘postfascism’, drawing in particular on Gáspár Miklós Tamás’ interpretation. Utilising the British far-right landscape as a centralizing case study, Pates seeks to discern how the contemporary far right strategically approaches, and thus politicises, the past, producing what he calls – riffing on Roger Griffin – ‘tempered “fascist temporalities”’. In a digitally mediated age, Pates reminds readers that, on the part of the far right, ‘mastery of history is less articulated in party edicts than expressed through diffuse and ephemeral conversations on social media’. Consequently, the article focuses on four themes prevalent within far right discourse about history, namely the belief in a return to a mythic Golden Age, the regeneration of a since decadent and degenerate society, a revanchist impulse against perceived historical grievances, and the selective remembrance (and thereby exclusion) of past events, persons, and national memories.

Prof. Dr. Bauerkämper’s contribution then shifts the focus to the conceptual boundaries and evolving strategies of far-right movements themselves, interrogating how present-day populist authoritarianism both echoes and diverges from its fascist antecedents. Bauerkämper resists the temptation to collapse modern populist authoritarianism into the category of fascism, instead emphasizing both points of convergence - such as xenophobic rhetoric and the strategic exploitation of democratic institutions - and crucial divergences. Central to his analysis is the argument for privileging the term ‘populist authoritarianism’ to more precisely capture the contemporary threat to democratic institutions - a threat characterized by subversion rather than outright rejection of democratic norms. Although fascism is ‘dead’, the article draws further sobering historical parallels between the role of conservative parties as gatekeepers during the interwar period, ultimately warning against both the oversimplification of historical analogies, and the contemporary complacency that allows such movements to flourish.

Finally, Kiley Fuller’s contribution positions itself in the literature on gender and race within far-right movements, offering a comparative analysis of British and American contexts during the Reagan and Thatcher eras. Fuller’s study interrogates the strategic deployment of gendered and racialised discourses by far-right organizations, with particular attention to the ways in which white women were positioned as both biological reproducers of the race and as emblematic defenders of the heteronormative family. Drawing on case studies from both sides of the Atlantic, Fuller identifies a dual rhetorical strategy: the portrayal of non-white men as hypersexualised dangers to white wom-

en's safety, and the construction of motherhood as a patriotic duty under threat from these racialised 'Others'. Returning to a theme of mainstream conservatism's gatekeeping role, the article traces its complex entanglement with the far right, demonstrating that the Reagan and Thatcher administrations selectively appropriated diluted extremist rhetoric into the political mainstream, thereby normalizing far-right anxieties while maintaining plausible deniability about direct ties to extremist organizations.

Alongside these research articles, this theme section includes five transcribed interviews conducted with leading experts on ideology, fascism, and the contemporary far right, each of whom touches on central questions and topics pertinent to the present thematic. The first interview is with Emeritus Professor Michael Freeden, which returns to his pioneering scholarship in the field of ideology studies against the backdrop of a resurgent far right. The next interview features Professor Rita Abrahamsen, wherein highlighting some of the wider arguments and themes contained within her co-authored and undoubtedly timely book, *World of the Right* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

The issue then engages with the scholarship of Dr Pablo de Orellana. In this interview, Dr de Orellana reflects on, among other subjects, the intellectual pedigree and nature of 'reactionary internationalism' and the importance of studying the right from an interdisciplinary approach. Interrogating manifestations and discourses of fascism in non-European contexts, Professor Lilia Moritz Schwarcz offers a nuanced account of Brazil's far-right evolution within its distinct historical and social context, drawing on central arguments and insights from her seminal work, *The Spectacle of the Races* (Hill and Wang, 1999), while Deacon Dawit Muluneh foregrounds his efforts to decolonize Ethiopian studies by centering indigenous perspectives, challenging Eurocentric frameworks, and advocating for the study of Ethiopia within the broader context of African knowledge systems.

Surveying the contemporary terrain of far-right and fascist politics reveals a landscape shaped as much by its historical legacies as by its capacity for adaptation and reinvention. The resurgence of radical right-wing movements is not a simple reprise of the interwar Fascist Epoch, but rather a dynamic interplay of economic anxieties, political fragmentation, and shifting social imaginaries that have enabled new forms of authoritarian politics to take root across diverse contexts. As the contributions to this section demonstrate, the far right's appeal is amplified by its tactical flexibility – mobilizing local histories, appropriating digital technologies, and forging transnational linkages that blur the boundaries between the national and the global. The interdisciplinary approaches showcased here – from conspiracist millennialism and postfascist temporalities to the gendered politics of the radical right and the decolonization of fascist historiography – underscore that understanding the contemporary far right demands analytical tools as varied and mobile as the movements themselves.

At a time when reactionary politics proliferate and democratic norms face critical challenges worldwide, scholars, policymakers, and citizens must not only historicise the far right's protean manifestations but also interrogate the novel alliances, discursive strategies, and counter-movements that define its contemporary evolution. Confront-

ing these challenges demands more than disciplinary silos or national frameworks, it requires a commitment to understanding the far right's global resonances, ideological flexibility, and capacity to exploit both local grievances and transnational networks. Only by grappling with these movements' inherent contradictions, and their contested relationship with mainstream institutions, can we begin to dismantle the threats they pose to pluralistic societies. As the essays and interviews in this collection attest, the far right today is not a pale echo of its interwar forebears, nor is it easily contained by the conceptual apparatus forged in the crucible of the last century's crises.

Theme Section Editors,

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Notes

1. Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 2006 [1932]), 26.
2. Benito Mussolini, preface to *The Universal Aspects of Fascism*, by J.S. Barnes (London: Williams and Norgate, 1928), xix-xx.
3. For the English translation, see Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965). Recourse to the idea of a 'Fascist Epoch' may be found in, inter alia, Roger Griffin, "Fascism's New Faces (and New Facelessness) in the 'Post-Fascist' Epoch," in *A Fascist Century*, ed. Matthew Feldman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 181-202; Nigel Copsey, "Neo-Fascism: A Footnote to the Fascist Epoch?," in *Beyond the Fascist Century: Essays in Honour of Roger Griffin*, ed. Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 101-121.
4. On para-fascism, see Aristotle Kallis, "'Fascism', 'Para-Fascism' and 'Fascistization': On the Similarities of Three Conceptual Categories," *European History Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2003): 219-249.
5. William E. Rappard, *The Crisis of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).
6. See Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazis Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Book, 2009).
7. Jens Steffek and Francesca Antonini, "Towards Eurafrica! Fascism, Corporativism, and Italy's Colonial Expansion," in *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 145.
8. We, of course, borrow this phrase from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).
9. Roger Griffin, "Mussolini Predicted a Fascist Century: How Wrong Was He?," *Fascism* 8, no. 1 (2019): 8.
10. Federico Finchelstein, *The Wannabe Fascists: A Guide to Understanding the Greatest Threat to Democracy* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2024).
11. See, inter alia, Roger Griffin, "The 'Post-Facism' of the Alleanza Nazionale: A Case Study in Ideological Morphology," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1, no. 2 (1996): 123-145; G. M. Tamás, "On Post-Fascism," *Boston Review*, 1 June 2000, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/g-m-tamas-post-fascism/>; Chamsy el-Ojeili, "Reflecting on Post-Fascism: Utopia and Fear," *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 7-8 (2018): 1149-1166.
12. See, for example, Christian Fuchs, *Digital Fascism: Media, Communication and Society, Volume Four* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).
13. In particular, see the scholarship of William I. Robinson, such as his "Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype," *Science & Society* 83, no. 2 (2019): 155-183.
14. See, for example, Dylan Matthews, "Is Trump a Fascist? 8 Experts Weigh In," *Vox*, 23 October 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/21521958/what-is-fascism-signs-donald-trump>; Paul Nicholas Jackson, ed. "Debate: Donald Trump and Fascism Studies," *Fascism* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1-15; Geoff M. Boucher, "Is Donald Trump a Fascist? No — He's a New Brand of Authoritarian," *The Conversation*, 28 October 2024, <https://theconversation.com/is-donald-trump-a-fascist-no-hes-a-new-brand-of-authoritarian-241586>; Timothy Snyder, "What Does it Mean that Donald Trump is a Fascist?," *The New Yorker*, 8 November 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/dispatches/what-does-it-mean-that-donald-trump-is-a-fascist>.
15. Rita Abrahamsen, Jean-François Drolet, Michael C. Williams, Srdjan Vucetic, Karin Narita, and Alexandra Gheciu, *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).
16. George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume III: As I Please, 1943-1945*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harvest Book, 1968), 113.
17. Naomi Wolf, "Fascist America, in 10 Easy Steps," *The Guardian*, 24 April 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/24/usa.comment>; Naomi Wolf, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing).
18. Herman Schwendinger and Julia Schwendinger, *Homeland Fascism: Corporatist Government in the New American Century* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2016); Henry A. Giroux, *Proto-Fascism in America: Neoliberalism and the Demise of Democracy* (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 2004).

19. For a more serious discussion of this term and a sound history thereof, see Tamir Bar-On, “‘Islam-ofascism’: Four Competing Discourses on the Islamism-Fascism Comparison,” *Fascism* 7, no. 2 (2018): 241-274.
20. Taki Theodoracopulos, “Fascism Lives Rent-Free in the Mind of the Left,” *Chronicles*, January 2025, <https://chroniclesmagazine.org/columns/fascism-lives-rent-free-in-the-minds-of-the-left/>.
21. Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (London: Penguin, 2009). For a scathing review, see Roger Griffin, Roger, “An Academic Book — Not!,” *History News Network*, accessed 20 April 2025, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/122473>.
22. See, for example, Uygur Baspehlivan, “Cucktales: Race, Sex, and Enjoyment in the Reactionary Memescape,” *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 3 (2024): 1-28; Rodrigo Duque Estrada Campos, “The International Turn in Far-Right Studies: A Critical Reassessment,” *Millennium* 51, no. 3 (2024): 892-919; Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*; Kye J. Allen, “Why is There No History of Fascist International Thought?,” *Millennium* 51, no. 3 (2023): 758-784.