

ST. ANTONY'S INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

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St. ANTONY'S INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

St. Antony's College, University of Oxford

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Syaza Shukri

Letter From the Editor

Issue 20.1 is a milestone for STAIR, as it leads the pair of issues which will be published during the journal's 20th anniversary. Founded in 2005, STAIR was an ambitious enterprise of doctoral students at St. Antony's College who wished to feature emerging and veteran scholars alongside each other in a peer reviewed journal about timely topics in International Affairs. Since then, STAIR's community of readers, contributors, and subscribers has grown well beyond the university, and we are delighted to announce that this year will be STAIR's first as a fully open access journal. With the College's support, we endeavour to bring STAIR to a broader audience than ever before, particularly in the Global South.

Our editorial team gave considerable thought to the title and framing of Issue 20.1. In orienting the Theme Section around the subject of "Fascism" we have aimed to simultaneously move beyond and welcome disagreement about the precise meaning of that word. We regard the very fact that the word 'fascism' is being used in political and scholarly circles alike with growing frequency and urgency a subject of interest in International Affairs unto itself. By "Fascism," we refer to a series of contemporary developments in right wing mass politics originating following the Global Financial Crisis. Whether best exemplified by right-wing political leaders with distinctly populist political brands (Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Jair Bolsonaro, Vladimir Putin, etc.), growing mainstream disillusionment with hallmark virtues and institutions of liberal democracy, or other emblems and events (see this issue's cover for a rather strange syncretism), we imagine nearly all readers and authors of this issue will implicitly recognize what this issue is about even if they disagree about what it is that is taking place before them.

In our experience reviewing submissions to this issue and corresponding with authors, event and podcast guests, and commentary contributors, reticence to use the word 'fascism' to describe contemporary right-wing politics, particularly in the West, is largely rooted in three rather pragmatic concerns. First, many regard today's right-wing populism as sufficiently distinct in content and practice from fascisms of the interwar period to use the same word for them both. Second, there are those who believe that other terms can analytically capture contemporary right-wing politics without the political baggage and prognosis that accompanies the word 'fascism.' Finally, there are those who do not regard the term 'fascism' as all that coherent to begin with, and question the value of applying what they regard as a troublesome term in a context where it may not be needed.

Other terms used to describe (aspects of) contemporary right wing politics tend to fall into two categories. The first are the trade vernacular of discrete policy communities whose scholarship on right-wing politics primarily serves the end of governance. Among these I would count “Euro-scepticism,” “democratic backsliding,” “institutional distrust,” and “mis/disinformation.” These terms refer to afflictions besetting the post-war international order, and they attract those seeking to write about ways to protect that order. As laudable as these aims may or may not be, they are explicitly secondary to this issue’s focus. Many journals have and continue to handle those issues well, whereas we hope to chart a different path. Another category of terms including “right-wing populism,” “populist nationalism,” the “New Right,” etc. either describe clearly novel or distinct elements of right-wing politics today which do not fit under the umbrella term of ‘fascism,’ or, as is especially the case with “right-wing populism,” tend to be used almost as ‘anti-terms’ by those who decidedly do not prefer the term ‘fascism.’ In our promotional material, outreach, commentary pieces, and podcast episodes, we have made abundantly clear that we welcome discussion about new kinds of right-wing politics alongside right-wing politics more akin to prototypical fascism. We are substantially more interested in how right-wing politics today differs from that of 10-15 years ago than we are in devoting an issue to very specific taxonomies of right-wing politics today since our aim is to understand the effect right-wing politics has on International Affairs, not the intellectual or political histories of right-wing thought unto themselves. Finally, we would rather invite open disagreement about the term ‘fascism’ and publish scholarship taking seriously the notion that today’s right-wing politics is fascist, even if only in part, than avoid a reckoning with that disagreement by eschewing mention of the term ‘fascism’ altogether.

Put simply, if a king is drawn and quartered in the street and new flags are raised in halls of government, analytical paralysis over whether that indeed constitutes a ‘revolution’ or an ‘uprising’ poorly serves those seeking to understand the pivotal transformations happening before them and the echoes or frontiers of history which may soon follow.

As ever, I am deeply grateful for the tremendous fortune I have had to work alongside our team. Brian, you excel as both manager and editor each day more than the last, and your pragmatic approach to the theme of this issue has been sorely needed as a counterweight to my many ridiculous ideas. Kye, I remember when Brian and I first reached out to see if you were interested in submitting a piece given how perfectly your expertise matched the issue’s theme. When we found out that you had independently applied to be an editor, we were almost unable to believe how perfectly everything had worked out. Your knowledge of the field and fearlessness in pursuing a theme as complex and even thorny as ‘Fascism,’ have been pivotal. Julia, all of STAIR is grateful that you chose to return after having started at STAIR midway through last year and taking multiple editorial responsibilities on such short notice. Your enthusiasm is both refreshing and persistent, and you are responsible more than anyone else for bringing interviews back to our publication.

To Yacine, thank you for carrying the General Section on your shoulders, and in so doing, allowing Brian and I to have our cake and eat it too when it comes to STAIR’s operational strategy. This year, publications received a record number of submissions,

and we have been able to manage that volume with a publications team smaller than the one I joined when I started at STAIR. We have all the advantages of a small, efficient team without any trade offs in quality or output. Your talent and dedication genuinely contradict conventional logic, and STAIR is better off for it. Elena and Theo, I think I brag about you two the most. The podcast episodes you have created are of such quality that they surpass that of the professional teams who run many of the other podcasts at this university. Hiring you two and getting out of your way are the two best decisions I have made in my time at STAIR. And to Emory, I give you my most heartfelt thanks for filling probably the most undesirable role at STAIR, not merely for having to navigate the constant uncertainty of the rapid financial and operational transformation STAIR is undertaking by becoming an Open Access journal, but more importantly, because you've had to do all of these things dragging me as deadweight behind you. Finally, to the reader, thank you for joining us in the ensuing pages and celebrating our 20th anniversary alongside our team.

Armin Safavi,

Editor in Chief

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,

Julia Hoffman

Kye Allen

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.

The background features a large, faint watermark of the St. Antony's International Review logo. The logo is circular, with the text "ST. ANTONY'S • INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW" around the top edge. In the center, there is a five-pointed star above the word "STAIR". Below this, there is a stylized illustration of a person's head and shoulders, facing right, with a star on the forehead. The person appears to be wearing a traditional turban or headpiece.

THEME SECTION

FASCISM AND THE LURE OF POPULIST AUTOCRACY – PAST AND PRESENT

Arnd Bauerkämper

Abstract: *In recent years, some politicians and scholars have claimed that the new right-wing populist and radically nationalistic movements that have emerged in countries such as the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Hungary since the 2000s can or should be interpreted as a resurgence of 'fascism'. By contrast, the contribution argues that these parties represent a new type of populist authoritarianism that has spread fear and promised quick solutions to pressing problems. Inspired by autocratic regimes, right-wing populists have also cooperated across borders, despite their radically nationalistic programmes and agendas. Even though they cannot extricate themselves from the haunting legacy of interwar fascism, the Holocaust and the Second World War, the lure of populist autocracy continues to be a dangerous temptation in the face of present-day concerns about the dark sides of globalisation in the post-fascist present. Similar to the 1920s and 1930s, conservatives play a key role in the slide to right-wing populism.*

In recent years, some politicians and scholars have claimed that the new right-wing populist and radically nationalistic movements that have emerged in countries such as the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Hungary since the 1990s can, or even should be, interpreted as a resurgence of “fascism”. According to some other authors, however, new radically nationalist, xenophobic, and anti-parliamentarian groups, parties, and leaders are merely populist and opportunistic, lacking any clear political programme and political agenda. By contrast, this article argues that they represent a new type of populist authoritarianism that has spread perceptions of insecurity, de-liberalised democracy and promised quick solutions to pressing problems. Disregarding political institutions, political regulations and traditional conventions, populist authoritarian politicians have promised strong leadership against the backdrop of multiple crises that they have highlighted in order to lend their far-reaching claims and appeals credibility, legitimacy, and urgency. Seeking to deprive minorities of their rights, they aim to undermine pluralist democracy from within. This gradual process of seeping authoritarianism is no less dangerous to democracies than fascism.

Due to the above-mentioned close associations in public debates, political contests, and even academic studies, interwar fascism and its relationship to authoritarianism merit some attention in the first section of this contribution. The following detailed account deals with the transformation of neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups into populist authoritarian parties which have assumed a specific political profile. Their characteristics as well as their tensions will, therefore, be dealt with, as well. The conclusion will outline the distinctions between fascism and populist authoritarianism while acknowledging some overlaps.

Interwar Fascism and Authoritarianism

Ever since the formation of the *Fasci di Combattimento* by Benito Mussolini in March 1919, “fascism” has been both a political label and an analytical concept. According to the generic understanding, Italian Fascism has been associated with similar movements, including German National Socialism, by contemporary followers as well as by their adversaries. Fascist parties and groups undoubtedly shared a common ideology and political style in the 1920s and 1930s. Rejecting democracy, liberalism, communism, and socialism, as well as the politics of compromise and negotiation, they strove for comprehensive integration into the nation, authoritarian one-party rule, and territorial expansion. Not least, fascists cultivated a specific political style that was characterised by a commitment to action (instead of discussion), mass rallies, violence, and mystical, palingenetic rituals.¹ Deliberately heightening crisis consciousness and invoking apocalyptic visions of decline in democracies, they built on the backlash to the economic and cultural globalisation that had left many losers even before the First World War, and disrupted the process in 1914. As a response to these experiences of decline, depreciation, and humiliation, fascists promised salvation through authoritarian leadership.²

Based on these commonalities and a sense of destiny, a continuous interchange and communication between fascists emerged in interwar Europe. Beyond overtly political issues such as propaganda, it comprised fields as diverse as labour relations, youth, violence, and mutual assistance in war, but also seemingly non-political activities such as cultural and aesthetic representations. For instance, fascists wore uniforms not only in order to impress and intimidate their opponents in domestic politics, but also to demonstrate their claim to represent a transnational movement of warriors.³ This vision concentrated on Europe, but also assumed a global dimension, especially during the Second World War.⁴

Yet interwar Europe was home not only to fascist movements and regimes, but also to various authoritarian parties and dictatorships. Scholars such as Stanley Payne and Juan Linz have sharply distinguished them from fascism. According to their interpretation, authoritarian groups and regimes sought to stabilise the existing order. Not coincidentally, their leaders and rulers relied on entrenched elites in the monarchy, the military, and churches. They also cherished religion and espoused a corporate organisation of the economy and society, while allowing limited and tightly controlled pluralism. By contrast, fascist movements and parties were latecomers (compared to movements such as conservatism and socialism) that aimed at a new civilisation to amend or obliterate the perceived drawbacks of modernisation, especially economic liberalism, social upheaval and the degeneracy of liberal cultural pluralism in Europe since the *Belle Époque* of the late 19th century. Fascists also called for revolutionary social and political change in order to empower underprivileged strata and groups.⁵ Roger Griffin has added to this list by highlighting the role of “palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism” as the supposedly most important ideological driving force of fascism.⁶ According to Roger Paxton’s attempt to summarise the essential features of fascism, it “may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in un-

easy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.”⁷

Recent research, however, has superseded ideal-typical definitions of fascism by specific characteristics as well as rigid distinctions between fascists and authoritarian politicians. In fact, various studies have conceived fascism as a process, distinguishing specific stages of development (especially movements and regimes), and highlighting the role of actors and practices.⁸ These investigations have demonstrated that authoritarian politicians sometimes borrowed from fascism or fascistised themselves when it promised political gains. Dictators such as Francisco Franco in Spain, and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal tapped the social base of fascists, partially adopted their agenda, and harnessed it to their political ends. Ion Antonescu's and Miklós Horthy's dictatorships in Romania and Hungary, respectively, as well as the regimes of Antanas Smetona in Lithuania and of Józef Piłsudski in Poland appealed to their countries' fascist parties. At the same time, however, they subjugated them to their rule and even fought them in their states. Altogether, scholars have analysed processes of fascistisation and identified a continuum of non-democratic movements, parties, and regimes, ranging from authoritarian to para-fascist (for instance the Irish “Blueshirts”), and fascist variants.⁹ They were interrelated by mutual perceptions, transfers, borrowings, and even learning. As a result, historiography has emphasised “the fluid character of interwar fascism as a political ideology and practice beyond narrow and static definitions, entangling proponents of fascism, the radical right and conservatism.”¹⁰

The New Threat: The Emergence, Characteristics and Limitations of Populist Authoritarianism

Mainly due to its catastrophic consequences, especially the Second World War and the Holocaust, “fascism” became a political spectre and sometimes even a swearword in political discourse after 1945. Some minor neo-fascist and neo-Nazi parties such as the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, founded in 1946 in Italy) and the National-Demokratische Partei (NPD, established in 1964 in the Federal Republic of Germany) achieved short-lived electoral successes. The NPD managed to get elected to parliaments in seven states of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) from 1966 to 1968 (passing the 5% barrier), and the MSI gained 8.7% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in Italy in 1972. Some ideological and personal continuities with interwar fascism were obvious. For example, Giorgio Almirante, an influential functionary of Mussolini's Repubblica Sociale Italiana (1943–45), led the MSI from 1946 to 1950, and from 1969 to 1987. Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists from 1932 to 1940, founded the Union Movement in 1948, propagating a “European patriotism” against the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Global South. Like their interwar predecessors, neo-fascists and neo-Nazis shared a radical nationalism, a rabid anti-communism, and an uncompromising rejection of pluralist, liberal democracy. Some of them also cooperated across borders. The MSI, for instance, established close contacts to Francoist Spain. Yet a broad consensus in favour of parliamentary rule, a liberal order, and political pluralism gradually emerged in the affluent societies of the West. Fascism and Nazism were largely seen as ghosts of a bygone age.¹¹

Nevertheless, neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties successfully exploited and spread xenophobia which was no longer primarily directed against Jews, but against the rising number of immigrants from the 1950s to the 1970s. Moreover, some of these groups successfully transformed into right-wing populist authoritarian parties. Disenchanted by political failure under Almirante's leadership, the MSI, for instance, attempted to shed the shackles of Italian Fascism and turned into the populist, seemingly more moderate Alleanza Nazionale (AN) in 1983. Led by Gianfranco Fini, it scored 13.5% in the parliamentary elections of 1994, and entered Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government. Although the dissolution of the existing party system in Italy in the early 1990 fuelled the rise of the AN, populist appeals, the endorsement of authoritarian attitudes (including the quest for strong leadership), as well as xenophobia in general, and campaigns against immigrants, in particular, increasingly stroke a chord in the 1990s. This also applies to the Front National (FN), which Jean-Marie Le Pen had established in France in 1972. Thirty years later, he drew more votes than the candidate of the Socialist Party, Lionel Jospin, and got into the second ballot in the presidential elections of 2002. Similarly, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), which former National Socialists had set up as early as 1955, received a share of 27% of the vote in Austria in the parliamentary elections of 1999. Its leader, Jörg Heider, joined Wolfgang Schüssel's Conservatives of the Österreichische Volkspartei to form a coalition government.¹²

Against the backdrop of this gradual transformation of former neo-fascist parties into populist authoritarian organisations and the formation of new right-wing groups such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, founded in Germany in 2013), political and academic observers have warned of a "new fascism". Most prominently, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright has closely linked the rise of radical nationalist politicians such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and even Vladimir Putin, to the increasing electoral successes of right-wing parties like the FN (since 2018 Rassemblement National) and the AfD. According to this perspective, the supposedly overarching trends towards "fascism" also encompasses the radicalisation of formerly moderate conservative parties in countries such as Britain (the Tories) and the United States (the Republicans).¹³ Writer Umberto Eco's warnings of the 1990s have received new attention, as well, and philosopher Jason Stanley (who has recently announced his intention to leave the United States for Canada) has identified tropes, tactics and themes that fascist movements have used to achieve power.¹⁴ Not least, journalists such as Paul Mason have argued that fascism has returned, even though he has distinguished between right-wing extremism, right-wing populism, and authoritarian conservatism.¹⁵

By contrast, most historians have been more reluctant to apply the term and label of "fascism" to the new right-wing political parties and leaders. According to their interpretation, interwar fascism was closely related to the context of the early 20th century, especially the consequences of the First World War, the global economic depression of the late 1920 and early 1930s, as well as the multiple crises of liberal democracies. As they have argued, the devastation of the Second World War and the Nazi's extermination policies largely discredited "fascism". Not coincidentally, almost all right-wing extremists have shied away from the very term which no longer seems advantageous as a self-designation. In addition, decolonisation and large-scale migration since 1945 differs from the context of the 1920s and 1930s, when warlike attitudes still loomed large.

Moreover, new communications technologies (especially the internet) have facilitated radicalisation, polarisation, and hate politics.¹⁶ Dissatisfaction with the seemingly boundless usage and exploitation of “fascism” for political gains and vested interests have even led some experts, for example Austrian political scientist Anton Pelinka, to take up Gilbert Allardyce’s early plea for a deflation of the term as a generic concept, and to privilege German National Socialism as a field of research.¹⁷

Because of objections to directly applying the word “fascism” to present-day forms of right-wing extremism, scholars have proposed the concept of “populism”. As a political movement, it has taken up and fuelled concerns about the limitations of representation and national sovereignty in Western democracies. Populist politicians consider “society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’.” They argue “that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”¹⁸ Claiming that the despised “establishment” disregards “the people” as a supposedly homogeneous and united force, populists have demanded to introduce or reinforce forms of direct representation such as referenda at the expense of the traditional institutions and conventions of representative parliamentary democracy. In a similar vein, populist right-wing extremists have largely reduced democratic rule to majority vote, ignoring, or rejecting key characteristics such as the division of political power, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities which are vital for thriving pluralist democracies. The adulation of “the people” also comprises inclusion and exclusion as well as Manichaeian worldviews. Juxtaposing “us” and “them”, populist politicians have demanded comprehensive assimilation into a homogeneous community and attempted to achieve cultural hegemony by advertising themselves as guardians of ethnic identity and national sovereignty. As a corollary, they have nourished xenophobia and fuelled anti-immigrant resentments. Not least, the rejection of economic globalisation, multilateral negotiations as well as supra- and international institutions such as the United Nations, and the European Union has been a central pillar of populist authoritarian politics.¹⁹

However, some limitations of “populism” as an analytical tool are conspicuous. First, it is an ambivalent concept, as it can also serve as a corrective force in defective democracies marred by limited representativeness, weak responsiveness, corruption, or excessive party strife. In this sense, populist groups address real problems in existing democracies. Second, whereas the term “fascism” has usually been applied to the interwar years, “populism” refers to different temporal contexts. The word had been coined and propagated as a political concept in the United States, where the People’s Party emerged in the 1890s. Not coincidentally, the concept has primarily been used to describe and explain the rise of Donald Trump as much as his electoral successes in 2016 and 2024, even though European right-wing parties like the FPÖ had espoused the word “populism” as a self-designation in the 1990s. Moreover, the campaign by Republican politician Newt Gingrich against Bill Clinton’s administration had already shown key features of populism, especially during the midterm elections of 1994. The roots of radical nationalism (“America First”) even reach back to the late 19th century.²⁰

Third, “populism” can refer both to right-wing and left-wing movements and parties. For this reason, it is related to “extremism”. As “populism” appears to be more neutral, and

less contaminated than “right-wing extremism”, however, it has served its proponents as a camouflage for demands to undermine representative institutions in democracies and limit political pluralism. Fourth, the discourse about “populism” disregards some basic similarities between authoritarian populism and fascism. As Griffin has indicated in his definition, fascists relied on populist appeals in the 1920s and 1930s, exploiting and creating the impression that the institutions of representative democracy no longer took up concerns and grievances of large groups of the population. Like populists, they conceived of the people as a homogeneous unit and actor. Fascists also tapped into and heightened fears of losing jobs, security, traditions, and identities because of globalisation, liberal internationalism, and multilateral interdependencies. In addition, they shared xenophobia, a Manichaeic worldview, and the demonisation of “foes” with recent populist authoritarian politicians. Not least, the belief in the efficacy of strong leadership and political staging have been similar. Despite these overlaps between fascists and authoritarian populists, the former outrightly rejected and directly attacked existing democracies, whereas the latter seek to undermine them from within, especially by winning elections. Populists have usually respected electoral results. Furthermore, the different degrees of violence and repression against “enemies” distinguish the two groups from one other.²¹

Ultimately, however, these are differences in degree, not absolute ones. Fascists also attempted to subvert democracies by exploiting commitments to liberty and pluralism for their own ends. They hollowed out democratic institutions and tailored existing laws to non-democratic ends. Emergency legislation is a case in point. Following the burning of the Reichstag building on February 27, 1933, for instance, German President Paul von Hindenburg signed a decree at the request of Hitler. It was based on Article 48 of the constitution of the Weimar Republic and suspended most civil liberties while not officially renouncing the constitutional order *per se* (which officially remained in force until 1945). Moreover, conservative elites vested the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists with power under the impact of their electoral successes, even though they never gained an absolute majority of votes. Not least, by no means have all populist politicians respected the outcomes of elections. Donald Trump, for example, not only claimed fraud after he had been defeated by Joe Biden in November 2020, but he also incited his radical supporters to attack the Capitol Building in Washington on January 6, 2001.²²

Seeking to establish autocratic rule and impose strong leadership in “illiberal democracies” (Orbán) or “managed democracies” (Putin), populists have spread authoritarian attitudes of leadership and submission. In academic discussions and research on the emergence of new nationalist, illiberal, and anti-democratic forces, the concept of “populism” has, therefore, to be qualified by highlighting authoritarian streaks. Exclusionary populists, in particular, rely on central, hierarchical rule by one ruler, a single party, or group. They aim at restricting pluralism, imposing strong leadership on the population and implanting a mentality based on obedience at the expense of critical reflection. In essence, authoritarian rule is a top-down process. By contrast, populist leaders seek to mobilise the population “from below”. The fusion of populism and authoritarianism in new right-wing extremist parties and movements, therefore, creates tensions that they must paper over. Yet populist politicians have repeatedly failed to

harness protest, unrest, and dissatisfaction for their ideology and political mission. In a last resort, authoritarian populists not only rely on previous expansions of political participation in democracies, but they also depend on previous experiences of superseding these systems of rule. Authoritarian populism as a political goal and practice is, therefore, by no means simply post-democratic and post-fascist.²³

Whereas earlier autocratic rulers usually sought to preserve the political status quo in general, and in the state in particular, populist authoritarian populists seek to undermine the existing order by appealing to the masses and tapping into widespread resentments in order to propose and promote fundamental change. Suspicions of a “deep state” are a case in point. In order to nourish protest and undermine trust in established institutions like the judiciary, authoritarian populists have relentlessly spread their propaganda. Distorting or inventing news, its goal has often been identical with outright indoctrination, fuelling crisis perceptions, nourishing anxiety about impending doom, and whipping up emotions. New social media has played an important role in this process. Like interwar fascists, populist authoritarian politicians meticulously stage their appeals for support, their assaults on “the system”, and their attacks on political adversaries. Their commitment to strong and unrestricted leadership, as well as a quest for protection and security, closely resembles fascism. As in the 1920s and 1930s, when the preceding process of increasing worldwide (though uneven) exchange and entanglement backlashed, the “dark sides” of globalisation have lend these demands more urgency in recent years. As a corollary, populist politicians and rulers have also pursued and spread self-assertive narratives of a supposedly untarnished national history. With respect to their memory politics, overlaps with radical right-wing groups are clearly discernible, particularly in Hungary, Germany, and Russia.²⁴

Yet populist authoritarian rule is a contradictory tenet and practice. In the first place, its representatives strive for control of social movements, especially with regard to the exercise of civil liberties. At the same time, however, they claim to represent “the people” and, therefore, need popular support, which has to be mobilised and orchestrated. Populist authoritarian politicians combine repression with appeals, as well as incentives and rewards. A pronounced cult of leadership, too, is to integrate members and distract voters from the fissures and even contradictions inherent in populist authoritarian movements. Yet social and political mobilisation may unleash a dynamic that populist authoritarian politicians had not intended. In fact, (self-)empowerment of large sections of the population can even endanger their rule. Resembling a tightrope walk, populist authoritarian rule therefore depends on preconditions and contexts that defy comprehensive control “from above”.

As a second tension, populist authoritarian politicians are usually nationalistic and protectionist while interacting with like-minded politicians across borders. They have even actively supported each other, not only when in power.²⁵

In conceptual terms, at least three dimensions of transnationality are to be distinguished. First, populist authoritarian politicians have founded parties and established governments in various countries. Spreading across borders, specific national manifestations are nevertheless distinct. For instance, President Vladimir Putin has rigorous-

ly suppressed any opposition in Russia, whereas protests are still possible in Hungary, even though to a limited degree. Second, populist authoritarian rule has been perceived as a transnational political tenet and practice, both by its adherents and its foes. In fact, it relies less on specific parties than on a free-floating movement and discourse. Third, populist authoritarian movements and regimes should be analysed from a transnational perspective. This includes comparative studies, as well as investigations of transfers, exchanges, and even entanglements. Leaders, minor functionaries, and members from different European parties and movements have met on innumerable occasions and different levels, not only to exchange views on ideological questions and policies, but also to communicate on political styles, and support each other in their political campaigns.

Populist authoritarian politicians have rejected globalisation while cultivating European or even global cooperation, and agreeing on common initiatives, for instance in the European Parliament. The political group “Europe of Nations and Freedom” (which consists of representatives of several populist and anti-immigration parties), for example, held a convention in the western German city of Koblenz in January 2017. Participants included the leaders of the AfD and the FN, Frauke Petry and Marine Le Pen, as well as the chairman of Italy's Northern League, Matteo Salvini, and Geert Wilders of the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom).²⁶ Similar to the attempts to forge a “Fascist International” in the 1930s and early 1940s, however, nationalism and strife for hegemony have repeatedly impeded a comprehensive cooperation. In May 2024, for example, Le Pen, broke with the AfD after the party's lead candidate in the European elections of June 9, Maximilian Krah, had summarily exculpated the members of the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*. Like the interwar fascists, moreover, populist authoritarian politicians have rejected globalisation without calling the capitalist economic order into question.²⁷

Like all ideologies and forms of government, populist authoritarianism has no clearly defined boundaries, while intersecting with other forms of non-democratic rule. As already mentioned, it also takes up some elements of fascism which had preceded it. Yet populist authoritarian politicians usually do not admit to this legacy as they fear the charge of “fascism”. They also seek to avoid the impression that they are imitating foreign “models”. This resembles tensions in the transfers and appropriations between fascist, para-fascist, and authoritarian movements and regimes during the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas the German Nazis emulated the Italian Fascist before they were invested with power in 1933, the relationship reversed after 1935–36. At the same time, minor fascist movements adapted to, and borrowed from Adolf Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes. At the same time, they attempted to maintain their nationalist credentials.²⁸

Conclusion: Fascism, Populist Authoritarian Politics, and Democratic Defiance

As demonstrated in this article, it is misleading to apply the term “fascism” to the new right-wing authoritarian populist groups and parties that have emerged in the new millennium. Despite some undeniable overlaps, scholars should stick to an analytical distinction between the two political movements. First, the context of the interwar years differs from present-day conditions. The devastations of the First World War, and the

global economic crisis that had triggered social unrest and political dislocation in the late 1920s and early 1930s were unprecedented and have remained unique up to the present, at least in the Western world. Second, the Second World War and the extermination policies of the Third Reich had unleashed extreme violence and horror that largely discredited right-wing extremism after 1945, although this effect has lessened since the 1990s. Third, “fascism” has been inflated in public discourses and thereby degenerated into a slogan lumping together diverse dictatorships. As Richard Evans has argued in his critical review of Madelaine Albright’s book, it has become a catch-all word that may give rise to false analogies in historical and political education.²⁹

Whereas fascism is dead, populist authoritarian politicians are not only alive but thriving at present. Rather than directly attacking democracies, they attempt to subvert them by creating unrest, distrust, disorientation, polarisation, and hate. Their leaders and members aim at replacing democracy through the hierarchical, centralised rule of one group or person through appeals to popular sentiments and resentments. Based on a comprehensive crisis consciousness, (perceived) social upheaval, and political polarisation, populist authoritarian politicians seek to stem the repercussions of globalisation by promoting ethno-nationalism and rigorously restricting immigration. In a similar vein, they promise quick and easy solutions to complex problems. Although they cannot extricate themselves from the haunting legacy of interwar fascism, the Holocaust and the Second World War, the lure of populist autocracy continues to be a dangerous temptation in the post-fascist present. Even the United States no longer seems entirely “dictator-proof”.³⁰ Yet populist authoritarian rule as a political agenda and practice uneasily combines mobilisation with rule from above, both within parties and countries (after rising to power).

Like the fascists and communists, populists have successfully cast doubts on the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic governments that had been contested throughout the 20th century, especially during the interwar years.³¹ Yet democrats have by no means been helpless. While acknowledging and taking up pressing problems that may alienate large sections of the population from existing institutions, they should avoid dystopian narratives. Moreover, democrats can defend themselves by strengthening their institutions, thereby providing security, order, and orientation. Ameliorating their constitutions in order to fend off the challenge of populist authoritarian politics is another response to efforts to exploit weaknesses of democracy. As the policies and measures taken against fascist and communist parties in democracies such as Britain in the 1930s demonstrate, however, governments have to balance restrictions of political freedom and civil liberties to preserve the core of pluralist democracies. Restrictive legislation, excessive policing, and unrestrained surveillance by secret services is counterproductive, as it gives rise to charges of repression and undermines the legitimacy of democracies.³²

In general, contexts and constellations are of crucial importance for calibrating reactions to populist authoritarian politics. In this respect, a close investigation of the interwar period highlights the critical role of conservative parties and forces. After all, King Emanuele III of Italy appointed Mussolini as President of the Council of Ministers on October 30, 1922, and German President Paul von Hindenburg invested

Hitler with the chancellorship of Germany on January 30, 1933. The two regimes were initially coalition governments, before the Fascists and National Socialists, respectively, gradually sidelined and disempowered the conservative politicians. Hopes of having tamed Mussolini and Hitler as well as their supporters proved to be illusory, although remnants of conservatism persisted in the two regimes, in particular, the Fascist dictatorship. The fixation of fascism in scholarship should, therefore, give way to a more comprehensive perspective on extreme and moderate right-wing groups and parties (without equating them), as Martin Blinkhorn demanded as early as 1990.³³

At present, conservatives are important gatekeepers once again. In the United States, for instance, the entrenched elites selected Trump as their candidate for the presidential elections of 2016 and 2024. They even supported his claims of election fraud and refused to hold him accountable after he had openly called upon his supporters to storm the Capitol.³⁴ Yet the crucial role of conservatives does not relieve other democratic parties and groups in politics and civil society of their responsibility to protect liberal, democratic, and representative rule from the onslaught of populist authoritarian forces. They are different from, but no less dangerous than their interwar fascist counterparts.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Oswald Mosley, *Fascism in Britain* (Westminster, 1935), 11: "We have had enough talk; we will act!" Also see Mike Cronin, "The Blueshirt Movement, 1932-5: Ireland's Fascists?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995), 211-332, 315.
2. Tara Zahra, *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York: Norton, 2023). For an overview, see Tara Zahra, *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars*, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington* 73 (2024), 3-22.
3. *Fascism without Borders. Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, ed. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); *Nazism Across Borders. The Social Policies of the Third Reich and Their Global Appeal*, ed. Sandrine Kott and Kiran Klaus Patel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Nils Fehlhaber, Netzwerke der „Achse Berlin-Rom“. *Die Zusammenarbeit faschistischer und nationalsozialistischer Führungseliten 1933-1943* (Köln: Böhlau, 2019); Helen Roche, "Nazi Elite-School Pupils as Youth Ambassadors: Between Fascist Italy and the Third Reich," *European History Quarterly* 54 (2024), 258-275; Patrick Bernhard, "Colonial Crossovers: Nazi Germany and its Entanglements with Other Empires," *Journal of Global History* 12 (2017), 206-227.
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What is Digital Fascism?

Christian Fuchs

Abstract: *This book has addressed the question: How is fascism communicated on the Internet? This article offers an explicit definition of digital fascism rooted in its theoretical foundations and case studies of the transmission of fascist thought and politics on-line. NOTE: this article is a republication of Christian Fuchs' concluding chapter to Digital Fascism. Media, Communication and Society Volume Four, Routledge (2022).*

What is fascism?

A critical theory of fascism must ask itself in what relationship fascism stands to capitalism. Classical Marxist definitions of fascism often characterised fascism as a particular type and stage of capitalist development. Let us have a look at two examples.

Georgi Dimitrov, who was the Communist International's general secretary from 1935 until 1943, defines fascism as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”¹ Dimitrov sees the fusion of finance capital, terrorism, dictatorship, and imperialist warfare as characteristic of fascism.

Leon Trotsky gave a comparable definition: “fascism is nothing else but capitalist reaction; [...] The historic function of fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organizations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery.”² “The mission of fascism is not so much to complete the destruction of bourgeois democracy as to crush the first outlines of proletarian democracy.”³ For Trotsky, fascism is just like for Dimitrov the most reactionary form of capitalism that uses terror for destroying socialist organisations and their struggle for socialism.

Such definitions ignore the important role that nationalism and exterminatory racism and xenophobia have historically played in fascism. For example, in the case of Nazi-fascism such approaches understand anti-Semitism as “peripheral, rather than as a central moment.”⁴ They also overlook that fascism often contains particular forms of one-sided anti-capitalism such as the hatred of finance capital because it is seen as being Jewish in character. For example, Hitler did not see an antagonism between capital and labour, but between “Jewish finance-capital” on

the one side and German labour and German capital on the other side, which is why he spoke of the “exexploitation of German labor power in the yoke of world Jewish finance”⁵ via financial mechanisms such as loans. Hitler’s propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels⁶ argued that the Jew is “the creator and bearer of international stock-market-capitalism, the main enemy of German liberty”. Hitler⁷ wrote that the “fight against international finance and loan capital has become the most important point in the program of the German nation’s fight for its independence and freedom”. “The Left once made the mistake of thinking that it had the monopoly on anti-capitalism or, conversely, that all forms of anti-capitalism are, at least potentially, progressive.”⁸

By breaking interest-slavery we mean the elimination of the tyrannical money-power of the stock market in the state and economy, which exploits the productive Volk, making them morally contaminated and incapable of national thinking. The Nazis wanted to advance “breaking interest-slavery” (*Brechung der Zinsnechtschaft*), a political demand that goes back to and that Hitler took up from the fascist economist Gottfried Federer who also wrote the Nazi Party’s programme. By breaking interest-slavery, the Nazis understand “the elimination of the tyrannical money-power of the stock market in the state and economy, which exploits the productive Volk, making them morally contaminated and incapable of national thinking.”⁹ The whole concept is based on the assumption that there is a “sharp separation of the stock exchange capital from the national economy.”¹⁰

The Nazis saw finance capital as parasitic and Jewish and industrial capital as productive and German. They propagated a simplistic and one-dimensional form of anti-capitalism that moralises, dualises and personalises capital (good German industrial capital VS. evil Jewish finance capital). Finance capital is biologised as being Jewish and opposed to a fictive national interest of German capital and German labour.

Moishe Postone points out in this context:

“This form of ‘anti-capitalism’, then, is based on a on the abstract. The abstract and concrete are not seen as antinomy where the real overcoming of the abstract – of the value dimension – involves the historical overcoming of the a well as each of its terms. Instead there is the one-sided attack on abstract Reason, abstract law or, on another level, money and finance capital. [...] The manifest abstract dimension is also biologized – as the Jews. The opposition of the concrete material and the abstract becomes the racial opposition of the Arians and the Jews. Modern anti-Semitism involves a biologization of capitalism – which itself is only understood in terms of its manifest abstract dimension – as International Jewry”¹¹

Orthodox Marxist definitions of fascism have overlooked the importance of nationalism and racism as ideological dimensions of fascism. In contrast, an opposite extreme are liberal definitions of fascism that ignore capitalism or deny a relation between capitalism and fascism. Let us have a look at some of these definitions.

The historian Roger Griffin established a widely cited and used definition of fascism:

“Used generically, fascism is a term for a singularly protean genus of modern politics inspired by the conviction that a process of total political, social and cultural rebirth (palingenesis) has become essential to bring to an end a protracted period of DECADENCE, and expressing itself ideologically in revolutionary and forms of deeply antiliberal and mythically charged NATIONALISM (ultranationalism) which may often embrace overt notions of racial superiority”¹²

For Griffin, nationalism, racism, and anti-liberalism are the three key features of fascism. There are no aspects of terror, militarism, patriarchy, authoritarian leadership, and capitalism in this definition. The historian Stanley G. Payne approves of Griffin's definition and defines fascism as “a form of revolutionary ultranationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy, is structured on extreme elitism, mass mobilization, and the Führerprinzip, positively values violence as end as well as means and tends to normatize war and/or the military virtues.”¹³ Payne sees nationalism, authoritarian leadership, and violence as features of fascism. Such a definition does not allow a distinction between fascism and Stalinism.

The historian Walter Laqueur sees nationalism, hierarchy, the leadership principle, and violence as key features of fascism: “a ‘fascist minimum’ such as the common belief in nationalism, hierarchical structures, and the ‘leader principle’. All fascisms were antiliberal and anti-Marxist, but they were also anticonservative, inasmuch as they did not want to submit to the old establishment but to replace it with a new elite. Fascism rested on the existence of a state party and, to varying degrees, on a monopoly over propaganda and the threat and use of violence against opponents. Such a ‘fascist minimum’ is far from perfect, but it is sufficient for most purposes.”¹⁴ Also in Laqueur's definition, the relationship of capitalism and fascism remains unclear.

The political theorist Roger Eatwell defines minimum features of fascism. This is what he calls the fascist minimum. Fascism is an

“ideology that strives to forge social rebirth based on a holistic-national radical Third Way, though in practice fascism has tended to stress style, especially action and the charismatic leader, more than detailed programme, and to engage in a Manichaeian demonisation of its enemies. [...] Nationalism: The belief that the world is divided into nations is central to fascism [...] Holism: Fascism is based on a view that the collective predominates over individual rights and interests. This helps to explain its hostility to liberal democracy. However, the principle also has an individual aspect in the sense that it portrays man as a victim of alienation, divided from other members of the true community and as incapable of finding fulfilment within existing socioeconomic structures. [...] Radicalism: [...] Fascism involves the desire to create a new political culture, partly through mobilisation and sometimes through cathartic violence. Although the idea of rebirth figures prominently in propaganda, there is no reactionary or populist desire to return to a former

society or mythical past (though there is a desire to preserve aspects of the past). Fascism is an alternative form of modernity, though it synthesises the optimism of most modernists with the pessimism of conservatism. The Third Way: Fascism is hostile to both capitalism and socialism, but draws on aspects of both. It sees capitalism as too individualistic, too dominated by the short run and ultimately not loyal to the community. It sees socialism as too internationalist and based on false views of equality. [...] It syncretically seeks to draw on what is seen as the best of capitalism (the naturalness of private property, its dynamism) and socialism (its concern for the community and welfare)."¹⁵

For Eatwell, the key features of fascism are nationalism, charismatic leadership, collectivism, violence, anti-liberalism, and a self-understanding that propagates a Third Way beyond both capitalism and socialism. It remains unclear what the relationship is between capitalist society and fascism. The problem of liberal definitions of fascism is that by ignoring the relationship of fascism and capitalism they cannot explain why fascist movements exist in capitalist societies and do not “explain why fascist movements, however great their rhetorical anti-conservatism, always relied on conservative forces to gain support and aim at power – never on those of the left.”¹⁶ Both the reduction of fascism to capitalism and the ignorance of capitalism in definitions of fascism are inadequate. A critical theory of fascism should neither underestimate nor totalise capitalism as explanatory feature and characteristic of fascism.

The historian Ian Kershaw, author of a widely-read biography of Hitler, gives an enumerative characterisation of fascism.¹⁷ According to Kershaw, important features of fascism include hyper-nationalism, racism, authoritarian leadership, the friend/enemy-scheme (anti-Marxism, anti-socialism, anti-liberalism, anti-democratic, patriarchal values, militarism, violence and terrorist extermination of identified enemies. Other than authors such as Griffin, Payne, Laqueur, or Eatwell, Ian Kershaw provides some indications about the relationship of fascism and capitalism without reducing the one to the other.

“hyper-nationalist emphasis on the unity of an integral nation, which gained its very identity through the ‘cleansing’ of all those deemed not to belong – foreigners, ethnic minorities, ‘undesirables’; racial exclusiveness (though not necessarily biological racism like Nazism’s variety) expressed through insistence on the ‘special’, ‘unique’ and ‘superior’ quality of the nation; radical, extreme and violent commitment to the utter destruction of political enemies – Marxists quite especially, but also liberals, democrats and ‘reactionaries’; stress upon discipline, ‘manliness’ and militarism (usually involving paramilitary organizations); and belief in authoritarian leadership. Other features were important, indeed sometimes central, to the ideology of a specific movement, but not omnipresent. Some movements directed their nationalism towards irredentist or imperialist goals, with devastating effect, but not all were intrinsically expansionist. Some, though not all, had a strong anti-capitalist tendency. Often, though not invariably, they favoured reorganizing the economy along ‘corporatist’ lines, abolishing independent trade unions

and regulating economic policy by 'corporations' of interests directed by the state. This amalgam of ideas, with varying emphasis, was generally consonant with the aim of establishing mass support for an authoritarian regime of an essentially reactionary, non-revolutionary kind. Some of the radical Right movements, those that were avowedly fascist, went further. They wanted more than just to overthrow or dismantle the existing state and replace it with a nationalist, authoritarian government. They sought total commitment to the collective will of a united nation. They demanded soul as well as body. They looked to create a 'new man' (the language was invariably macho), a new society, a national utopia. This total claim, more than anything else, was ultimately what made fascism revolutionary and distinguished it from related parts of the Right that were authoritarian and nationalist but looked essentially to conserve the existing social order. Fascism sought a revolution not in terms of social class, as Marxists advocated, but a revolution nonetheless – a revolution of mentalities, values and will. [...] Whether the shift was to the conservative or to the radical Right, it was advertised as essential to protect and regenerate the nation. As class conflict intensified – now no longer primarily economic but overtly political and ideological in nature – national unity was advanced as the essential bulwark to the threat of socialism. [...] Fascism's message of national renewal, powerfully linking fear and hope, was diverse enough to be capable of crossing social boundaries. Its message enveloped an appeal to the material vested interests of quite disparate social groups in a miasma of emotive rhetoric about the future of the nation. It touched the interests of those who felt threatened by the forces of modernizing social change. It mobilized those who believed they had something to lose – status, property, power, cultural tradition – through the presumed menace of internal enemies, and especially through the advance of socialism and its revolutionary promise of social revolution. However, it bound up these interests in a vision of a new society that would reward the strong, the fit, the meritorious – the deserving (in their own eyes)."¹⁸

Kershaw argues that fascism tries to mobilise those who fear they might lose status, property, power, or culture through the promise of a revolution. Fascism arises in the context of crises of capitalist society. It presents itself as a solution to such crises. The solution it poses does however not want to overcome class society, but rather constructs socialism as one of the enemies of the nation. Kershaw does not explicitly stress the ideological dimension of fascism, namely that it distracts from and denies class conflicts in capitalism, but he points out that fascists stress national unity as opposed to class conflicts and want to preserve the existing social order, i.e. capitalism.

Max Horkheimer writes that "whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism."¹⁹ This statement should be understood in a double sense: a) Capitalism is the context of fascism. Economic, social, political, and ideological crises of capitalist society and their intersection increase the likelihood that fascist movements emerge and that a fascist society emerges; b) Fascism plays an ideological role in capitalism. Fascism as ideology distracts from the role that capitalism and class play in social problems by scapegoating constructed enemies of the nation who are presented

as causing society's problems. The implication is that fascists advocate terror against constructed enemies instead of challenging the systemic causes of society's problems. Fascism does not challenge but practically deepens class society and capitalism. Fascism is a particular form of capitalist society.

Horkheimer and Adorno analyse the dialectic of the Enlightenment, the "self-destruction of enlightenment"²⁰ that results in "the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism."²¹ Capitalism's structures of exploitation and domination turn against liberalism's enlightenment values and in the 20th century resulted in Auschwitz. "After the brief interlude of liberalism in which the bourgeois kept one another in check, power is revealing itself as archaic terror in a fascistically rationalized form."²² Horkheimer and Adorno argue that capitalism on the one hand propagates Enlightenment values that aim at advancing freedom, equality, and solidarity, but on the other hand advances possessive individualism and freedom of private property that undermine equality and solidarity so that the capitalist antagonism between private property of capital and inequalities creates fascist potentials.

The concept of fascism underlying the book *Digital Fascism* is based on critical theorists such as Erich Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Moishe Postone. Fromm and Adorno characterised the fascist as the authoritarian personality. The levels of the psyche and ideology are two important dimensions of fascism, but fascism not only operates at the level of the individual and groups but at all levels of society. Fascism is neither an individual ideology and practice nor a type of society, it is a feature of class societies that can exist at different levels, namely at the levels of individual consciousness and practices, the ideology and practices of groups and organisations, institutions, and society as a whole. Fascism is a practice, ideology, social movement, mode of organisation, and a mode of capitalist and class society. The mentioned critical theorists do not give explicit definitions of fascism, but their theoretical approaches provide indications of how to define fascism.

Any social group, social system, and society has a) organisational principles, b) an identity and practices that bind together and relate individuals and give certain meanings to their existence, c) relations and definition of relations to the outside world, d) ways of how problems are solved. No matter at what level it is organised, proponents of right-wing authoritarianism are convinced of and propagate a) top-down authoritarian decision-making and the leadership principle as organisational principle, b) nationalism (the belief in the superiority and primacy of a biologically or culturally defined nation over other humans) as identity principle, c) the construction of the friend/enemy scheme that polarises and explains the world as an antagonism between the nation and groups that threaten the nation (such as immigrants, refugees, socialists, liberals, Marxists, religions that are different from the nation's dominant religion, which implies that fascism is often racist, xenophobic, anti-socialist, anti-liberal, anti-Semitic, etc), and d) militant patriarchy that sees the soldier as the ideal citizen, advances patriarchal values that want to confine women to subordinate roles in society, and believe in violence (including, for example, law and order-policies, war, and terror) as the ideal means for solving conflicts and answering to society's problems. These four features are characteristic of right-wing authoritarianism. Figure 1 shows a model of right-wing authoritarianism.



Figure 1: A model of right-wing authoritarianism

Right-wing authoritarianism responds to political-economic crises with ideologies that speak to disenfranchised individuals' psychology. Those who feel politically anxious have an ambiguous relationship to love and hate. They seek for an alternative and identity that promises them hope and they want to express their anger and aggression. Figures like Trump on Twitter and in other forms of public communication institutionalise anxiety by offering opportunities to these individuals for loving the nation and the Leader and expressing hatred against scapegoats. Right-wing authoritarianism works on the level of psychological anxieties, desires, emotions, affects, and instincts. It often prefers post-truth political psychology and ideology to reason.

Conservatism is a form of right-wing authoritarianism that accepts the existence and framework of democracy and practices the four principles of authoritarianism within democratic societies. It does not support terror but rather propagates law and order policies. Right-wing extremism is an ideology, political movement and not a type of society. It shows the tendency to accept and favour violence against constructed enemies but its attacks are mainly limited to political style, ideology, communication, and symbols. Fascism can operate at the level of consciousness, groups, organisations, institutions, and society as a whole. Fascism organises and institutionalises violence and terror as political means, it is a terrorist and exterminatory form of right-wing authoritarianism that aims at establishing a society built on terror against identified enemies that aims at their extermination, institutionalises the practice of the leadership principle, nationalism, the friend/enemy-scheme, and militant patriarchy. Fascism is a response to the antagonisms and crises of capitalist societies and class societies. It tries to mobilise those who are afraid of social decline by promising a better society where the national collective rules, benefits its members, and terrorises and eliminates the constructed enemies who are blamed for society's ills. By scapegoating constructed enemies for society's problems and abstracting from these problems systemic causes and propagating nationalism, fascism plays an ideological role in class societies. It distracts from the connection of society's problems to capitalism and class relations. Bourgeois theories of fascism often abstract from, ignore, or downplay the double role of fascism in capitalism and class society, namely fascism's ideological role in capitalism and capitalism's fascist potentials. Orthodox leftist concepts of fascism in contrast often underestimate, ignore, or downplay aspects of the friend/enemy-scheme, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and extermination in fascism and reduce fascism to capitalism. Fascism operates on different levels of society, namely the individual,

the group, institutions, and society. Fascism on one level does not automatically lead to fascism on the next level, but each upper level presupposes the existence of fascism on the lower levels. For example, a fascist society is based on fascist institutions, groups and individuals but is more than the sum of fascist institutions, groups and individuals.

We can define fascism as anti-democratic, anti-socialist and terrorist ideology, practice, and mode of organisation of groups, institutions and society that is based on the combination of a) the leadership principle, b) nationalism, c) the friend/enemy scheme and d) militant patriarchy (the idealisation of the soldier, the practice of patriarchy, the subordination of women, war, violence and terror as political means) and the use of terror against constructed enemies, aims at establishing a fascist society that is built on the use of terror and the institutionalisation of the four fascist principles in society, tries to mobilise individuals who fear the loss of property, status, power, reputation in light of the antagonisms as its supporters, and plays an ideological role in capitalist and class societies by blaming scapegoats for society's ills and presenting society's problems as an antagonism between the nation and foreigners and enemies of the nation so that fascism distracts attention from the systemic roles of class and capitalism in society's problems and from the class contradiction between capital and labour. Fascism often propagates a one-dimensional, one-sided and personalising "anti-capitalism" that constructs the nation as political fetish and an antagonism between the unity of a nation's capital and labour on the one side and a particular form of capital or economy or production or community on the other side that is presented as destroying the nation's economic, political and cultural survival.

We want to now briefly discuss examples of critical theory approaches that have influenced the development of the understanding of fascism underlying this book.

Frankfurt School critical theorist Franz L. Neumann²³ defines fascism as "dictatorship of the fascist (National Socialist) party, the bureaucracy, the army and big business – dictatorship over the whole of the people, for the complete organization of the nation for imperialist war".

Neumann here identifies some core characteristics of fascism:

1. Fascism is based on authoritarian leadership;
2. Fascism is nationalist; it propagates that "employers and workers work together in perfect harmony"²⁴ although class society and the division of labour continue to exist
3. Fascism is a dictatorial form of capitalism;
4. Fascism uses militaristic means (such as war, terrorism, and imperialism).
5. A feature that is missing is that fascism uses the friend-enemy scheme for creating imagined enemies and scapegoats in order to distract from social problem's foundations in class inequality and power asymmetries.

The historian, political economist and philosopher Moishe Postone²⁵ argues that the analysis of fascism should not be reduced to its definition as "a terroristic, bureaucratic

police state operating in the immediate interests of big capital, based on authoritarian.²⁶ structures, glorifying the family and using racism as one means of social cohesion “He stresses that extermination is a central feature of fascism. In the case of Nazi-Germany, the Shoah – the project of the extermination of the Jews that is symbolised by Auschwitz – is a central defining feature. “No analysis of National Socialism which cannot account for the extermination of European Jewry is fully adequate.”²⁷

Postone has given special attention to the analysis of Nazi-fascism and anti-Semitism as the form of the friend/enemy-scheme that dominates in Nazi-fascism and has brought about the Shoah as terrorist project of extermination. He sees Nazi-fascism and Auschwitz based on Horkheimer and Adorno as the consequence of capitalism and characterises Auschwitz as negative factory:

“A capitalist factory is a place where value is produced, which ‘unfortunately’ has to take the form of the production of goods. The concrete is produced as the necessary carrier of the abstract. The extermination camps were not a terrible version of such a factory but, rather, should be seen as its grotesque, Arian, ‘anti-capitalist’ negation. Auschwitz was a factory to ‘destroy value,’ i.e., to destroy the personifications of the abstract. Its organization was that of a fiendish industrial process, the aim of which was to ‘liberate’ the concrete from the abstract. The first step was to dehumanize, that is, to rip the ‘mask’ of humanity away and reveal the Jews for what ‘they really are’ – ‘Müsselmänner,’ shadows, ciphers, abstractions. The second step was then to eradicate that abstractness, to transform it into smoke, trying in the process to wrest away the last remnants of the concrete material ‘use-value’: clothes, gold, hair, soap”²⁸

The political theorist Daniel Woodley²⁹ discusses features of a critical theory of fascism. He builds a critical understanding of fascism on the works of Karl Marx and Moishe Postone³⁰ and interprets fascism as a political version of fetishism concept. Woodley sees fascism as “a populist ideology which seeks, through a mythology of unity and identity, to project a ‘common instinctual fate’ (uniform social status) between bourgeois and proletarianized groups, eliding the reality of social distinction in differentiated class societies.”³¹ Woodley³² writes in this context that “the social function of fascism is to create a unity of social forces incorporating propertied interests, lower-middle class voters and plebeian elements”.

Fascism aims at creating a particular model of society:

“[F]ascism must itself be understood as a political commodity: Fascism is not simply a subjectively generated, reactive strategy – a desperate attempt by atomized individuals to overcome the disenchantment and inauthenticity of modernity – but an aesthetic innovation which transcends existing patterns of differentiation and political subjectification to disrupt established narratives of history and progress. [...] the fetishization of communal identities which conceal the true nature of the commodity as a structured social practice, bridging the gap between the specificity of the nation-state (as the nexus

linking culture and power) and the rationalization of circuits of capital.”³³

What is Digital Fascism?

Digital fascism means the communication of fascism online as well as fascist groups' and individuals' use of digital technologies as means of information, communication, and organisation. Fascism is a particular, terrorist form of right-wing authoritarianism that aims at killing the identified enemies by the use of violence, terror, and war.

Digital fascism means that fascists utilise digital technologies such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones, apps, social media, etc. in order to a) communicate internally so that they co-ordinate the organisation of fascist practices and b) communicate to the public the leadership principle, nationalism, applications of the friend/enemy scheme, and threats of violence as well as the propagation of violence, militarism, terror, war, law-and-order politics, and extermination directed against the constructed enemies and scapegoats in order to try to find followers, mobilise supporters, and terrorise constructed enemies.

In digital fascism, fascists make use of digital technologies for trying to advance violence, terror, and war as means for the establishment of a fascist society. Scapegoats that ideology constructs and against whom it agitates online include, for example, socialists and immigrants. The scapegoats that fascist ideology constructs and against whom it agitates online include, for example, immigrants, socialists, liberals, intellectuals, experts, and democrats. In their goal to advance fascist society, digital fascists make use of digital technologies and their particular features. There is a number of key characteristics of digital fascism:

1. *Fascist convergence:*

Networked computer technologies enable to convergence of one-to-one and the convergence of information-, communication- and production-technologies in one digital platform. As a consequence, fascist digital communication is based on converging forms of communication and the convergence of activities. The convergence of social roles on social media supports fascist ideology's spreading on the Internet.

2. *User-generated fascism and fascist prosumption:*

Networked computers are not just information and communication technologies but also means of production. The computer is a means of communication and a means of production, it enables consumers of information to become producers of information, so-called “prosumers” (productive consumption), which resulted in the emergence of user-generated content on the Internet. Digital fascism utilises these digital capacities in the form of user-generated fascist content and fascist prosumers who are active on social media platforms.

3. *Interactive and multimedia fascism:*

The Internet is interactive and multimedia-based: users change the status of Internet applications by entering commands and navigate in individual forms through combinations of digital texts, images, sounds, videos, and animations.

Digital fascism utilises the interactive and multimedia capacities of networked computing.

4. *Hypertextual, networked fascism:*

The World Wide Web is a networked of interlinked online texts, sites and platforms. Digital fascism makes use of this networked character of the WWW so that there are fascist networks, platforms and communities on the Internet, the WWW, and social media and fascist ideology and practices spread on mainstream sites and platforms.

5. *Fascist co-operation:*

The networked computer supports online collaboration. Digital fascism makes use of the co-operative potentials of the Internet so that fascist co-operate in their goal to establish fascist societies.

6. *Fascist tabloidisation*

The Internet enables the combination of piece of information that are devoid of context (decontextualisation). It supports the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual, reality and fiction, truth and ideology. Internet communication operates with high-speed flows of vast amounts of information. The logic of tabloidisation shapes the Internet in the form of the accelerated production, distribution and consumption of often superficial and sensationalist information. Digital fascism makes use of tabloidisation on the Internet in order to spread fake news, post-truth culture, algorithmic politics, and filter bubbles.

7. *Fascist surveillance:*

On the Internet, private, semi-public and public information converges. This means that fascists on the one hand are enabled to collect private, semi-public and public data about their enemies that enters their practices. On the other hand, fascist activities can also be traced, documented and tracked online.

Fascist surveillance means the online surveillance of and by fascists.

Gáspár Miklós Tamás³⁴ argues that fascism is not limited to German Nazi-fascism that organised the Nazi state in the years from 1933 until 1945 and to Italian fascism (1922-1943), but changes historically. He characterises contemporary fascism as post-fascism, by which he understands a “cluster of policies, practices, routines, and ideologies” that constitute an unclassical form of fascism that shares with classical fascism the “hostility to universal citizenship” and the distinctions between nation/enemies and citizens/non-citizens. “Post-fascism does not need stormtroopers and dictators. [...] Cutting the civic and human community in two: this is fascism”. Post-fascism argues for installing and practices the constructed enemies’ “suspension of [...] civic and human rights”. Tamás utilises Ernst Fraenkel’s³⁵ notion of the dual state: there is one part of the state, the normative state, that defines and guarantees rights for regular citizens; and another part of the state, the prerogative state, that discriminates, oppresses, marginalises those who are defined as non-citizens and enemies of the state. “By the Prerogative State we mean that governmental system which exercises unlimited arbitrariness and violence unchecked by any legal guarantees, and by the Normative State an administrative body endowed with elaborate powers for safeguarding the legal order as expressed in statutes, decisions of the courts, and activities of the administrative agencies.”³⁶

Post-fascism utilises all means necessary for destroying defined enemies and to construct and attack them as scapegoats for society's problems so that there is a distraction from the actual material causes of these problems. Classical fascism operated in the context of the crisis of financialised, industrial, state monopoly capitalism. Contemporary fascism has operated in the context of the crisis of financialised, digital, neoliberal capitalism. Classical fascism used stormtroopers and monopolised, state-controlled broadcast media (such as the *Volksempfänger*). Contemporary fascism, among other means, uses troll armies and social media in order to attack defined enemies. Classical fascism was strictly organised top-down based on the leadership principle. Contemporary fascism fetishises the leader and more combines fascist leadership with networked, decentralised organisation. Classical fascism openly opposed democracy. Contemporary fascism often disguises itself as and claims to be democratic. Classical fascism defined the enemy primarily in terms of race and biology, contemporary fascism more defines the enemy based on culture and religion. Both classical and contemporary fascism construct conspiracy theories about a union of socialists, liberals, experts, and minorities (Jews, immigrants, refugees, people of colour, Muslims, etc.) that are said to rule the world. Classical fascism often racialised this proclaimed union, whereas contemporary fascism constructs such a union as one of "globalisers", "metropolitan elites", "political correctness", "cultural Marxism", etc. Classical fascism operated based on the central organisation of propaganda and lies for which it utilised broadcasting and mass events. Contemporary fascism also spreads propaganda and lies, but combines a central ideological apparatus with the organisation of user-generated post-truth, user-generated fake news and filter bubbles that spread fascist ideology. Both contemporary and classical fascism appeal to human consciousness by combining emotions and ideology.

Right-wing authoritarianism and fascism involve a high degree of polarisation. It is difficult to convince those who believe in racism, nationalism, authoritarianism of the problems these worldviews entail. Rational debate is often not possible and not welcome. In the long run, only a society that strengthens equality and overcomes exploitation and domination can undermine the roots of fascism. In the short-term, only reforms that redistribute wealth and power coupled with the advancement of the general level of education and critique of and deconstruction of false news, post-truth culture, and ideology can help to weaken fascism and digital fascism. The digital means of information and communication are not just tools that help spreading but also tools for challenging fascist ideology.

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BORN AND BRED: WOMEN IN THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN FAR-RIGHT FROM 1982 TO PRESENT

Kiley Fuller

Abstract: *After World War II, American and British conservative politicians sought to distance themselves from the stain of fascism while maintaining relevancy in the liberal democratic system. This required coalition building among anti-communist groups, including the far-right. Into the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of right-wing politics in both the US and UK built upon the anti-communist rhetoric of the postwar period. The success of mainstream conservatism gave room for the far-right and its racialized anti-communist rhetoric in the political mainstream. This paved the foundation for a new movement of far-right politics focused on anti-immigrant and white supremacist messaging. As such, the far-right in both nations appealed to a considerable number of white, women voters along the right-wing spectrum who perceived themselves as under attack from non-white, hypersexual, and criminal males. These concerns permitted the far-right to position themselves as the last defenders of women's freedom in the cultural war against the communist threat (i.e. racial equality). The role of white women and gender in the contemporary far-right varied between the US and UK but provided the far-right a veneer of decency to these otherwise radical policies in both nations. Adoption of pronatalist policies based on the protection of white women (and their wombs) from non-white encroachment enhanced the masculine image of the far-right and its appeal to conservative voters, while also engaging white women in anti-progressive political rhetoric via propagandist depictions of happy, white families, and looming threats to their safety. Centred on the Reagan and Thatcher period, this paper argues that the perceived collapse of white supremacy pushed the far-right to appeal to white women through gendered political rhetoric that centred womanhood and motherhood as national duties under attack by an elusive, foreign threat, masculinity as the last line of defence for women and nation, and that the sense of community created by the far-right entices women to join as their status above people of colour is solidified.*

The 20th century radically changed the course of American and British politics. Advances in racial and gender equality propelled both the liberal cause and the conservative cause along oppositional paths. Into the 1980s, the rise of right-wing politics in both the United States and United Kingdom built upon the anti-communist rhetoric of the post-war period, ushering in a new era of conservative politics, and the collapse of the rival Soviet Union. This paved the foundation for a new movement of far-right politics centred on anti-immigrant, and white supremacist messaging. Far-right groups appealed to white women via 1) conspiracies about non-white, hypersexual, and criminal males and 2) the community and family friendly imaging of far-right propaganda. Women in the far-right positioned themselves as the last defenders of women's freedom in

a conspiratorial culture war against immigration and radical Islam. Adoption of pronatalist policies centred on the protection of white women (and their wombs) from non-white encroachment enhanced the masculine image of the far-right and its appeal to conservative voters, while also engaging white women in anti-progressive political rhetoric via propagandist depictions of happy, white families and looming threats to their safety.

This paper will focus on the rise of British and American far-right organizations as these groups have become increasingly connected in the internet age and are among the most deeply connected globally.¹ Furthermore, contemporary British and American white supremacist groups often follow similar racist doctrines, particularly those that profess the natural ordering of whites over racial others.² The internet has allowed this doctrine and other white supremacist literature, music, and messaging to be widely shared between British and American members. Lastly, debates over family and sexuality in Britain and America often reflect one another and make references to each nation's respective policies in political debate.³ The recent spike of far-right political activity across Britain, the United States, and many places around the globe has created cause for concern. In many places, these groups are steadily gaining organizational cohesiveness and influence.

It is pertinent to establish the role gender (in particular, the gender expression of white women) have held in this network historically to better inform our understanding of their influence in contemporary debates on immigration, gender (including transgender debates), and the function of citizenship. Beginning in 1980 and moving to the 2000s, this paper argues that the perceived collapse of white supremacy and patriarchy wrought by social advances of the late 20th century pushed the far-right to appeal to white women through gendered political rhetoric that centred womanhood and motherhood as national duties under attack from an elusive, foreign threat. This paper will also discuss how the mainstream conservative movement aided in, and benefitted from, the growth of the far-right and the policies put forth in opposition to changing social norms. The impending doom of white supremacy was the catalyst for a rise in the far-right, not a signal of its loss. Women are valuable to the far-right as both its physical progenitors and for the symbolic value they provide for the white, heteronormative family and its superiority above racial and sexual others.

Scholars have produced many theories to explain what draws women to the far-right and what role gender may play in the development and maintenance of the movements. Regarding gender expression and far-right politics, there are a few useful works on the subject, particularly on German Nazism and Italian Fascism. Klaus Theweleit's groundbreaking psychological analysis of male sexuality and its relationship to violence demonstrated how gender anxiety in Nazi Germany led to misogynistic violence and the dehumanization of women subject to that violence.⁴ Barabara Spackman assessed virility as central to politics, not just Italian Fascism, and found that cultural definitions of natural, commonplace human life can shape rhetoric conducive to the development of fascist ideology.⁵ To have gender feature so strongly in both fascist manifestations is interesting, although the framework of fascism in each group is different, just as other far-right political leanings stray from these historical fascist manifestations. Fascist groups,

as explained by Robert Paxton, are united in their ability to grant unity to communities that believe they have been divided and discarded by liberal democracy, but fascism as a term is very difficult to define without losing the complexity of situation-specific factors that create its existence, which can vary across time and location.⁶ Both Britain and America have had their own fights against self-identified fascist groups, however, in this paper, the term far-right will be utilized to describe the many British and American extreme, radical, right-wing groups thriving in the 1980s through the early 2000s, not just those groups whom identify as fascist or neo-Nazi. This term better identifies the wide array of political and social positions that grew out of the fascist cause.

Groups and ideological enclaves, such as British imperialists and the American ultraconservatives, were adept at utilizing the passions and emotions of fascism to appeal to broader far-right positions, from anti-immigrant groups to the staunchest of neo-Nazis.⁷ Despite the outwardly male appearance of the far-right, there is a wide underbelly of women's membership and a critical influence of gender politics. It is problematic to say that far-right movements share a line of historical continuity, as movements differ in their constitution and in where they direct their anger.⁸ Implying historical continuity without critical analysis may lead to overgeneralizations and uncontextualised ignorance of what drives individual members of the far-right, including women. It is important to emphasise the point of Julie Gottlieb, that solutions to these questions are "sensitive to female subjectivity, agency, and the ways in which otherwise ordinary and 'normal' women enlivened their existence," as women in the far-right joined the cause for their own personal reasons.⁹ There are important questions raised by this framework: In what periods does gender appear to matter more to the far-right? To whom does it matter? What is the goal of caring about gender? These are all questions this paper will seek to address by focusing on British and American manifestations of the far-right from 1980 to the present.

Advances in racial and gender equality in both Britain and the US at the end of the 20th century seemed to predict the gradual deconstruction of the intertwined social forces of white supremacy and patriarchy. This threat to white supremacy led to a growth in both far-right and mainstream conservative movements, the proliferation of far-right talking points, and the centring of gender within these movements. Gender mattered in this period as it provided a solid reactionary argument against immigration, a means to prop-up white nationalism, and a tool to entrench racial inequalities. Furthermore, it was the notions of gender held by women that influenced their membership, as well as the sense of community and empowerment to otherwise disadvantaged women granted therein.

The 1980s and 1990s: Far-Right, White Might, and Gender Salience

To ascertain the attraction of women to the far-right and situations in which gender is salient in far-right discourse, one must first turn their attention to issues of race. Within mainstream conservative groups, so-called colour blindness (the belief that one does not see colour, and that seeing colour is inherently racist), allows conservatives to stymie efforts to address structural racism by centring blame on members of

disadvantaged communities rather than the macrolevel obstacles that plague them.¹⁰ In this framework, racism becomes an individual problem, something not reinforced or supported by oppressive social structures, nor the ideological movements that create and protect them. Some far-right groups have also adopted this ideology. The American organization National Equality for All (NEA) frequently espouses white supremacist rhetoric under the guise of racial equality, utilizing eugenics arguments on the natural, objective inferiority of Black and Latino people, and the need for reinvigorated white pride.¹¹ This perspective grants white nationalism mainstream appeal. These groups live alongside the mainstream, participate in mainstream culture, and defend their position as white people organised against a threat to their existence.

This is not the case for all the far-right groups. Some believe themselves to be driven out of mainstream society as the result of Jewish invasion, or immigration, or feminism, or any of the many social changes that challenge white supremacy. These individuals are not colour blind. A key component of their success is the construction of alternative cultures following an awareness of people of colour in their communities. Far-right groups have their own music, literature, entertainment, and even children's toys. There are white supremacist cookbooks and homeschool curricula, GI figures painted to be Nazis and Aryan Barbies, and more. The far-right has created a culture that parallels the mainstream, requiring its members to interact very little with cultures they believe themselves to be fighting against.¹² As this section will discuss, the creation of far-right communities perpetuates this culture, while also driving mainstream conservative beliefs further to the right.

There is also the principal issue of masculinity. To the far-right, their enemies can be grouped as either too masculine (dangerous, hypersexual, criminal), or not masculine enough (weak, feminine, unworthy).¹³ When gender is important to the far-right, so too is race and the intersections formed by these components of individual identities. These categorizations of masculine are also fluid, meaning they are weaponised by the far-right against their enemies in various ways. An enemy may be a hypermasculine rapist of white women one day, and devoid of masculinity in need of a helping hand the next. Far-right propaganda requires the depiction of the perfectly masculine white man and the perfectly feminine white wife. American and British political debates on race are thereby deeply gendered, especially to the far-right. Likewise, the relationship between the far and mainstream political right on these issues presents a dynamic shift of political boundaries that changes over time. One must analyse how the mainstream right rationalised issues on race and, in both the American and British case, drove further right and gave buoyancy to the sinking ship of white supremacy and far-right politics.

Thatcher, Immigration, and the Drive to Extremism

To understand the relationship between 1980s British Conservatives and far-right politics, one must note that the white, working class were not the sole perpetrators of racist and misogynistic political discourse. In the early postwar period, there were purposeful attempts by mainstream politicians and elites to codify race and citizenship in British law and society, thereby shaping working class perceptions of race and citizenship; this relationship is more than a fringe group pushing elites into action, but a

two-way exchange of actions and ideas.¹⁴ In short, race and white supremacy concerned members of all social classes and analyses of non-working class engagement with those ideas deserve greater attention. I also argue that the coalition of Britain's political right, which peaked in the 1980s, was rooted in racist, eugenicist, and patriarchal modes of thinking reimagined as conservative economic concerns. This process positions these ideas within the mainstream, not on the political periphery. As recent research suggests, this rhetoric may have existed as early as the 1960s.¹⁵ However, the gravity of this proposition is best observed in the Thatcherite period. During the administration of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, local councils' policies to address racial inequalities were targeted.¹⁶ Thatcher and the Conservatives framed these policies as anti-British policies designed to support the gravest threats to the nation (i.e. multiculturalism).¹⁷

In a 1977 debate between Labour MP Audrey Wise and Tory candidate John Butcher, Butcher exclaimed that conservatives of the past were "too late" in conducting conservative policy, whereas Wise proclaimed such policies to be, "...in Mrs. Thatcher's words, the freedom to be unequal."¹⁸ The two-fold recognition of a shift in Conservative policy and fears said policies drew on, underscored the political tensions of the Thatcher administration and the broader conditions that fuelled the spread of far-right groups. Thatcher, one of the preeminent conservative leaders of her time, was careful to toe the line between the colour blindness perspective of her party, as well as the growing percentage of Brits concerned with the collapse of the white majority. Thatcherism was successful in turning British politics towards the right, while also returning power and control to the elites via the reestablishment of bourgeoisie hegemony.¹⁹ There were very real issues faced by the white working and middle classes (unemployment, lower education, poor health outcomes, and so on) that did not receive the same attention, thereby escalating racial tensions as immigration became the target of these frustrations. These anxieties may best be defined as fear for the loss of white, British status to a dangerous, uncontrollable enemy. This conspiratorial undertone would define British politics for decades to come.

It may seem paradoxical that Thatcher would gain such power among conservatives. One journalist remarked that Thatcher's "passionate conviction that the country's problems can be solved," launched a fresh style of political leadership that is not solely a "different gender."²⁰ However, it was difficult for some to untangle Thatcherite politics from gender. Indeed, a common critique of Thatcher was her lack of a "domineering" personality and her resemblance to "English spinsters" from popular novels.²¹ Others refer to Thatcher as "sociologically a man," under the assumption that she leveraged her femininity and masculinity to gain acceptance and power in varying scenarios.²² Regardless of one's personal beliefs about Thatcher, it is evident that her position as Prime Minister is both the result of, and further fuel for, a broader crisis of gender that Thatcher and her party benefitted from.

Her success is owed, in part, to her failure to conform to a warm, feminine image; her speeches and statements conveyed a sense of immense urgency and danger, leading her to swing working class and young voters to the Conservative side in the 1979 election.²³ She validated the fears of the white working class, and assured them of their superiority

to all others as white British people. In a 1988 speech at the College of Europe in Belgium, Thatcher spoke on the shared history and culture of European nations, stating: “the story of how Europeans explored and colonised – and yes, without apology – civilised much of the world is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage,” a striking comment in support of the European imperial mission and the superiority of European governance and culture.²⁴ This is similar to many far-right depictions of imperialism as a general good for the world. In one of Thatcher's most infamous statements on British exceptionalism and the evasive foreign threat, she referred to the influx of Pakistani and other immigrants as detrimental for race relations, as “if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.”²⁵ She underlaid this assertion by describing the success of British democracy and her perception of its good for the world. Thatcher rebuked the criticism of her policies as racist, instead she referred to the unified people of Britain and support for their prosperity. In this argument, there is an important undertone of British exceptionalism presented as a benign mode of colour blindness. In sum, Thatcher argued that Britain was extraordinary in its culture and civilization, that it attracted immigrants, but that its culture must be protected from non-members (i.e. Pakistanis).

The result of governmental failures to address racial tensions were feelings of unfairness and identity loss among whites in the wake of growing cultural diversity and a keen lack of attention paid to whiteness by policymakers. The transition from an economic definition of the white working class into a cultural one has been significant in shaping the identification of the white working class based on their behaviours, appearance, and general conduct.²⁶ The white working class came to be known in a negative light, while public opinion stressed the homogeneity of the group. In addition to cultural ostracisation, the perspectives of the white working class were absent from British politics as the priorities of political parties had shifted.²⁷ Some blamed the invisibility of the white working class on the grouping of immigrants and marginalised groups within the same class, who white Brits thought were stealing political focus. This sentiment spoke to a white working class that felt disenchanted with Labour and the left, who felt these parties had not addressed the practical issues of race in British communities.

As Thatcher recognised, race was an important part of immigration policies especially to Tory voters. Despite attempts by the Tories to recruit ethnic minorities, the party failed to address internal racism and struggled to reconcile rising public anti-immigrant sentiment.²⁸ Thatcher stated that immigration was an issue driving people towards the far-right National Front (NF), even people who may not otherwise agree with the politics of the organization.²⁹ She presented two arguments that are vital for understanding the British perspective on race in this period. First, Thatcher argued that the NF was attracting more Labour voters than Conservatives, given the National Front's extremist stance on immigration. Secondly, she argued that the Conservatives must become stricter on issues of immigration and race relations, or people will succumb to extremism. Interestingly, Thatcher borrowed policies from the NF, particularly from supporters of white nationalist Enoch Powell. Powellism, as this ideology would come to be known, depicted immigrants of colour as sexual predators lurking in British streets.³⁰ Powell gained immense notoriety through the 1960s and 1970s because he did what Conservatives had not, he addressed what they saw as the most pressing issue:

immigration. He brought racism boldly into the mainstream, creating the opportunity for Thatcherism to capitalise on its rhetoric and grow.³¹ Powell, and later Thatcher, also demonstrated how the rhetoric and passion of the far-right was not exclusive to the fringe, white working class, and can be found within all social classes, and even among conservative political leaders. Thus, the National Front did not overtake the Conservatives, but it did highlight how gender became important to the right, and how it is utilised to gain support for political causes.

Thus, the decline in British white supremacy (brought about by immigration and the increasing fear of becoming outnumbered) fostered the growth of the NF and later, the British National Party (BNP). Between the Thatcher era and the election of Tony Blair in 2001, the far-right remained electorally insignificant.³² Studies of BNP voters suggest that the BNP's large base of support is only the beginning of a much longer tradition of anti-multiculturalism and anti-immigration feelings. Historically, the BNP is Britain's most electorally successful far-right party. From 1992 to 2005, the total number of BNP voters rose from around 7,631 to 192,700.³³ While these figures may seem politically insignificant considering the success of Britain's major political groups, these figures represent a sharp rise in BNP support not typical of far-right groups in Britain. The beliefs of the BNP were not marginal. Some voters (even those who had voted Labour) reported that they understood the appeal of the BNP and even agreed with some of its policy initiatives.³⁴ The upending of racial hierarchy concerned many Brits, from individual voters in working class communities to the Prime Minister herself. Latent support for the anti-multiculturalism movement fed the far-right, allowing it to persevere and adapt to changes in Britain's political scene.

The BNP's primary political positions focused on critiques of multiculturalism and the perceived failures of the British government to address the problems of immigration and race. The far-right often utilises the rhetoric of meritocracy, a system they believe is fairer to all, including white people marginalised by mainstream favouring of immigrants and people of colour. Given this cultural conflict, an important part of the BNP's later rise to success was the intergenerational movement of far-right ideals. For BNP voters in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was the experiences of their parents that shaped their far-right ideology. The generation that experienced economic depression and the impacts of decolonization after World War II inculcated the British government and its embrace of multiculturalism for their plight. The Nationality Act of 1948 (which granted equal citizenship to all members of the British Empire) was reimagined as an attack on whiteness and white people. Witnessing the poverty of their parents, coupled with the blame placed on immigrant communities circulating through communities at the time, aided in the development of a minority consciousness among the white, British working class.³⁵ In Britain, homeownership carries cultural prestige, meaning the inability of younger generations to find housing (and earn said cultural prestige) made it easy to blame minorities and racial justice programs.³⁶ The far-right understood the concerns of the white working class and provided validation, but perhaps even more important was the sense of ideological community given to a class who felt as though they were rapidly losing their physical community to others. One BNP voter recounted his dismay at the construction of "alien mosques" that, in his view, disrupted the architecture of the area.³⁷ For him, these mosques were not seen as a sign of racial

equality, but of unfairness to whites and preferential treatment for immigrants. BNP voters masqueraded their beliefs as critiques of culture because it allowed them to shed the stigma of biological justifications for racism.³⁸

In the case of the BNP, just as in the eyes of Thatcher Conservatives, belief in racial equality required the dismantling of racial equity initiatives that sought to uplift marginalised communities.³⁹ They saw themselves as the next generation of victims, behind their fathers and grandfathers. In their eyes, men could not fulfil their duty as providers and protectors, and women could not be women, so long as the danger of non-whites lurked. Evidence of their marginalisation was everywhere, threats to the safety of women and children were everywhere, and their whiteness became reimagined as a burden. This led individuals to validate their support for socially unacceptable political beliefs and behaviours they otherwise may not have had. Focusing on gender, sexuality, and other cultural norms granted space for racism without being labelled as such. Therefore, it is simply not enough to say that the far-right had little electoral influence overall in British politics. There is a broader, and greater, social and cultural movement at play that requires the investigation of gender.

It is at this juncture that the role of white women as the physical carriers of white children and ideological carriers of the far-right cause became most important, and gender became most salient. The relationship between the state and white women is central. The state plays a crucial role in the gendering of behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs and, as such, gender informs public opinion.⁴⁰ In this manner, personal perceptions of gender guide one's interpretation of race and immigration. Many believed the state's attempts to promote gender equality were dangerous for women because of personal belief in the natural inequality of the races and the danger posed to white women from men of colour. In this manner of thinking, feminism robs women of the natural protections they believe the patriarchy gives by sheltering women within the home in traditionally feminine roles. In the far-right imaginary, feminism places women in traditionally male spaces where they may become victimized by men or enter relationships with non-whites. State acceptance of non-white immigrants, or state acceptance of gender equality, would fundamentally alter the ideological framework the far-right rests upon. Thus, feminism and women's equality would be counterintuitive to white supremacy and to white women's protections from men of colour. They believed the state had failed women just as it has failed white people, a consistent theme throughout the British and American far-right. In this fear of government encroachment, the nuclear family becomes paramount to white supremacy. Coded in eugenics language, the BNP advocated for birth control to stop the reproduction of Muslims, as well as an end to all family arrangements that did not include a married, heterosexual family unit.⁴¹ Describing the conception of Black children as "breeding," and the children produced as "feral" further validated the supremacy of whites and the importance of white women to protecting the supreme, clean, pure British identity.⁴²

Feminism and related social justice causes were dangerous to Britain in the eyes of the BNP. BNP texts, including the party's journal *Identity*, denounce feminism and the movement of British society away from traditional gender roles; one author blames increasing male violence and alcoholism on women's success in higher education and

movement into male spaces, such as athletics.⁴³ Deviation in gender was equated to deterioration of society, with some of the blame placed on the state. Proposed solutions to the crisis varied, but many authors believed in the importance of heterosexual marriage and the birth of (white) British babies. Again, the anxiety wrought from immigration and fears of white replacement are evident. The ability of the BNP to send enemies “back to the darkness” became appealing for women who feared for their safety and for the future of their children.⁴⁴ Women also valued the BNP’s family-friendly image and its ability to protect them from the threats to their safety, namely men of colour. Moreover, women saw the BNP as a community aiding those oppressed by the state which left them vulnerable to a wave of foreign abusers.

Here the foundation of the female-nation and male-state takes effect. The state failed to protect the female-nation because the state is effeminate, much in the way the BNP believes British men have become effeminate and women have become masculine in the era of feminism. Far-right children are therefore socialised to perceive gender in a more conservative way. To detract from this vision of gender is to leave the individual women vulnerable, which the state has done through its overly progressive, supposedly evil policies of racial and gender equality. These parallel relationships (man/woman, nation/state) form the basis for the BNP’s prescription of the symbolic and literal function of women, an ideology that becomes more pressing in the post-9/11 period.

American Neo-Nazism, The New Right, and Reagan

The American far-right is just as complex as the British, particularly in the case of women. The United States’ most glaring examples of far-right politics are its white supremacist organizations, including the Ku Klux Klan and contemporary organised racist groups like the National Alliance (NA).⁴⁵ Since the 1980s, American organised white supremacy has increasingly attracted women who have been actively recruited to the cause.⁴⁶ Much like their British cousins, the American far-right is disillusioned with mainstream conservatism that it believes has not done enough to manage racial issues. American neo-Nazis frequently depicted the conservative movement as a Jewish conspiracy, and that the free market economic policies of Reagan and Bush allowed capitalism to perpetuate problems of race and the subjugation of white people.⁴⁷ The NA argued that conservatives may be racist but were still unwilling to do what was needed for the white race. Though the feelings and language of segregation have not entirely faded from the American consciousness (even in mainstream politics), social panic over race and the far-right’s notion of racial “suicide” are important factors that facilitate recruitment from mainstream prejudice into white supremacy.⁴⁸ As such, gender becomes more salient in American far-right political discourse when social panic over race becomes more prominent, and as white minority rhetoric propagates.

The New Right, an uneasy coalition of conservatives and elites, had to contend with the ideology of the far-right and its growing influence in the United States. The goal of the New Right was to build bridges between voters who were disillusioned with the social advances of the 1960s and 1970s. From the 1980s into the 1990s, the right saw the nation’s economic issues as evidence that the power and status of white men was under attack.⁴⁹ Gender is central to this cause. A core belief of many social conservatives was

the natural, innate authority of men over women within a nuclear family system.⁵⁰ This belief is fixed in the fear of women's vulnerability. To opponents of feminist advances like the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, the state's authority over women and their role would render them sexually vulnerable via the dissolution of the nuclear family.⁵¹ In this, just as in the British circumstance, one can observe how small government ideology bleeds into issues of gender as people rebuke attempts by the state to advance women's rights and change perspectives on gender and race.

Of course, there were feminists within the Republican Party and anti-feminists within the Democratic Party. However, the important conclusion of the gender debate is the solidification of each party's position on gender and the movement of the Republican party to the right following the 1976 campaign of Ronald Reagan and the New Right, as well as the failure of moderates in the Republican Party to keep pace with the right wing.⁵² The moderate candidate Gerald Ford (whom most feminists preferred) won the GOP nomination but lost the election, signalling the beginning of the party's coalesce to the right. The leadership of Reagan and Thatcher moved their respective parties further to the right, but this process also gave fruitful ground for voters on the far-right to organise in their own ways. Thus, gender became wildly important to resist liberal gender roles and to garner support for one's own cause by promising protections for white women and the white family who had been discarded by the mainstream. However, while the far-right believed white women should be protected from the treachery of people of colour but would not go as far as to proclaim white women's equality to men. White masculinity gives white men power over people of other races and was the focus of progressive legislation that marginalised white men.⁵³ Civil rights laws of the 1960s and 1970s were received by white men as direct attacks on them, not on injustices.

Ronald Reagan succeeded in the 1980 election where he had failed in the 1976 election, due to this rightward shift. The festering of racial discontent and the legacy of the postwar Red Scare fed the far-right during the Reagan administration, through to the 21st century. Reagan was unpopular among women, and his support from the female electorate continued to slump through the early 1980s.⁵⁴ The "gender gap" resulted from what female voters saw as "daily attacks from the White House," particularly Reagan's failure to address gender discrimination and promote the Equal Rights Amendment.⁵⁵ Defence of children and the traditional family features heavily in Reaganite rhetoric. Reagan's commission of investigations into education and other institutions exemplifies this. As part of a broader series of reports sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Paul C. Vitz concluded that public school textbooks contained "clear attacks on traditional sex roles, especially traditional concepts of manhood," culminating in a "systematic denial of the history, heritage, beliefs, and values of a very large segment of the American people."⁵⁶ Vitz also found a lack of patriotism, appreciation for business, and white Protestantism in the textbooks he surveyed. The report later concludes that textbooks across numerous fields discount the role of Christianity and traditional values in American life, some of which the authors remark "fails the test of equity -- of fairness."⁵⁷ This echoes British sentiments and speaks to a pressing issue of entitlement and loss felt by white, Protestant America in the face of racial and feminist progress. The connection between Britain and the United States became clearer during the Reagan administration. In a speech delivered to British Parliament, Reagan referred to

the United States and Britain as “sister democracies,” built from the same foundation of “enduring greatness of the British contribution to mankind, the great civilised ideas: individual liberty, representative government, and the rule of law under God.”⁵⁸ It is interesting then, that the far-right of each nation could grow connected during this period and even more so in the internet age.

Despite hopes for the New Right, it did not satisfy white supremacists. While many on the left proclaimed the radicalism of Reagan's War on Drugs or his handling of other social issues, the far-right felt this administration did not go far enough.⁵⁹ Reagan was not a public supporter of the Ku Klux Klan, nor their vision of racial/religious discrimination.⁶⁰ In a 1984 letter to Morris B. Abram, the Chairman on the Commission on Civil Rights, Reagan remarked that he was “distressed to learn that some individuals back home have questioned whether my views on the Ku Klux Klan have somehow changed,” alluding to criticisms of Reagan's War on Drugs policies and his dismantling of important government policies and regulations in his efforts to downsize government spending.⁶¹ In 1987, the New York Times published quotes from several American mayors including Mayor Holland of Trenton, who explained that there was “a new awakening on the part of the people of the United States that we can't ignore pressing social problems.”⁶² These feelings speak to a broader shift in American politics wrought from feminist and gay rights campaigns, changes that the far-right did not support as they upended the very hierarchy that kept white men in a position of power and authority.

It is worthwhile to remember the organisation of the American right along anti-feminist and racial lines. The War on Drugs and its related policies cannot be analysed as simple criminal justice reforms, as they are not independent of the social perspectives of those who created them, and the movements inspired from them. The aggressive and violent rhetoric of the political divide is emblematic of the movement of the party away from the moderate mainstream, and the ever-increasing role of enemies and danger in the far-right imaginary. Symbols of degeneracy defined the right wing's enemies, while violence and virility defined their sense of self. T-shirts sold in New Jersey by the right-wing National Anti-Drug Coalition read “Warning: I Don't Brake for Liberals,” and “Pot Smokers Make Lousy Lovers.”⁶³ The first speaks to the widening gap between the political right and left, as well as the hypermasculine violence that shaped the right wing's notion of liberalism. The second shirt is explicitly sexual in nature, something the right often disassociates itself from as a product of the left and its sexual revolution and feminist movement.

In the eyes of the far-right, masculinity is constantly under attack and must be proven through the actions of men. Men of the far-right must prove their sexual success and ability to attract women and be attracted to women in the creation of the white family. Strongmen rule by control of bodies and use their sex life to gain credibility and legitimacy among voters, especially men.⁶⁴ The sexual prowess of the authoritarian is something for men to aspire to, and something used to justify sexual transgressions. So too is the masculine image of the average far-right man. For the far-right, the emasculation of men by mainstream society is something to be rectified; this goal is achieved through membership in the far-right and winning the highest prize, a woman.⁶⁵ This kind of macho, heroic tale entices men from the farthest, most rural corners of the United

States. Women allow men to prove their sexual virility and attraction to women to the other men in the group. The far-right likely felt inspired by the masculinity and small-government policies of Reagan, as well as his policing of marginalised communities. Gender is, once again, central in the relationship between the far-right and politics. It is not only women who were fixed into a gender role, but also men.

Where the far-right had previously been loosely tied together by ideology, the 1980s and 1990s became inundated with the development of white supremacist militias, neo-Nazi groups, and far-right organizations around the country. Regulations on firearms, tobacco, alcohol, and other goods enraged the far-right who feared growing government overreach into their communities.⁶⁶ Similarly to their British counterparts, American far-right groups recruited from white communities who felt marginalised, as well as the working poor. Just like the British, the new wave of American far-right activists were intergenerational. They felt robbed of their inheritance and birthright by global capitalism and the economic downturn of the white working class.⁶⁷ The racial blindness of mainstream American society prevented the development of class consciousness and coalition between whites and minorities, and instead drove the new, impoverished generation to the far-right.

Here, the similarities between the British and American far-right members become clear. These communities gave comfort, assistance, and a place to direct one's dissatisfaction.⁶⁸ Racist beliefs may or may not have existed prior to membership, but the far-right was able to recruit socially and culturally through appeals to the family and the necessity of community to uplift the unfortunate whites in ways the national government had not. In these communities, women were vital. The American neo-Nazi movement attracted many young women to its ranks, even more than its European counterpart.⁶⁹ Women joined white supremacist groups; women rationalised their membership in the far-right along gendered terms. They had a specific role to play, for themselves, for their families, and for the community they claimed membership to. Some women joined under the guise of self-transformation,⁷⁰ for others it was resignation to a racial duty.⁷¹ Their physical ability to carry white children is one of those, but so too is their social role in the family and as caregivers. Further, their membership can also be attributed to their desire to conform to a passive, feminine role for themselves, even if they did not believe such a role should be placed upon others. Thus, far-right does not necessarily mean anti-feminist to women, even when the groups they subscribe to are proud of misogynistic beliefs. There is clear ideological complexity here that displays the salience of gender in the American far-right in this period, as well as how gender is understood and mobilised for the far-right cause.

Regardless, women in these groups rationalised their membership along their own individual lines and for very rational reasons. Some objected to the misogyny and male-domination of their respective groups but still maintained membership. For them, the cause was as individual as it was national. Gender was important to the women, even if their gender expectations defied that of the group. The ability of American far-right groups to accommodate ideological variations is what drove membership and recruitment in the late twentieth century.⁷² The most successful of organised groups had an official platform or disseminated ideas through propaganda. But the reality was that the group was heterogenous, and this was a strength for its inclusion of women.

Conclusion

Transnational analysis of far-right groups is a growing field of study that has broadened our understanding of the creation, maintenance, and potential demise of many of these groups. An examination of the late 20th century relationship between US and UK groups demonstrates several key points. First, gendered politics and anxieties have a fundamental role in the ideologies of these groups and serve as a conduit for their engagement with women. Secondly, the dynamic between mainstream conservative politics and far-right politics is much more complex than they may appear. In both the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, the mainstream adopted components of far-right ideology (based on issues of race and gender), while the far-right also gained attention as an alternative to the perceived failures of the mainstream. Lastly, reproduction and sexuality are cultural norms that can shape the appearance and success of the far-right. This role shapes how women approach the far-right and how the far-right imagines women in their utopic societal imaginings. However, the debate over definitions of natural human behaviour and life extends beyond the far-right. Future analysis may consider how labelling certain people as unnatural may facilitate far-right radicalisation.

Recent political debates on immigration and transgender identities reflect many of these same gendered, socially conservative perspectives. The belief in the benefits of imperialism was not a novel belief during the Thatcher period, nor has it faded from relevancy. A 2020 YouGov poll found that 32% of Brits felt that the empire was a source of pride, with an additional 37% arguing it was neither a source of pride nor one of shame; further, imperial nostalgia was almost twice as prominent among Conservative voters than Labour voters.⁷³ Donald Trump's second-term rhetoric also reflects his imperialistic views, professing a desire to annex Canada and purchase Greenland and the Panama Canal.⁷⁴ Whether or not American and British Empires will rise again is not the key point here, it is the notion that such a goal is acceptable by voters. This is the impact of the far-right's push of the mainstream conservative party to the right. Hypermasculine visions of global domination, of protecting the white majority, of saving women, all culminate in the cult of personality that creates enemies and creates heroes. Efforts to tie definitions of womanhood solely to reproductive capability reflect this trend, as does anti-immigrant language. Gender is important now because women are the battleground that the far-right leverages for political gain; the last four decades of political upheaval and the slow return of racial violence and hate groups is evidence of this. Anglo-Saxon supremacists are created, born and bred.

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INTO THE STORM: QANON AND THE APPEAL OF CONSPIRACIST MILLENNIALISM IN FAR-RIGHT AND FASCIST POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract: *Despite widespread criticism, condemnation, and the failure of many of its prophecies, QAnon remains one of the most successful conspiracist social movements of the 21st century, gaining millions of followers, propelling adherents to cultural and political success, and radically re-shaping the policies and rhetoric of the now ruling party of the most powerful nation on Earth. Despite this success, there has been limited academic research that has attempted to understand the role that conspiracist and millennialist social movements like QAnon have in the broader success that far-right parties have experienced across the globe. This paper will address this central question through a detailed case study of the QAnon movement. It will begin by providing a framework to understand the persistent relationship far-right and fascist parties have historically had with millennialist and conspiracist social movements, which have frequently functioned as important parts of their political coalitions. Moving to then provide a detailed overview of the QAnon movement, I will analyse how QAnon differs from early pre- and post-war fascist conspiracist movements, noting in particular how QAnon draws from a far more eclectic and improvisational millennialism than these older more nationally bounded movements, and how the movement's international appeal and decentralized structure highlights the digitally mediated and globalized nature of modern far-right parties that represent an important evolution from the fascist era of the 20th century. Through this analysis, this paper demonstrates the enduring but changing role that conspiracist and millennialist social movements play in supporting far-right and fascist parties, and confronting the global far right must involve a sustained assault on its apocalyptic vanguards.*

QAnon lives. As Donald Trump's new administration continues to defy norms and raise fears of a global far-right turn, the conspiracy social movement that viewed him as a messianic figure, QAnon, continues to persist in the background, clinging to life eight years after its initial emergence onto the American political landscape. Indeed, data continues to support the resilience of QAnon's social support base. Polling conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in 2024 found that nearly two in ten Americans supported core QAnon beliefs, with this number rising to 28% when only considering Republican voters.¹ Beyond mere social support, QAnon has remained an active organising force in American politics. In a 2021 study of QAnon aligned telegram groups, Wildon and Argentino identified that despite a modest decline in activity post

January 6th, the groups remained key organisational hubs for political mobilisation across numerous American swing states, even being involved in high profile political contests such as the recall election mounted against Californian Governor Gavin Newsom.² Moreover, in the early days of Trump's new administration there is evidence that QAnon aligned groups and personalities have been rewarded. For example, we can note the mass pardoning of individuals who participated in the January 6th riot, many of whom were directly aligned with QAnon.³ Even more clearly, some of Trump's new picks for key posts in his administration, such as FBI director Kash Patel, have past histories of acting as boosters and promoters of the QAnon movement.⁴ QAnon is thus not quite dead yet, and this resilience invites us to return to the original movement and ask why it came to enjoy such broad support and success.

QAnon has understandably already drawn attention from academics from a variety of different disciplines.⁵ However, less attention has been paid to the role that QAnon plays within the wider far-right turn we are experiencing in global politics. This leads us to ask what function do conspiratorial millennialist movements like QAnon play in both Trumpism and the global far-right in general? The relationship between QAnon and this type of apocalyptic thought is not entirely understudied in the wider literature.⁶ For example, long time QAnon researcher Marc-Andre Argentino has considered how QAnon relates to longstanding religious currents of American Protestant eschatology. His research found that many of these themes have been worked into the wider cosmology of the movement, particularly dominant pre-millennialist dispensational currents that await the coming of a cleansing millennial apocalypse.⁷

However, I wish to extend this consideration by examining QAnon in light of a variety of different secular millennialist and conspiracist movements of the far right that go beyond American Protestant traditions. The original fascist and proto-fascist parties of the 20th century "Fascist Era"⁸ also included conspiracist millennialist elements as part of their political coalitions, with members obsessed with uncovering international cabals of conspirators and seeking utopian visions of racial and national rebirth through apocalyptic war. The far right has thus always been haunted by what we might call an apocalyptic vanguard, yet, the exact relationship QAnon might have to these earlier movements remains under-theorised. How does QAnon differ from these earlier incarnations of the far right, and what do these differences tell us about the changing nature of the relationship between the far right, conspiracism, and millennialism? Through attempting to answer these questions, I wish to situate QAnon within the transnational history of the far right and in doing so begin to answer a broad sociological question of why a disparate collection of far-right movements find recourse to recurring narratives of millennium and conspiracy. In this way, this paper offers a unique contribution to the existing literature not just on QAnon, but the far right as a whole.

To begin, I will provide a more detailed definition of what I mean when I discuss concepts such as conspiracism and millennialism, showing how the two, though distinct, are frequently connected within apocalyptic social movements. Secondly, I will provide a framework with which to understand how conspiratorial millennialist social movements frequently interact with and function as part of wider far-right or

fascist political movements. Thirdly, I move on to a detailed case study of the QAnon movement itself, noting its conspiracist and millennialist components, and discussing how QAnon differs from earlier fascist or far-right conspiracist movements of the past. I will then conclude by discussing what lies in store for QAnon's future, and how the movement's diffusion into the wider Republican Party might suggest that conspiracist millennialism will continue to spread and grow within the wider global far right.

Waiting for the End: Conspiracism and Millennialism

Before we can properly begin our discussion, we must define what we mean when we discuss the concepts of conspiracism and millennialism. To begin with conspiracism, it is worth first defining the vital component of this worldview, that of the conspiracy theory. This can be problematic, as in defining conspiracy theories we must not risk tarring legitimate scholarship which aims to uncover real examples of government, corporate, or criminal malfeasance. With this in mind, I submit that one of the best attempts to draw a line between legitimate conspiratorial politics and unfounded conspiracy theories can be found in the work of Jeffrey Bale.

Bale argues that whilst conspiratorial plots do occur, most conspiracy theories presented by popular conspiracy theorists fail to accurately identify them.⁹ He suggests that the key distinction is to be found in how the plots themselves are described and understood by the theorist. Conspiratorial plots are time-bounded, small scale, and localised actions that can have significant impacts but are limited to specific geographical locations for specific time periods to achieve specific goals. In contrast, what he calls conspiracy theories instead advocate for the existence of an ever present historically resilient global conspiracy that is constantly working, with supernatural efficacy, secrecy, and power, towards the complete and total annihilation of the way of life of the conspiracy theorist.¹⁰ In this way, these "theories" cease to refer to specific events and instead become more akin to religious worldviews that explain all of reality itself. From this, I argue that it is not useful to talk of conspiracy theories in the singular. Instead, we can use Frank P. Mintz's concept of "conspiracism", which he identifies as an ideology or worldview that sees conspiracies as the motive and driving force of history itself.¹¹ Conspiracism, now properly defined, has much in common with another pseudo-religious worldview, that of millennialism.

Millennialism describes a worldview or belief system advocating for an approaching end of history where society will be destroyed and renewed in a perfect utopian form in which all human ills will be resolved.¹² Whilst the origin of millennialism lies in the study of Christianity,¹³ in the modern context of millennialist scholarship there is a recognition of the flexibility and inherent applicability of the concept of millennialism to a number of religious, spiritual, and, as we shall see below, secular movements. The flexibility of millennialist rhetoric might be said to come from the inherent utility the concept has for social movements as like conspiracism, millennialism provides a valuable tool during times of crisis. As the scholar Stephen O'Leary has argued, both millennialism and conspiracism perform a similar function in that they work to explain and manage the problems of human evil and suffering.¹⁴ For conspiracy theories, the problems impacting a society can be externalised as originating from an outside source,

a conspiratorial cabal that has infiltrated the otherwise healthy society and corrupted it from within.¹⁵ In contrast, millennialism explains that the problems the community faces are merely harbingers of the greater coming crisis which will inaugurate the end times that lead to the promised millennium, where all suffering and pain will finally end.¹⁶

This similar function means that it should not be surprising that both conspiracism and millennialism re-occur within the same social movements repeatedly across history. This might be explained in part because both forms of rhetoric can be, when used properly, mutually reinforcing and work to maintain the overall structure and success of a given social movement. As Michael Barkun notes, conspiracism allows millennialist groups to explain why the end of the world has not yet come, as it has been delayed by the nefarious conspiratorial cabal seeking to prevent the coming of heaven on earth.¹⁷

Simultaneously, millennialism allows conspiracy theorists to provide a roadmap for how the evil they identify will eventually be routed and defeated, inaugurating an earthly paradise where believers will finally be rewarded for their struggles. Both modes of thought thus provide a function that the other requires, and together they can thus provide a powerful integrated framework that is rhetorically very compelling. I argue that what we can observe here, is the fact that conspiracism and millennialism retain similar functions, namely, to explain social ills and suffering and provide frameworks for understanding an anxiety producing world. Each of their unique focuses allow both worldviews to complement each other, creating a richer conceptual framework that allow adherents to address social concerns and mobilise for potential political action. It is exactly this utility that has made conspiracism and millennialism such frequent rhetorical tools used by social movements, and we will now turn to examine their role in the type of social movement central to this paper, the far right.

Fascism and the Far Right

Given the nature of this special issue, it is worth directly addressing the question of whether the wider movement within which Q is embedded, that of Trumpism, is part of the fascist tradition. This is not in and of itself easy, as definitions of fascism have always been fraught enterprises and become more so when applied to parties without direct ties to the original crop of classic fascist movements in Europe. Indeed, many post-war groups labelled as fascist have significantly altered their rhetoric and political orientations away from the explicit violent paramilitarism of the original fascist parties. Moreover, they have been joined by numerous newer parties that lack any explicit ties to classical fascist movements, but which share numerous nationalist, chauvinist, and reactionary political positions that clearly place them on the far right.¹⁸ For some, these developments have led to the suggestion that fascism should be restricted to describe the specific populist ultra-nationalist movements of the inter-war period.¹⁹

The question then arises of how we should define post-war far-right movements that contain many similarities to the original fascist parties but exist in entirely distinct cultural, historical, and economic contexts? One of the most widely supported definitions is Roger Griffin's argument that there is a generic "true fascism" which can properly be

understood as a form of “palingenetic ultra-nationalism.”²⁰ That is, a form of obsessive and violent populist nationalist myth that advocates for the phoenix-like rebirth of the nation through popular mobilisation for revolutionary social revolt motivated by the promise of a bright and glorious future once the old regime is torn down.

However, one possible alternative is to move away from the concept of fascism and instead focus on defining the far right as a broader category which can include both fascist and post-fascist parties. A good example of this approach comes from Richard Saull and his colleagues who outline a sociological and historical view of right-wing politics in their edited collection *The Longue Durée of the Far-Right*.²¹ In the work's introductory chapter,²² the authors argue that the core definitional attribute of the far right that binds together movements across time and space, is an appeal to: “‘the people’, understood as a racially defined demos, premised on a gendered social hierarchy and obscuring the class cleavages associated with capitalist development.”²³ This rhetorical focus on the people is shared with traditional conservative parties of the broader right, but what distinguishes the far right, and what they share with the original parties of the fascist era, is a willingness to embrace radical methods and solutions to protect the people from perceived outsiders.²⁴

This can include jettisoning the traditional conservative need to protect the existing status quo and social hierarchy in favour of more extreme measures that could go as far as reconfiguring social relations to better fit this nationalist vision of the people. Interestingly, the authors note that this radicalism often leads the far right to put forward a conspiracist view of politics, in which a cosmopolitan or liberal elite has worked to exploit and corrupt the people. This inevitably leads, so the authors argue, to calls for a political purge in order to “‘cleanse’ the body-politic of such alien and corrupting influences.”²⁵ This framework, I argue, provides a strong basis for understanding contemporary far-right movements by highlighting the core ideological and rhetorical aspects of their appeal and guiding our study of their political behaviour. It is also a framework that can be easily applied to Trumpism.

Trumpism is deeply pre-occupied with cultural understandings of American nationhood and citizenship, which presents a vision of the United States as a corrupted country weakened by foreign ideas and ideologies and beset by both internal and external enemies who seek its destruction.²⁶ Both of Trump's presidential campaigns displayed an obsession with demonising immigrants as a threat to American security, culture, and even health, alongside calls for dubious legal action to violently remove these dangerous elements.²⁷ Even beyond this foreign threat Trump has also attacked the enemy within, claiming society is filled with unpatriotic traitors seeking to destroy America from the inside.²⁸ Curiously, he identified many of these enemies as Marxist, communists, or anti-fascists, according with Saull's argument that the far right exalts symbols and ideas that cement national unity whilst attacking those that are seen to divide the people, as a Marxist or class-based analysis clearly would. These claims are frequently combined with Trump's attacks on so-called Globalists or The Deep State,²⁹ which speak to a clearly identified view of politics as conspiracy in which the country is beset by a nefarious cabal pulling the strings behind the scenes, and which requires radical actions beyond the boundaries of traditional conservatism to root out. From this,

I argue that it becomes clear that Trump and his movement can be accurately placed within Saull and his colleague's framework of the far right. With this set out, we can now turn to examine how our two conceptual frameworks fit together by asking; what is the relationship between fascism and conspiracist millennialism?

Searching for the Fascist Millenium

Conspiracism has long been recognised as a recurrent component in both fascist thought and rhetoric. Indeed, fascist regimes and leaders frequently constructed elaborate conspiracy theories that painted a picture of a nation under attack from a world spanning evil that wished to corrupt and destroy the people's way of life. The most obvious example of this kind of fascist rhetoric could be found in Nazi Germany, where the myth of a global Jewish conspiracy was an essential element in National Socialist ideology, rhetoric, and eventually, policy.³⁰ The party frequently promoted antisemitic propaganda at the highest level, including infamous texts such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.³¹ Though less prevalent in traditional scholarship on fascism, more recent research has highlighted the role of conspiratorial anti-communism in Fascist Italy, where conspiracy theories of communist infiltration and barbarism were used as part of government propaganda campaigns during the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil war and later during World War Two.³² Less discussed than the reliance on conspiracism, however, is the role that millennialist thought played during the Fascist Epoch, this is even though, when we examine fascist rhetoric and ideology of this period, the spectre of both apocalypse and millennium are ever present.

Again, returning first to the Nazis, National Socialist ideology was frequently expressed in apocalyptic terms, describing a coming period of strife and war in which the old Germany would be destroyed, and a new society would be constructed in its ashes.³³ German fascist and proto-fascist ideologues spoke of the coming of a third and final Reich which would permanently secure Germany's status as the predominant world power.³⁴ David Redles has argued that millennialist themes and ideas extended far beyond Hitler's rhetorical flourishes, and that millennialism was a core aspect of National Socialism which was critical to its appeal and eventual success with large swathes of the German people.³⁵ What is of further note here is the way in which the Nazi's conspiracism and their millennialism were deeply intertwined with each other. The salvation of the German people in the Final Reich could only be achieved through the destruction of the global Jewish conspiracy. History would only end when the eternal parasitic enemy of the Aryan race was finally defeated.³⁶

Whilst the Nazi's remain the most obvious examples of conspiracist millennialist themes and ideas within the broader Fascist Epoch, they are not the only ones. Contemporary with the Nazi's themselves, though less pronounced than their German counterparts, Italian Fascism still produced its own genre of millennialist thought. This was particularly prominent in its colonial policy where fascist ideologues argued the Italian wars of conquest provided the means to create a new utopian society.³⁷ Millennialist thought can also be observed in other less successful fascist movements or ideologues of the period, such as William Dudley Pelley's American Silver Shirt Legion.³⁸ Even after the war, conspiracist millennialism thrived among the radical sects and fringe political

movements that composed the global far right, such as in the American Christian Identity movement.³⁹ In more recent times, the connection between conspiracist millennialism and the far right has merely solidified, where some of the loudest proponents of the modern global far right are explicit proponents of millennialist worldviews. Take for example the prominent conspiracist Alex Jones, who for years on his popular InfoWars online broadcast merged conspiracy theories about a coming New World Order with a Christian inspired eschatology that promised an apocalyptic confrontation with this satanic conspiracy that would either result in global destruction or eternal salvation.⁴⁰ It therefore seems that within each instantiation of the far right, we also observe an apocalyptic vanguard seeking out conspiracies, warning of the end times, and prophesying a millennium to come. Yet, why is this the case? What is it about these movements that attract these two integrated forms of ideological thought?

One argument is that the relationship exists as a result of a correlation in the social conditions that produce both far-right thought and conspiracist millenarism, namely, periods of social, economic, and political crisis. Traditional historians of the far right have noted that radical counter-revolutionary movements seem to gain prominence during periods of intense collapse,⁴¹ highlighting, for example, the fact that it was the economic shocks and political instability of the post-war Weimar period that seemed to prime many in the German population to accept Hitler.⁴² In a similar vein, conspiracy theories, millennialism, and movements which join them together have been found to arise in similar conditions of political instability and societal crisis. This has been observed both through historical analysis of conspiracist and millennialist movements which arose during periods of acute social collapse,⁴³ and through social psychological research which stresses that conspiracist and teleological worldviews (a key characteristic of millennialist thought)⁴⁴ become more likely when individuals experience intense feelings of anxiety, fear, and powerlessness, all of which are clearly associated with periods of crisis.⁴⁵

As compelling as this argument is, it risks simplifying both the appeal and the function of these modes of thought for the far right specifically. After all, fascism was not the only ideology to benefit from the crisis of the inter-war period, as the preponderance of large-scale Communist parties shows.⁴⁶ I argue that to understand the appeal of conspiracist millennialism purely as a response to crisis then risks missing a key nuance in how fascist and far-right movements use these ideas as part of their worldviews. To understand this, we need to turn to examine what function conspiracist millennialism plays within wider far-right ideology.

This function, I argue, is that both modes of thought allow the far right to resolve contradictions and flaws in their overarching worldview, particularly when it comes to their responses to failures in capitalist development. The far right has often adopted critiques of prevailing social and economic structures which at times includes nominal critiques of certain aspects of the capitalist system. This should not be mistaken for a full-blown anti-capitalism however, as these critiques are often adopted tactically and used as a means of bolstering other more reactionary aspects of their ideology. This includes, for example, bemoaning the destabilising impact capitalism has on the traditional family through encouraging women to enter the workforce rather

than keeping in their “natural” roles as mothers and homemakers.⁴⁷ This occasional system critical stance is however also qualified by another strain of far-right thought that exalts markets and seeks a further expansion of the capitalist logic to all aspects of society.⁴⁸ This seeming contradiction between critique and embrace of prevailing economic orthodoxy has led Owen Worth to argue that the international far right has failed to construct a new hegemonic economic common sense in the face of a still powerful Neo-Liberal economic consensus.⁴⁹ Indeed, this “contradictory embrace” of Neo-Liberalism, as Saull and Davidson put it,⁵⁰ I argue can be better explained by deeper contradictions within the ideology of the far right. Nominal critiques of certain aspects of existing capitalism can be useful for far-right parties seeking power, both to distinguish themselves from liberal capitalist parties and to draw social support away from the traditional left. However, any sustained critique of the capitalist world order would potentially unravel the shared homogeneous notion of the people that sits at the core of the far-right worldview, through exposing irreconcilable differences in class and economic position within the national body. The far right thus needs a means to critique the system whilst fundamentally not challenging its core assumptions. Conspiracism, therefore, functions to resolve a fundamental contradiction within far-right thought, that is, if the nation is a pure, organic, and natural body that exists in harmonious hierarchy, then what is the cause of social strife and conflict within the people?⁵¹ Why do, for example, women rebel against their husbands, children against their fathers, and racial minorities against their racial superiors? These contradictions, I argue, prime the far right to seek a scapegoat which allows them to critique current systems of economic and social power without exposing the underlying systems which produce them. Conspiracy theories are a perfect means to achieve these goals, as they function to both externalise and personalise systemic problems arising from the corruption of society by an outside evil rather than existing as a consequence of a system’s pre-existing contradictions and structural logics.⁵² Conspiracy theories thus allow the far right to continue to obscure divisions in the national body and blame hardship and misfortune on an external foreign force that once defeated will allow the nation to return to an organic state of peace. The historian Moishe Postone similarly argued that conspiratorial antisemitism was an integral part of Nazi economic policy, noting that by externalising all of capitalism’s problems to a cabal of nefarious Jews, the Nazi could critique the artificial system of what they called “finance capital” whilst presenting “industrial capitalism” as a purely organic productive process that, once the conspirators were eliminated, would flourish.⁵³ It is thus arguable that conspiracism plays an important function within the ideological toolkit of the far right, a functional explanation to resolve contradictions and paradoxes in their worldview whilst redirecting the anger of their constituents towards those considered outside of the national body.

Millennialism, I argue, serves a similar function, particularly as a means of dealing with hardship and misfortune. In the millennialist worldview, all pain and suffering can be taken not as signs of political defeat and setback, but instead as a sign of the imminent coming of the apocalypse that heralds the beginning of heaven on earth.⁵⁴ For far-right parties, millennialist thought provides a powerful ideological resource to draw on in motivating followers to keep faith and hold the line for future confrontations with the enemies of the people. Moreover, millennialist thought often shares similar

structural similarities to far-right and fascist doctrines. Millennialist thought often divides the world between the ignorant masses and the chosen elect who are specially ordained to receive the kingdom to come, in a similar way, far-right thought divides the world between a racially or culturally constructed people, and outsiders who are seen as unworthy of protection and support within the new regime.⁵⁵ In addition, millennialist thought often bases its imagined heaven on earth as a return to a previous golden age or pre-corrupted utopia once lost to sin, which accords with the reactionary counter-revolutionary impulses of many fascist and far-right movements.⁵⁶ In this way millennialism embodies the narrative of rebirth and renewal that Griffin identified as the minimum generic palingenetic core of fascist thought.⁵⁷

Thus, I argue, we should not be surprised that in times of great social and economic crisis when far-right and fascist parties surge, that these movements attract and encourage an apocalyptic vanguard. Conspiracist millennialism merely represents the integration of two worldviews that fit neatly within the ideological tendencies of the far right, and which provide crucial functions for nascent and empowered reactionary political forces. With this demonstrated, I now wish to turn to the second question within my research, how should we understand QAnon within this far-right conspiracist millennialist tradition.

What is QAnon

QAnon is a conspiracist millennialist social movement which is part of the broader Trumpist political tendency in the United States. A full comprehensive overview of the entire QAnon movement is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵⁸ But two important moments in online culture were instrumental in its eventual form and content.

The first was the long-standing tradition on online image posting boards such as 4-Chan for users to impersonate high ranking government or security service officials and then present “insider” information to people on the board. These users, who were within the culture of the boards understood to be trolls and frauds, would be dubbed with titles such as “FBI Anon”, “Clinton Anon”, or “CIA Anon.”⁵⁹ In addition to this insider tradition, these image boards helped to produce the clearest forerunner to QAnon, that of Pizza-Gate. This was an online conspiracist panic that, to simplify, involved accusations that Hilary Clinton and other democratic or liberal elites participated in satanic, cannibalistic, paedophilia as part of a broader plot to control the politics of the United States.⁶⁰ Both Pizza-Gate and the insider tradition would shape the context in which QAnon would eventually emerge in 2017. That year, on the boards of 4-Chan, an anonymous user began to post cryptic messages in a code-like speech suggesting that Hilary Clinton would soon be arrested and tried for crimes against humanity on October 30th.⁶¹ This prediction, like many more to come, would eventually prove to be false, but Q developed a sizable audience. In its early days Q resembled the earlier incarnations of the insider Anons, but a crucial step in its development occurred when online pro-Trump activists took the posts and began amplifying them on other more mainstream social media platforms. This publicity led to the movement's growth as Q began to spread, first in the wider pro-trump media sphere and eventually throughout the entire internet.⁶² By 2018 the movement began to get mainstream publicity due to adherents

appearing at Trump rallies carrying QAnon t-shirts and other conspiracist apparel.⁶³ By 2019, movement members had begun to conduct a string of crimes including the assassination of a New York mob boss,⁶⁴ an armed standoff on the Hoover Dam,⁶⁵ and a series of incidents of property damage, assaults, and threats of violence.⁶⁶ By 2020 the movement had begun to organise even more effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic, as QAnon affiliated protests swept the country and members of the movement began to run for both state and federal offices.⁶⁷ When Trump eventually lost the 2020 presidential election the movement began to act as a sort of an informal research arm of the GOP, working to whip up conspiracies surrounding voter fraud,⁶⁸ and when Trump's attempt to push "the big lie" culminated in the January 6th riot at the Capitol Building, numerous QAnon flags could be seen in the crowd of supporters storming the building.⁶⁹

Q-Anon and the Millenium

The ideology put forth by QAnon combines both conspiracism and millennialism into a vision of a country in crisis and the visionary messianic leader who has come to save it. According to Q, the United States, and the rest of the world, is ruled by a cabal of satanic paedophilic cannibals, who use their power to secretly sacrifice millions of children each year as part of blood magic rituals to sustain their power.⁷⁰ This cabal is responsible for all the world's problems and deliberately immiserates the population through war, poverty, and disease to maintain their control. However, decades ago a group of patriotic generals decided to act against the cabal, and asked Donald Trump to lead a counter coup against the conspirators. So, for years Trump and a group of "white hats" have been waging a secret war against the satanists to restore the republic and thus the world. We are being made aware of this war by Q, a group of military intelligence operatives posting clandestine information to patriots through 4-Chan and then later the spin off site 8-Chan.⁷¹ This war culminated in Trump's election victory and he was now in the process of laying the groundwork for a purge of the US government and society which would reveal the existence of the conspiracy and lead to the public executions of the conspirators. This apocalyptic event, known as "The storm" within the movement, would herald the beginning of "the great awakening", a utopian golden age where Trump would bring peace and prosperity to the world through dispensing hidden technology and debt free money.⁷²

QAnon is reminiscent of other far-right movements in that it centres on a national re-birth through redemptive violence overseen by a messianic "national chieftain".⁷³ Moreover, its notion of the people is, if not always explicitly racialised, culturally in line with Christian nationalist notions of America as a nation under god which is under siege by demonic forces.⁷⁴ Indeed, QAnon's notion of the storm is structurally similar to Christian concepts of Tribulation and Armageddon found in the eschatological Book of Revelation, and Christian ideas, themes, and iconography suffuse the wider cultural scene of the QAnon movement.⁷⁵ Furthermore, some scholars, such as Argentino, have argued that the millennialist and conspiracist culture, found in American protestant Premillennialist churches, primed many evangelical Christians to embrace the structurally similar mythology of destruction and salvation found in QAnon.⁷⁶

Beyond drawing from religious tradition, QAnon's twin concerns of conspiracy and millennialism echo earlier secular far-right ideologies. The belief in a conspiratorial

cabal seeking to steal or murder the children of the nation has a long history in fascist and far-right propaganda, particularly in explicitly antisemitic formations.⁷⁷ Indeed, there are many parallels with QAnon's rhetorical structure and earlier National Socialist or neo-Nazi conspiracist millennialism. Some scholars have drawn parallels between the calls for the punishment of public officials in the storm with neo-Nazi millennialist call for a "day of the rope" where race-traitors and communists would be hanged en masse.⁷⁸ On a more functional level, QAnon displays the same mystification of social problems that I argued was a core part of the function of conspiracist millennialism in far-right thought. Within QAnon all, of America's, and the world's, problems arise from the machinations of this cabal, and it is only through the defeat of the conspiracy (the storm) and the coming of the millennium (the great awakening) that true peace and progress will reign. However, despite these core similarities there are many differences that make QAnon distinct from earlier far-right conspiracist millennialist movements.

The Changing Nature of Far-Right Conspiracist Millennialism

First, QAnon is significantly more eclectic and diverse than far-right conspiracist millennialist movements of the past. Many of these movements drew heavily on specific religious or rhetorical traditions such as Christian Pre-Millennialism, anti-masonic conspiracism, or European antisemitism, but remained contained within these traditional explanatory paradigms. Michael Barkun's⁷⁹ distinction between religious and secular millennialism is helpful here, as he notes that prior to the latter half of the 20th century, most millennialist or conspiracist belief systems could be safely segregated into religious or secular types. The former drew from specific religious traditions, such as Christianity, whilst the later took millennialist impulses from secular political sources such as Marxist doctrine. We can thus say that earlier forms of far-right conspiracist millennialism typically bound themselves within specific traditions of explanations that drew from religious or secular thought, be it the religious millennialism of American Christian Identity churches, or the secular millennialism of National Socialist thought. However, these two forms of millennialism are joined by a third, what Barkun calls improvisational millennialism.⁸⁰

Improvisational millennialism is a type of millennialist thought that draws liberally from a range of different ideological, spiritual, or esoteric traditions to create entirely unique end times theories that cannot be easily placed in a religious or secular frame.⁸¹ QAnon, I argue fits into this type of millennialism as it incorporates elements from a staggering range of traditions. Whilst, as already shown, QAnon draws from Christianity, it also equally takes from the New Age, wellness, and spiritual healing communities, which draw their ideas from a range of sources such as occultism, fringe-science, and eastern religions.⁸² Furthermore, QAnon has infiltrated UFO and alien disclosure communities, many of whom have come to view the Great Awakening as including revelations about benevolent extraterrestrials waiting to uplift humanity with wondrous off-world technology.⁸³ Both New Age and UFO communities not only intersected before the rise of QAnon, but also both had their own independent traditions of conspiracism and millennialism,⁸⁴ and movement members were able to draw on these traditions when entering the Q scene. These more esoteric strains of thought are no less prominent in

QAnon than their Christian counterparts. Consider the now infamous poster boy for the January 6th riot, Jake Angeli, the so-called “Q-Shaman” who was deeply involved in New Age spiritual circles prior to identifying with QAnon.⁸⁵ He even went as far to self-publish a book detailing his encounters with spiritual extraterrestrials who warned him of dark cabals controlling earth from the stars.⁸⁶

Moreover, QAnon's improvisational nature has allowed it to incorporate other conspiracist and millennialist traditions into itself. QAnon is thus what is often referred to as what Barkun calls a “super conspiracy”;⁸⁷ that is, a conspiracist framework in which numerous different individual conspiracy theories and conspiracists traditions can co-exist. For example, QAnon has been able to incorporate older millennialist theories into its own ideological worldview. A prime example of this is the Nesara and Gesara movements, which claim an imminent financial reset will soon occur, freeing believers of their debts and making them millionaires in the process.⁸⁸ This belief has existed for decades, with its own large scale online following and influencers, but was easily incorporated into QAnon's existing belief system, and Gesara soon became a core part of the utopia to come after the Storm clears away the corrupt financial elite and begins the Great Awakening.⁸⁹ This is further complemented by the fact that once a new theory is incorporated into the movement, QAnon's elaborate and expansive narrative makes falsification of its core claims almost impossible. The absence of evidence or even direct refutation of predictions can be transformed into confirmation of either the duplicitous power of the cabal, or through the thought terminating cliché that “disinformation is necessary” for the storm to occur.⁹⁰ The resistance of conspiracist and millennialist beliefs to falsification has long been a recognised phenomenon within the study of apocalyptic social movements.⁹¹ Indeed, within the study of QAnon itself Amarasingam and Argentino have applied Leon Festinger's famous framework of cognitive dissonance management to demonstrate that Q believers similarly deploy these psychological techniques to manage potential doubts when predictions made by Q or other members of the movement failed to occur.⁹²

This improvisational adaptability of QAnon also leads to another important aspect of the movement which distinguishes it from older far-right conspiracist or millennialist projects, that of its transnational nature. Traditional far-right movements have often based themselves on national traditions in an effort to present a pure nation state ready to be gloriously reborn.⁹³ In many ways QAnon follows this trend, embodying aspects of the traditional American far right such as Christian Nationalism, and Americanist iconography, all the while exalting Trump, an American President, as the central messianic figure in their eschatology.⁹⁴ Yet, despite being incredibly America focused, the movement has spread rapidly to numerous different countries and found solid success in gaining a large transnational following.⁹⁵ This appears to be in part due to non-American activists taking the theory and adapting it to meet local conditions and to speak to specific national concerns and traditions. In Japan, QAnon activists merged the movements pre-existing millennialist motifs with traditional Japanese national and religious currents to argue the Great Awakening would involve the exaltation of the Indigenous Japanese people over their enemies.⁹⁶ Whilst in Germany, many within the pseudo-legal and neo-Nazi Reichberger movement adopted QAnon as part of their general belief that the post war German state was an illegitimate foreign entity, and that

the Storm would see its destruction and the return to the pure German Reich of the past.⁹⁷

I argue that two factors help explain the flexible and adaptable nature of QAnon as compared to other far-right conspiracist movements. First, QAnon's central ideological framework is remarkably simple: the world is ruled by evil forces but a messianic-like figure will soon return to purge the conspirators and inaugurate a heaven on earth. All that is thus required for a theory to be part of the movement is to recognise Trump's leading role in the coming millennium, and to highlight that Q is an important source of information. Everything else is remarkably adaptable and flexible. Indeed, even who the cabal is can change due to local conditions, with European activists adding local politicians and EU bureaucrats into the global conspiracy to appeal to national far-right talking points.⁹⁸ Thus, local concerns and even entirely different conspiracy theories can be imported into QAnon's lore with ease and not risk disrupting the movement's pre-existing ideological frameworks.

This is helped by the fact that there is no one central ideological text within the movement; the closest to this is Q's post themselves (referred to as Q-Drops within the community). However, these are deliberately vague and obtusely written in a pseudo-cryptographic style. This has bred a culture of "de-coding" amongst adherents, where the followers attempt to divine the meaning of Q's words and apply his prophecies to existing events. This do it yourself approach to conspiracy theorising may have a strong impact on Q adherents which can be explained by the so-called "Ikea effect" identified within social psychology. Put simply, researchers observed that individuals who construct objects themselves have a higher tendency to view them more positively when compared to objects that they purchase or are given to them, even when their objective quality differs.⁹⁹ Applying this to QAnon, we can observe that its decentralised structure leads followers to build and assemble their own theories out of pre-existing beliefs and ideas and come to view these independent narrative constructs as more valid and real than opposing narratives by experts.

Extending this metaphor, we might suggest that QAnon operates on an Ikea like model for conspiracy construction. In QAnon, members take blueprints or instructions derived both from Q himself and the wider movement and then construct their own conspiracy theories from the surrounding material available to them. This is analogous to how the furniture giant Ikea provides customers with the material and plans for their items but leaves the construction up to them. QAnon adherents around the world are thus empowered to construct their own theories in a DIY format. This not only provides a strong psychological attachment to the constructed ideas and theories but also allows for multiple competing ideas or explanations to exist simultaneously as individual theorists or communities develop diverging narratives to explain contemporary events.

Indeed, the movement has shown itself to be remarkably open to hosting disagreement over the nature of the conspiracy even if it goes against Q's own words. A good, if absurd, example of this, can be seen in the controversy over the existence of JFK Jr. Many in the movement have come to believe that President John F. Kennedy's son, JFK Jr., is in fact secretly alive and working behind the scenes with Trump to destroy the cabal. This

belief in JFK Jr. is not universally supported by the movement, and indeed in a Q-drop, Q himself appeared to state that JFK Jr. was in fact dead.¹⁰⁰ Despite this fact, belief in JFK Jr. remains powerful within certain currents of the movement, even up to the point of inspiring splinter groups to form cult-like sects built around anticipating his return to public life, which they believe will be the signal that inaugurates the storm.¹⁰¹

The plurality and flexibility in belief within QAnon highlights the second important aspect that has allowed it to spread so successfully; its de-centralised and diffused nature. Unlike other older conspiracist millennialist far-right movements, there is no central ideological structure or party in which to hold Q to account. Q does not appear to emanate from the Trump administration or the GOP itself and any attempt to directly control the movement by officials has failed.¹⁰² Thus, rather than being a project of party politics, QAnon arose as a de-centralised communally authored conspiracist millennialist movement. In this way, the internet has been indispensable as a mechanism for QAnon to spread and develop. Whilst scholars remain divided on whether the internet has increased the propensity for conspiracy theorising in the wider population, it is undeniable that digital technology has enabled conspiracist communities like QAnon to develop, spread, and network across a vast geographical distance at incredible speeds.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the internet has allowed for the intensive marketisation of QAnon, with Q followers developing their own independent online marketplaces to sell merchandise and services, and for influencers in the movement to monetise their followers and in some cases work on the movement as their full-time occupations.¹⁰⁴ The internet's e-commerce functions thus fosters increased social bonds within the movement and helps it develop momentum and culture separate from any centralised party control. Online platforms thus facilitate the creation of what some scholars have called "echo-chambers", self-reinforcing communities where ideological narratives are hardened and alternative explanations are systematically de-legitimised and marginalised.¹⁰⁵ For many QAnon members therefore, these digital communities can become large or even primary sites for social interaction and economic exchange, even up to the point of replacing important outside social relationships with family and friends.¹⁰⁶ In this way, the internet facilitates the movement's growth, a process that was only increased during the Covid-19 pandemic where in-person social interaction became impossible for most and thus digital communities, like QAnon, were able to step in to provide needed avenues for socialisation.¹⁰⁷ QAnon's elaborate online network differs substantially from earlier forms of far-right mobilisation where conspiracist or millennialist propaganda was produced as part of centrally organised campaigns directed from within the party.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, large sections of QAnon's belief system were generated entirely improvisationally by movement members themselves in these online spaces, even if these beliefs clashed with the specific instructions given out by Q. This type of decentralised conspiracist millennialist thought is not entirely new for the far right. Roger Griffin¹⁰⁹ and Nicholas Godrick Clarke¹¹⁰ have both noted that in the post-war era, the far-right often operated as a diffused underground network of groupuscules that passed ideas across clandestine or fringe networks. Yet, none of these movements ever achieved the size, influence, or international scale of QAnon.

Conclusion: The Coming Storm

From the above discussion, I argue that both conspiracist and millennialist traditions have been consistent components of fascist and far-right ideologies in numerous mutations both during the pre- and post-war eras. This form of ideological tradition performs an important function within far-right thought through providing a means of explaining contradictions in their worldview and the movement's misfortunes through a framework that identifies enemies, defines an in-group, and motivates followers to fight towards a utopian future that will be released when the conspiracy is finally defeated. From reviewing QAnon's history and belief system, I argue that it clearly fits within this broader tradition of far-right conspiracist millennialist thought, with a focus on national renewal, a cultural understanding of the people that obscures class cleavages, a vision of an all-encompassing globe-spanning evil conspiracy, and the promise of an apocalyptic confrontation with the enemy that will result in a utopian future. However, whilst a part of this tradition, QAnon innovates in a number of critical areas. Firstly, it draws from a rich well of improvisational millennialism, taking aspects from various often contradictory traditions to construct a unique form of conspiracist millennialism. Secondly, QAnon's ideological flexibility has allowed it to spread internationally, adapting to local conditions and integrating pre-existing conspiracist and millennialist traditions into its worldview and thus creating a large scale and global coalition. Thirdly, its diffuse and digitally decentralised nature allows it to operate outside the boundaries of traditional party-political structures and to produce a range of distinctive and at times contradictory tendencies that can co-exist as part of a larger conspiracist coalition.

As we bring this discussion to a close, the question arises as to what the future holds for both QAnon and the wider reactionary right moment that it was a part of. First, it is worth noting that though QAnon has receded in popularity and power in the wider Trumpist coalition, the movement very much still exists, and one can find numerous online forums where believers wait feverishly for the storm to finally arrive.¹¹¹ Moreover, regardless of the fate of the movement's true believers, the ideology and general worldview of QAnon has indeed proven to be immensely influential on the wider American far right. Many of QAnon's core ideas and rhetoric have become dominant Republican talking points,¹¹² whilst many former QAnon followers or individuals that flirted with the movement have gone on to become elected politicians or prominent appointments of the new Trump administration.¹¹³ Thus, perhaps QAnon's most lasting impact does not come from the movement itself but rather in the ideological and rhetorical toolkit it has handed to the Republican party and the global far right in general. QAnon could thus be seen to have functioned as an ideological laboratory where new tactics and rhetoric for the far right were crowdsourced, tested, and then deployed, with the most politically useful finding their way out of the movement and into the hands of more mainstream far-right and even conservative activists. This might further lead us to speculate that this could be the model for future developments in the relationship between the far-right and their conspiracist millennialist vanguards. In the past, fascist movements produced apocalyptic rhetoric within their own party organisations and later promoted these narratives from government offices to prime their populations for war. However, in the modern day, far-right parties and their elected representatives only have to dip their toes into largely independent and de-centralised networks of conspiracy theorists and

apocalypse seekers to find the narratives that are most effective.

In this way, QAnon is arguably the model of conspiracist millennialism for the 21st century, a decentralised diffused network of apocalyptic reaction self-generating narratives and ideas to be used by more organised actors for their own purposes. This is all the more frightening given the global nature of the modern far right, which frequently seeks to build large scale supra-national coalitions as part of a “reactionary international.”¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, it is highly likely we will see many more of these movements in the coming years. As global instability increases and the world continues to suffer from economic collapse, geo-political conflict, and our ever-changing climate, many more individuals may find themselves pulled into the allure of conspiracist millennialist worldviews, particularly if influential politicians continue to find it in their interests to draw from these networks. A great awakening that brings about heaven on earth may not be on our horizon, but it seems that in our near future, a storm is still coming.

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“Re”-centring the Past in Postfascism

Harrison Pates

Abstract: *Griffin’s idea of palingenetic myth, Eco’s ‘cult of tradition’, the Roman fasces reappropriated by Mussolini – displays of classical fascism engaged with the past both symbolically and in practice as part of broader goals to re-shape society by force. The postfascist era is no different, where far-right groups ostensibly operating under the auspices of liberal democracy deploy the same discursive and cultural processes when they discuss the ‘death of the West’ or rally against ‘woke degeneracy’. The past continues to occupy a foundational conceptual role as understandings of the nation, purity, and degeneration are grounded in manipulated histories which manifest at varying degrees in today’s postfascist era. This article thus explores far-right and postfascist ideologies’ reliance on the strategic use of the past. It argues that especially in the current culture of social media and casual engagement of history for political ends, we must maintain an appreciation for the central position of this backwards-facing rhetoric in postfascist manifestations to both understand and counter it. The following article does so using four key examples: return (to a mythic ‘Golden Age’), regeneration (as a response to perceived degeneracy), revanchism against historical grievances, and remembrance (in selective memorialization and engagement with ‘memory wars’). As Gáspár Miklós Tamás, the originator of the ‘postfascist’ category, put it – “these people don’t need to fight a war. That war is being fought for them by public culture itself”. With examples from the British far-right, the article seeks to contribute to the literature on postfascism an appreciation of tempered ‘fascist temporalities’ and approaches to the past as a cultural-political object. It reflects upon the implications of these dynamics in a fragmented digital age where postfascist groups use history not only to define themselves but to disseminate their ideology among hijacked conversations within broader cultural discourse.*

Fascism, obsessed with the nation and deeply dyed in a culture of ‘re’-making the world, posed itself as both a reclamer of historical greatness and drew heavily on the past in aesthetics and the practical construction of its goals. This is not a novel observation by any means. Within Umberto Eco’s base formulation of Ur-fascism, “the first feature is the cult of tradition.”¹ Paxton’s *Anatomy of Fascism* found an “obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood”,² emotional motivators necessarily grounded in past events, and Griffin’s fascist minimum boiled down to a “palingenetic ultranationalism” in the ‘re’-birth of the nation.³ In each of these efforts towards defining fascism, of all the features typically associated with it – totalitarianism, violence, masculinity, anti-Enlightenment thought – first position is granted to a configuration of the past, for good reason. What Griffin identified as “fascist temporalities”,⁴ where time and modernity themselves were submitted to the revolutionary fervour of fascist totality, reflected the necessity of connecting with the past. National myth and adaptation of historic symbols were inseparable from the contradictory revolutionary projects of fascism, with a considerable body of work spotlighting these processes in the two best-known examples of Italy⁵ and Germany.⁶

At the turn of the century, Griffin identified a “taxonomic problem” posed by the Italian Alleanza Nazionale (AN); a party “rooted in historical Fascism” yet “unequivocally commit[ted to] upholding the institutions and methods of liberalism” within Italy.⁷ Tentatively the suggestion was that we were seeing the emergence of a new, democracy-friendly fascism, or “post-fascism” as AN leader Gianfranco Fini put it.⁸ Tamás’ work on this ‘post-fascism’ centres on an insidious observable move away from universal citizenship, the notion of equal political membership unimpeded by individuals’ personal characteristics such as race or gender. Where previous fascisms sought revolutions within society to openly upend this Enlightenment arrangement, Tamás’ conception of postfascism “finds its niche easily in the new world of global capitalism without upsetting the dominant political forms of electoral democracy and representative government,” judging individuals to belong or not belong using the language of ‘security’ and ‘order’ to maintain and enforce these divisions.⁹ To reach this judgement requires a conception of national history to cast the distinction between the citizen and the ‘other’. Traverso adapted and expanded this frame, understanding the shifting nature of the far-right today as part of a postfascist “constellation” with a shared lineage in the “fascist womb”.¹⁰ It is the emphasis on continuation of the underlying ideals with a made-over visage from which postfascism derives its applicability to far-right movements we see in our time. In particular, it offers for scholars a way to jointly conceptualize movements which may not adhere to the existing multitude of labels – alt-right, alt-light, fascist, neo-fascist, far-right, radical right, extreme right – but share tropes in their communicative style and overall aims (the restriction of citizenship to an exclusive and predetermined ingroup at the expense of the ‘other’). Though not without criticism¹¹ and lacking precise delineation, postfascism maps together the shared facets of the new fascisms while also respecting their chameleonic shift and adaptations to the “different terrain”¹² of the twenty-first century and how its cultural vehicles for controlling historical narratives have adapted in turn. Under the historiographic regime of this ‘postfascism’, the terminology chosen to map the dialectic continuation and adaptation of past fascisms to modern day for the purpose of this article, mastery of history is less articulated in party edicts than expressed through diffuse and ephemeral conversations on social media.

The gradual shedding of overt fascism and deliberate self-censoring of major British far-right parties fundamentally demonstrates fascism’s fluidity and reinvention under contemporary political contexts, buttressing the utility of postfascism as a heuristic solution to view these as part of a connected web with shared lineage and ideological infrastructure.¹³ Banned openly fascist groups like Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF), with predecessors such as the British Fascisti and Imperial Fascist League, regrouped as the pressure-group styled League of Empire Loyalists (LEL) in the postwar. After a period of fragmented far-right activity, the infamous National Front (NF) took pole position in 1967. The NF’s most well-known leader, John Tyndall, steered it toward openly violent, antisemitic, and pro-Nazi stances; opposition within the party meant the NF eventually fractured, giving rise to Tyndall’s new British National Party (BNP) in the early 1980s. Nick Griffin took the helm in 2000, rebranding and securing electoral success at local and European levels in the early 2000s. Today, former BNP members and their rhetoric persist across the far-right spectrum in offshoots like Patriotic Alternative, Combat-18, the English Defence League (EDL), and Britain First, as well as

mainstreamed parties like the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Reform UK, which occupy the populist-radical right rather than extreme or hardline neofascist. Rather than see contemporary far-right groups as either populist or extreme, with no connective matter, we can follow Keim's lead in emphasising the enduring exclusion, grievance, and cultural reaction that define postfascism in general.¹⁴

This article uses as its gimmick four aspects of past-facing rhetoric of postfascism using the contemporary British far-right as exemplar, emphasising the different narrative impetuses which draw on national histories to promote (post)fascist solutions. First is the appeal of return, as in taking the nation back to a perceived Golden Age and distinctly tied to nationalism and nostalgia. Similarly, regeneration applies this idea in a cultural sense, where modern society has lost the purity and moral strength of the past and requires a cleaning-up to bring back norms and values of previous ages. Revanchism traditionally refers to the desire to regain lost territory but more generally manifests as a desire for revenge against perceived foes and the regaining of ground in non-physical spaces such as the culture war or collective memory. This brings on the topic of remembrance as the distinct meta-process of recalling the past, which postfascists do in a particular way to emphasize some parts of national or individual memory while excluding those that do not fit. While they serve different purposes, the categories are not mutually exclusive and are expected to overlap and interact – memory and history are fuzzy topics with unclear borders, after all – and certain instances of historical narrative might fit into multiple sections comfortably. The intention is to suggest for literature on postfascism some potential starting points for comprehending the relationships between history and contemporary ideology or identity, rather than trying to blindly approach all of 'the past' at once – like Toscano's late fascism, which overlaps with postfascism in many ways, the categories are used "not [...] like an academic brand, [but] to name a problem".¹⁵ The analytical strength derives from foregrounding four different roles that history can serve, as the dialectic of postfascism crystallizes continuity and change, mirroring the internal contradictions of a fascism that glorified the past while obsessing over modernity and the future.¹⁶ This article comes as a timely intervention into the discussion as far-right talking points continue to breach the digital divide and effect the real world, as in the riots of the summer of 2024 and concurrent rise of radical right parties. Conceptualising the ways that postfascists discuss the past is vital as we shift increasingly to decentralized, identity-bound sources of information online, and the urgency aroused by calls of 'fascism' should be matched by an equal observation of postfascism as a contiguous but concealed force of adaptation and persistence.

Return

Nationalistic pride is embedded in postfascism as a collection of ideals to which we should return rather than in strict corporeal forms. One common finding on the pull-factor of far-right parties is in national pride or perceived loss of national strength¹⁷ – in narrative, if not in practice, which other parties fail to adequately address. This is the gap which postfascists most effectively address for the in-group, making it more easily engaged with and drafting it as the most effective single messenger for postfascist narratives. Elgenius and Rydgren use the model of the Golden Age when considering the success of right-populists, electoral parties who are good candidates for the

postfascist label.¹⁸ These Golden Ages provide effective narrative paths for the radical right to gain support, with positive yesteryears embedded in both personal and national memory providing the “conception of an ideal world that is constructed, respectively, from the past” and highly engaged with individual rose-tinted memory.¹⁹ In twentieth century fascisms the specific revolutionary obsession with power over reality meant channelling national Golden Ages monumentally, as in a New Rome or Fourth Reich, but British postfascists lack this explicit relationship and, constrained by material realities, turn to ‘softer’ depictions of the Golden Age through nostalgic “idealised imagery conjuring” rather than reproducing the past.²⁰ As we will see, the idea of return promises a restoration of status and societal privileges to the in-group and a contrast of the negative ‘other’-bound now with the positive, white past.

The affective, instead of pragmatic, model of this ‘restorative nostalgia’ – of “going back somewhere”²¹ is so effective because it taps into the emotive cores which have been associated with models of fascism while avoiding material promises. This is alternatively modelled as a “futural nostalgia”, an interpolation between the mythologized pasts of Griffin with the firmly revolutionary focus on the future.²² Mussolini aped from ancient Rome the eagle, salute and, famously, the fasces, while the planned EUR zone for the 1942 World's Fair saw Italian fascism display itself as a radical “mirror image of classical Rome”.²³ In contrast, the postfascist ‘Greatness’ of Britain is to be stage-managed in brief flashes and symbols that can be popularly-supported without demanding massive constructions, such as the imagery of Britannia and a lion in the British Freedom Party's magazine header,²⁴ which engage historical tropes but do not trouble “immutable” systemic foundations and as such rendering postfascism an “illusory alternative to neoliberalism.”²⁵

The BNP will protect our unique and precious British identity from Mass Immigration, multi-culturalism, health'n'safety killjoys and globalisation.

We will:

- Reassert that British law comes before any other in Britain
- Fly the Union Jack from all public government buildings
- Make Saint George's Day a national holiday
- Uphold our hard-won right to free speech
- End public funding of organisations advocating multiculturalism

Figure 1: A section of the British National Party's ‘British Culture’ policy.

Colin Jordan, a British neo-Nazi, once traced National Socialism back to “ancient Greece and Rome [...] and to the ‘Nordic tribes’ of early Europe”²⁶ – the main difference from today is that British postfascists largely shed this mythologizing and instead imagine “a simpler world without globalization” lacking coherent fascist revolutionary idealism.²⁷ Direct challenges to democracy are now likewise ‘soft’ fascist in their erosion of norms and the favouring of white voters, while challenges to global capital are relegated to the fringe as with the protectionism which attacks free markets and global finance but not capitalism itself.²⁸ Past fascist's scapegoating of Jews for the decline in British might and greatness²⁹ disappears under the BNP's “concerted attempt to revise the history of the British far-right in order to make it serviceable for future ideological exigency,” reflecting the pragmatic adaptation and shedding of radical imagination hypothesized

under postfascism.³⁰ Instead, everyday reference to ‘when things were better’ focus on nostalgic and familial return over constructive ones and removes entire sections of society from being associated with this greatness (and as a result a factor standing against the return of the good old days). These emotionally successful stories feed on “nostalgic deprivation”, flourishing in areas with a greater decline in perceived status – namely white working or middle classes³¹ – and provide a promise to restore the status quo without articulating any revolutionary action.



Figure 2: A leaflet from the British National Party advocating a return to postwar prosperity of a ‘granigure’.

with weak, nostalgic constructions of history replacing concrete dreams of the future. Toscano uses the phrase “nostalgia for synchronicity”, a “hankering for the image of a moment, that of the post-war affluence[,] for the industrial worker-citizen”, in describing the allure of visions of hardworking coal miners as signposts of a better time.³³

In this absence, the disingenuous ‘return’ sought today is instead to generalized societal greatness of traditional social norms and the predominance of masculine, white capital over the physical embodiment of ancient or medieval society – “the utopian dimension [...] is utterly absent” as Traverso puts it.³⁴ Interwar fascists in Britain dreamed of nobility, chivalry, and hierarchical aristocracy, while “medievalism was [...] part of the Union Movement’s emotionology” after the war in combination with the longing for global power exemplified by the LEL.³⁵ The muted Golden Age instead evokes a vaguely pre-globalization era where a white Britain is defined largely by race over any real sense of how the past was governed, having been stripped of spirited political imagination by the dulling of fascism’s initially sharp revolutionary thrust. Britain First’s content uses both ancient notions of Celt and Pict (which Nick Griffin recognizes as “less significant than previously thought by nationalists”³⁶) alongside Christianity, not in a legitimate desire to turn back the clock but in an effort to web together these identities as anti-multicultural jostling against the Muslim ‘other’.³⁷ Loose groupings with shared history or culture are militarized as worthy of defence as carriers of ‘British identity’ tied to retrotopian populist notions of taking back control,³⁸ justifying increasingly authoritarian solutions to perceived threats of immigration and demographic change. Returning national greatness is assumed to hinge on the legal and de-facto restriction

of Britishness to certain groups. The “symbolic resurrection” of immigration-critical figures like Enoch Powell in the absence of an actual return³⁹ is evidence of generalized whiteness replacing concrete structures, with British historical greatness swept up in the civilizational tones which postfascists assume when discussing Europe or the West.⁴⁰

Traverso posits that Islamophobia now largely plays the role within postfascism that antisemitism did for its historic counterpart, taking on the racialized panic and urgency which was previously attached to Jews and applying it to Muslims.⁴¹ Groups such as the EDL and short-lived Pegida UK existed only to stop the ‘Islamization’ of England, and the support of Israel by prominent postfascists indicates their concern with European surrender to ‘militant Islam’ is a more marketable version of the now-unfashionable of international Judeo-Bolshevism. But postfascist parties were split on their support of the 2024 riots precisely because contemporary conditions do not allow them to wholeheartedly support anti-immigrant violence, despite the underlying militancy and fearmongering.⁴² In the absence of

concrete ideas of power, order or control, their whiteness is a defensive supplication. Toscano argues for seeing the current ‘late fascism’ as a reflexive phenomenon, emergent in response to perceived crises.⁴³ Thus, on immigration, their chief concern, the Patriotic Alternative website has a tenaciously detailed section on ‘demographic decline’, framing “the number of ‘foreign born’ citizens [as] insignificant before 1948”⁴⁴ but with no comment as to the long-term makeup of the ‘British people’. The ‘greatness’ of the British past is bracketed by a decline which, in their view, is distinctly connected to the arrival of globalism in the British Isles as represented by increased immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. Excluding minority groups from the Golden Age presents them as a barrier to it, which permits their exclusion from rights of citizenship regardless of whether the BNP conceded that non-whites may nominally join the party.

The same demographics webpage ends with the declaration that “this is why [they] formed Patriotic Alternative: to orchestrate real change and secure an existence for our people”.⁴⁵ Those familiar with the explicitly neo-Nazi ‘Fourteen Words’⁴⁶ should immediately spot the significant dog whistle - a coded reference which the far or alt-right use to signal more radical or extreme meanings – and thus the slipping mask of respectability under the amorphous nature of postfascist rhetoric. A physical return of the past – of greatness as expressed with titanic architectural projects or in urban spaces – is sidelined by a preferred narrative and cultural return. This impulse is expressed in demographic sense, biopolitically through electoral promises towards immigration restriction, remigration and policing which are themselves “reproduc[tions of] the old forms of exclusion and violence with newly modified and veiled forms”.⁴⁷ Within the

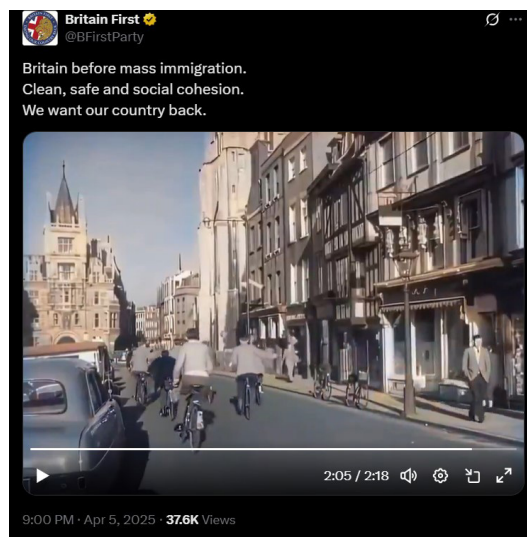


Figure 3: An X post from the official Britain First account. The video shows vintage footage of everyday life, with scenes of doctors' offices, churches, and public transport.

philosophy of postfascism, the shift visibly and strategically manipulates history to limit citizenship through putting demographic conditions on the ability to return Britain to greatness. This is the defining strategy which 'return' outlines for the contemporary far right; rather than the model for organizing society, it is the imposition of an anti-immigration defensive nostalgia over a reconstructive one, engaging emotive and symbolic notions of the past instead of attempting to physically rebuild it.

Regeneration

Narratives of degeneracy recur throughout different scholarly definitions of fascism, as a feature of the "new consensus".⁴⁸ Fascists viewed their contemporary society as morally degenerated, associated with subhuman groups or diseased body politics. If we see return as explaining how the country should be modelled politically, regeneration can be expressed as the transference of this trend to the restoration of a pure national culture. To do this, one must have a grasp as to what culture was like before, and who is leading it to a path of degradation. *Mein Kampf* and the cultural infrastructure of the Third Reich attacked what they called a Judeo-Bolshevik agenda in modern art and took steps to destroy extant cultural 'degeneracy' while ensuring the markers of martial prowess, masculinity, traditionalism, and purity were retained. El-Ojeili, exploring the cultural boundaries of postfascism, explores the difference with historical fascism as a shift from the utopian to dystopian aspects of the movement, with passivity, degeneration, pacifism, and equality representing some angles to their dystopic, degraded view of the present.⁴⁹ Regeneration, as it appears in British postfascist ideology, instrumentalizes traditional values and regressive social ecologies as solutions to the perceived ills of today with the past as an ideal type to govern culture and societal norms.

The digital culture war is the new mode of this expression and replaces much of the concern with physical space, where society and culture are instead the battleground and history memes with far-right messages abound.⁵⁰ This digital turn represents postfascism's "new-media democratic populism [...] attached to scandal politics, celebrity, participation" and using the new information-cultural infrastructure to shape conversations about culture.⁵¹ Diffusion of cultural messaging away from party-centric means has also allowed the far right to avoid many of the pitfalls of 20th-century fascists whose influence was limited by their direct connection to parties like the BUF, as experienced by Mosley's postwar failure to remake his image in the era of radio and television.⁵² While memes and message boards may carry more of the explicit degeneration-regeneration discourse today, the think tank-styled groups like the London Forum discuss the need for regeneration in clearer terms.⁵³ The Traditional Britain Group further exists as a kind of far-right pressure group to this exact end, who for their 2014 conference hosted speakers on topics of "Modern education and the destruction of culture", "Decline and Culture: The Waning of British Culture", and "Culture and political engagement: a view from the right".⁵⁴

'Death of the West' narratives which were popular in the last century nevertheless remain so because the idea of degeneration and decline have persisted, in our era lending themselves to revitalization and urgency but channelled through votes and literature rather than violence.⁵⁵ This is the "cultural translation of a long period



Figure 4: An instance of the Sunwheel podcast produced by the British Movement (Northern).

of politico-economic decline”, reflected in the disconnection between supposed degeneration and resignation to complaining rather than regenerating the nation on a material level.⁵⁶ Continuations with historical fascism, as in the antisemitic conspiracies regarding globalization and the stereotypical depictions of Jewish bankers⁵⁷ as opposed to financial systems distinctly (which are criticized, but with antisemitic and conspiratorial overtones and without serious challenges to the fundamental structure of global finance capital), reuse old tropes with new scapegoats to match shifting immigrant demographics and not the practice of globalization.⁵⁸ While still posed as ‘genuine concern’ for emotive targets such as women or children, the articulation of exclusive discourses and scapegoating groups now largely relies on dogwhistling and policy to mainstream positions of the BNP, where electoral success has been limited.⁵⁹ This is a fragmentation of talk and action assisted by social media and the internet, massively boosting communicative potential but eroding the ability of postfascists to act themselves in regenerating the culture.⁶⁰ The danger stems from the osmosis of cultural talking points into the mainstream and wider circulation, which can then be used to restrict certain privileges of citizenship such as healthcare or benefits.

For historical fascists, queer communities were pathologized as a dual source of degeneracy, challenging desirable traditional values and resisting fascist orderings of individuals.⁶¹ To perform the same exclusion with this kind of language is an untenable position in mainstream Britain today, and so LGB communities may be nominally accepted while the ‘T’ is distinctly marked as alien, transgressive, or similarly pathological.⁶² Postfascist parties who have had their hand forced or sought greater participation with inclusion of non-heterosexual members are undermined by the rhetoric of their base, which exposes itself as decentralized and pseudo-anonymous digital networks attack queer identity online as a cultural ill.⁶³ The EDL LGBT ‘divisions’,⁶⁴ following the “good homosexual” model emerging as early as the 1990s, illustrate the ironic progressiveness of postfascists who recognize the need to superficially appear more tolerant and prioritize cultural-racial regeneration over sexuality.⁶⁵ Despite nominal acceptance of some queer identity, societal recognition of nonconforming sexual or gender identities are nevertheless visualized as part of a globalist plot in “the feminizing and ‘gaying’ of national cultures.”⁶⁶ Degeneracy and the logically-following regenerative project are imagined within a contradictory acceptance while imagining conspiracy and blame, because fascism fundamentally needs enemies even if it has taken a defensive stance. Positions that place queer communities, and trans communities specifically, as sources of cultural degeneration make use of simplistic memories to justify exclusion and restriction of rights and yet are increasingly gaining ground within anti-gender or gender-critical coalitions in the UK.⁶⁷

Classical fascist and postfascist historiography which scapegoat groups to explain cultural decline can both be understood in simplistic terms as conspiratorial where these groups have an active role in degrading society.⁶⁸ This is fundamentally an approach to history, with conspiracy requiring a vision of the past where bad actors

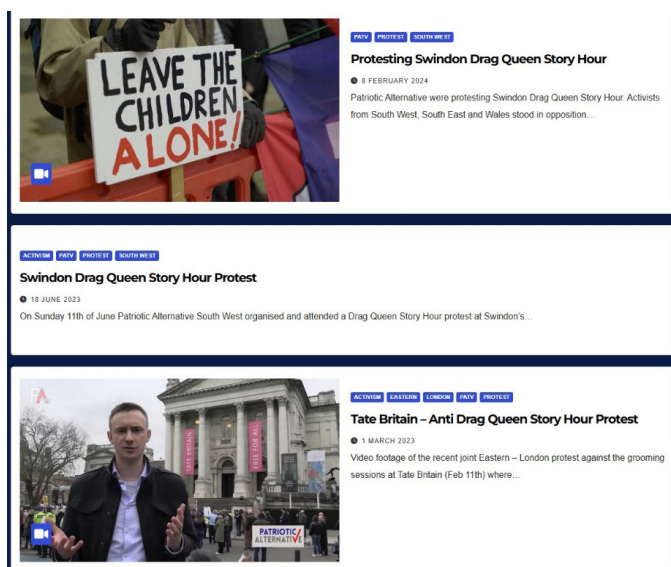


Figure 5: A number of videos on Patriotic Alternative's video hosting site, all relating to protests over drag queen events.

are said to have carried out their corruptive plans.⁶⁹ At the level of cultural degeneration, the conspiratorial enemies are flexible and numerous analogues in the form of 'woke', Cultural Marxism, Critical Race Theory, feminism, and others.⁷⁰ Conspiratorial histories told by the contemporary postfascist right conceptualize these as the most recent stage in a centuries-long movement by global elites to control culture and repress purity, reflecting the kind of populist memory of return in a cultural sense. The Great Replacement

conspiracy theory is a direct descendant of the interwar fascists and ties together all the elements of the degeneration narrative we have discussed; immigration, loss of purity, the 'queering' of society, and conspiratorial intent, marking the reflexiveness rather than ingenuity of historical analogues.⁷¹

There are postfascist elements which address this electorally, with promises to reverse immigration or teach 'common-sense' (read: traditionalist) stances on gender and sexuality, but the prominence of explicit conspiracy reflects a continuation with historical fascism. Efforts to reconstitute the BNP's history failed in the view of Macklin purely because "its ideologues and activists [...] would have to reject the essential 'truth' of the BNP's racial-nationalist ideology and, with it, a racial Weltanschauung⁷² that they genuinely believe".⁷³ Postfascism retains a distinctly exclusionary element that may have moved away from violence and towards cultural incompatibility, reflecting the appropriate discourse of liberal democratic regimes and able to reject Muslim immigrants or drag queens due to their degenerative effects. Regenerative impulses are significantly limited in terms of tangibility but display the internal contradictions of fascism, as well as dynamic adaptation to social media and their ability to permeate wider conversations in the 'woke' era.



Figure 6: An X post sharing footage of ex-BNP leader

Revanchism

Paxton explains how fascists became “carriers of substantial grievance” in the wake of destructive economic collapse and World War, steering the profound loss their nations had suffered at the hands of elite and aristocratic machinations.⁷⁴ They appropriated the sense of betrayal, channelling it into a collective project for revenge and renewal based on mythical national pasts and violent solutions to decay. This revanchist impulse was inseparable from scapegoating. The adoption of the ‘Stab-in-the-Back’ myth and Big Lie weaponized conspiratorial thinking, shifting blame for national decline onto minorities and elites and particularly the Jews’ supposed “declaration of war” against Germany (which has clear parallels to contemporary anti-Islam)⁷⁵ which culminated in state-sanctioned or institutionalized violence like Kristallnacht. While the postfascist era has not yet produced such coordinated violent expressions of revanchism, it has preserved their symbolic and ideological core; today, revenge is sought less commonly through overt thuggery and more through cultural and political mechanisms that aim to ‘reclaim’ the lost nation. It must pose itself as “subversive” against liberal norms in new ways following the abandonment of anti-democratic methods and the exceptionalization of violence.⁷⁶

‘Woke’ is the result of attempting to channel what would have been territorial or military demands under decentralized, ephemeral culture war flashpoints like school curriculums or media representation, and portrays a defensive position against ‘cancel culture’ lending postfascists a “moral equivalence [...] disregarding the inherent ethical dimension of the fight against fascism.”⁷⁷ Revenge is reduced to a petty and reactive form of superstructural resistance, expressed in slogans and campaigns to ‘take back’ the nation from the perceived control of international entanglement, globalist conspiracies, or multicultural policies which “privilege ethnic minorities”.⁷⁸ Taking back, rather than bearing something new, is another symptom of the degraded virility of fascism as it has become tempered and restricted. Dialectically, the survival of the revanchist

imagination with its focus turned inward becomes a kind of “mediated populism”, which “can be seized and employed in the service of irredentism and racialized annihilation” and thus offer a reflexive revanchism through symbolic digital engagement.⁷⁹



Figure 7: A Facebook post from the official page of Rupert Lowe, previously an MP for Reform UK.

Brexit stands as the pinnacle of this new inward-facing revanchism, a campaign to “take back control” that extends into exclusionary policies like the “stop the boats” campaigns and has infiltrated establishment parties.⁸⁰ Instead of expansion or

land-seeking, the postfascist preference is for isolating and consolidating the national community as a populist reclamation of sovereignty. With secession from the EU came

promises of immigration control (whiteness), freedom from globalism (for English culture), and economic and political independence. The aggressive expansionist urge has been supplanted by a retreating isolationist one with the same sense of revenge at its heart. As Traverso put it, “they say: [...] we are not going to conquer Ethiopia; we are going to protect ourselves from Ethiopian immigration”.⁸¹

Historic fascism required constant military and colonial projects to vent the central violence into spiritually ordering the degenerated world. This, combined with revanchism, resulted in an insatiable expansionism. Pre- and post-war, the LEL embodied this latent tendency towards imperialism amidst international and domestic pressures to release colonial subjects.⁸² In modern Britain the impulse is almost the exact opposite and sometimes borders with faux anti-imperialism, as the British Democrats seek to “avoid any partisan involvement in the Middle East or exploitation by the United States” as well as only sanctioning defensive military action.⁸³ Patriotic Alternative promises to “defend both the UK’s borders and territories overseas. [They] will never again involve them in foreign conflicts where Britain has no direct interest”.⁸⁴ ‘Soft’ targets instead define the postfascist logic because they are more easily addressed than interwar demands that required physical action; they are more easily confronted under liberal freedom of speech and translate into dogwhistles which legitimize and conceal extremism. Between the wars, “the British Union of Fascists built their ideology out of the past and present of the British Empire, and conceived of their hoped-for future in its image”,⁸⁵ but as empire collapsed and post-colonialism and globalism came to Britain this was no longer realistic. Non-white immigration melded with the degeneration narratives and attached crime, poverty, and moral bankruptcy to groups of newcomers. Thus, “Britain First is committed to preserving [the] British cultural heritage [and] oppos[ing] the increasing colonization of our homeland through uncontrolled, mass immigration”.⁸⁶ The particular use of ‘colonization’ to describe immigration reveals a sense of reversed fortunes, lost prowess, and defeatism. To remove, punish, or restrict these specific ‘others’ by curtailing their rights and protections is a small way of ‘taking our country back’ in the model of Tamás citizenship-severing postfascism.⁸⁷ But just as postfascism materially relies on the stresses of globalism and neoliberal capital to generate any narrative support, it also relies on these same state instruments to introduce exclusionary migration policy. Globalism is construed as a cultural weapon, and thus nativism is the cultural response in defence. This expresses a paradoxical adoption of mainstreamed capitalist frameworks which explain exclusionary policies as good for the economy while simultaneously adopting right-populist economics that do not challenge such structures once in power.

At home, small systemic changes envision “reintroduc[ing] capital punishment” as both the celebration of more punitive pasts and revanchist desires to indulge these vengeance.⁸⁸ Since imperialism now means imperial subjects ‘invading’ the core, postfascists no longer seek to control other nations, instead securitizing borders and immigrants themselves as one of the few viable means to express fascist dogma in terms of self-defence.⁸⁹ The “dogwhistle dilemma” explored by antifascist magazine Searchlight in the wake of the 2024 riots refers to the internal disagreements among far-right groups as to whether the violent events should be condemned or supported as retaliatory actions. They bay for the deployment of military forces to defend borders,

seek state contravention of international refugee law, and attack 'two-tier' policing when facing the 'other' because their desired draconian punishments are not enacted or supported by the majority. Histories which draw attention to the reality – that British 'greatness' was built with the extraction of resources, labour, and wealth from the colonies, citizens of which were told that they belonged to Britain via the empire – are rejected as woke along with other efforts at inclusion, in effect “the assertion of a new common sense which normalizes that which social justice politics aims to contest” and transformation of political incorrectness or bigotry into acts of cultural fightback.⁹⁰ Even the discussion of the past becomes an arena of revenge by defending the 'progressive' and 'civilizing' attributes of colonialism and unconditionally refusing to engage in historical evaluation, coded as 'white guilt'. The sense that British identity, heritage, or history has been attacked as part of this woke campaign results in a number of postfascist party organizations expressing historiographic revanchism; PA declares that “British children will not be taught to hate themselves or their ancestors” should they win, quite ironically remarking that “teachers are there to teach, not impart their own political views”.⁹¹

Postwar fascist and para-fascist groups immediately sought repatriation or a ban on non-white immigration.

Reform UK: Our Contract with You

RECLAIMING BRITAIN

Reform is Needed to Defend and Promote British Culture, Identity and Values

“Upholding British culture, identity, and values.”

Reform UK will uphold British values and legislate against extremist forces that seek to undermine our way of life.

CRITICAL REFORMS NEEDED IN THE FIRST 100 DAYS:

Reaffirm British Sovereignty
Reject the influence of the World Economic Forum.
Reject the World Health Organisation (WHO) Pandemic Treaty and cancel our membership of the WHO unless there is fundamental reform to its structure and funding. Reform UK also opposes the Creation of a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC). We oppose a cashless society.

Replace the 2010 Equalities Act
The Equalities Act requires discrimination in the name of 'positive action'. We will scrap Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DE&I) rules that have lowered standards and reduced economic productivity.

Propose a Comprehensive Free Speech Bill
Legislate to stop left-wing bias and politically correct ideology that threatens personal freedom and democracy. No more de-banking, cancel culture, left wing hate mobs or political bias in public institutions. Stop Sharia law being used in the UK.

Commence Reform of the BBC
The out-of-touch wasteful BBC is institutionally biased. The TV licence is taxation without representation. We will scrap it. In a world of on-demand TV People should be free to choose.

Make St George's and St David's Day a Public Holiday
English national identity should be officially promoted and celebrated, not ignored or banned.

Launch an Anti-Corruption Unit for Westminster
We will ensure that public officials face sanctions if they break the rules, including prison. Our new Anti-Corruption Unit will have legal powers to investigate past and future scandals.

Figure 8: Reform UK's populist cultural policies, promising to withdraw from international groupings, remove equality legislation, and encourage 'free speech' as part of a cultural fightback.

Intermediately untenable, postfascist groups today have been able to resurrect the narrative for themselves as right-wing media track illegal immigration with a fascist alarmism over degeneracy and decline. Now, without recourse to pogroms and anti-immigrant violence at an organized level, postfascists turn to the apparatuses of this system in defensive and reflexive ways. The UK branch of Generation Identity, explicitly reproducing conspiratorial approaches to post-1948 immigration, find that “the Great Replacement in Europe requires us to work towards reversing migration flows”.⁹² Others seek to place specific restrictions on

citizenship in the limiting of access to public services, short-term professional visas, or removal of cultural or religious rights such as those of halal food.⁹³ Institutionalized revanchism is the best example of the mechanisms that Tamás espoused as citizenship-reducing postfascism, because it shows the adaptation of both discourse and method to contemporary norms. Race has become the expressive battleground of revanchism where whiteness is associated with the heritage and national history of the English,

and those deemed a threat can be peacefully extracted to regain the nation. It allows the postfascist right to present the 'defence' of the white race as part of the struggle and combat against globalism, immigration, and anti-nationalism. The "hybridity of EDL Englishness between mainstream and marginal conceptions of national identity" is a marker of postfascism's fluidity, warning that various notions of 'defence', 'othering', and 'victims' anchor themselves in the mainstream while expressing fundamentally combative stances.⁹⁴ Revanchism integrates the sense of loss and decline from the past with the adaptation of postfascism to the vocabulary and logic of the modern state

The Twenty Demands of the National Rebirth Party

1. We demand that only people of British heritage or lineage shall be inherently entitled by birth to be British citizens.
2. We demand that foreigners whose presence is harmful to the interests of the National Community be expelled, without exception, from Great Britain. Those who enter without permission shall be expelled by default and prohibited from ever returning.
3. We demand that only British citizens be permitted to vote or hold public office at any level.

Figure 9: The first three points on the Twenty Demands manifesto of the National Rebirth

structure.

Rememberance

It is through remembrance that the postfascist strategic use of the past surfaces most clearly because it is here that the relationship is most explicit. Their remembrances are selective of points of reference that align with their overall goals of purity, authority, and violence, ideally moments in the national corpus which feed into the chronological storytelling of the fascist leadership. However, in her writing on fascist Italy, Falasca-Zamponi reveals again the initial difference of historic fascism by pointing out that "the political, institutional factor is crucial in the analysis of fascism's use of memory/history".⁹⁵ Postfascists today, even in power, are expected to perform memory in a certain way. It is difficult to support historic fascism when most of the world either fought against it or has a complex memory of shame, guilt, and collective forgetting of it. Gradual rather than revolutionary adjustment is required today, and was how Meloni and the Fratelli d'Italia succeeded by "chipping at established Italian memory narratives slowly but surely, changing them too subtly to be called out on it".⁹⁶ The old line of British fascism that opposed entrance into the war or exalted "tales of Waffen SS courage and sacrifice" must be abandoned.⁹⁷ Following the much earlier example of Tyndall, who took on "remembering the British war dead in part as a strategy [...] to help legitimise its agenda",⁹⁸ Griffin (who wrote a piece sympathetic to the SS in *The Rune* magazine in 1995) was by 2009 claiming that Churchill "would belong in the BNP" by positioning him against "mass immigration" and "the dangers of fundamentalist Islam".⁹⁹ Macklin meticulously outlines the conscious effort by the contemporary BNP to erase their own party's extremist past and rehabilitate themselves for their democratic era through engagement with fondly-remembered figures such as Churchill, whose place in history as an opponent of Nazism offers the BNP a chance to present themselves as opposed to fascism.¹⁰⁰ Gradualism such as this enables postfascists to embed their reinterpretations

of history into the mainstream that stress 'real' Britishness without provoking immediate backlash, so iconography of the poppy and veneration of the armed forces can leverage the corpus of British patriotism into hypernationalism, authoritarian policy, and exclusion by implication.

Remembering three young Scottish soldiers
murdered by the IRA
Posted on March 16, 2025 by admin978



Figure 10: A Heritage & Destiny blog post in remembrance of three British soldiers killed during the Troubles.

The singular significance of the Second World War in Britain cannot be understated. As “a touchstone for a widely shared (yet still exclusive) concept of national identity” the intergenerational memory of resilience is a source of pride which cuts across society and is constantly reproduced.¹⁰¹ The ubiquitous Spitfire motif and obsession with Churchill, the two most instantly recognizable icons of British anti-Axis resistance and the Battle of Britain, make any openly pro-fascist status unsustainable in terms of mass support, and have hindered the progress of far-right groups before. These limited, superficial visual engagements with the past through memory icons are different to the narrative connections of the past, where “Mosleyites [...] argued that fascism was a creed deeply rooted in British history [and] saw themselves as the

new, dynamic Elizabethans”.¹⁰² These relationships today are unarticulated as the revolutionary fervour and philosophy of fascism has been subsumed under a rather more mass-produced and neoliberal nothing-ness of identity, choosing broad categories such as ‘English heritage’ to facilitate “shapeshifting [...] omnipresent discourse reflecting present events, decisions and conditions” of the modern information landscape.¹⁰³ The model of the digital soldier has therefore replaced mobilizations of violence but retains emotional strength through the provision of meaning, struggle, and pride. Richards and Mollan used the postfascist label in exploring the purchase of Enoch Powell’s car by Generation Identity, finding the digital campaign which ran alongside the purchase “a media and political spectacle [...] an aesthetic propaganda exercise, designed to instil nostalgic sentiment and nationalist fervour” before falling flat as it failed to articulate anything more than a surface-level reference.¹⁰⁴

The digital era which facilitates these fleeting memetic reproductions is oppositional to the single-minded submission of history which were common among orators and leaders of twentieth century fascism. Macklin pointed to two dual approaches to history in the British postwar extreme right, the “philosophy about time [and] an alternative, non-liberal narrative about Britain’s past”.¹⁰⁵ As postfascist groups have adjusted to democracy, shedding the former’s linguistic styles of order over time and adopting the political classes’ policy-talk through manifestos, the latter narrative of history permeates social networks. One such case is the broadly radical-right Lotus Eaters platform and podcast, which produces general history content as opposed to “self-consciously mythic” grand narratives of English or British history-identity, lacking the promulgation in fascist histories.¹⁰⁶ Contemporary postfascism more often engages with memory wars in individual battles and not grand strategy, in a parallel to the ever shifting and quickly forgotten points within the culture war.

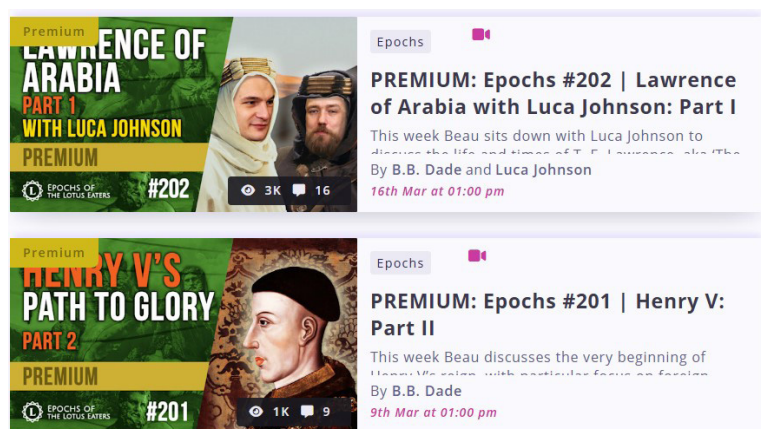


Figure 11: Two example videos from the Lotus Eaters' premium 'Epochs' series, covering a range of historical events.

education, evidence towards non-white Britons having lived on the Isles with the Roman invasions is rejected as “fantasy”¹⁰⁹ and the English Democrats (the self-declared “party of British Identity”) aim to preserve “ancient ethnocultural identities, Scots, Ulster, Welsh, Cornish, Manx and last but not least, English”.¹¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, Englishness or Britishness are exclusive and tied to race. Because it is not (yet) possible to physically expel ‘degenerates’ through policy or violence, postfascists settle the rejection of efforts towards inclusive and historically accurate pasts through negation. Holocaust Denials, once popular as the pinnacle of negationist history, are far too risky to reproduce in today’s climate. Griffin’s 2009 appearance on Question Time devoted much time to the topic and coverage highlighted his shaky response.¹¹¹ While fringe journals and ‘revisionist’ sites continue Holocaust denial, organized parties tend to avoid such hardline neofascist rhetoric.

Historical fascism’s cult of physical return and totalizing reach meant that remembrance was often expressed with grand monuments or museums in public, spaces where fascists no longer have control. The anti-racism protests of 2020 saw Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol toppled into the sea, an act against the public memorialization of a slave owner which immediately angered postfascists who lamented the destruction of English heritage and the woke erasure of history. It also reflects the defensive shift of postfascism and their inherent clinging to retain identity as the carriers of ‘English culture’ – they have since mobilized to ‘defend’ the Cenotaph in London from peaceful BLM and Palestine protests, and in doing so revealed the hollowness of their claims over British memory when one member was photographed urinating besides a memorial for PC Keith Palmer, who had been killed during a 2017 terrorist attack in London.¹¹²

Without revolutionaries or the ability to construct new public memorials to hypermasculine and radical individuals which the mass movement needed, stand-ins for British cultural memory who fought fascism are artificially attached to their defence of Englishness. Performatively, “the most important print publication produced by the traditional British fascist scene”¹¹³ had its editor leave a branded poppy wreath at his local memorial for Remembrance Day, while its website carries links to Holocaust denial and pro-Axis blog posts.¹¹⁴ The ‘In Memoriam’ section of the PA website demonstrates this victim narrative, collating white British citizens who were killed in incidents involving non-white immigrants and “memorializing the victims of a multicultural society and the

“Reflexive fascism”, emphasizing responsive adaptation to cultural and societal change, is another name for the same phenomena where the “very point of [the] meme is to collapse disparate elements of past and present into one another so as to make an affective point”¹⁰⁷ rather than inform.¹⁰⁸ In

relentless push for diversity”.¹¹⁵ This is the state of postfascism, as well as its threat; it now seeks to infect mainstream cultures, conversations, and histories rather than seeking to invent their own. Their defensive, reflexive posturing within liberal democracy leans into the reactionary rather than revolutionary, making them appear more reasonable and allowing them to appeal to the nostalgia and past greatness embedded in wider culture.

Conclusion

Fascism is obsessed with the past, both in emulating and superseding it. Fascism's unique mix of modernization and hypertraditionalism renders historical narratives central to building nations, identities, and ideology. The same conditions under which fascism thrived have withered away, and with them the possibility of openly expressing violent and order-obsessed hyperconservative sentiments. Each of the four narratives examined – return, regeneration, revanchism, remembrance – display the continuation of core ideals but also their filtering through the linguistic cadence of liberal democracy. Major visible shifts are from offense to defence, totalitarianism to decentralization, and the physical to digital or cultural spheres.

Discussing *The Fascism of Our Times*, Tuscano reflected on the shift from aggressive revolutionary ideology to a defensive postfascism:

“While it trucks in the paligenetic tropes of historic and generic fascism – reconquistas, renaissances, redemption and revanches, ‘make X great again,’ and so forth – it is ultimately more in the business of conserving or restoring privileges or statuses real and imaginary, than in that of promising a future, however archaic, or fashioning a New Man.”¹¹⁶

British postfascism encapsulates these shifts. Though the BNP peaked electorally in the mid-2000s and has atrophied since, it continues alongside other parties with electoral politics and detachment from violent pasts. The EDL, until recently the prime organizer of street marches, has died out, and its leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (Tommy Robinson) is moving towards party politics within the carcass of UKIP.¹¹⁷ There are exceptional groups that do espouse classical fascist-style wills to power and militant organization, with the looming threat of pogroms or riots, but these remain the exception and often they play a more important role in the circulation of discourse. It remains essential to recognize their masking under democratic conditions and the fact that rhetorics can jump the cordon sanitaire. Establishment media's obsession with immigration and ramping-up of exclusionary rhetoric in the decade before Brexit was an early warning sign of this shift and its seepage into the mainstream.¹¹⁸ Legitimate institutions and social media conversations are vulnerable to postfascist discourse, especially as narratives of decline and betrayal remain as emotionally appealing at times of economic and social upheaval. UKIP, struggling for relevancy after the departure of Farage, lifted its moratorium on ex-BNP members joining the party. In these times the importance of dynamic, accurate, and meaningful categories is second-to-none.

The ‘defensiveness’ of postfascism referred to in this piece is perhaps a misdirection, as we have noted evidence that rebranding is a tactical decision to keep the revolutionary

and outwardly violent aspects dormant while working on electability. This only makes it harder to detect, and more dangerous. We have a scholarly responsibility to be attentive to the powerful draw of the narratives they peddle and their ability to manifest in radical, violent action, even when parties transition to outwardly democratic perspectives. Intertwining itself with the structure of the modern world and bending the legitimate structures of society is arguably a more insidious and threatening route than the street-marches of old. With respect to the past, the efforts to refocus history in more exclusive terms can be an effective way to transmit the message while emotively reshaping 'Britishness' to be more exclusive.

Postfascism is thus a label with significant application and appreciation for these shifts, in an era where fascism alone is concurrently overused and loosely-defined. That is not to abandon fascism as a category altogether, exemplified by the thickly detailed scan of British fascists' approaches to nostalgia which leads into the modern context and represents the indispensable work from previous waves of fascist studies.¹¹⁹ Roger Griffin, whose definition of fascism appeared in the framing of this article, recognizes the "diversified and mutated" fascism in its violent form, "a largely subcultural or counter-cultural extreme-right" with "polycentric, leaderless and hierarchy-less" perspectives.¹²⁰

But we should also recognize the 'non-violent' adaptations of this system, their perspectives on the past and, in tandem, the present and future, which have found themselves in the mainstream with increasing recurrence. As Tamás put it, "these people don't need to fight a war. That war is being fought for them by public culture itself".¹²¹ What we see today is the adaptation of fascism to a system it resents, creating internal tensions and forcing certain concessions to the popular viewpoints – contemporary Italian postfascism makes "fascist identity claims and cultural reflexes, but [does not aim] to restore it in its classical form".¹²² The postfascist desire to "liberate" history from the postwar antifascism of the Republic instead wants to pose its narrative reworking as a de-politicization, working instead behind the scenes.¹²³ It follows that the rich work on the cultures, organizations, structures, and worldviews of fascism can carry over into this new project. Historical manipulation is not distinct to fascism; the position of this analysis has been to add to growing efforts aimed at rethinking fascism not as a discrete historical episode, but as a recurring reactionary logic – expressed under different names – embedded in crisis, nostalgia, and capitalist structures. By foregrounding the functions of historical narrative within postfascist discourse, it highlights how appeals to the past are not rhetorical excesses but central tools in the contemporary reconfiguration of power.

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AFTER LIBERALISM, AFTER FASCISM? A LOOK AT THE POSTLIBERAL MOVEMENT

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Abstract: *The ‘postliberal’ movement holds that liberalism has “failed” (Deneen, 2018), and (in its right-wing variety) that it should be replaced by a radical form of illiberalism, whether a Catholic ‘integralism’ (see Vallier, 2023) whereby the Church directs the state to punish heretics and deviants, or a less-defined program of state promotion of religion and ‘traditional’ social values (e.g. Deneen, 2023, or Vermeule, 2022 on the “common good”). Is it helpful to view this movement as fascist? Deploying Freeden’s morphological approach to the study of ideology, which has not been systematically applied to fascism (Martins, 2022), I argue that a plausible “fascist minimum” (Eatwell, 1996) involves at least (1) national rejuvenation through (2) holistic ethno-cultural solidarity and (3) a totalitarian state which (4) glorifies violence against internal and external ‘enemies’. Postliberalism does not fit easily into this framework. Postliberals are ambivalent about nationalism (see e.g. Blond, 2023 on ‘National Conservatism; Deneen, 2018 on the American founding) and, though they deploy a concept of the ‘working class’ that is (arguably) implicitly coded as white (see e.g. Lind, 2020), they have little explicit interest in the ethnic rejuvenation of specific nations. On element (3), postliberals, unlike fascists, claim to be defending ‘true’ liberty (see Field, 2024, “forced to be free”) against a “coercive liberalism” (Oakes, 2011) that represses religious traditionalists, and they advocate semi-coercive ‘nudge’ style paternalism rather than direct violence. If fascism, despite its claimed hostility to modernity, sought to harness the bourgeois order for its own purposes (Sternhell, 2001), so postliberals seek to turn liberal ideas against the purposes of their pioneers. But rather than national rejuvenation, they seek the trans-national imposition of a religious order that would override national concerns. Deploying the concepts of the 20th century to understand this new threat will obscure its true character.*

US Vice-President J.D. Vance considers himself a member of the “postliberal right”.¹ According to popular commentators, postliberalism is “dangerous”,² “more radical”³ and “far worse than MAGA”,⁴ as well as an “ominous philosophy”⁵ “steeped in revolutionary religiosity”.⁶ The Trump administration appears to be accelerating the deportation of migrants⁷ and Republicans are rolling back abortion rights at the state level. While right-wing populism remains prominent in Europe, some scholars have identified “fascist returns”,⁸ though others have argued the differences between the contemporary ‘New Right’ and 20th century fascism are greater than the affinities.⁹

The postliberal movement, a subsection of the wider ‘New Right’, remains poorly understood. Postliberals, who include academics like political theorist Patrick Deneen and legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, blame liberalism for a perceived crisis of social

capital and offer an authoritarian, religiously-inspired social conservatism oriented towards the “common good” as an alternative.¹⁰ To date, only a few scholarly articles have attempted to analyse the movement and its claims,¹¹ and there is no consensus as to how postliberalism should be characterised.

There is also a lack of consensus as to how we should conceptualise fascism. Roger Eatwell and Roger Griffin defend different conceptualisations of a “fascist minimum”, aiming to identify a set of necessary conditions for an ideological formation to be considered fascist.¹² Stanley Payne identifies a loose set of characteristic fascist features including both positive ideological goals and negations of competing ideologies, as well as aspects of political style.¹³ Umberto Eco’s “ur-fascism” schema proposes to link a spectrum of various fascistic ideologies through “family resemblances”, though noting that the resemblances might disappear when considering ideological formations sufficiently distant from each other along this spectrum.¹⁴

My interest in this article is in postliberalism’s character as an ideology, in Michael Freeden’s sense of a cluster of ‘de-contested’ political concepts.¹⁵ As such, I will focus on the affinities (or lack thereof) between the basic political concepts of postliberalism and those of fascism, largely abstracted from their instantiation in specific political practices. Since my focus is on comparing the beliefs of postliberals and fascists (qua postliberals and fascists), rather than their actions, I find Payne’s focus on political style unhelpful, as I also do his emphasis on negation. Two ideologies might negate the same things while having little positive content in common. I reject Eco’s schema for yielding the deeply counter-intuitive result that two ideological formations, A and C, could have nothing in common, but both qualify as fascism simply because they both (separately) share a family resemblance with a third ideology, B, situated along the fascist spectrum.¹⁶

The conceptualisations of Griffin and Eatwell overlap substantially. Griffin identifies the central fascist value as national “palingenesis” (rebirth), from where follow fascist commitments to overcoming the perceived anomie and disenchantment of modernity through the complete and willing dissolution of the individual into a radically modern, secular, hierarchical “charismatic national community”.¹⁷ This dovetails closely with Eatwell, who identifies the core of fascism as a “holistic-national radical Third Way”.¹⁸ Rebirth is not explicitly mentioned by Eatwell, but both authors capture the same core value of subsuming the individual into a project of radical national renewal.

Eatwell identifies four radial aspects of fascism emerging from this value. Fascists embrace (1) nationalism, defined as “the belief that the world is divided into nations”¹⁹ and pursue a project of renewal of an imagined national community, which might be constructed along racial or cultural lines.²⁰ In pursuing this nationalism, fascists assume (2) holism, that “the whole is greater than the parts”, in that the individual finds “fulfilment” and a relief from “alienation” through integration into the national whole, and that “collective” interests predominate over the rights of individual citizens.²¹ This holistic nationalism is pursued through (3) a radicalism that rejects the existing cultural establishment, pursuing an “alternative form of modernity” in which culture is renewed, “sometimes through cathartic violence”.²² Finally (4), fascists embrace The Third Way between capitalism and socialism, rejecting both the individualism

of the market economy and the egalitarianism of the left in favour of a hierarchical organicism that prioritises collective interests without rejecting inequality, often through a version of “corporatism”.²³ Comparing these four commitments to Griffin's expansion on palingenesis, we find substantial overlap. Both Griffin and Eatwell's fascist minima share the notion of subsuming the individual into a collective (holism) that is also national (nationalism), modern (rupturing with past, sometimes through literal violence—radicalism), and organized economically per a hierarchical but collectivist socio-economic vision (Third Way). These four commitments also largely capture Payne's analysis of fascist goals as involving a “new nationalist authoritarian state” (nationalism and holism), an “integrated national economic structure” (Third Way), and a “voluntarist... self-determined, secular culture” (radicalism).

Granted that the substantive views of Griffin, Eatwell, and Payne on fascism's positive ideological goals are similar, I will deploy Eatwell's framework in the following evaluation, simply because his four concepts provide the most straightforward and transparent way of categorising fascist commitments, while also comprising a definite list whose items are plausibly both collectively sufficient and individually necessary to render an ideology fascist.

My argument in what follows is that postliberalism, despite certain limited affinities with fascist ideas, exhibits a fundamentally different cluster of core ideological concepts. Postliberalism, unlike fascism, is ambivalent about nationalism, uninterested in explicit ethnocentrism, and declines to glorify violence. The “postliberal order”,²⁴ as described by its theorists, would involve a religious orientation towards a ‘common good’ that decentres traditional nationalist concerns.

Postliberalism

The cluster of ideas identified with postliberalism can be traced back to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In the UK, Maurice Glasman's ‘Blue Labour’ movement blamed both the neoliberalism of the right and the social liberalism of the left for a perceived collapse of social capital and solidarity.²⁵ A similar diagnosis was offered by the ‘Red Tory’ movement associated with Phillip Blond, the founder of the thinktank Res Publica.²⁶ Blond, as well as the influential Blue Labour thinker and self-identified postliberal Adrian Pabst,²⁷ was influenced by the ‘radical orthodoxy’ of theologian John Milbank. Radical orthodoxy rejects secular rationalism and sees liberalism as based on an ontology of violence, in contrast to the participatory metaphysics that Milbank associates with Christianity and with communitarian and postliberal thought.²⁸ Despite Milbank's theological anti-liberalism, both Blue Labour and Red Tory thinkers call for economic and technical solutions to the perceived crisis of social capital.²⁹

Indeed, there is a deep ideological gulf between Pabst's postliberalism and the radical ideas of the likes of Deneen and Vermeule, which came to prominence after Trump's election and Brexit. Pabst believes both liberalism and “illiberalism” comprise “the same conceptual trap of false binaries”, and calls for a communitarianism that builds on liberal achievements rather than reversing gains in individual rights.³⁰ Centre-right Red Tories like Phillip Blond have not maintained the same emphatic rejection of radical

postliberalism but adopted a more ambivalent posture, supporting some of the anti-liberal social conservatism of Orbán's Hungary and the Law and Justice government in Poland while rejecting these governments' nationalist and xenophobic tendencies.³¹

Nevertheless, there is still a sharp divide between Blond's postliberalism and the radical strand that is this article's focus, and which is primarily (but not entirely) based in the US. This radical strand comprises a coherent body of ideas, containing both diagnoses of liberalism's alleged failures and deeply illiberal prescriptions for what is to replace it. Radical postliberalism is linked to reactionary strands of Catholic political thought, such as so-called 'integralism', the theory that the state should be subordinated to the supernatural common good identified by the Church, which can direct the state to use its coercive power to enforce canon law against baptised Christians.³² The main hub for postliberal public intellectuals is the blog *Postliberal Order*, edited by Deneen and Vermeule as well as political scientist Gladden Pappin and theologian Chad Pecknold.³³ Vermeule, Pappin, and Pecknold have all endorsed integralism, though Deneen has not.³⁴ Vermeule's academic influence lies primarily in his "common good constitutionalism", which calls for a jurisprudence that actively pursues shared goods not reducible to autonomy or preference satisfaction, but which stops short of explicitly endorsing the supernatural common good identified by integralism.³⁵ Deneen's "aristopopulism", though not prescribing an integralist institutional blueprint, calls for a populist movement led by new elites, infused with traditional and religious virtues, to impose a perfectionist order and "publicly promote and protect a life of prayer"³⁶ while "rewarding marriage and family formation".³⁷ These radical postliberals not only seek to transcend liberalism but to replace it with an authoritarian social conservatism that would impose their preferred religious and family values through public power. Sometimes associated with postliberalism, and sharing an embrace of illiberal social conservatism, is Yoram Hazony's National Conservative movement.³⁸ National Conservatism tends to diverge from Catholic postliberalism chiefly with respect to its views on nationalism and the nation-state while sharing similar attitudes to sexual politics and public religion.³⁹

There is no consensus on how to categorise various strands of postliberal thought. Pabst divides the movement between National Conservatism, Catholic integralism, and "communitarian pluralism".⁴⁰ I will exclude National Conservatism from this analysis since its nationalism would substantially change likely judgements about fascism. I follow Stefan Borg in identifying National Conservatism and postliberalism as distinct strands of the New Right.⁴¹ Pabst's communitarian pluralism, as I argued above, collapses into liberalism, so will also be excluded. Offering an alternative schema, Paul Kelly identifies radical postliberals like Vermeule as "common good absolutists".⁴² 'Absolutism' is an unhelpful concept since Vermeule permits value trade-offs; his illiberalism more strongly emphasizes his refusal to ascribe any priority to liberty over other goods.⁴³ My view in this article is closest to that of Patterson and Howes, who consider postliberalism a Catholic confessional movement.⁴⁴ I will not adopt Pabst's convention of equating Catholic postliberalism with 'integralism', since the broad banner of postliberalism contains Catholic writers who criticise integralism as overly schematic, like Sebastian Morello,⁴⁵ as well as those who decline to explicitly endorse it, like Deneen. The focal case of radical, illiberal Catholic postliberalism is the fairly cohesive ideology espoused by the editors of *Postliberal Order*: I will use 'postliberalism' hereafter to refer to this

ideology, and permit its application to other texts and thinkers to the degree to which they exhibit affinity with the Postliberal Order ideology.

Postliberalism, thus delimited, diagnoses the failure of liberalism with two main theses. The structural radicalisation thesis (SRT) holds that liberalism tends to radicalise a particular set of anthropological assumptions over time. Postliberals like Deneen claim that liberalism is committed to a particular conception of human flourishing that valorises radical autonomy.⁴⁶ This conception is centred around “anthropological individualism” and “the voluntarist conception of choice”, as well as “human separation from and opposition to nature”.⁴⁷ Anthropological individualism is the assumption that humans have no unchosen obligations (except those reducible to protecting the equal autonomy of others), and thus that relationships not based on choice are illegitimate.⁴⁸ The voluntarist conception of choice and “separation from... nature” involve an anti-teleological metaphysics, whereby human fulfilment is achieved through the exercise of choice rather than conformity to a normative natural order.

This belief in autonomous choice as the basis of human fulfilment is supposed to involve rejection of any criteria for the human good outside individual choice, for liberalism reconceives liberty as the capacity to satisfy one’s “ineradicable human selfishness”.⁴⁹ If there are no criteria for a specific choice’s contribution to the human good, but rather choice itself contributes to that good independently of the object chosen, it follows that choice is arbitrary or subjective. There is no way, in this conception of autonomy, that a person can make a choice on the grounds that it is, irrespective of whether they choose it, in any sense good.

Let us call this conception of autonomy voluntarism. It is obvious that this is a far more radical conception of autonomy than those offered by liberal theorists like Rawls,⁵⁰ Dworkin,⁵¹ or Raz.⁵² None of these theorists believed that autonomy required rejecting the idea of independent criteria for the goodness of one’s choices. More often, autonomy in liberal theory features as a necessary condition for a life’s goodness but not a sufficient one. This contradiction exists because liberalism is viewed by postliberals as something that exceeds and escapes liberal theory and exists primarily as a discourse instantiated in the implicit commitments of the “regime”. As Deneen puts it, the aim is to write “explorations of the ‘logic of a regime’”.⁵³ Vermeule agrees that he is “not interested in the latest minor paper on Rawlsianism”,⁵⁴ and indeed goes further, asserting that liberal theory “bears roughly the same relationship to any actually existing liberal political order as the novels of J.K. Rowling bear to the current United Kingdom”.⁵⁵

The blog post in which Vermeule makes this claim features an image of London’s Regent Street adorned with Progress Pride flags.⁵⁶ Vermeule thinks that this symbolises the liberal regime’s commitment to voluntarism—the authorities are asserting that the good life consists of making self-authenticating (or arbitrary) choices about sexuality and gender identity. In practice, the postliberals continually identify the voluntarism they claim to detect with progressive views of sexual politics. For Deneen, demands for LGBT and reproductive rights involves voluntarism “liberating humans from the biological nature of our own bodies”,⁵⁷ while Vermeule identifies a “liturgical script” that tomorrow may celebrate “polygamy, consensual adult incest, or who knows what”.⁵⁸

The postliberals claim that the liberal regime contains an inbuilt, 'structural' tendency to continually radicalise its commitment to voluntarism. Deneen sums up his critique with the claim that liberalism contains an "inner logic" that has driven it to "become more fully itself".⁵⁹ Vermeule believes liberalism's evolution is driven by a psychological need to celebrate the overcoming of reactionary forces.⁶⁰ The postliberals tend to avoid providing highly detailed mechanisms for this process, but the implicit thought seems to be that the voluntarist assumptions embedded in the regime are progressively extended to new domains of human life and stripped of their hedges and qualifications. Once committed, implicitly, to the voluntarist anthropology, one is vulnerable to appeals to autonomy and resistant to appeals to other values; a teleological tendency for liberalism to work itself pure of non-voluntarist residues thus sets in. A variety of pathologies are then attributed by the postliberals to this structural radicalisation, such as the erosion of intermediary institutions and their sublimation to the impersonal state and the atomised individual,⁶¹ the decay of particular cultures in the face of a global liberal "anti-culture",⁶² the decline of the humanities and arts,⁶³ spiralling economic inequality,⁶⁴ and the hollowing out of civic life and of citizenship.⁶⁵

The second central postliberal diagnostic thesis is what I call the coercive liberalism thesis (CLT).⁶⁶ Deneen argues that persons who reject voluntarism as a conception of flourishing, notably traditional religious believers and other social conservatives, are increasingly persecuted, with the authorities "forcing churches, religious organizations, and other traditional communities to conform to progressivist ideology".⁶⁷ He claims to observe a "tyrannical liberalism... that is not a contradiction of liberalism but its fulfillment",⁶⁸ targeting "religious believers"⁶⁹ with a "white-hot fervor" to guarantee the triumph of "individual preference".⁷⁰ Similarly, Vermeule identifies a "liberal intolerance" as the "fulfillment of [liberalism's] essential nature".⁷¹ The claim here is not just that liberalism is intolerant towards openly authoritarian or illiberal ideas. Rather, the postliberals think that citizens who merely wish in their private lives or freely chosen associations to hold and teach more traditional beliefs about human flourishing—especially beliefs that harbour reservations about sexual autonomy—are increasingly targeted by the state for coercive correction.

To illustrate how liberalism can become coercive towards traditionalists, Deneen argues that principles of negative liberty, such the famous harm principle of J.S. Mill, implicitly rely on judgements about human flourishing.⁷² Deneen argues that criteria for deciding what counts as 'harm' depend on one's prior, substantive view about the wider human good. As this prior view becomes increasingly inflected by voluntarism, the argument goes, previously innocuous practices protected by negative liberties like freedom of worship, speech, and association will be identified as acts of oppression potentially justifying state intervention. Does it harm children to teach them traditional religious values? Does a preacher cause harm if she tries to non-coercively persuade others to accept her controversial views about gender roles? Our answers, say the postliberals, will depend on the degree to which we are voluntarists. Ultimately, merely declining to "openly and actively approve" of someone else's choice might be interpreted as harming that person.⁷³ Postliberals thus foresee a future in which living by conservative religious values is effectively criminalised by a "tyrannical liberalism".⁷⁴

The SRT supplies the mechanistic foundation for the CLT. The CLT is then deployed by postliberals to justify their rejection of liberalism and preference for authoritarian conservatism. Kevin Vallier identifies the “main argument” for postliberalism as the claim that there is in some sense “no alternative” to authoritarianism.⁷⁵ Postliberals argue that, if (as Andrew Koppelman imputes to Deneen) “it is inevitable that someone will end up being bullied and humiliated by the law”⁷⁶ on the basis of some (voluntarist or otherwise) conception of flourishing—and if the postliberals’ religious and conservative conceptions of human flourishing are true—then religious and social conservatives have no tolerable alternative to seeking to coercively impose their own conceptions of flourishing if they wish to avoid being the victims of coercive liberalism. If the true ‘religion’ isn’t coercively established, a false one will be. All qualms about illiberalism are, in this zero-sum way of thinking, moot.

Fascist Returns?

Recall that Eatwell’s conceptualisation of fascism does not mention religion, or specific conservative beliefs about human virtue (which are often linked to religion), such as sexual restraint. In fact, the radicalism of the ‘fascist minimum’ hints at a vision of the nation as the ultimate source of value, at least political value, inasmuch as individual virtue enters the picture only as a means by which individuals contribute to holistic national renewal, a task for which they are rewarded with a relief from “alienation” but not with conformity to any objective standard of goodness that transcends national bonds. We might say that Eatwell offers a very secular conceptualisation of fascism, which of course coheres with Griffin’s claim that the fascist conception of national rebirth substitutes the “organic nation” for the “pre-modern... religious worldview”.⁷⁷

To this extent, it should be immediately clear that the ultimate concerns of the postliberals are radically different to those of fascists. Postliberals place their commitment to religious faith, and their secondary but still central support for conservative family values, ahead of any loyalty to the national flag. Our answer would look very different if we addressed this question with respect to Hazony’s National Conservatism, but the core postliberals evince a remarkable ambivalence towards the idea of national renewal.

Nationalism

In the American context, nationalism is inextricably linked to the ideas of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, and thus to commitment to a set of propositions with substantially liberal content. While there are postliberal-adjacent thinkers outside the US, systematic postliberal reflections on national identity have not yet emerged from these quarters. Obviously, white supremacy has been a major component of American national identity historically, but postliberals do not regret its loss of social respectability or in any way pine for the restoration of an explicitly racially exclusive culture. Instead, we find a remarkable ambivalence about patriotism combined with a call for re-founding America on a competing set of anti-liberal and religious propositions.

Vermeule has called for transforming the American regime, which he takes to have no “best self to which it might somehow be recalled” in an anti-liberal direction from within the bureaucracy of the administrative state.⁷⁸ He has even called for a gradual move towards “the world government required by natural law”, while “opening the southern border of the United States”—specifically and exclusively to Catholics who pass some kind of test of religious commitment.⁷⁹ Pecknold has looked back fondly to when “large parts of America were once Catholic by God’s grace” under “the French and Spanish crowns”.⁸⁰ The ambivalence about national mythos is most apparent in Deneen, who is the postliberals’ most systematic critic of the liberal regime. Deneen claims that “the nearly 250-year-old American constitutional experiment may be nearing an end,” and evinces contempt for the founders’ aspiration to escape the “natural cycle of corruption and decay” of political regimes.⁸¹ Indeed, Deneen has been criticised by more mainstream conservatives as “un-American”.⁸²

Deneen is situated in a particular intellectual tradition that has long been at least ambivalent about America’s virtues. Leo Strauss, who influenced major strands of thought on the American right, held that modern political thought involved a declension from the “high” to the “low”, a regrettable ‘Machiavellian turn’ away from classical aspirations to a virtuous polity and toward a merely instrumental view of politics as a means of channelling self-interest into material improvements.⁸³ While holding that the American founding was structured by this modern ‘low’ moral horizon, Strauss nevertheless appeared to affirm the essential goodness of the American founding.⁸⁴ His intellectual followers attempted to resolve this trilemma (‘modernity bad, America modern, but America good’) in a variety of ways, but the so-called “East Coast” Straussians rejected, or qualified, the latter proposition and wondered if America might have been philosophically rotten from the beginning.⁸⁵ Deneen was taught briefly by the East Coast Straussian Allan Bloom,⁸⁶ and he appears to affirm something like the East Coast position in an essay on Strauss.⁸⁷

If the perennial conservative cry for returning to the founding must be dismissed as hopelessly liberal, Deneen offers the prospect of a re-founding modelled on the early Puritan townships. Drawing on Tocqueville’s claim that the active self-government of the New England townships could provide an antidote to excessive individualism and withdrawal,⁸⁸ Deneen argues that these societies embodied a non-liberal conception of freedom as involving the self-disciplined choice of virtue rather than arbitrary “license” to follow one’s desires.⁸⁹ In such a self-governed “antiliberal democracy,”⁹⁰ democratic governance and civic participation would be joined at the hip with “self-discipline” and “self-rule”, by which Deneen means primarily the practices of abstention and chastity representative of an idealised Puritan community.⁹¹ Deneen presents John Winthrop’s *A Model of Christian Charity*, purportedly a sermon delivered by a Puritan leader while at sea on route to Massachusetts, as an alternative founding text, grounding a communitarian Christian solidarity in which “love is the bond of perfection... a bond or ligament”⁹² that unites the community as one body. For Deneen, Winthrop’s sermon, negating the Declaration of Independence’s prioritisation of individual rights, provides a normative model of a non-liberal American tradition, in which “America was settled before it was American”.⁹³

The postliberals, then, have some interest in the idea of national renewal insofar as they envisage a radical re-founding of the nation on a non-liberal, communitarian basis, but their prioritisation of religious over national values demands a drastic and self-conscious break with national tradition. Over a sufficiently long term horizon, at least some postliberals envisage the nation state's replacement by world government. In the immediate future, they do not reject the imagined national community, but they subordinate its needs to their interpretation of transcendent religious truth and virtue. A reconstruction of this community is offered, grounded in a particular cultural ideal, but a culture that is valued not because of its centrality to the national past—indeed, the marginality of Winthrop's vision to post-revolutionary America is part of the point—but because of its perceived conformity to religious guidance.

Holism

How holistic is this highly eccentric postliberal vision of the nation? In assessing the holism or individualism of a vision of community, we might adopt a scalar analysis. At the holistic extreme, a community might be the locus of overwhelming values that are entirely free-floating of individual members, overriding them whenever there is a perceived conflict. For instance, civilisational greatness might be identified with a set of rituals in which individuals are not viewed as participating and are not perceived to improve individuals' lives—civilisational flourishing would be an entirely free-floating collective value. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a radical individualism would see all value as reducible to a simple aggregation of the goods of individuals.

In the intermediate space lie more plausible visions of community. A 'common good' of some kind presumably exists but does not exhaust or override individual goods. We can assess the relation between common and individual goods on several dimensions. First, we might ask what is included in the common good—whether it incorporates all the goods of the individuals in the community, or only some of them, leaving some goods with a purely individual locus. For instance, is all an individual's economic welfare, including their ability to afford creature comforts, a contribution to the common good? Second, if the common good does include all individual goods, by what kind of operation does it relate the two? Does it simply aggregate the individual goods or use some more complex distributive function like the difference principle?⁹⁴ If a distributive function is used, how does it weight the sum of individual goods against distributive relationships (e.g., are distributive constraints lexically prior to summative considerations, as in the difference principle, or merely weightier in a non-absolute sense)?

Third, what is the role (if any) of irreducibly relational (but not distributive) goods within the common good? For instance, what is the role in the common good of plausibly relational goods like flourishing relationships between friends, colleagues, or family members, that cannot be reduced to the individual goods of specific friends, colleagues, etc.? And conversely, if the common good in some sense supervenes on other, individual or relational, goods, does it in turn impinge on the good of individuals—is an individual's good enhanced to some extent simply by belonging to a community whose common good is flourishing? Finally, having determined the common good, what is its normative weight vis-a-vis individual goods? How are we to assess priorities and relative

importance in cases of conflict, should our conception of the common good permit any to arise?

Vermeule has written most systematically about the common good, but his remarks often leave his position on the above issues quite obscure. *Common Good Constitutionalism* is a work of legal theory, not political philosophy, but this does not excuse Vermeule from clarifying his central normative concept. He emphasises that the common good is not the mere “sum of separate private utilities”, but this does not tell us much.⁹⁵ Rejecting an extreme, reductive individualism is not especially informative, for it does not address any of the four dimensions on which the relationship between individual and common goods can be assessed. Vermeule also asserts that individual flourishing is “essentially... dependent upon”⁹⁶ the common good of the political community and that this communal flourishing is the individual’s “highest good”.⁹⁷ He does not offer any clear reason for accepting the claim that an individual’s highest good is the flourishing of their community, nor does he offer any further conceptual clarification of how we are to identify the common good.

Vermeule does, however, take pains to explain that the common good relies upon “a substantive conception of human flourishing”.⁹⁸ By ‘substantive’, Vermeule means to reject the common liberal notion that the common good is in some way independent of individuals’ diverse conceptions of flourishing, for instance the thought that the common good concerns only “primary goods” valued by all citizens regardless of their more specific views of the good life.⁹⁹ We know that Vermeule is an integralist, but the theory of common good constitutionalism is supposed to be detachable from the “supernatural” common good and to directly concern itself only with the temporal domain.¹⁰⁰ Despite his belief that communal flourishing is also an individual’s highest good, Vermeule does not entirely reject the idea of individual rights, but believes they must be ordered to the wider good of the community. This appears to permit some space for individual rights protections against public authority when violating those rights would constitute (in Vermeule’s view) “intrinsic evils”.¹⁰¹ To the obvious concern about the potential for abuse of power by the authority charged with determining the common good and delimiting individual rights claims, Vermeule offers the response that the risk of the abuse of private power in the absence of public action demands a balancing approach rather than an unbalanced precautionary attempt to minimise the risk of abuse by public authorities while ignoring private abuses.¹⁰² Vermeule’s earlier work, *The Constitution of Risk*, developed this argument more systematically.¹⁰³ One might, however, accept the claim that a balancing heuristic considering all risks is superior to a one-sided focus on minimising public abuses without embracing the more radical claim that power is fully “conserved” regardless of the relationship between private and public powers, or that all kinds of power are equally prone to abuse.¹⁰⁴

The practical implications of common good constitutionalism reveal some of the content of Vermeule’s ‘substantive’ conception of flourishing. Vermeule writes that “free speech, abortion, sexual liberties... will prove vulnerable under a regime of common good constitutionalism”.¹⁰⁵ To reach these conclusions, which are nothing if not substantive, without relying on revelation or theology in the domain of the ‘temporal’ common good, the real work must presumably be done by a conception of natural law. Vermeule,

elsewhere, approvingly cites John Finnis,¹⁰⁶ who theorised a natural law jurisprudence and political morality that yielded similar conclusions about abortion,¹⁰⁷ sexual liberty,¹⁰⁸ and (at least 'obscene') free speech.¹⁰⁹ Finnis's natural law theory was not intended to be a total rejection of liberalism, but part of a project of "shoring up" liberalism with more conservative anthropological assumptions, associated with pre-postliberal conservative Christian thought.¹¹⁰ Finnis, and his intellectual followers such as Robert George, were much more explicit about the role and limits of individual rights-claims in a society oriented to the common good. Notably, although George defended—far more systematically, and with far more good faith engagement with the particulars of liberal thought than Vermeule has evinced thus far—the legitimacy of paternalistic 'morals laws',¹¹¹ including highly controversial limitations on sexual liberties,¹¹² he also took pains to argue that the incommensurable character of the goods natural law recognises, and the 'reflexive' nature of the goods of practical reasonableness and of religion (i.e. the fact that coercing someone into religious performances against their will does not realise any genuine good because the good of religion, even on the hypothesis that the religious performances in question really are mandated by God, inherently involves free assent), provide strong grounds for endorsing a robust set of civil liberties that are not contingent on their serving some highly abstract common good that mysteriously comprises the highest good of individuals.¹¹³ For these sophisticated natural law theorists, the common good is simply the state's respecting and promoting, while acknowledging its subsidiary role vis-a-vis institutions like the family, the substantive but incommensurable goods of individuals.

By comparison with the well-developed and systematic qualifications of liberalism offered by the most developed recent versions of natural law theory, Vermeule's remarks on the common good are obscure, cryptic, and positively gnomic. The substantive work in getting from the severely incomplete outline of the common good offered by Vermeule to the specific contentious conclusions he wishes to draw is done (we must assume) by natural law theorising that Vermeule does not explain. So far as we can judge the degree of holism involved in the postliberals' conceptions of the common good, then, it appears that Vermeule thinks individual goods should be quite drastically (but not absolutely) subordinated to the good of the community. This, at any rate, seems to be the force of his repeated claim that the individual's own "highest good" is the flourishing of the political community.¹¹⁴ Potentially any limitation on individual rights could be made to follow from this, since the move of claiming that the limitations actually serve the individual's good because it is constituted primarily (in its 'highest' capacity) by the common good itself, is always available to the theorist: and without specification, which Vermeule never provides, of how and why the individual's "highest good" is communal in this way, we have no principled way of limiting the deployment of this paternalistic move.

Despite this deeply authoritarian thread, which certainly appears to involve the holistic prioritisation of collective interests, in another sense postliberals remain sceptical of holism. Deneen discusses paternalism in a less legalistic register, drawing on Jean Daniélou's *Prayer as a Political Problem*¹¹⁵ to argue that individual faith and worship depend on a congenial socio-political environment. "Ambient conditions", such as "constant distraction, technological acceleration, and consumerism" are "inimical to

the habit of prayer” and “functionally equivalent” to the “outright deprivation” of the right to pray.¹¹⁶ Therefore, a society ordered to the common good will systematically promote the environmental conditions and social norms that make it psychologically easier for individuals to form and preserve habits of prayer,¹¹⁷ and the same logic applies to other practices Deneen judges to be good such as marriage or preserving one’s “cultural inheritance”.¹¹⁸ There is certainly a sense here in which individual rights (such as the right to do things that indirectly ‘distract’ others from prayer) are subordinated to collective interests, and Deneen clearly feels that individuals will find relief from alienation in a theocentric community. However, despite this argument’s deeply paternalistic character, we must note that it is crucially focused on individual goods: the ultimate value being promoted through authoritarian means is “personal piety”,¹¹⁹ and not some ‘higher good’ consisting of participation in a flourishing community.

Would Vermeule accept that this captures his ultimate concerns—that he is interested, as theorist of the temporal legal order, above all in individuals living in accordance with natural law, and that the “highest good” of participation in communal flourishing must be ultimately reducible to some set of individual goods (one that allows relational and distributive goods, rejecting utilitarian aggregation), rather than implying a set of free-floating, purely communal goods? I suspect the answer would be affirmative. The postliberals endorse a partially holistic conception of social life (one that is very vague and indeterminate), but their authoritarian paternalism is oriented ultimately towards individual goods. Fascist valorisation of dying for one’s fatherland, of sacrificing individual goods on the altar of the nation and the free-floating communal goods it embodies, is alien to postliberal thought with its grounding in the ultimately individualist anthropology of Christianity—the unique value and importance of each individual soul.¹²⁰

Radicalism

I have already commented on the radicalism of the postliberal project in its rejection of the prevailing political and constitutional order, so this section will be brief. Eatwell suggests that fascist radicalism offers “an alternative form of modernity”, and that this is sometimes pursued through “cathartic violence”.¹²¹

There is some debate as to whether, and to what extent, postliberals endorse violence as a means to unify the community. Vallier argues that while Vermeule and other integralists disclaim violence, Vermeule’s programme for eventual integralist state capture would entail violence,¹²² and that an integralist regime would need to use widespread violence to achieve its policy ends.¹²³ An integralist state, we will recall, is one that is subordinated to the Church, which can authorise the state to use physical coercion to enforce canon laws, such as bans on heresy and apostasy, against baptised Christians. Thus, Vallier suggests that integralism would require “mass surveillance”,¹²⁴ “modern heresy trials”,¹²⁵ and “secret police”.¹²⁶ Integralism would of course permit heresy trials, at least in principle. Vallier is correct that an integralist state “must decide whether to declare Black Protestant churches criminal organisations,”¹²⁷ for Protestants, being baptised Christians who reject important Catholic teachings, would be liable to punishment for heresy (though an integralist state could still decide to tolerate them pragmatically.)

Whether, beyond an in-principle power to punish Christians for breaching canon law, integralism would involve a wider level of violence (“mass surveillance” and “secret police”) to retain its political stability turns on the accuracy of Vallier’s judgements about the tendency of an integralist regime to decay over time if not backed up by highly intrusive and widespread legal coercion, beyond the occasional (perhaps largely symbolic) punishment of canon crimes. This is something of a moot point for our purposes, for the aim is to assess whether postliberalism pursues a fascist-style violent emotional catharsis, not whether its long-term aims would ultimately require violence—violence that postliberals might seek to avoid and indeed bitterly regret. As Edward Feser points out¹²⁸ and Vallier acknowledges,¹²⁹ Vermeule does not delight at the thought of cathartic violence or brutal “Thomism-Leninism”¹³⁰ on the road to integralism but rather advocates the use of “soft paternalism”¹³¹ and the ‘nudges’ famously outlined by behavioural economists Thaler and Sunstein.¹³²

Moreover, postliberalism, as I have said previously, is a wider family of views than just integralism. Many supporters of Vermeule, and even fellow editors of *Postliberal Order* such as Pappin and Pecknold, place less emphasis in their public writings on the specific institutional architecture of integralism and more on the general principle that the state should promote the religious common good, an observation which Vallier himself acknowledges.¹³³ The vehicle may be integralism, but the energy comes from the softer and more ecumenical (but still highly paternalistic) impulse to use state power to achieve what the integralist-sympathising journalist Sohrab Ahmari calls a “public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good”.¹³⁴ Similarly, the postliberal-sympathiser and editor of the religious conservative journal *First Things* R. R. Reno claims that integralism merely means that state, society, and church teaching should be “integrated”,¹³⁵ ignoring the fact that integralism’s technical definition is far more specific and more radical. Vermeule’s most systematic academic writing on postliberalism (*Common Good Constitutionalism*), being concerned only with the temporal common good, does not address integralism at all, and Deneen has never endorsed integralism.

Postliberalism is profoundly radical, and fits Eatwell’s idea of fascism as offering an “alternate form of modernity” (though unlike fascism, it is comfortable grounding this modernity on ‘traditional’ religious values rather than a new, organic form of nationhood). Eatwell does not claim that fascism always advocates violent catharsis, but he considers the possibility significant enough to mention it with the core features of his fascist minimum. It is therefore important, in contributing to our overall case, that postliberals tend to reject this. While their ideas might, depending on one’s predictions as to a hypothetical regime’s stability, require the use of widespread violence, this is not something in which postliberals seek cathartic relief.

Third Way

Finally, we will consider whether postliberalism offers a radical third way between capitalism and socialism. The attempt to find a third way between the state and the market was central to the early, moderate ‘postliberalism’ of Pabst and Blond, and this concern was carried over into hard-right postliberalism without much modification.

Thus, we find Deneen identifying a false “energy and acrimony” between the mainstream left and right that “shrouds a deeper cooperation”.¹³⁶ Both the free market right and the socially progressive left are believed to be agents of the same liberal project of removing constraints, grounded in an atomistic and voluntaristic anthropology.¹³⁷ Both thus advance the same basic project, albeit in different domains (economics for the right, social relationships for the left).

Moreover, this cross-partisan collusion on individualism is mutually reinforcing, for “the global ‘free market’” is “the main instrument of practical individualism in our modern world”.¹³⁸ Postliberals reject the conservative ‘fusionism’ of thinkers like Frank Meyer, which long dominated mainstream conservative institutions in the US, and which held individual liberty, including the negative liberties advanced by free markets, to be the foundation of the authentic exercise of the traditional and religious virtues that both postliberals and fusionists prize.¹³⁹ Instead, postliberals believe unchecked capitalism tends to yield rampant vice: “thralldom to the addictions afforded by big tech, big finance, big porn, big weed, big pharma, and an impending artificial Meta world...”¹⁴⁰

The postliberals’ concerns about the effects of capitalism are not limited to the moral and cultural domains. Postliberals also critique neoliberalism, which they take to be a natural outgrowth of the individualist anthropology of liberalism itself, on grounds that are shared by many on the left, for contributing to “titanic inequality”,¹⁴¹ the loss of social mobility, and the decay of ‘left-behind’ working-class communities.¹⁴² Ahmari, a populariser of postliberal ideas who is associated with integralism, co-founded the journal *Compact*,¹⁴³ which publishes left-wing thinkers critical of neoliberalism and free trade alongside religious conservatives, and Ahmari’s book *Tyranny, Inc.* argues that a “monstrous government” has permitted the rise of “private tyranny” by powerful corporations.¹⁴⁴ Michael Lind, who is supportive of many postliberal concerns and often cited by the core postliberal thinkers, has argued that neoliberalism has systematically betrayed the interests of “multi-racial” working-class “heartlands”.¹⁴⁵

While denouncing unchecked markets, postliberals also decry the effects of an expanding state. Deneen argues that “left and right cooperate in the expansion of both statism and individualism”.¹⁴⁶ Classical liberalism and neoliberalism, by expanding the reach of markets over customary and traditional economies, “require an extensive and growing state structure” to “enforce rationalisation and imposition of depersonalised modern markets.”¹⁴⁷ Citing Karl Polanyi, Deneen argues that the commodification of labour and land requires the state’s active intervention and expansion, a process that continues today with attempts to enforce free trade agreements, allegedly “with the aim of disrupting and ultimately displacing native cultures.”¹⁴⁸ At the same time, Deneen argues, progressive liberalism, by liberating people from traditional cultural, religious, and family structures deemed oppressive, requires the “mutual support of the expansion of the state” to insure autonomous individuals against risks previously managed by local communities or civil society.¹⁴⁹

Statism in the economy, then, is decried by postliberals because the state is viewed as an agent of individualisation and the promotion of autonomy in both economic and

social spheres, which makes individuals less mutually dependent on each other and less reliant on religious and traditional social structures. Like the fascist Third Way, postliberals call for a more organic, community-based economy to replace the false dialectic between state and market. Also like the fascist Third Way, postliberals often seem to call for a more corporate, but still hierarchical, vision of economic life. Indeed, Pappin has developed detailed proposals for reforming Congress along neo-corporatist lines to include elements of vocational representation.¹⁵⁰ Deneen fiercely criticises meritocracy on the grounds that it weakens empathy for the losers while engendering a degrading self-congratulatoriness among the successful, and proposes combating this psychology by introducing an element of randomness into university admissions processes, hoping to engender a more solidaristic attitude.¹⁵¹ In this alternate model, “inequality” is valorised as a “sign of our mutual need and insufficiency... demanding... recognition of our mutual obligations.”¹⁵² Put crudely, the hope seems to be that mitigating meritocracy will induce a sense of paternalistic noblesse oblige among the wealthy and of thankfulness among the poor. More charitably put, the aim is to create a community in which inequality co-exists with a sense of social solidarity. In this solidaristic society, unequal talents and gifts would be used for “the benefit of the whole community”.¹⁵³

Overall, then, postliberals envisage an economic model strikingly similar to hierarchical corporatism, and share the fascist striving for a radical Third Way more clearly than they share any of the other radial aspects of fascism this essay has explored. Nevertheless a clear difference still exists with respect to the locus of the solidaristic community this Third Way is supposed to create. Where fascists idolise the nation, postliberals subordinate it to God: the solidarity sought through the Third Way is ultimately that of Winthrop's Christian “community as members of the same body,”¹⁵⁴ rather than a fascist vision of an integrated and holistic national community.

Conclusion: After Fascism

Postliberalism is indeed ‘steeped in a revolutionary religiosity’. It is an ideology that seeks to subordinate all other concerns, including national independence and cohesion, to a religious vision of the good and its corollary virtues. The postliberals’ holism, while often obscure, appears to be more a shadow of their religious and conservative authoritarianism than a commitment to a collectivist or communitarian anthropology. Thick communal ties are sought chiefly to create a ‘moral ecology’ favourable to individual faith and virtue, particularly (we might add, given the postliberals’ preoccupation with issues of sexual politics) the traditional virtue of chastity. The postliberal economic vision shares with fascism a commitment to a Third Way between capitalism and socialism, viewing both market and state as agents of individualism and atomisation, but subordinates this to the needs of religion rather than those of the nation. While deeply radical, not to say revolutionary, the postliberals largely avoid fascist flirtation with cathartic violence.

Of course, postliberalism does not matter only as a body of ideas; these ideas are articulated by people and institutions with real agendas. James Patterson has documented deep and extensive postliberal ties to illiberal regimes like Orbán's Hungary.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, I do not disagree with his and Thomas Howes's argument that postliberalism is ideologically similar to the radical Catholic movements that allied with right-wing authoritarianisms

like the Salazar or Franco regimes.¹⁵⁶ Nor do I disagree with their further claim that the best the postliberals are likely to get out of the current Trump administration is a very junior partnership with an essentially secular nationalism deploying a thin Christian veneer.¹⁵⁷ Ahmari's willingness to accept Trump's compromise position on abortion portends the likely marginalisation postliberals will face in the wider New Right coalition.¹⁵⁸ Yet it is as partners in a broader New Right that the postliberals might, despite their express commitments, end up contributing to a movement that is closer to fascism. If our interest is in the validity of postliberal claims—if, like Vallier, we wish to entertain them “not as lurid oddities but as ideas that might be true”¹⁵⁹—then we will not be served by equating them to the ideas of fascism, which evince a radically different ordering of fundamental values. If our interest is more in the practical consequences of New Right policies to which postliberals contribute, then a different answer might serve our purposes. Whether other (perhaps more powerful) strands of the New Right, such as National Conservatives¹⁶⁰ or the Claremont Institute's Straussians,¹⁶¹ might be closer to meeting the fascist minimum is a question that will await other scholars.

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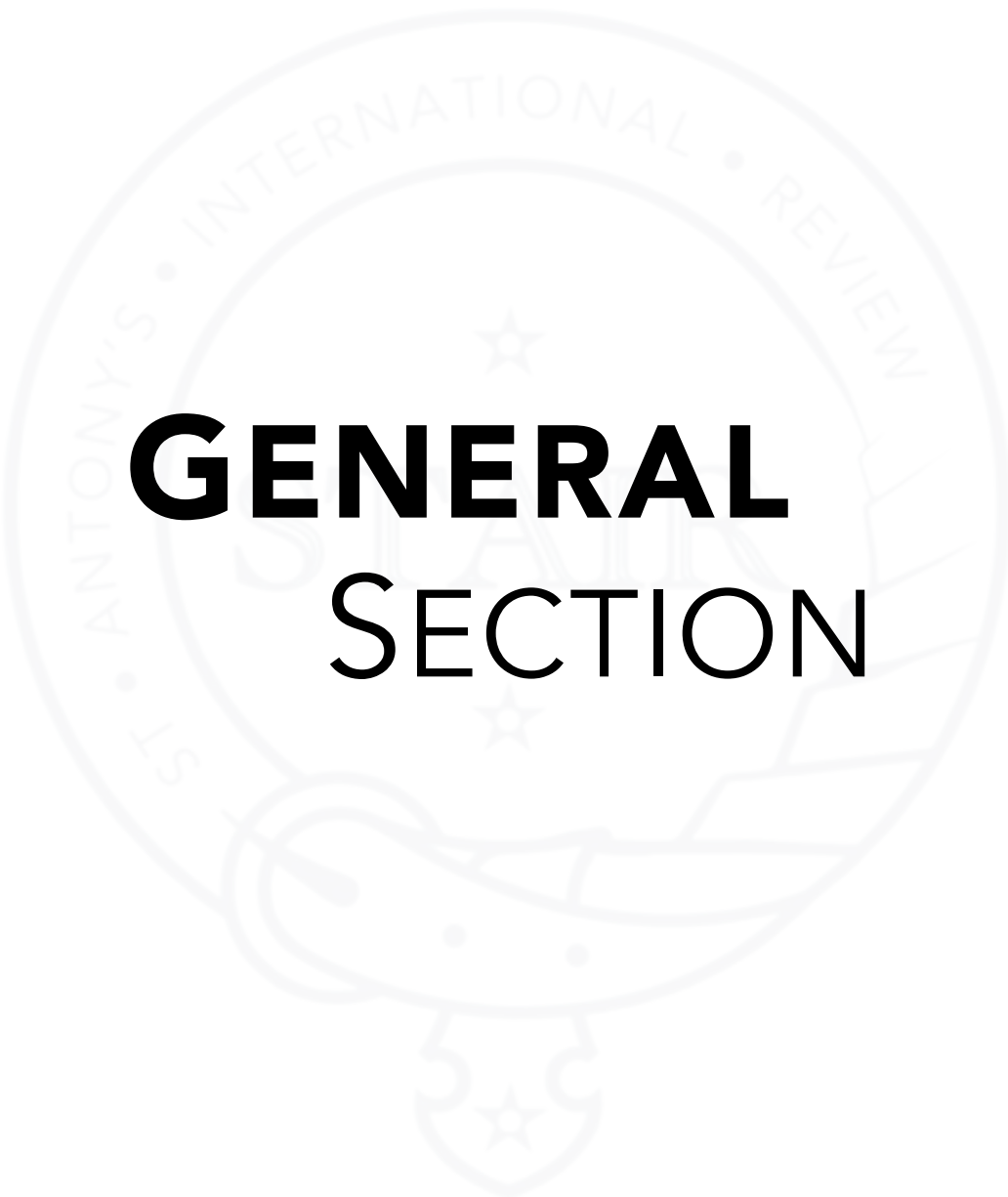
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The background features a large, faint watermark of the St. Anthony's International Review logo. The logo is circular, with the text "ST. ANTHONY'S • INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW" around the top edge. Inside the circle, there is a five-pointed star at the top, a stylized eagle with spread wings in the center, and a shield with a star at the bottom.

GENERAL SECTION

BUTT NAKED WEARS ITS PANTS: RELIGION AND THE REINTEGRATION OF LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR FIGHTERS

Paolo Bellone

Abstract: *This paper examines the role of non-state actors in post-civil war reconstruction and reconciliation through the example of churches in Liberia. The Liberian civil wars (1989-1997 & 1999-2003) were concluded with the 2003 Accra Peace Agreement, which intended to initiate national reconstruction. Despite the set-up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its mandate to hold war criminals accountable, the judicial system failed to prosecute several perpetrators of mass killings and human rights violations. This paper argues that some of these apparent omissions point toward the role of churches in facilitating the reintegration of ex-combatants where state mechanisms failed, significantly shaping Liberia's recovery trajectory and allowing converted warlords to avoid prosecutions. Central to this study is the example of Joshua Milton Blahyi (also known as 'General Butt Naked'), former warlord turned Pentecostal pastor whose impunity illustrates the influence of churches in the Liberian State and their heightened socio-economic importance after the civil wars.*

*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves."
-Matthew 7:15*

On August 18, 2003, the Accra Peace Agreement successfully ended Liberia's second civil war, which started in 1999 following the conclusion of the first conflict in 1997. The initial outbreak began in 1989, nine years after Samuel Doe took power in a coup d'état, overthrowing President William Tolbert in 1980. Liberia's political history took a unique turn when a native Liberian, Doe, established the country's first government led by the indigenous people. This was a significant milestone considering that since Liberia gained independence in 1847, the country had always been ruled by 'settlers' - formerly enslaved African-Americans who had returned and settled in the region. The severity of this exclusion has been likened to 'quasi-apartheid'¹, as the locals were unfairly deprived of access to power and natural resources. The advent of the first indigenous government brought about a sense of optimism and promise among the local populace.

Soon after, Liberia's aspirations for a brighter tomorrow were crushed as Doe initiated an unparalleled authoritarian and oppressive rule. The foundation of his authority rested on exploiting and exacerbating ethnic divides and creating an oligarchy comprising

individuals from his ethnic community, the Krahn.² In 1989, Liberia experienced its first civil war as a rebellion against the government led by Samuel Doe. The conflict drew in several factions, including the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor, the Independent National Patriotic Front (INFP) led by Prince Johnson, and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO).³ These groups, further divided into several subgroups, had a common goal of toppling the Doe regime. The warlords who led these small underground armies were akin to 'military entrepreneurs'.⁴ Their personal ambitions were deeply ingrained, and they acted on them with a fervent thirst for power, both material (economic and military resources) and immaterial (national and international recognition).⁵

In September 1990, Samuel Doe was captured and murdered by Prince Johnson and the INFP. However, the war only ended in 1997 when Charles Taylor took power. Taylor assumed the presidency in July following a relatively democratic electoral process.⁶ His victory at the polls was influenced by various factors, including the opposition's fragmentation, the war-weariness of the Liberian populace and, most significantly, security concerns.⁷ Indeed, Taylor seemed to be the leader most able to guarantee the return of security and the end of the conflict. The looming threat of renewed hostilities should Taylor fail to achieve his aims through political means also undoubtedly played a part in the landslide score he garnered among Liberian voters.⁸ Charles Taylor rapidly instituted an authoritarian and oppressive regime, following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Samuel Doe.⁹ In 1999, the conflict resumed with the birth of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), an insurgent group primarily composed of former ULIMO members, including other rebel groups such as the Kamajors and the RUF.¹⁰ In 2003, a second faction, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), entered the conflict. These groups, supported by Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively, shared the goal of toppling Charles Taylor. Following nearly four years of renewed violence, an agreement was finally reached in Accra in 2003. A key stipulation of the accord was Taylor's resignation, which came to fruition, after which Taylor fled to Nigeria.

For over two decades, Liberia was plagued by a near-constant civil conflict, resulting in a dire state of affairs for the country.¹¹ The death toll of both conflicts combined is estimated to 300,000, while the number of internally displaced Liberians may have reached over 1,500,000 and the number of refugees over 1,480,000 (Kieh, 2016). As with similar civil conflicts such as the Rwandan civil war, not only were the country's infrastructures left in shamble, but the very sociological fabric of the country had been destroyed by socio-ethnic violences. In this context, the peace agreement contained several provisions designed to rebuild the country. Among them, the setup of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aiming to "provide a forum that will address issues of impunity, as well as an opportunity for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to share their experiences to get a clear picture of the past to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation".¹² The work of the TRC was met with challenges to its legitimacy. Despite public confessions of their war crimes, several former combatants were omitted from the commission's final report, igniting accusations of arbitrariness and incompetence.

In this paper, I argue that, in some cases, these omissions also point toward the importance of religion in Liberia's post-civil war reconstruction, and its role in reintegrating ex-combatants into society. I focus on a specific case of former warlord Joshua Milton Blahyi, also known as 'General Butt Naked.' Warlords such as Blahyi were central charismatic figures of these conflicts, leading violent episodes and committing mass murders. Blahyi admitted, for instance, to having killed over 20,000 Liberians during the conflicts and having performed religious rituals on living human sacrifices. Yet, despite his public admission of war crimes during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) hearings, his name was not included in the final list of individuals the TRC recommended to prosecute. This apparent omission, which I argue is not so in fact, highlights the role of religions, particularly Christianity, in the Liberian society and State throughout history, and the critical role of Churches in post-civil war reconstruction and reconciliation. I argue that their role, along with the very public conversion of Joshua Milton Blahyi, explains the latter's impunity. General Butt Naked's story offers a more intriguing case study than similar cases like Prince Johnson's because of its theatricality and radical transformation.¹³ His past as a self-proclaimed cannibalistic warlord who fought naked for spiritual protection, along with his highly publicized repentance and direct engagement with victims, creates a striking narrative of redemption. Unlike Johnson, whose conversion appears to be more politically strategic, Blahyi's story is infused with mythology, supernatural beliefs, and performative violence, making it a rich subject for analyzing the links between war, religion, and human psychology.

Part I provides an overview of the country's religious landscape, focusing on the intersections between Christianity and power. Part II scrutinizes the TRC's (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) decision-making process and the influence of the broader political-economic context on it. Finally, I analyze the personal trajectory of Butt Naked after the war, highlighting how religion shaped his reintegration into Liberian society in a decisive way.

Land of God: The Cumbersome Function of the Liberian Churches

Religion institutions and individuals have played a key role throughout Liberian history, partly explained by the countries' institutional shortcomings. The latter peaked after the civil wars, living gaps filled by religious actors. This section examines Liberia's varied religious makeup before delving into the symbiotic relationship between the state and its churches to set the ground for analyzing the fate of religious actors after the civil wars.

Sociology of Religious Complexity in Liberia

Although Christianity is considered the dominant religion¹⁴ in Liberia, determining the precise breakdown of religious affiliations is challenging due to the country's intricate and syncretic religious fabric.¹⁵ Moreover, Liberian Christianity itself is fragmented, despite numerous churches emphasizing Pentecostalism.¹⁶ Pentecostalism's roots date back to the 19th century when formerly enslaved African-Americans migrated

to Liberia.¹⁷ Among the Christian denominations introduced were Methodism, Presbyterianism, and Episcopalism, which were influenced by the practices of enslaved Black people in America, where singing and the idea of a supreme being known as the “Almighty” were prevalent.¹⁸ The idea of God’s infallibility and omniscience, coupled with his ability to punish or bless, played a crucial role in solidifying the influence of Protestant churches. In the aftermath of the war, war criminals used the pretext of being ‘born again’ to absolve themselves of guilt and evade judgment, eroding the credibility of the Liberian state and international organizations in the eyes of some segments of the population.¹⁹ The emphasis put by Pentecostalism on messianic figures of authority also appears to infuse the Liberian State’s power dynamics, where an individual is vested with significant powers under a presidential system, enjoying what Max Weber would have qualified as a charismatic authority.

Given the complexity of this landscape, this article confines itself to Christianity, which, compared to other religions, has always played a dominant, decisive role in Liberia’s history. Although influences between these faiths have led to unprecedented forms of syncretism,²⁰ following the civil wars, the absence of a unified religious framework and the desire to form a national “religious community” led to a notable degree of puritanism in established religions like Christianity and Islam.²¹ Some religious leaders began to view syncretism and animism as heretical which influenced Butt Naked and his followers to reject animist practices and adopt a more puritanical approach.²² This puritanical approach, based on written texts and established practices, facilitated significant proselytizing efforts and contributed to the growth of the national religious community.²³ In this context, the predominant members of the Christian faith, such as priests and religious preachers, were regarded as the most trustworthy interpreters of the unseen realm. Consequently, they wielded significant influence over public opinion and served as essential intermediaries in governmental affairs.

Liberian Churches and Power: A Subtle Boundary

From its inception, the Church has been considered the core of the Liberian state,²⁴ illustrating the important material and spiritual role it has played in the country’s history.²⁵ During the 19th and early 20th centuries, being a Christian was synonymous of being literate in English and associated with the upper echelons of society.²⁶ This was a key factor in the successful evangelism campaigns that took place over the course of multiple decades. Several of the country’s presidents were closely connected with the churches, including William Tubman, who served as president from 1944 to 1971 and was a Methodist preacher.²⁷ Because of this, the 1980 coup d’état, led by Samuel Doe, amounted to a substantial blow to the Methodist church’s influence given Tubman’s connection to the denomination. The link between political power and religion remains strong in contemporary Liberia, and the fact that many ex-military leaders have reintegrated into society as evangelists suggests that conversions were not just about spiritual salvation but social reintegration as well, if not regaining power in addition.

It is crucial to keep in mind that there exist several denominations of the Church across Liberia, such as the Baptist Church (established in 1822), Methodist Church (1823), Protestant Episcopal Church (1836), Presbyterian Church (1833), Lutheran

Church (1860) and the Catholic Church (primarily established during the 1930s).²⁸ In his book on the role of Christianity and Churches during Doe's regime, Paul Gifford provides a valuable analysis of the rise of what he calls "Biblical Christianity"²⁹ and the substantial support it received from the United States. The author emphasizes the pervasive influence of fundamentalist churches (such as the Pentecostal one) and missions to Liberia, which were rooted in biblical interpretation and financially backed by the United States. This brand of Christianity gained a stronghold in Liberian media, particularly through privately-run radio stations, and was unwavering in its support of Doe's regime.³⁰ The regime's adherence to biblical principles, as well as economic and political considerations, solidified this alliance. Following Tubman's footsteps, President Doe skillfully employed Christian language and persuasive tactics to advance his own agenda. His successor, Charles Taylor, was no exception. He claimed to be a born-again evangelical Christian and flaunted his connections with leading figures in the global evangelical movement such as American Television evangelist Pat Robertson.³¹

Taylor's association with American Evangelical leaders reflected not only theological affinity but also the enduring influence of U.S. based missionary efforts in Liberia, many of which began in the 19th century with the resettlement of freed African Americans under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. These missions established denominational roots—particularly Baptist, Methodist, and later Evangelical—that continued to shape the country's religious and political landscapes. Though the distinctions between denominations may not have always translated directly into policy, they served important symbolic and rhetorical functions, as evidenced in Doe's appeal to Methodism and Taylor's embrace of Evangelical language to project moral legitimacy and secure both local and international support.

It is important to recognize that Doe's oppressive regime prompted numerous churches to join forces with the opposition.³² Consequently, a substantial portion of the populace empathized with their cause and gradually became disenchanted with his oppressive rule. The opposition to Doe's regime reached its climax when the Liberian Council of Churches emerged as a prominent religious institution that denounced human rights violations by the government.³³ This council was instrumental in spearheading the peace process following the wars.

Impunity: The Success of the Truth and the Failure of the Justice

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established with the Accra Agreement of 2003 to help Liberia recover from two decades of conflict.³⁴ Rather than more drastic solutions, such as setting up a special tribunal to judge crimes committed during the civil wars, the commission was tasked with collecting testimonies from both victims and perpetrators. Indeed, during the negotiations leading up to the Accra Agreement, former warlords were dominant and ensured that no institution was created with the power to directly convict them.³⁵ In 2005, the ten members of the commission set to work. In total, they collected more than 20,000 testimonies.³⁶ The highlights of this process were undoubtedly the testimonies of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the incumbent Liberian president elected in 2005, and Joshua Milton Blahyi, former

General Butt Naked. Sirleaf admitted to having supported Charles Taylor at the start of his involvement in the war and publicly apologized.³⁷ Blahyi, for his part, admitted to having been involved in the deaths of 20,000 people.³⁸ Except for a couple of prominent individuals, hardly any influential figures - particularly the major warlords - participated in the TRC's public hearings. The TRC received significant criticism for allegedly being too forgiving of the culprits of the crimes and occasionally condescending towards the victims. Additionally, the commission's members were scrutinized for their lack of experience, stature, and professionalism.³⁹

The publication of the commission's final report in 2009 did nothing to dispel the doubts surrounding the TRC.⁴⁰ On the contrary, it was a divided commission - two of the ten members did not sign the report - which presented its conclusions in the form of lists including the people the TRC thought should be tried by a special court set up for the occasion, as well as the individuals who should be banned from holding any public office. The third list, identifying those to whom the TRC recommended granting amnesty, included the name of General Butt Naked.⁴¹ This decision coupled with a lack of definition of the criteria used to select the names on the lists, made the lists appear arbitrary.⁴² Despite its flaws, the TRC report received a degree of support among the Liberian population. Amid the contemporary climate of popular discontent with the elite, some held a favorable view regarding the endeavor to hold accountable the primary actors in the war who have been accused of acting purely out of self-interest.

Overall, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cohered with Article IV of the Act, which established the TRC in 2005.⁴³ This article specifies the need to investigate "... gross human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law as well as abuses that occurred, including massacres, sexual violations, murder, extra-judicial killings and economic crimes, such as the exploitation of natural or public resources to perpetuate armed conflicts, during the period January 1979 to October 14, 2003;..."⁴⁴ However, despite its recommendations, no special tribunals were set up to try war criminals, as was the case in Sierra Leone, and some former warlords were even elected to public office in the 2005 and 2011 elections.⁴⁵ There have been hardly any convictions, and most warlords, including General Butt Naked, are still at large.

Warlords' exemption from prosecution by Liberia's TRC, despite admissions of war crimes and human rights violations, could be attributed to several factors. Some warlords' full cooperation, confession, and expressions of remorse aligned with the TRC's emphasis on truth-telling as a means of reconciliation.⁴⁶ The public redemption of Blahyi as a preacher further shaped perceptions of him as a reformed individual. Cultural beliefs in spiritual powers ('juju') may have also played a role, as fear of his supernatural influence could have affected decision-makers.⁴⁷ Finally, selective accountability protected many former warlords, making their non-prosecution part of a broader pattern of political pragmatism in post-war Liberia. This failure to enforce justice increased the divide between the common people and the ruling elite, eroding people's trust in the political class.⁴⁸

I argue that the apparent failure of the TRC to condemn perpetrators of war crimes and its subsequent lack of implementation by the Liberia state reflect both the religiosity

of the Liberian society and the struggle of post-civil war nation-building efforts by the state. The case of Blahyi highlights the role undertaken by the churches in nation-building and providing basic goods and services to citizens amid the failure of the state. The civil wars profoundly impacted the transformation of some soldiers into preachers. S. Ellis details a comparable journey taken by warlords such as Butt Naked and other militiamen on their road to redemption. In this journey, dreams became a symbolic passage into a new state of being,⁴⁹ aiding in resolving psychological traumas caused by war. Dreams provided a rationalization for past actions, paving the way for healing. In the dreams of militiamen, the Devil often appeared, serving as another supernatural figure absolving individuals of their responsibilities. They believed their crimes were not of their fault because, according to the monotheistic tradition, humans are imperfect and can fall into temptation.⁵⁰ Religion was, therefore, utilized as a means of healing trauma and as a distraction from individual accountability.

These conversions happened against the backdrop of post-civil war state fragility, and the ensuing relative importance of several churches, such as the Pentecostal, Evangelical, or Baptist denominations, in the reconstruction phase.⁵¹ As explained above, churches held significant power in civil society due to their proximity to the government, which brought them legitimacy and prestige. Additionally, their large membership allowed them to reach a wider audience and educate believers on religious views regarding reconciliation and forgiveness,⁵² making them a valuable source of information during the post-war period. This is especially important considering the uncertainty that prevailed at the end of the war. Similarly, in terms of logistics, the churches leveraged their vast networks and infrastructure to distribute humanitarian aid. As Abramovitz points out, churches were sometimes just as effective as NGOs in providing food, clothing, and shelter.⁵³ Following the conclusion of the second civil conflict, the collective actions of the churches granted them a considerable degree of influence and power. This authority, to some extent, even surpassed that of the state, which proved incapable of adequately addressing the needs of its citizens.⁵⁴

In this context, the apparent failure of the TRC to condemn war crimes of warlords converted to Christianity may be interpreted not only as a sign of the lack of strength of the judicial system - despite reforms initiated by Sirleaf - but also as a sign of these warlords' importance during and after the civil-wars. The role played by churches and preachers after the war, such as the provision of basic goods and services as well as the reintegration of former warlords in the social body, arguably contributed to shielding them from prosecutions, as the TRC's objective (as its name suggests) aimed at reconciliation. The difficult reintegration of ex-combatants through the DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration) programs also illustrates the difficulties encountered by the Liberian government: the program faced major financial and logistical obstacles - amongst others- and, therefore, could not care for all ex-combatants and secure them a new place in post-war society.⁵⁵ As a result of the Liberian government's inability to effectively reintegrate ex-combatants and foster true national reconciliation, many Liberians sought alternative means to meet their needs. Religion, such as in Butt Naked's case, served as a solution for many, assisting them in navigating the obstacles of reintegration and facilitating societal stability.⁵⁶ In the last part of this paper, I dwell on the trajectory of Joshua Milton Blahyi to illustrate this phenomenon.

The Ways of the Lord are Infinite: Finding Impunity through Religion

Born into a highly religious background, Joshua Milton Blahyi was seven years old when his father voluntarily gave him up to Krahn elders, who designed him to be a warrior and initiated him as a priest in 1982.⁵⁷ In his autobiography, *The Redemption of an African Warlord*,⁵⁸ Blahyi claims to have had a vision of the Devil in his youth, which led him to join the war and command paramilitary factions close to Samuel Doe, the Liberian president during the first civil war (1989-1997). Butt Naked's loyalty to President Doe can be explained by the fact that they were both members of the same ethnic group. As its leader's name suggests, General Butt's Naked Brigade was known to fight in the nude. This was due to Blahyi's vision, which revealed to him that fighting naked was the best way to avoid bullets.⁵⁹ This brigade was also infamous for committing unprecedented violence, such as child sacrifices and cannibalism.⁶⁰ In 1996, General Butt Naked converted to Pentecostal Christianity after a theophany in which, following his testimony, Jesus appeared and convinced him to change his life radically.⁶¹ He renounced his warlike activities and went into exile in Ghana and later Nigeria. Following the end of the second civil war (1999-2003), he returned to Liberia to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in which he confessed to having played a role in the deaths of 20,000 people.⁶² Despite this admission, his name was not among those listed for prosecution for war crimes when the TRC released its final report. To date, former General Butt Naked has not been tried, let alone convicted, for his involvement in Liberia's first civil war.⁶³ Instead, he has become a pastor, preaching to his followers and visiting the families of his victims to ask for forgiveness. Religion played a significant role in Blahyi's journey, influencing his involvement in the war and his reintegration into Liberian society after the conflict. Arguably, Butt Naked's conversion may have contributed to his impunity by projecting the image of a reformed man.⁶⁴

The case of Joshua Milton Blahyi illustrates the consequences and complexities of conversion among former military leaders following periods of conflict. Blahyi's conversion to Christianity marked a significant change in his life, prompting him to leave the battlefield and take on the role of a pastor after the war's conclusion.⁶⁵ Alongside him, numerous former military leaders sought comfort in faith to keep pace with the societal transformations accompanying the shift from conflict to peace.⁶⁶ This trend has facilitated an increase in conversions among former faction fighters, though the authenticity of these conversions is often disputed. Many conversions may represent a blend of genuine belief and opportunistic motivations, especially in a collapsed economy where roles such as prophet or pastor might offer financial incentives.⁶⁷ Additionally, adopting these roles may allow individuals to deflect criticism from victims and their families and can provide a means of avoiding legal repercussions.⁶⁸ Blahyi's case is particularly notable due to his admission of responsibility for 20,000 deaths during the battles of Monrovia while also being shielded from prosecution by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).⁶⁹ He has established a modest church on the outskirts of Monrovia as part of his religious transformation. It is essential to recognize that individuals who experience religious conversions do not always acknowledge their past actions as wrongful. Instead, some may attribute their former behaviours to external influences, such as an alleged demonic force.⁷⁰ This dynamic

complicates the healing process for victims, who continue to face the lasting effects of the violence. The broader implications of these conversions contribute to a culture of impunity with significant political and economic consequences.⁷¹ This raises questions about the effectiveness of measures to combat corruption when individuals who have committed serious offenses may appear to evade accountability.

In that sense, the situation concerning Butt Naked remains shrouded in uncertainty. Former war criminals, including Blahyi, have made efforts to seek forgiveness, offering some sense of solace to those who suffered from the war's traumatic effects.⁷² Nevertheless, the situation remains intricate in a nation ravaged by civil war, with hundreds of thousands of individuals caught up in the violence. Convicting all of them could have deprived Liberia of a workforce needed to rebuild the country. At the same time, although free, many ex-combatants who have become religious preachers still live under constant death threats. Although individuals who are "reintegrated" into society may not be entirely forgiven by civil society, some, like Joshua Milton Blahyi, have gained authority and influence.⁷³ As a preacher, Blahyi leverages the Church's legitimacy and influence to establish himself as a leader in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Through his influence and wealth, this former warlord provides his followers with access to crucial resources such as electricity and the internet - resources that the government cannot consistently ensure. In addition, he holds significant moral and religious authority.⁷⁴ Consequently, both Butt Naked and the Church, more broadly, can offer an alternative to state services that neither the struggling government nor the disinterested global community can effectively challenge or regulate.

Moreover, well-organized religions played a vital role in promoting economic progress for individuals. Like other ex-combatants, Butt Naked underwent societal reintegration through economic opportunities facilitated by religious organizations.⁷⁵ As previously noted, the relationship between Liberia's political class and Christian denominations may elucidate why individuals like Milton Blahyi are able to evade consequences. As adherents of Christianity, they are perceived as belonging to the same social group as the political and financial elite, affording them a certain level of advantageous standing. The religious terrain in Liberia is intricate and multifaceted. Although animist practices are officially condemned, and a more puritanical approach is encouraged, Pentecostals such as Butt Naked have succeeded in reviving some pagan practices that are both profitable and spiritually significant, such as dream interpretation and healing.⁷⁶

Conclusion: A Country in Search of Faith

Ultimately, the TRC in Liberia failed to bring about a widespread reconciliation for several key reasons, including political interference, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and the broader challenge of balancing justice with national reconciliation.⁷⁷ One of its most significant weaknesses was the political resistance to its recommendations — many of the warlords implicated in the TRC's findings held or later gained political power, making it nearly impossible to implement the commission's call for accountability.⁷⁸ Figures like Prince Johnson became senators, while others leveraged their wartime influence to gain political, economic, and religious capital, effectively shielding themselves from prosecution.⁷⁹ The TRC also lacked the authority to enforce

its recommendations, particularly in the absence of a special tribunal or court to prosecute war crimes. This meant that even though the TRC identified perpetrators and made explicit recommendations for prosecution, there was no mechanism to ensure follow-through.

Another major factor of this apparent failure was the prioritization of reconciliation over retributive justice.⁸⁰ Indeed, Liberia's fragile post-war state and the need for stability led to an emphasis on reintegration rather than punishment. This was compounded by the role of religion in shaping the perception of justice. As discussed in the paper, warlords who publicly embraced religious repentance, such as Joshua Milton Blahyi and Prince Johnson, were able to avoid prosecution, as their conversions were seen as a form of moral redemption. The TRC, paradoxically, became a platform for these warlords to construct narratives of regret, further undermining the push for judicial accountability. The commission's work was also constrained by financial and logistical challenges, including a lack of resources to fully investigate cases or protect witnesses. International pressure for justice was inconsistent, with global actors often prioritizing stability and economic recovery over transitional justice.

Sirleaf's government represented this stability and economic recovery well. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election as President in 2005 marked a turning point for Liberia, indicating a departure from its tumultuous past and a shift towards a more technocratic approach to governance. Sirleaf represented the principles of a legal-rational leader, as defined by the German sociologist Max Weber,⁸¹ whose legitimacy rests on expertise and technical knowledge. After working in the banking sector in the United States, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf secured a decisive electoral victory over former soccer star George Weah. Her win was met with optimism from a large segment of the international community.⁸² While there were some positive advancements toward combatting authoritarianism during Ellen Sirleaf's tenure, they were primarily focused on the expansion of fundamental political freedoms, including freedom of expression and the press. Unfortunately, the economic climate did not see a significant improvement, with many Liberians facing increased poverty and economic hardship throughout her term in office.⁸³ The issue of endemic corruption posed a considerable challenge to the efforts aimed at promoting post-conflict peacebuilding.

During the two presidential terms, a number of officials within the Sirleaf regime were implicated in cases of embezzlement of public funds.⁸⁴ Under Sirleaf's "technocratic" administration, the shortcomings of state and judicial policies led to a widespread sense of disillusionment and skepticism regarding the capacity of state institutions to deliver justice. Consequently, individuals resorted to other institutions, particularly religious ones, in their quest for justice and peace. As illustrated earlier, these institutions have played a pivotal role in reintegrating numerous ex-combatants, either as active members or passive supporters. The significance of religion in Liberia, coupled with the challenges faced by its technocrats, including Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, made rebuilding the country after two civil wars a problematic task. As a result, charismatic leaders gained a positive image as exceptional figures. In this context, rational-legal leaders like Sirleaf lost appeal among the masses, paving the way for charismatic leaders like George Weah to rise to power.⁸⁵ Weah's political journey in Africa is undeniably intriguing. Despite the

turmoil that plagued his nation in the 1990s, Weah remained a celebrated soccer player throughout the continent. In fact, he remains the sole African player to have ever won a Ballon d'Or.⁸⁶ At a time when Liberia was widely recognized for its internal conflicts, this notable accomplishment helped shift the country's perception in a positive light.

Following his retirement from football, he utilized his favorable standing with the Liberian citizen to pursue a career in politics. Although this "self-made man" held a near-heroic status and brought honor to African and global soccer, Weah's triumph in the political sphere was influenced by various factors, including the revival of a widespread religious sentiment within civil society. The outcome of the 2018 presidential elections, resulting in George Weah's triumph, reflects Liberia's move towards an almost redemptive, charismatic form of leadership.⁸⁷ This shift was supported by the endeavors of religious leaders, with the objective of achieving peace and extending communal benefits in accordance with biblical teachings.⁸⁸

Notes

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BEYOND THE GOALPOSTS: THE POLITICIZATION OF FOOTBALL IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract: *This paper explores the interaction between football and ethnic division in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Following dissolution of the Former Yugoslavia, BiH was split into two autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), mostly inhabited by the Bosniak and Croat populations, and the Republika Srpska (RS), primarily consisting of the Serb population. In parallel with these events, Football within BiH emerged in strikingly similar circumstances, having been split into three associations in accordance with BiH's constituent peoples and only unified from 2002 onwards. In utilizing secondary publications and local reports, particularly drawing upon Davide Sterchele's ethnographic study on Bosnian sport post-2003, this paper explores how BiH's football clubs have become ethnically charged by reproducing the enduring legacies of war in an everyday environment. I explore how football clubs have been instrumentalized to feed into the ongoing societal divides that dictate contemporary affairs within BiH. I will examine how football, specifically the Mostar Derby, becomes a convenient channel to project the threat of difference onto wider society in BiH. I find that ethnic division and football share a two-way relationship and as such, often feed into each other. Whilst my analysis supports the importance of domestic elites in facilitating the divide, I argue that many of these football clubs are formed as political entities in themselves because they were birthed as ethno-national symbols during the war. In effect, their power to also reinforce BiH's ethnic divides in their own capacity remains an underexplored area of research within the current literature. Thus, this paper aims to contribute towards the study of memory politics and its interpenetration between different events outside the formal political process, like sport, and the challenge of nation-building in divided societies.*

On the 4th of October 2009, a domestic fixture between NK Široki Brijeg and FK Sarajevo was scheduled to kick-off in the 'Premijer Liga', the topflight in Bosnia's footballing pyramid. Both teams were considered among the most established in the league and with many other matches scheduled against competing teams, the significance of this fixture was not deemed to hold any serious ramifications in determining the league table. Yet, the Bosnian public was to be left shocked by the violence that ensued as tensions between the rivalling club's supporters became untenable prior to kick-off, resulting in the death of FK Sarajevo fan Vedran Puljić and injuries to fifty others.¹ As NK Široki Brijeg hailed from a support base of ethnic Croats within BiH, whilst FK Sarajevo possesses a predominantly Bosniak following, the ethnic demographics that are represented by these two clubs are more widely illustrative of the fragmentations present in Bosnian society.

Even if incidences of crowd violence during sporting events are no new phenomenon,² the occurrence of the '2009 Football Riot' as it was later coined introduced several important realities in BiH. The narrative of these riots soon deviated away from an incident of isolated violence towards the underlying fragility between BiH's multi-ethnic communities as a single national entity, and how easily intolerance can escalate into violence.³

Whilst Bosnians today have moved on from the 2009 Football Riots, the precedent set by the event illustrates the inter-ethnic tensions that BiH's three constituent groups (Bosniaks, Serbs, & Croats) find ingrained into their social consciousness. In ethnically diverse states, established institutions can exacerbate social divides more frequently than the policies that abate it,⁴ but how this process of politicisation is found within activities beyond the realm of politics itself deserves closer attention. In BiH, football's sheer popularity offers a valuable insight into this process since the identities associated through football allegiances⁵ are interwoven through an ethnic application across BiH's domestic clubs. The purpose of this paper therefore examines how football can undermine the process of reconciliation in a post-conflict society and in turn, be manipulated to reinforce divides. Furthermore, it illustrates how Bosnian football is instrumentalized to preserve ethnic division and prevent a collective 'Bosnian' identity from developing.

In conducting this analysis, this paper will first provide an overview of BiH's historical background as the roots of ethnic division initially emerged within the Bosnian psyche. Next, I will examine the relationship sport and nationalism shares and specifically using Davide Sterchele's description of 'Fertile Lands and Mined Fields',⁶ apply this to the Bosnian case. Using the Mostar Derby as my case study, I will then identify three themes (symbolism, othering, and perception) to explain how football is reflective of BiH's division along ethnic lines and in turn, how football can then feed into those said divides. The Mostar Derby will qualify as a suitable unit of analysis to examine the relationship that Bosnian football shares with ethnic division. The fixture between Zrinjski Mostar (Croat) and Velež Mostar (Bosniak) widely illustrates the city as split into two. Unifying the Croat and Bosniak populations thus far has proven limited as its institutional frameworks have hardened ethnic divisions and bolstered obstructionist political elements in the city.⁷ The significance of these findings therefore deserve discussion, both in how the divides in Mostar are reproduced beyond football itself and what the following implications are within Bosnian society.

Background: The Bosnian War

The conflict in BiH had emerged following the dissolution of the Former Yugoslavia, a federal territory with six different republics. As a multi-ethnic country accommodating the dominant Bosniak population totalling 43.5% according to the 1991 census, alongside a substantial Serbian and Croat contingent each accounting for 31.2% and 17.4%,⁸ the eventual rupturing of Yugoslavia into its newly independent entities had profound effects upon BiH as a melting-pot of these groups. President Tito's tenure in power had largely suppressed the sentiment of nationalism from curtailing the Yugoslav values of 'Brotherhood and Unity'.⁹ Following his death and without the appointment of an

immediate successor, the power vacuum engulfing Yugoslav politics had given rise to the nationalist resurgence capitalized upon by opportunists such as Slobodan Milosevic & Franjo Tudjman. After Croatia seceded in 1991, BiH promptly followed suit in declaring independence by holding a referendum that passed in favour of secession. Notably, this omitted the Serb population who boycotted the referendum entirely¹⁰ whilst the Croat population only supported independence on a conditional basis, interpreting the question differently to the one written on the ballot paper,

Gradually, the collapse of social order in BiH had diffused along ethnic lines with the next three years characterized by intense violence, acts of genocide, and a humanitarian disaster unforeseen in Europe since 1945.¹¹ During which, all three belligerents (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs) would engage in conflict against one another as each side sought to declare their vision of an independent, in some cases, irredentist reality. The Yugoslav Football Federation in BiH dissolved when the war began and three football associations were immediately established to enforce their own mono-ethnic leagues, representative of the deep fragmentations the conflict had onset amongst BiH's constituent peoples.¹² Clubs that were previously banned under the Tito regime had re-emerged as nationalist symbols in their ethnic lineage, including those of HSK Zrinjski (Croat), FK Slavija (Serb) and Djerzelez (Bosniak), reinforcing the political dimension football now held in further legitimising the ethnic splits across BiH.

Hostilities in BiH had ceased following the ratification of the Western-brokered Dayton Accords in 1995. In brief, the Dayton Accords had created two autonomous entities that each functioned under its own governing institutions, the Federation of BiH (inhabited by Bosniaks & Croats), the Republika Srpska (inhabited by Serbs), and a third enclave in the Brčko District. The mechanisms of the Dayton Accords had sought to ostensibly support a unitary Bosnian state that functioned through democratic power-sharing structures to promote cohesion amongst the heterogenous population.¹³ Yet, these mechanisms in practice have contrarily obstructed a lasting prosperity in BiH since the reaffirmation of BiH in its ethnic, as opposed to civic, principle of political organisation has sustained the same animosities that originally arose during wartime¹⁴ and instead cultivates a culture of ethnic apartheid. Within the context of our research question, I expect that the legitimisation of these preexisting narratives continues to hinder BiH's reconciliatory project following the war. Its impact is not only isolated to formal institutions but also remains prevalent in BiH's footballing culture as the enduring legacy of ethnic segregation from wartime has since become embraced as the defining feature that gives many of BiH's clubs their 'identity' today.

Sport, Nationalism and its Relationship within Divided Societies

Reconciling BiH's multi-ethnic inhabitants reeling from war under the implementation of the Dayton Accords had drawn substantial interest from scholars who sought to examine how these interactions evolve. Football within BiH had introduced a particular point of contention as the ethnic organisations that formed out of conflict had since unified under a single regulatory body in 2002.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the politicization of football in BiH today continues to persist through the ethnic fragmentations that

emerged during the Bosnian War and consolidated thereafter, with several of BiH's most successful clubs establishing themselves during the conflict itself. Scholars therefore suggest that football reflects the ethnic markings in BiH that separates in-groups from out-groups.¹⁶

Given the pervasiveness of sports in late modern societies and its links to nationalism, strong and widespread national identities are produced from sport-related activities.¹⁷ Because sport bolsters nationalism in our global age and activates ideas and memories of who we are as citizens, its presence 'everywhere' and in different guises¹⁸ discredits the notion that it can encourage societal cohesion at the national level since it must also penetrate the individual level too, and to automatically re-integrate diverse communities through its use is ultimately built upon an illusionary premise.

Bairner and Han similarly discuss the multilayered character of nationalism within sport, suggesting that this relationship can be manifested within and between different types of nationalism.¹⁹ This argument expands upon state nationalism within sports and equally acknowledges the use of sport in cultivating rising support for political independence of a hegemonic national identity that is not necessarily considered inclusive within the existing state apparatus.²⁰

Beyond the Bosnian case and its Bosniak/Croat/Serb entities, the Catalan and Scottish examples also demonstrate how the sentiments of national determination are expressed through their sporting teams and more generally how exercising identity through the medium of sport becomes more contentious within divided societies at the intra-state level. Teams such as FC Barcelona or Celtic FC act as important signifiers of autonomy for the stateless nations they inhabit and thus fulfil safe places to express those sentiments. Regardless of the political, cultural, and legal contexts that have varied on the issue of Catalan and Scottish independence, the role of sport across both cases has proven highly instructive for the understanding of sport and its impact within contemporary political nationalism.²¹

This is not to say that sport does not hold the potential to build cohesion, but rather that its function can also exacerbate social divides as well. Sport alone is not enough to bridge ethnic groups without the institutions it depends on to actively promote the same values. In essence, in a country whose institutions are unable to reciprocate the mission such sport-related programmes hope to achieve, then ethnic differences can be strengthened rather than overcome.²² In BiH, football could create an ethnically homogenous reality for the breakaway territories by mapping the imagined communities each group saw fit.²³

The footballing culture in BiH largely emerged out of the wartime environment as beacons of an ethnic allegiance. Club leadership is often linked to the local political leadership and these organizations typically depend on municipality funding when unable to do so independently.²⁴ In the initial years following conflict, BiH represented a paradigmatic case where there were two separate championships in operation with no matches that ever overlapped.²⁵ Football in BiH was birthed as an ethnically homogenous affair and the politics of exclusion continues to shape the identities of

these teams today. Enabling this, Bosnian society still puts an acceptance behind the instrumental uses of ethnic-identity politics decades later.

Because the paradox of 'ethnic security' in BiH should be recognized as an institutionally, discursively, and socially constituted practice whilst collectively produced on the individual level.²⁶ The insecurity that inter-ethnic violence catalyses throughout BiH is noted to be most prevalent during mass gatherings like football fixtures and can capture the intricate ways in which individual and collective security mixes with ethnic identity in the daily lives of citizens.²⁷

Within BiH, these attitudes are emboldened along its ethnic lines to separate each support base into three general camps, each of which antagonistic to one another. The politicization of football thus becomes an important tool for BiH's elites to establish the 'divide' supposedly inherent throughout Bosnian society. If this divide is representative of the wider social fragmentation in BiH, then football can encapsulate the very objectives that these ethno-nationalists hope to fulfil as protective forces amongst their respective ethnic group. Yet, whilst recent literature has typically examined the enduring capacity for BiH's political elites to instrumentalize ethnicity with what they seek to gain, which I coin the 'why'. Little has been done to investigate the channels through which this division is sown together, this is the 'how' and is what our themes will focus on. Here, BiH's footballing culture becomes a vessel to peddle BiH's ethno-nationalist sentiment to normalize its presence within everyday life.

Bosnian Football: A Fertile Land or Mined Field?

Whilst the growing unification amongst the Bosnian football community acts as a 'fertile land' and improves the prospects for ethnic reconciliation, football within BiH ultimately rests upon the interplay between ethnicity, socio-economic inequality, and power relations. Under these conditions, the enduring capacity of BiH's elites have sought to preserve the status-quo²⁸ and habitually exploit it through clientelism and financial misappropriation, both to disempower competent operators and football enthusiasts from enhancing the game. As recently as March 2024, FK Sarajevo players walked out of their scheduled fixture against Borac Banja Luka citing an instance of match fixing.²⁹ Here, it is important to note that the head of BiH's football association is the former president of Borac Banja Luka, which is a team situated in RS. Moreover, he is also the nephew of RS's pro-secession president, Milorad Dodik.³⁰

Of course, this was not too dissimilar from the patterns observed during the Yugoslav years under Tito. Often, clubs such as Partizan, the 'army's club', forced the transfer of different players from rival clubs through its own unofficial structures.³¹ Moreover, different clubs and more broadly, the popular passion for the game, had been routinely utilized as political instruments during turbulent periods to unify the population and achieve national aims.³² The key difference in this case turned out to be ideological. The transition from communism to nationalism inevitably onset divisive cultures to develop within BiH's footballing leagues based on ethnic identity. These changes yielded profound consequences upon Bosnian football by increasingly disrupting the game. This is what Sterchele coins the 'mined field'.

How this process is used to then undermine the ambivalent potential of sporting cohesion in BiH takes several forms. Nationally, the Bosnian team has become more multi-ethnic and with that, has attracted an increasingly mixed pool of supporters from across the ethnic spectrum.³³ A pivotal moment for the country had been marked with its qualification to the 2014 World Cup, an achievement that bought newfound legitimacy to the national team and courted favour from all sides of Bosnian society. However, in the years since and as the national team fell down the FIFA world rankings from 13th in 2013 to 74th in 2024,³⁴ initial causes for optimism may have been premature.

Such a drop in form weakened the allure of playing for the Bosnian national team as many from the Serb or Croat ethnic groups now opt to play for their mother-nations whilst at the administrative level, ethnically obedient committees have navigated themselves back into powerful positions again. Today, the prospects for a multi-ethnic base of support have seemingly regressed to a position of indifference as the task of bridging broader divides has become ever-more contentious with the failure to capitalize upon the short-lived success of Bosnian football on the international stage.

Domestically, and since the Premijer Liga had been established, incidences of verbal abuse have been commonplace within any one of BiH's typical matchday fixtures. Today, the weaponization of verbal insults to antagonize opposing supporters remains central to fan behaviour in BiH's fixtures. Often, fans will draw upon derogatory terminologies of war to sow division amongst these teams and more widely, of the ethnic space they occupy. All sides seem proud to brandish sensitive material whether it be Serbs referencing the Srebrenica Massacre, Croats celebrating Ustashe fascists, or Bosniaks enforcing their Islamized stereotypes.³⁵ However trivial these examples may seem being localized instances of sporting 'back and forth', the culture embraced by fans here stems from wider processes and is reproduced using different means.³⁶ The different forms this then takes are expressed through ethnic lineage. Regardless of whether these behaviours necessarily deepen inter-ethnic tensions, what they certainly do is normalize the fan activity that sustains the divide.

In BiH, acts of physical aggression are also observed to have been less common but more serious in the incidences it does occur. Here, the actions of these groups tend to be indicative of a wider and shared goal, reflective of their segregated and ethnically homogenous club demographic. In 2011, the noticeable increase of riots during certain fixtures (FK Borac Banja Luka vs Zeljeznicar, Zrinjski vs Velež, etc.) happened in close succession and in BiH's three major cities (Banja Luka, Sarajevo and Mostar). Likely, these were devised to weaken the positive atmosphere of inter-ethnic cooperation in the very week when a delegation from UEFA was due to extend an existing mandate that sought to normalize Bosnian football.³⁷ Violence can therefore be used sparingly to undermine the initiatives that seek to unify Bosnian football. Many of BiH's most established clubs are infiltrated by strong ethno-national forces, groups who wish to preserve those structures and coalesce with one another to sabotage prospects for inter-ethnic progress. Rather than to bridge these gaps, there is a strong counterforce who instead use ethnicity as an effective tool to preserve existing divides.

The impact that this verbal/physical violence has on Bosnian public opinion crucially depends on the way they reverberate through BiH's typically factious media coverage.³⁸ Indeed, the media can create a perception of 'national unity' through the interactions, discourses, and narratives it constructs in mobilising people towards a common cause.³⁹ However, a factious media is also significant amongst the out-group in intensifying their hostile sentiment towards the target audience.⁴⁰ Depending on the outlet bias, coverage of these clashes often stigmatizes the out-group supporters and sets an agenda in place that alienate each constituent group from one another whilst diminishing prospects for reconciliation.

Analysis: The Mostar Derby's Divide

The politics of landscape in Mostar remain interlinked with Velež and Zrinjski as clubs that are representative of the city's ethnic divide. Along the Neretva River, Mostar's Croat population is situated west of the bank whilst the Bosniaks are predominantly based eastwards. Both clubs found themselves inhabiting noticeably different positions in the Bosnian framework following the conflict.

Velež, founded in 1922 by the rising numbers of workers and proletarians, long embraced its ties to the Communist Party and the Yugoslav regime that eventually took power. But during the 1990s, had now become forcefully redefined by the ethno-nationalistic discourse that dominated post-war Mostar. Instead, by removing the iconic petokraka (red star) from its official logo, the club was forced to symbolize the very concept its officials had endeavoured to distance from – a monoethnic identity tied to the Muslim community it came to represent.⁴¹ It was only in 2005 that the petokraka was reinstated and Velež begun the gradual process of reconciling with its founding identity as a club, along with its core principle as a multiethnic team.

Contrarily, and having been formed in 1905 as BiH's oldest football club, Zrinjski carried a strong Croat identity from its inception which when banned by the Yugoslav authorities in 1945, was interpreted as an attack on the Croatian national character. Thus, Zrinjski's rebirth following the Yugoslav collapse came to symbolize the Croat renaissance as it had survived the vicissitudes of history for many who had supported its cause.⁴² By association, the distinctiveness of a Croat identity was partly found in Zrinjski's past as local supporters sought to split from their Yugoslav association. Its participation in the 'Croatian First League' during its tenure within the Independent State of Croatia, a fascist puppet-state established during the Second World War, had controversially emerged as one source of inspiration.

Between two strands of society that had effectively segregated themselves from one another, Mostar was split by the front line during the war and still retained those borders in the psychological sense long after its conclusion.⁴³ Velež and Zrinjski had thus sourced their post-war identity from the symbolic partition of Mostar as the two ethno-national communities continued their conflict through its re-territorialisation whilst each authoring what post-war Mostar had become and should be.⁴⁴ In this struggle, both Velež and Zrinjski were utilized as tools to enforce the narratives of either side.

The former Velež stadium, Bijeli Brijeg, had been overrun by Croat forces during the war and used as a detention facility for Bosniak prisoners.⁴⁵ Being situated on the Croat side of Mostar, the municipal authority gave Zrinjski a long lease on the stadium despite it having belonged to their transpontine rivals. Clearly, the state had yet again used football to embed division rather than to reconcile the memories of past conflict⁴⁶ with these territorial clashes now transcending the physical violence of war to instead cultivate an enduring symbolic significance. Zrinjski were seen to have restored what were rightful Croat lands, cleansing their territory from unwanted impurities through a bounded and exclusive constituency.⁴⁷ For Velež, matches played at the Bijeli Brijeg remain painful affairs of loss, as the venue that had been effectively stolen from them was now reimagined by a club that imposed their own political identity.

As Zrinjski cemented itself as Mostar's dominant team, its footballing supremacy continues to hold symbolic significance at the expense of Velež's forced expulsion. To support Zrinjski is to celebrate Croatism and through sponsorship by the region's largest business, the Croat-owned Aluminj Mostar,⁴⁸ it also receives the overwhelming backing to further legitimize and instil the Croat presence in the city. Whilst Bosniaks are represented in Sarajevo and Serbs in Banja Luka, Croats see Mostar as their quasi-national capital and thus the home for Croat cultural, social, and business institutions.⁴⁹ As the Croatian identity has been championed through every possible channel in Mostar, football has become an invaluable tool to further entrench those ideals. With Velež relegated to the outskirts of Mostar at the decrepit Vrapcici Stadium, the existence of Zrinjski came to symbolize occupation and a manifestation of extremist nationalism at odds with the Yugoslav principles Velež had been formed upon. Today, this confrontation defines relations between the two clubs and more widely between the divided societies in Mostar.

Constructing the 'Other' on Either Side of the Neretva

Nationalism responds to the threat of difference by projecting it on an 'other' who exists outside the national ideal. Indeed, all differences here are distilled to one: us versus them. Amongst Mostar's two rivalling clubs, one can often think of the fandom within their imagined communities as fundamentally Manichean.⁵⁰ Like much of BiH, the communities in Mostar are built through ethnicity and share its fraternity against their past legacies. Consumed by physical violence during the war and managing the symbolic conflict ever since, the fanbases of either club must magnify difference and promote inequality to defy the 'other'. The presence of an 'other' is inherent in the doctrine either side employ, for the existence of a Bosniak/Croat community emerged out of conflict against one another and presupposes a continued threat that the other community poses against the in-group.⁵¹ Otherness is thus constructed in the realm of discourse, which through the stigmatisation of difference⁵² categorizes Zrinjski and Velež into two antagonistic camps, built upon their ethnic divides and representative of Mostar as a city of two separate communities.

Having been rebirthed as a product of the war, Zrinjski had been especially receptive in emphasising its distinct identity. Previously banned due to its nationalist tendencies, the resumption of its initial operations at the holy Catholic site of Medjugorje in

1992⁵³ constructed the Croat vision of an in-group from the very moment the club formed. Clearly then, Zrinjski could now articulate its history as an exclusively and unapologetically Croat organization. Unlike the autonomous entity that BiH's Serbian population inherited following the Dayton Accords, Croats were incorporated into the FBiH sharing their territory with the Bosniaks.⁵⁴ Because of this, clubs such as Zrinjski fulfil a position that protects and legitimizes the Croat community within the framework of a shared federation.

To define a club such as Zrinjski within its ardently nationalist roots, its exclusionary premise against those that fail to fit its mould becomes inevitable. Since the construction of an in-group amongst Zrinjski's supporters is strongly built upon an ethnic premise, its current existence is at odds with any development of a civic identity within Mostar. The animosities that overarch the Mostar Derby suitably illustrates these tensions at play and proves more widely indicative of past resentments that have failed to be reconciled amongst the two constituent peoples.

Namely, these tensions are epitomized by the cultural, ideological and religious schisms present amongst BiH's football and political landscapes.⁵⁵ Typically, these fixtures represented an act of resistance towards any assimilation processes and particularly on the Croat side, encapsulated their on-going rejection of cohabitation.⁵⁶ What such attitudes culminate towards are the eventual incidences of violence that then take place. In Mostar, a group of fans wore the insignia of the Croatian national team and gathered on the site of former wartime conflict, leaving several injured as violence ensued.⁵⁷ Another example includes Bosniaks taunting the Croat population after Croatia lost to Turkey in an international fixture, playing into their derogatory image as Turks and once again, escalating into widespread rioting.⁵⁸

To clarify, incidences of sporadic violence during a matchday fixture across any country are generally considered commonplace. Nevertheless, the significance this carries in BiH and especially Mostar as a melting-pot of ethnicities, usually bears close resemblance to the trauma of its past conflict. Returning to Sterchele, these issues are made more contentious by the over- exaggerated amplification of such incidences, done so through the bias of mass media and the corrupted power structures present to deepen social distrust through an artificially constructed narrative.⁵⁹ In Mostar, these narratives only serve to intensify ethnic separation amongst Croats and Bosniaks. With either group sourcing their security from the imagined community to which they identify with, its inhabitants are further alienated from the out-group or depicted 'other'.

Perceptions of the Past in Today's Mostar

Football is seen to be an important platform for sociopolitical distinction, and a space for hegemonic groups to demarcate the normative cultural values that are associated with the club they represent. Since clubs are enmeshed within politics and can be formed through population upheaval,⁶⁰ their identity shares a close overlap with the ethno-national and/or religious communities who make up their fanbase.

In the former Yugoslavia, the rupture of war instigated a long-term colonisation of fan movements by nationalist ideologies. And due to the dominance of ethno-national politics residing over the region ever since, these football clubs remain tied to these narratives. Djordjevic & Pekic examine the pertinence of nationalism and its constant promotion amongst these fanbases in the post-war years as it transcends any type of politics and thus depoliticizes the potential space for alternative groups to intervene.⁶¹ Here, nationalism remains the dominant and only discourse amongst the fans leaving little room for other forms of political agency.

Patterns akin to these are mirrored in Mostar, where the identification of Zrinjski and Velež as Croat and Bosniak clubs respectively, holds significant cultural weight. As Yugoslavia dissolved, fan hooliganism soon translated to participation in the war itself with these groups among the first to join the fighting,⁶² and in Mostar this was no different. Since Velež sought to carry the continued existence of the deteriorating Yugoslav regime, and Zrinjski arose as a nationalist faction at odds with the multi-ethnic project, their initial contact during the war emblemized Mostar as a city now divided. Each side developed a distinct identity from one another through which they continue to be perceived by. Commemorating memories of war has since been reaffirmed as a form of hyper-fandom to provide an inexhaustible reservoir of legitimacy in the public eye. From this, Zrinjski and Velež are both afforded a patriotic respectability⁶³ and are empowered to express themselves as the loyal representative of their ethno-national identity, and the protector of its values.

Split between the Croat/Bosniak ethnic divide, the religious contrast between Catholicism/Islam, or their ideological histories rooted within nationalism/communism, it is unsurprising that both Zrinjski and Velež act as microcosms of Mostar's wider societal interactions and a rivalry that reproduces its division through the homogenous makeup occupying either club. Today's generation of supporters had not experienced war and the circumstances that birthed the rivalry as we know it today. Instead, these fans use the perceptions ascribed to either club to emotionally over-invest themselves into the glory linked to the group that defended the homeland, and a part of the martyrdom linked to the war itself.⁶⁴

Understanding that perception is not based on registering some inherent properties of spaces and bodies, but rather it is intimately entangled with the histories and ideologies that operate within society.⁶⁵ In Mostar, conflict precipitated a noticeable recrystallisation of ethnic ways to act or think and from this, socio-spatial relations were reinforced by distinct boundaries as Mostar underwent a renewed process of polarisation.⁶⁶ Support for either Zrinjski or Velež is thus deemed to be so closely associated with ethnic identity that few narrate their tension as being between isolated groups of hooligans. Instead, the events map out a broader discourse of ethnic conflict in Bosnia whilst serving as a warning for those who seek to carve out alternative ways of coexisting and identifying themselves.⁶⁷

Beyond the Pitch: The Role of BiH's Political 'Entrepreneurs'

Thus far, our themes have shown how wartime antagonism is reproduced in Mostar's footballing culture to sow division along its ethnic lines. Clearly, football had been vital to the nascent state and nationalist ideologies of the 1990s and as Zrinjski and Velež first came into contact during the war as adversaries, those legacies of the past strongly inform their conduct amongst one another today.

However, football plays an undeniable role beyond the clubs themselves and is known to shape both political preference and national identity across Bosnian society.⁶⁸ So, our analysis must consider the influence that Mostar's footballing culture, which I have established is ethnically charged, has upon wider society and how its instrumentalization can stoke further tension. Here, acknowledging how our themes are interwoven beyond the Mostar Derby to peddle ethno-national sentiment requires an examination of BiH's politicians themselves, many of whom remain closely connected to the clubs that can best promote their agenda.⁶⁹ In the wake of BiH's war, the salience that identity now took on allowed it to be strongly mobilized when group members feel threatened.⁷⁰ In Mostar, the emergence of distinctive imagined communities following the conflict were expressed through physical symbols⁷¹ and here, both Zrinjski and Velež helped to create two separate entities that protected the city's Croat and Bosniak population from the fear and insecurity of its ethnic divide.

Nevertheless, these conflicts cannot sustain themselves from certain structural conditions alone, in this case through heterogeneity.⁷² After all, 74% of those throughout BiH favoured a ban on nationalist parties in 1990⁷³ and whilst nationalism entered the realm of sport in Yugoslavia's final years, BiH was a notable exception due to the diverse following of its clubs. Since it took historical and political upheaval to change the minds of Bosnian citizens, how political actors planned and organized these structures to perpetuate a culture of division is what ultimately proved to be the sufficient condition. In BiH, ethnicity has been treated as a matter of contrast and this exclusiveness is what forms the basis for political representation and legitimacy. Nationalist parties had mobilized identity particularly well in the post-war climate to aggravate difference and provoke division in fulfilling their own agendas.⁷⁴

Dragan Čović, the former Croat representative to BiH's presidency, has strongly advocated for Zrinjski's continued Croat identity and often cites their 'Ultras' group, of whom have shown far-right elements, as the 'pride' of football in BiH. Yet, Čović had been an ardent supporter of Velež throughout his youth and a leading figure amongst its fan-led associations.⁷⁵ Čović's pivot towards nationalism then, and his subsequent endorsement of groups that destabilize Mostar's fragile peace, capitalizes upon the vulnerability that exists within a divided society and more generally demonstrates just one example of political opportunism in practice.

It is unsurprising that elites succeed in consolidating power through their cohesive and ethnically defined networks, clearly manufactured to be favourable to one group but perceived as threatening to the other.⁷⁶ Representing either side of Mostar's ethnic divide, how Zrinjski and Velež compete against one another is reflective of the highly salient

nature of local politics in the city itself. Because football creates an 'affirmation of faith' and any fixture between two opposing teams cultivates a culture of intolerance,⁷⁷ the Mostar Derby introduces a particularly convenient opportunity to incentivize ethnic politics through its portrayal as a 'clash' of identities. Insofar as Zrinjski and Velež can be framed by their differences and weaponized as nationalist tools to feed into ethnic insecurity, then elites are empowered to use football as a continued source of legitimacy.

Discussion

Football within BiH is known to carry its historical and ideological roots today. From the circumstances in which it had formed following the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the eventual unification of BiH's football association took a further seven years after the Dayton Accords were initially ratified, having only been finalized in 2002.⁷⁸ Whilst the reconciliation of BiH's three constituent groups finally bought football under the jurisdiction of a single regulatory body, the league had never succeeded in distancing itself from the realm of politics and the ethno-nationalist narratives that dominate the current discourse. Many of BiH's largest clubs continue to manifest themselves at odds with the potential for a collective and 'Bosnian' identity to develop, of which formed the basis of this article.

Because BiH's clubs consist of a fanbase that can mostly be categorized along exclusive ethnic lines, the reality is that these clubs are not just tied to the political discourse in BiH but should be considered as political instruments in themselves. Clubs across BiH constructed their modern-day identity under the pretext of war and were birthed during this period as organizations that could protect communities seeking refuge by the means of their ethnicity.

Through the Dayton Accords and the power-sharing agreements that BiH currently abides by constitutionally, the nationalist realities that the Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs fought for were now legitimized.⁷⁹ Structurally, the mixture of patronage and nationalism that emerged during wartime became a virulent form of politics and brought ethnicity to the fore of BiH's internal affairs. Football contributed toward those identity constructions and as BiH's clubs divided themselves into antagonistic camps as homogenous entities, it becomes inevitable that football within BiH would remain closely associated to the power structures that currently reinforce ethnic gridlock across the country and weaponize the memories of past suffering.

The Mostar Derby was a suitable case study that illustrated the interplay that football holds with ethnicity in BiH. Whilst Mostar is unique as a divided city with both Bosniaks and Croats in such proximity to one another, I contend that these patterns of the Derby remain generalisable akin to other clubs across BiH. Just a few miles away from the city for example, lies the village of Bijelo Polje (or Potoci). Until relatively recently, it too had also been home to two football clubs distinguished by their Bosniak and Croatian linages, named FK Bjelopoljac Potoci and HNK Bjelopoljac Potoci respectively. Whilst the Croat team has since ceased operations, Bijelo Polje demonstrates that these divides do indeed exist and conflict against one another beyond the cityscape, and that the common themes found in urban centres such as Mostar can also diffuse onto its surrounding localities.

Since many clubs have redefined themselves under an identity in accordance with the ethno-spatial territories they operate within and because political power is mostly devolved to the local level, non-nationalistic forms of agency are sidelined by the parameters set through a nationalistic social contract and dictated by post-war elites,⁸⁰ of whom utilize football clubs in a similar manner to enforce the status-quo.

Interpretation of Analysis

The relevance of this research is understood through the channels in which football is instrumentalized to exacerbate BiH's ethnic divides. Following our analysis, three common themes have been identified that demonstrate how football within BiH becomes a politicized matter. I can confer that through these themes, football is a suitable vessel to then feed into BiH's ethnic divides more widely within society. Thus, a two-way association becomes apparent here.

Symbolism is often present during BiH's matchday fixtures in drawing attention to the enduring legacies of war. Symbols that are rooted in a cultural past are usually more divisive than unifying since different ethnic and political groups hark back to different pasts and these histories will be interpreted differently amongst each group.⁸¹ Because ethnic identity is distinctive amongst BiH's football clubs and their recollection of wartime yields vastly outlooks, fanbases will weaponize memory and trauma to ridicule their opponents, further segregating themselves into imagined communities as a result. In Mostar, the Bijeli Brijeg stadium arises as a point of contention having been taken by Zrinjski, expelling Velež away from the city and using their newfound ownership to proclaim what they deemed was a 'rightful' Croat presence in the territory it now oversaw.

Because football clubs within BiH are overwhelmingly categorized by their ethnic affiliation, these fanbases often isolate themselves from the 'other' through several unique traits. In the case of Mostar's Derby, ideological, religious, and of course ethnic discrepancies separate these clubs, giving either team a deeper significance that fans wish to preserve and simultaneously communicate to the world.⁸² Here, an in-group versus out-group dynamic materializes and through these distinctive markers project the threat of difference upon one another as a form of resistance to further assimilation. This confrontation is itself used as a justification to protect the imagined community that either Zrinjski or Velež claim they represent.

Nevertheless, the perceptions that Mostar's Croat and Bosniak populations hold against one another are not inherent. Being 'Bosnian', at least before the war, was to grow up in a multicultural and multireligious environment where cultural pluralism was central to the social order.⁸³ Ironically, both Zrinjski and Velež were among the first teams in BiH to incorporate players and staff from other ethnic backgrounds following the war. However, historic and ideological revisionisms fractured the potential for unity and were carefully manufactured to now distinguish its supporters and the wider city ever since, despite the multi-ethnic composition that both clubs still retain within their ranks today.

Both Zrinjski and Velež embolden fracture lines existing in Mostar and act as vessels entrenching these nationalistic sentiments. In any instance where these groups antagonize one another, its repercussions are no longer confined to the football pitch and instead feed into how either ethnic group are to judge one another in everyday environments,⁸⁴ only made possible by the elite actors who seek to actively exacerbate these divides.

Implications of Research

These results build upon the existing literature that football, at least in our Bosnian case, encourages bonding capital within an ethnic group rather than to bridge divides between them. Sport itself could be a driver towards reconciliation in diverse societies, and the academic literature can accept its potential to advance social development.⁸⁵ However, I find that the prospects for this outcome in BiH are contingent upon the political elites and their agendas aligning to the same cause.

If this is not the case, then BiH serves to demonstrate that sport instead reinforces existing divides. ~Thirty years on from the war's end, how BiH's ethnic divides remain so salient should therefore be attributed to the role of these elites. Our analysis suggests that whilst war itself is long foregone, the reproduction of trauma is constantly engineered to dictate contemporary affairs across the country and football is orchestrated to give these political strategies substance.

Because BiH functions within a framework that recognizes the autonomous rights of three different groups, the themes analysed (symbolism, othering, perception) give rise to these claims and BiH's different football clubs act as mouthpieces for this. In turn, football can serve as a reservoir that elites can tap into to promote nationalist policies,⁸⁶ where the tension that exists between these clubs and their communities validates one's own ethnic identification as a source of collective protection. Ultimately, this association is routinely instrumentalized to feed into the divides present across Bosnian society and amongst its constituent peoples.

Our analysis also reveals new insight into the mechanisms through which football is mobilized to sow division and as such, remains relatively unexplored within the existing literature. While the consensus attributes the construction of BiH's ethno-national tensions to top-down processes, I suggest that there remains an overreliance on political elites as the 'only' force feeding into these divides. This is not to say that BiH's political elites have not nourished BiH's status-quo, but that the narratives peddled are made most legitimate by the ammunition which is available to them.

Several of BiH's leading football clubs emerging from the war were birthed as inherently ethnic entities and have since took on an unwavering commitment to their founding identities. In our case study, the wartime revival of Zrinjski was built upon a platform of Croat nationalism that ingrained ethnic homogeneity into the club ethos. Because Zrinjski has risen to significant prominence as one of BiH's most successful clubs, the divide it had sown in Mostar is partly owed to their very identity and the values for which it has always stood for that flourished in BiH's tumultuous post-war climate.

If these sources of insecurity cannot be eradicated, then the capacity for BiH's institutional and plural governance to develop remains hindered by the establishment figures who can capitalize upon such clubs like Zrinjski to successfully exploit the social structures that exist in a divided BiH.

How this could be addressed thus introduces a suitable recommendation for future research. Should clubs such as Zrinjski be uprooted to phase out their ethno-national elements? Or alternatively, is club reform possible to then accommodate the multi-ethnic and diverse city Zrinjski presides in? Ultimately, this lies beyond the scope of the paper but inquires into an interesting question deserving of further attention.

Beyond the realm of our Bosnian case, attempts to apply our findings to other countries should err on the side of caution. Our research has explored the shared interplay between football and the wider social structures it affects, in which the findings this had yielded can bear close resemblance to examples elsewhere. Nevertheless, we must remember that BiH is composed of a highly complex political structure, often overlapping and sharing similar competences whilst the state itself remains contested from numerous sides.⁸⁷ In considering this, I remind those attempting to cross-reference our analysis to do so within the frameworks of their chosen case study, as the example of BiH remains truly unique in that sense.

Conclusion

In summarising this paper, I can conclude that football within BiH is indeed instrumentalized to preserve ethnic division and is in turn, used to prevent a collective 'Bosnian' identity from forming. Indeed, the Bosniak/Croat/Serb distinctions that have endured ever since the war remain the dominant social marker. Our analysis drew upon three themes to illustrate how several of BiH's leading clubs, and the culture within them, have emerged from a set of historical and ideological peculiarities to then establish their own identity. Through the Mostar Derby, the fixture between Zrinjski and Velež can create an intense confrontation by their means of ethnic lineage and on a matchday, these identities are often weaponized against one another. Furthermore, how these divides spread beyond the pitch requires a discussion of the existing political elite in BiH, of whom use the extravagance of these fixtures to amplify how division is perceived within wider society. Here, the evident tension that exists in the Mostar Derby is channelled to sustain fear and insecurity, which in turn directs the electorate towards a protecting force that shields them from the threat of an 'other'. In this case, the oft-repeated maxim of an 'imagined community' assumes that role and this is constructed through an ethnic belonging. As mentioned before, a two-way association thus becomes very clearly present.

However, the findings do come with a caveat. Under the academic consensus, football is instrumentalized by the conduct of elites to reinforce divides. I would contend that certain clubs in BiH, such as Zrinjski, were birthed as political entities and as a manifestation of ethno-national ideals. Thus, how these clubs are politicized and help to preserve the status-quo goes beyond the actions of today's elites alone. Simply put, these clubs are not manipulated by elites as a tool to fulfil their agenda per se but are

instead capitalized upon, with those elites fully aware that the ethno-national identities of certain clubs are inherent and can legitimize those agendas when instrumentalized to do so. As a club like Zrinjski grew into one of BiH's largest and most influential clubs, so did the calls of ethno-nationalist elites. Whether their positions endorsed or opposed the club and its ethnically Croat identity on either side of the political spectrum, their capability to polarize this issue now carried more weight amongst the electorate and only continues to sustain the divide across the country.

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A ‘SLOW TRAIN COMING FOR YEARS’?^I STRUCTURE, AGENCY, AND THE 2016 BREXIT REFERENDUM

Luca M. Siepmann

Abstract: This paper examines former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s decision to hold a referendum on Britain’s European Union (EU) membership. It assesses whether the referendum was the inevitable outcome of Britain’s historically strained relationship, or a strategic choice made by Cameron under political pressure. Contrasting inevitability and (increasing) likelihood, the analysis begins with by analysing the decision’s long-term lens. Using a comprehensive historical perspective of the UK’s selective engagement with European integration, it outlines long-term structural tensions and opt-outs from key EU initiatives. Turning to the medium-term geopolitical environment, the paper argues that the Eurozone crisis exacerbated these tensions, highlighting the challenges of the UK’s ‘inside-but-outside’ status as the nucleus of increased domestic Euroscepticism. Moreover, the paper explores short-term political factors, including the rise of UKIP and internal Conservative Party pressures. However, it concludes that, while both structural long-term and short-term factors made the referendum increasingly likely, Cameron’s personal beliefs, leadership style, and strategic approach were decisive. His preference for referenda as tools for resolving divisive issues, combined with his confidence in managing high-stakes situations, led him to commit to the referendum. Consequently, the decision is presented not as an inevitable endpoint but as a choice rooted in Cameron’s distinct political calculus and agency. This analysis contributes to long-standing discussions in the literature on prime-ministerial power in the UK. By approaching the decision to call the referendum with a structure-agency lens, it provides a key account rooted in political science. Its argument about the tight interplay of structural and agential factors aids our understanding of decision-making and leadership in the UK and beyond. With a new UK government seeking to ‘re-set’ the country’s relationship with the EU, the paper also provides a necessary counterweight to exclusively short-termist analyses.

Since the 23 June 2016, when the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the European Union (EU) in a nation-wide referendum, public debates have discussed not just the immediate consequences of the vote, but also the very fact of its having been held in the first place. In particular, it is debated whether then-Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron’s commitment to hold an in/out vote on British EU membership – announced in his famous speech at Bloomberg’s London headquarters on 23 January 2013 – in the event of winning a majority in the 2015 General Election (GE) was an inevitability, or a political choice.

By contrasting inevitability and (increasing) likelihood, this article will argue that a referendum was becoming inexorably more likely immediately before and during

Cameron's premiership, amid contemporary events and relevant intra-party and electoral challenges. Despite these structural elements, however, the fact that Cameron called the referendum for 2016 required a substantial degree of political agency. This casts doubt on the notion of an inevitable referendum.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it will historically outline Britain's membership of the EU and its institutional predecessors, from the UK's applications to join the European Economic Community (EEC) and ultimate entry in 1973 to the 1990s and the Maastricht Treaty. This emphasises European integration as a contentious issue in British politics, albeit to varying degrees and effects, showing longer-term structural tensions. Then, the article will address the shorter-term angle, first, by focussing on the European sovereign debt ('Eurozone') crisis, which hit the EU – and Eurozone in particular – in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007/2008 and ensuing Great Recession; as well as, secondly, the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Both sections highlight Cameron's short-term decision-making environment, both vis-à-vis his party and the wider electorate. Finally, the article briefly discusses Cameron as a leader – emphasising his political style, perceptions and beliefs, and leadership of the Conservative Party.

The paper comes at an important moment for new developments in the United Kingdom's relationship with its European neighbours, particularly with Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government since mid-2024, and exactly five years after 'Brexit' – Britain's withdrawal from the EU in January 2020. As the country continues to tread uncharted territory after the 2016 decision, most analyses and popular debates continue to be either short-termist – centred exclusively on 2016 and what happened afterwards – or have a solely long-term perspective which overlooks the role of prime-ministerial agency in the process that culminated in British withdrawal.

By contrast, this article employs a more integrated approach and focusses on the interactions between long-term structural factors in Britain's relationship with the European project and short-term political contingencies of the twenty-first century. In doing so, the article also provides a lesson in (British) political leadership, the constraints leaders face, and the continuing influence of ideas and long-standing debates in policymaking. Necessarily, this article relies on a wide range of secondary scholarly literature on Britain's relationship with the EU and the referendum. However, it also employs crucial primary source material – such as speeches and key actors' first-hand accounts – which is situated and critically evaluated.

Conceptual Notes

Existing scholarly analyses and journalistic narratives of the 2016 Brexit referendum often exclusively follow one of two approaches: (I) a temporally expansive but analytically narrow focus on structural contradictions and tensions of Britain's EU membership,² or (II) a temporally and analytically narrow scope centring on short-term (<20 years) factors.³ The former school tends to produce more deterministic narratives of (quasi-)inevitability, whereas the former neglects the longer-term perspective in favour of electoral strategies in the 2010s. While they are quite different, I argue that

they are similar in the underdetermination of how and why the referendum occurred in this way, at that point in time, and organised by this specific set of actors.

An important exception to this is Thompson's study of the 'Inevitability and Contingency' of Brexit – which blends the analysis of longer-running fault-lines of Britain's membership of the EU with medium- and short-term considerations of how these were actualised to create an environment in which the referendum itself (and its outcome) become much more likely.⁴ In many ways, this present article is indebted to Thompson's approach. It similarly adopts a focus on the interplay of inevitability and contingency, or – as I frame it here – a concern with increasing likelihood. Crucially, however, this article extends its focus beyond Thompson's narrower one on political economy. This enables a particular focus on the agency of prime-ministerial agency in the genesis of the referendum. In other words, by retracing the path of Britain's membership of the EU – with its structural complexities and institutional hurdles – and the emerging path dependencies, this article attempts to show how one actor's agency at one moment could be decisive in this way. Hence, the article's schematic consideration of David Cameron's socialisation as a politician, personal style, and beliefs – but embedded within the story of Britain's EU membership – provides a novel lens in scholarship on Brexit and political decision-making. While more parsimonious approaches certainly have their merit, this article's central contention is that the interplay of structure and agency, history, and personality, was necessary for the 2016 referendum.

Given the passage of time, this article also critically engages with a careful selection of primary sources which have since been published, and – in the final section – attempts a reflection on how its underlying questions still matter for UK-EU relations and perennial debates in studies of British (executive) institutions. Answering these questions and employing the (temporally and topically) integrated framework of this article are particularly important for a subject area in which post hoc rationalisation and retroactive notions of inevitability have often dominated the discourse of analyses.⁵ Instead, while the referendum must be viewed against the long-standing tensions of British membership, the medium-term factors created a window for agency – first and foremost Cameron's own – to play a decisive role.

I present a simplified illustration of the causal mechanism underlying this argumentation, complete with a discussion of the observable implications which will be traced in the remainder of this article using relevant primary and secondary material. The mechanism follows the process-tracing logic of the completeness standard by which all steps are required for the overall mechanism, the argument of an interplay between structure and agency to explain the genesis of the referendum at that point with a particular set of actors, to hold.

Britain in Europe – The 'Problem that, Like the Mississippi, Just Kept on Rolling'?⁶

This section discusses longer-term elements of Britain's EU membership, starting with its initial applications and 1973 accession. Over the course of the section, this will tease out the conditions and causes of why Britain's EU membership is often viewed from a

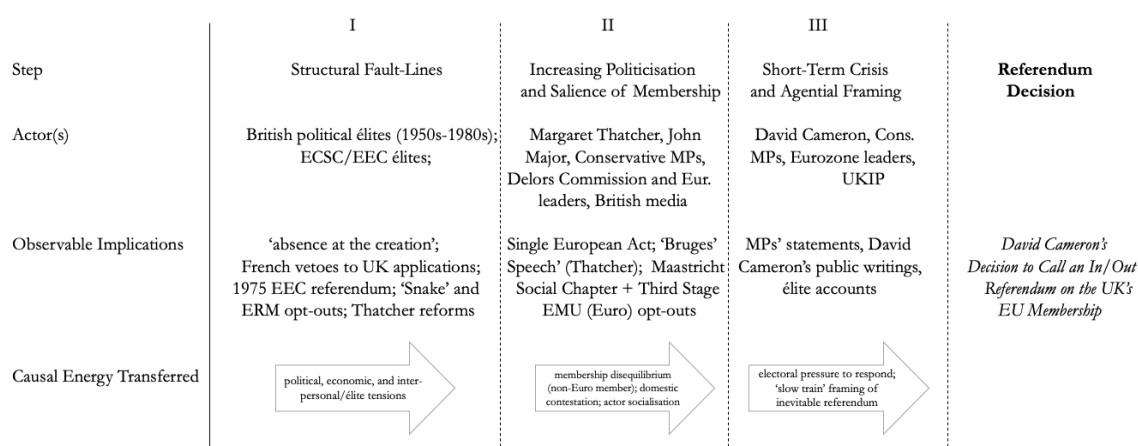


Figure 1: Illustration of the causal mechanism

perspective of (perceived) fundamental incompatibility. Crucially, Britain did not join the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) upon its foundation following French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman's proposal in 1952. This 'absence at the creation' is today often viewed as an instructive sign of later developments.⁷ Whereas the founding continental European nations came together to establish a common market for the crucial goods of coal and steel, delegating control thereof to an independent supranational authority, Britain's response was reticent.⁸ Therefore, the UK remained uninvolved in later stages of the ECSC's development – such as the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which founded the EEC. The UK applied to join the EEC in 1961 – under Conservative PM Harold Macmillan – and in 1967 – under Labour PM Harold Wilson. However, French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed these applications. Still, motives especially for the second application are instrumental: The application is widely considered to have been 'born out of weakness' at a time of economic turmoil which left Britain lagging continental nations and Germany in particular.⁹

While the UK eventually joined the EEC in 1973, preceding events meant two crucial things: First, the UK's absence at earlier stages had left the shaping of institutions to its continental partners, whose preferences often diverged significantly from the UK's with its still widely Atlanticist outlook.¹⁰ Second, French vetoes and the fact that the UK ultimately joined not (also) based on normative considerations like its continental partners but due to a rational cost-benefit analysis made Britain's membership a 'loveless arranged marriage' which never fully entered its national consciousness.¹¹ Also, even after joining, Britain remained sceptical especially of monetary and exchange rate co-operation, as Edward Heath's (Conservative Prime Minister; 1970-1974) opt-out from the so-called 'Snake in the Tunnel' before the UK's accession and James Callaghan's (Labour PM; 1974-1979) opt-out from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1978 demonstrate.¹² Together with the UK's general scepticism of supranationalism, this shows a conscious decision for a different path of membership: Even after becoming a member of an organisation which was geared towards ever-closer union from the outset, the UK kept its distance after joining as much as it had done before.¹³ The 1975 EEC membership referendum, which PM Harold Wilson called amid divisions in the Labour Party, is a final important legacy.¹⁴ As the first nation-wide referendum, it enshrined the principle and possible future use of referenda in legislation.¹⁵ This is especially important to note

given the previous and long-standing opposition to elements of direct democracy among key members of the British ruling elite, reflected not least in a dictum about referenda as the 'device of dictators and demagogues' attributed to Prime Ministers Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher.¹⁶ Finally, even though the 1975 referendum produced a fairly decisive result, with 67% of voters backing continued membership, it arguably did not overcome the principal issues underlying British membership. Throughout the ensuing time, supported for membership was driven only by a limited elite-level consensus that EU membership was worthwhile especially for its economic benefits. This is expressed in Bulpitt's model of statecraft which describes British leaders' interest in seeking an 'external support framework' to help satisfy the increasing demands of the British electorate.¹⁷ Together with the resulting absence of more normative and value-driven support for membership, the absence of more substantive Europeanisation that other member states had seen made a more lasting consensus about membership more difficult.¹⁸

Over the following years, Britain's membership became more stable yet remained sceptical. However, battles over what is often referred to as the 'BBQ' – the 'Big British Question' about its European budget contributions – until the early second term of Margaret Thatcher's premiership (1979-1990) underpinned and sustained the more long-standing impression of Britain as 'an argumentative and rather strong-minded member',¹⁹ encapsulated in George's (in)famous description of Britain as the 'awkward partner' in European affairs.²⁰ Nevertheless, the UK ultimately became instrumental in the European single market's foundation: Indeed, Lord Cockfield's (the UK's responsible European Commissioner) 1985 White Paper Completing the Internal Market and Thatcher's leadership towards the 1986 Single European Act count among the most instrumental factors in its creation.²¹ However, ensuing integrationist and supranationalist developments – driven, in particular, by Jacques Delors, the President of the Commission – hardened Thatcher's attitude.²² Ironically, these integrationist advances arguably have their nucleus in the creation of the single market which Thatcher had originally championed: As economic union was furthered, calls for political union re-emerged and various regulations were required.²³ Subsequently, Thatcher's now infamous 1988 Bruges Speech – following Delors's remark at the Trades Union Congress that 80% of economics legislation would become supranational by 1998 – has come to embody this personal shift, given its emphasis on a Europe of sovereign nations.²⁴

Indeed, together with Thatcher's structural reforms to Britain's economy such as deregulation and tax reductions, her more openly hostile rhetoric on European affairs towards the end of her premiership induced a change in the Conservative Party more broadly.²⁵ This perfected a shift in the two main British parties' stances on European integration, which is rarely recognised in more short-term centred analyses and studies of the 2016 referendum.²⁶ Initially, the Labour Party had been more overtly Eurosceptic, blending opposition to economic liberalisation with the more cross-cutting critique of European integration on the grounds of an infringement of the British convention of parliamentary sovereignty.²⁷ Over the 1970s, and since the 1975 referendum, however, the two parties shifted and the Conservative Party became the more overtly Eurosceptic of the main parties.²⁸

The ratification process of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty during John Major's premiership illustrates this shift. Within this Treaty which founded the EU in its present institutional form and legislated for the single European currency, Major negotiated several British opt-outs, notably from said currency and the workplace-regulating Social Chapter, which aroused particular ire in the UK.²⁹ The Maastricht treaty negotiation process lastingly cemented perceptions of Britain having 'carved out a distinct niche for itself' in the EU: one in which it participated where it wishes, but stood back elsewhere.³⁰ Ultimately, the successful treaty ratification – which cost Major much of his political capital – hardened views among Conservative Eurosceptics who regarded Maastricht as a 'step change' in European integration.³¹

In its aftermath, the fact that Italy and Ireland, among others, had held referenda on Maastricht, whereas the UK had not, led to domestic Eurosceptic critiques and provided fertile ground for the foundation of the Referendum Party and UKIP.³² Therefore, Maastricht has been identified by practitioners and scholars as a critical juncture in the UK's relationship with the EU, having cemented British 'divergence from the EU mainstream',³³ introduced a very critical popular media representation of European politics,³⁴ and changed the parliamentary Conservative Party's main dividing line from pro- and anti-Europeans to soft and hard Eurosceptics.³⁵ The fact that Maastricht structurally embedded and cemented the UK's resulting status as a 'macro-economic outsider' – most importantly, its non-participation in the single European currency – traces many of the structural fault-lines back to the treaty.³⁶ However, it would be teleological to conclude an inevitability to the referendum (and its outcome) on this basis alone.

Europe Changes... Again – Fault-Lines Become Crisis?

Having established the crucial longer-term perspective and the structural internal contradiction of British membership, the following two sections will identify how the medium-term and short-term created economic, political, and strategic pressures which made these contradictions harder to sustain. The emerging room for individual political agency and its enabling role is then discussed in the final section, with a specific focus on PM Cameron. First, I discuss how European politics changed over the two decades prior to the vote. Policy-related and structural arguments relating to the Eurozone crisis generally seem to corroborate the argumentation of an inevitable referendum, prominently voiced not least by Cameron himself.³⁷ Amid the Global Financial Crisis, the Eurozone crisis and resulting domestic and international turmoil re-introduced European 'integrationist dynamics': As leaders tried to stabilise the single currency, proposals for wider integration emerged.³⁸ Crucially, as a non-member of the Eurozone, the UK was not included in most relevant discussions. Given that any resulting institutional changes still required unanimity within the full EU – i.e. including non-Euro countries –, however, British domestic legislation and approval was still required to enact them.³⁹ While this created disquiet in the Conservative Party, Cameron regarded any potential financial contribution – direct or indirect – to ailing Eurozone countries as 'completely unacceptable, as the Euro wasn't our currency'.⁴⁰ For Cameron, he argues, this tension – Britain, a non-Euro but single-market member-state, being affected by reforms of Eurozone frameworks, while not being consulted on them – suggested a

profound instability and disequilibrium of the UK's position in the EU.⁴¹ Therefore, the Prime Minister regarded the Euro's creation without Britain as a critical juncture in the UK's EU membership which was 'not stable nor tenable', as it opened the possibility of an integrationist core of Eurozone member-states using a de facto 'near-automatic'⁴² qualitative majority to shape the institution without considering the UK's (and other non-members') interests.⁴³ Importantly, however, the key role played by British actors in excluding themselves, as it were, finds no consideration in Cameron's own reflections on this – nor does the at least possibility of becoming a late-joiner Euro member.

To illustrate the dynamics during the Eurozone crisis, the December 2011 European Council meeting of EU heads of government is instructive: Cameron planned to use discussions on the Treaty on Stability, Governance and Coordination, which included an automatic correction of unbalanced Eurozone budgets as part of the Eurozone's crisis response, in order to consider non-members' concerns about their relationship with the Eurozone – the 'club within that club' – too.⁴⁴ While a full procedural and topical discussion is beyond this article's scope, Cameron's specific proposals were unsuccessful. Other leaders circumvented the need for unanimity in voting – and, therefore, British approval which Cameron threatened to withhold – through an intergovernmental process.⁴⁵ In Cameron's own account, this attempted veto – highly commended, ironically, by Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers as an assertion of British strength and a veto even though, technically, it was no such thing –⁴⁶ left Cameron with 'absolutely no sense that his stance had been a triumph'.⁴⁷ On the contrary, it reaffirmed his perception of an inherent unsustainability of Britain's EU membership, which needed to be addressed. Indeed, Cameron traces the referendum promise to his post-summit reflections at this stage.⁴⁸

Naturally, this argument needs to be assessed critically; given that Cameron himself puts it forward to justify his decision and may, therefore, be illustrative of post hoc attempts to shape opinions of his premiership.⁴⁹ However, some scholars concur that the Eurozone crisis response intensified pre-existing fault-lines in Britain's relationship with the EU, and, therefore, merely accelerated an inevitable referendum. However, some scholars lend support to this, arguing that the Eurozone crisis response intensified pre-existing fault-lines in Britain's relationship with the EU, and, therefore, merely accelerated an inevitable referendum. Thompson, for example, argues that 2008 – the nucleus of the GFC – 'put a time-bomb' under Britain's EU membership: First, owing to the drive for integration which ensured. Second, because it politicised London's position as the Euro's off-shore financial centre – now increasingly viewed by European leaders as something in need of more substantial regulation.⁵⁰ Also, differing responses meant that the UK economy grew back significantly faster than European competitors.⁵¹ Together with an increasing European unease with perceived combative British behaviour, its institutional weakness as a non-Eurozone member and long-running inability to gain a leadership role – particularly amid Franco-German collaboration – meant that the UK was unable to steer developments in its, i.e., the government's, desired direction.⁵²

Crucially, this perceived deficiency was not seen as the result of short-term tactics and behaviour, but of structural tensions within Britain's position in the EU as a highly selective partaker in European integration;⁵³ what Cameron calls 'the practical problem'

of Britain's membership.⁵⁴ It is, of course, important to note that this 'problem' – while structurally embedded by Cameron's premiership – is to no small extent the consequence of political and agential choices. Following this reading, the referendum was indeed 'a slow train coming for years', and demand could well have re-emerged subsequently if Cameron had chosen a different path.⁵⁵ Interestingly, Cameron uses the EU's €750bn Next Generation EU fund in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to illustrate this; an example of a future stage where familiarly British Eurosceptic arguments about insufficient national control over the use of British budget contributions may have re-emerged.⁵⁶ Scholarly arguments about the path-dependent, gradual inevitability of decade-long developments – in the form of British arm's-length membership – corroborate this.⁵⁷

In an analysis focussing on the respective roles of structure and agency, it is important to reflect briefly on the latter's role in creating the former at critical junctures and through path dependencies. Indeed, the story of Britain's relationship with and membership of the EU and its institutional predecessors is an important reminder, as previous sections have outlined. Beyond key factors outlined above – especially the absence of a more concerted and holistic Europeanisation (the absence of which this article must consider a political choice), and the agent-driven selective engagement with Europe – two further points emerge in the decade prior to the referendum.

First, the New Labour governments' initial attempt to lead greater Europeanisation failed to materialise during its tenure from 1997 to 2010. Its approach to European politics remained 'utilitarian' in the sense that it ultimately remained focussed on reducing the domestic electoral salience of the EU.⁵⁸ The intra-administration battles over joining the single currency, an initial goal of Tony Blair's which was vehemently opposed by his Chancellor Gordon Brown and Her Majesty's Treasury, meant that the government missed a critical opportunity to lock-in British membership of the EU to an unprecedented extent.⁵⁹ Second, The government's decision to forego the transitional restrictions on freedom of movement for Central and Eastern European EU accession states in 2004, singular among the existing member states in an attempt by Blair to pursue a more integrationist position after non-successful Euro entry, induced wide-reaching changes to the political economy of Britain's labour market – and increased the salience of immigration as a subject of political debate.⁶⁰

Medium-Term Activation of Fault-Lines: Party-Political and Electoral Pressure

Domestic political analyses of the lead-up to the referendum decisions casts doubt on the notion of its inevitability, emphasising short-term tactical challenges and considerations as the root of Cameron's promise.⁶¹ Clearly, and as outlined above, the Eurozone crisis re-introduced the issue of European integration to the forefront of domestic debate, creating salient threat perceptions among Eurosceptic Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) in particular. For them, it is argued, the economic – and ensuing political – turmoil painted the EU as 'the proverbial burning building with no exits'.⁶² While, as regards issues, this referred mainly to the integrationist dynamics and a (partly self-enforced) lack of British influence on the response to the crisis, it reflected 'years of the issue growing in the heartlands of the party' more widely.⁶³ Following

Tony Blair's landslide victory in the May 1997 GE, the Conservative Party found itself in opposition after eighteen years in government. During its long period in opposition, the party continued the transformation which had started in response to Thatcher's own Eurosceptic turn embodied in the Bruges speech, as detailed above. Following its move to the opposition benches, the party now more frequently and prominently espoused much more openly Eurosceptic – and, at times, populist – positions under leaders Hague, Duncan Smith, and Howard.⁶⁴ Thus, the oppositional Conservatives' increasingly Eurosceptic rhetoric and policy-platforms – such as Hague's 'Save the Pound' 2001 GE campaign – changed debates on the European Question in British politics and 'primed the electorate' for Euroscepticism.⁶⁵ Thus, when Cameron won the 2005 leadership election on a modernising platform, he already inherited a party which was 'more deeply, and more publicly, riven by factionalism and in-fighting';⁶⁶ a perception which Cameron shared.⁶⁷ While his approach towards his party-leadership is discussed below, this section deals with one consequence, namely the substantial – and growing – number of Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers.⁶⁸ On a side note, the interplay between such Eurosceptic changes to the party's platform and the views not just of party members but of new MPs henceforth socialised into a more Eurosceptic parliamentary party tells an interesting story of generational and parliamentary cohort replacement and its consequences for party and public policy.⁶⁹

As Cameron frames it, Conservative leaders face one 'vital statistic': a vote of no confidence in the party-leader may be held whenever fifteen percent of Conservatives MPs request it.⁷⁰ Naturally, a leader and simultaneous PM could face discordant incentives in the realm of party-management and governing the country.⁷¹ During Cameron's premiership, the restiveness of Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers on European affairs increased for multiple reasons: First, many doubted Cameron's own self-proclaimed Euroscepticism; owing to his initial hesitancy towards an In/Out referendum – first debated in the House of Commons debate on a public petition, which Conservative MPs were instructed to oppose on a strong three-line whip; then outlined in an op-ed responding to backbenchers' campaign for a referendum – and the fact that Cameron's 'cast-iron guarantee' to call a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty was never fulfilled.⁷² However, though this episode was politically toxic, this U-turn was hardly avoidable given that Gordon Brown had eventually signed the Lisbon Treaty before the 2010 GE and Cameron's accession to the premiership.⁷³ Second and connectedly, being in a Coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) from 2010 to 2015 limited both Cameron's room for manoeuvre and the extent to which Conservative proposals could become government policy without impediment.⁷⁴ The mere existence of the Coalition – in a country that infamously 'does not love coalitions' – 'inevitably [produced] some friction', according to the Chairman of 1922 Committee of Conservative MPs.⁷⁵ Third, as noted, the response to the Eurozone crisis led to perceptions of the UK's position in Europe as 'strained', and intensified the 'drumbeat' from Eurosceptic MPs calling for a referendum.⁷⁶ The increasingly vocal nature of backbench Euroscepticism increased their agenda-setting dominance within the Conservative Party.⁷⁷ Finally, the aforementioned December 2011 European Council – with Cameron's threatened veto – pleased Eurosceptic elements within the party and fuelled calls for further, similar concessions in future, thereby bringing Cameron closer to the referendum promise.⁷⁸ Therefore, European policy-developments, the 'accidental' veto, and the unhappiness

within the Conservative parliamentary party put Cameron in a 'desperately weak position' immediately before the Bloomberg speech and his referendum promise.⁷⁹ This suggests a Prime Minister eager to secure his future as party-leader who considered a leadership challenge likely, and only promised an In/Out referendum to avert this for party-management tactics.⁸⁰

UKIP's rise further increased Conservative disquiet. Indeed, many scholars and observers consider this the single most important explanatory factor.⁸¹ Originally founded during the 1990s' debates over Maastricht, UKIP had become increasingly prominent ever since its breakthrough in the 1999 European Parliament (EP) elections where it gained three seats in the first-ever UK election to use a proportional representation electoral-system.⁸² Over the following decade or so, UKIP's strength increased, not least because of the exposure and normalisation gained from parliamentary representation at the European level, and some opinion polls recorded it as the third largest party by late 2012.⁸³ In the short term – and connected to Cameron and his eventual referendum pledge –, several factors help us to understand this: In addition to the discussed shifts in EU and Eurozone, Cameron's intra-party modernising agenda created a 'schism on the right'.⁸⁴ Cameron's more socially-liberal rhetoric alienated some Conservative supporters, and further opened political space for UKIP – and Nigel Farage, its prominent leader – to 'fill the gap'.⁸⁵ A prominent example is the Coalition government's legislation to allow same-sex marriage, a controversial policy among Conservative backbenchers and, much more so, the party membership.⁸⁶

Indeed, the very fact of the Coalition was conducive to UKIP's rise in two further ways: It could oppose some of the government's policies to attract Conservative defectors, and could replace the governing LibDems as the traditional 'protest' party.⁸⁷ Also, by moving UKIP towards a broader populist approach in addition to its hard Euroscepticism, Farage allowed UKIP to exploit wider disaffection with the government, such as over the so-called 2012 'omnishambles' budget, diminishing the Conservatives' cross-national appeal.⁸⁸ Finally, the narrative of the 'denied' referendum on European integration – on Lisbon, but also other European treaties and the Euro – gave rise to wider anti-establishment perceptions,⁸⁹ and entrenched and popularised referenda as legitimate constitutional tools.⁹⁰ Overall, UKIP managed to 'capture' Euroscepticism – thereby draining the Conservatives' core vote.⁹¹ Indeed, Farage eventually declared the 2014 EP elections – which saw great UKIP successes – as a proxy for what Eurosceptics considered the 'denied' referendum.⁹²

Indeed, perceptions of UKIP's success revolve most clearly around this very election. Since UKIP finished in second place – ahead of the Conservatives – in the parliamentary by-elections in Middlesbrough and Rotherham on 29 November 2012 at least, the party-leadership felt UKIP's 'wearing effect' on the Conservatives, as Kate Fall, Cameron's Deputy Chief of Staff, acknowledges.⁹³ The 'simmering rebellion' incentivised short-term strategic behaviour to outflank UKIP on the European issue, and has been suggested as the central factor behind Cameron's referendum promise.⁹⁴ According to analyses by Andrew Cooper, Cameron's trusted pollster and adviser, the strategic environment in 2012 – ahead of the January 2013 Bloomberg speech, so a likely component of Cameron's decision-making process – made a referendum promise a question of when, not if,

particularly ahead of an anticipated UKIP win in the May 2014 EP elections which would likely have threatened a leadership challenge.⁹⁵ While this is convincing given the strategic incentives faced by Cameron, the later defections of Conservative MPs Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless to UKIP and by-elections in their Clacton-on-Sea and Rochester and Strood constituencies only occurred in October and November 2014, respectively – around 20 months after Bloomberg. Therefore, they could not have been a direct element of Cameron's decision.⁹⁶ The strategic view of the decision to call the referendum is supported by the oft-voiced argument that Cameron and his inner circle never expected to follow through, at a time when another Coalition after the 2015 general election seemed likely.⁹⁷

All in all, the domestic angle paints a different picture than the policy-related argument on structural fault-lines of Britain's membership coming to the forefront during the Eurozone crisis. UKIP's rise and connected disquiet in the Conservative parliamentary party suggest that Cameron promised the referendum both as a pragmatic response to the strategic environment – for example, to prevent a leadership challenge – and that it was indeed a matter of personal political choice rather than inevitability.⁹⁸ This perception is one which Cameron himself denies, not surprisingly. While Cameron does acknowledge that UKIP's rise contributed to his perception of the referendum pressure, he argues that he decided on the referendum 'long before the UKIP threat' – after the December 2011 European Council –, and that it merely illustrated the wider unsustainability of Britain's membership on present terms.⁹⁹ Therefore, one must consider Cameron's personality and leadership style to answer why the referendum was eventually called.

David Cameron

Following the analysis of how medium- and short-term factors actualised the underlying structural contradictions of British membership of the EU to an extent that they became economic, political, and strategic pressures, this section analyses how – at this particular point in time – David Cameron's particular set of agential characteristics became decisive in producing this particular outcome. I begin by considering the contingencies of David Cameron's personal style, convictions and beliefs, and party-leadership, illustrating that – while increasingly likely – the eventual referendum required Cameron's personal agency. A major factor pertaining to Cameron's party-leadership is that, while Europe's intra-party saliency was suppressed in opposition, Cameron's 'best not mentioned' strategy meant that the party's foremost dividing-line was never effectively addressed.¹⁰⁰ Despite his modernising agenda, Cameron sought to reassure potential intra-party critics of his approach and, therefore, largely avoided Europe; to borrow his campaign slogan, on Europe, Cameron never holistically challenged his party to 'Change' its position and framing of European issues 'to Win' when we was strongest.¹⁰¹ Still, his leadership compounded the party's European divisions: His leadership-campaign pledge to withdraw the party from the pro-integrationist, centre-right European People's Party is considered as a signal to Eurosceptic factions that he was prepared to accommodate their positions, and the nucleus of future demands.¹⁰² It is important to note that David Cameron was socialised politically during the dying days of the Thatcher government (with all the move towards more openly Eurosceptic positions this entailed, as outlined

above) and in particular the 1992 'Black Wednesday' financial crisis: Cameron was serving as Special Adviser to Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont when the UK was forced to withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. Indeed, he considered himself Eurosceptic.¹⁰³ Crucially, personal style and agency thus contributed to the intra-partisan conflict outlined above. Thus, a different party-leadership strategy on Europe could have produced different intra-party dynamics.¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, this contradiction – of modernising rhetoric and status quo-preserving responses – reflects Cameron's personality: Arguably, on Europe, he – a self-proclaimed admirer of former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan – followed the latter's 'instinct to placate rather than challenge his critics'.¹⁰⁵ Together with an abiding belief in his own abilities – discussed not least by Kate Fall –, his previous successes in using two major constitutional referenda – on the Alternative Vote electoral system (2011) and Scottish independence (2014) – may, therefore, have suggested this as an opportune device to finally remove Europe's saliency.¹⁰⁶ Thus, such a strategic motivation coupled with previous successful uses of constitutional referenda and resulting belief in personal capacity appears to have been the principal driver.¹⁰⁷ However, Cameron denies this, arguing that he believed in constitutional referenda to empower people and – implicitly following a Lockean notion – allow them to determine how government operates.¹⁰⁸ Again, however, a different leader could have had a less favourable view of referenda, and, therefore, chosen a different strategy.

The procedural picture of how the decision to hold the referendum was reached corroborates the perception of a strategic move by the party leadership. It is sometimes argued that it was taken at Chicago O'Hare Airport by Cameron and his innermost circle of aides, suggesting a lack of wider planning.¹⁰⁹ Either way, what can be established with certainty is that the decision was taken without first consulting either the full Coalition or Political (i.e. Conservative-only) Cabinets. This non-collective decision-making process – relying only on trusted colleagues and advisers – suggests a lack of deliberation and proper challenge of underlying assumptions.¹¹⁰

Finally, considering Cameron's political style, he is considered a 'risk taker',¹¹¹ who believes in his ability to 'punch his way out of difficult corners'.¹¹² Crucially, this helps explain why others – most prominently George Osborne, Cameron's trusted Chancellor of the Exchequer – evaluated the self-same strategic (and structural) environment differently and opposed a referendum; thereby showing the decision's agency-contingent nature.¹¹³ Evaluating the situation, Cameron believed in 'confronting this issue – shaping it, leading the debate' and the necessity for decisive leadership, trusting in his own ability to deliver it.¹¹⁴ This reflects a particular strategic disposition in using referenda to legitimate the status quo, as had been the aim with the Alternative Vote and Scottish independence referenda before.¹¹⁵

Here, there is also an intriguing comparative parallel with Italian PM Matteo Renzi's 2016 constitutional referendum to reduce the number of parliamentarians and Italy's symmetrically bicameral legislature, which led to the leader's political downfall. Renzi's personalisation of the poll and tendency to overestimate his political capital bear a resemblance to Cameron's own personalistic approach to leadership.¹¹⁶ This shows the value of analysing individual political leadership in a comparative setting.

Similarly, Kate Fall says that not calling the referendum – which he felt was inevitable – ‘wasn't the Cameron way’; an argument which mirrors Cameron's that waiting for difficult issues to resolve themselves only increases the likelihood of unwanted consequences.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, Cameron justifies his decision to allow the Scottish independence referendum similarly: Amid a nationalist majority in the Scottish Parliament, denying the perceived inevitability would be the ‘fuel the [devolved government] needed to turn an unlikely vote for independence [...] into a near-certainty.’¹¹⁸ Indeed, this perception is described as being rooted in Cameron's political ideology of ‘reform to conserve’: Based on his situational evaluation, he believed that change – in the form of the referendum – was required to preserve Britain's EU membership. Without this change, Cameron argues, he expected the likelihood of eventual EU withdrawal – the outcome which Cameron opposed – to rise: ‘The risks of playing with fire are now safer than sitting and watching the fire burn’.¹¹⁹ Crucially, this analysis is rooted in Cameron's own beliefs and perceptions; his closest political confidante – Osborne – believed that avoiding Europe as an issue would be the better option, thus again illustrating the referendum promise's agency-contingent nature.¹²⁰

Five Years On – Why Should We (Still) Care

Five years after the formal withdrawal, and a decade after the referendum, one might wonder why another study of its genesis is required. I argue that this for two reasons: what it tells us about (British) political leadership and the constraints leaders face; and the more holistic understanding of Brexit and its underlying causes it provides at a crucial time for British-European relations – at which the referendum and why it happened are, arguably, still inadequately understood. Considering its implications for British political leadership, it provides a crucial case study in the debate on the power of the Prime Minister – a debate which seems to be almost as old as the office itself.¹²¹ While an exhaustive discussion of this perennial question is both beyond the scope and direction of the argument of this article, analyses are often divided between those understanding the office as either strong – focussing on its pre-eminent institutional position as *primus inter pares*, the crucial patronage powers at its disposal, and the gradual enhancement of capacity at the centre of His Majesty's Government – or weak – with emphases on the PM's need to act through departmental ministers and the convention of collective ministerial responsibility.¹²² Qualifying such sweeping arguments, Jones compares prime-ministerial power in the UK to an ‘elastic band’: Given certain institutional power resources a PM's actual power depends on their ability to navigate the constraints they face in their party, from the public, and the twenty-four-hour media cycle.¹²³ Crucially, this also explains within-premiership variation in power as much as it explains across-premiership changes: The strategic calculi and environments are, after all, ever-changing and – crucial to this analysis – malleable.

Amid this ongoing scholarly and public debate, this present case study of the Brexit referendum lends support to the ‘elastic band’ hypothesis: While facing constraining political pressure from within his own party and a rising UKIP challenge, and working amid a backdrop of several decades of British ‘in-but-out’ membership of the European Union, the decision to commit to an in-out referendum on Britain's future in the EU depended on prime-ministerial agency which, seemingly paradoxically, the Prime

Minister took outside of the institutional structures which are normally held to constrain decision-making at the top of government. In short, the elastic band permitted the Prime Minister to use some of his institutional power, while it constrained prime-ministerial action through the structural incoherences of Britain's EU membership and rising political pressure. This case study, thus, provides a key addition to the literature on UK prime-ministerial power – detailing as it does the intricate interplay of structure and agency; and, thus, the elastic band at work. It also has implications for our understandings of executive decision-making more widely and beyond the UK, particularly amid shared and rising constraints imposed by the transformation of the political space through technological and communicational advances, more volatile electorates, and – in other EU member states – the growing Eurosceptic contestation of integration.¹²⁴

Second, the present moment is the first key crossroads of UK-EU relations: Building on key discursive and substantive changes since 2022,¹²⁵ the new Labour government initiated a 'reset' of relations after its landslide election victory in 2024.¹²⁶ While – unsurprisingly – Brexit and the tumultuous period in British politics that followed the referendum have received much scholarly attention,¹²⁷ the referendum and how it relates to wider questions in British politics and political history remain poorly understood. Short-termist analyses focussing exclusively on narrow strategic considerations in explaining the referendum decision (and outcome). Excessively long-termist studies falsely suggest an inevitability to Brexit, without recognising – inter alia – the immediate and necessary political agency. By providing a more holistic study of Brexit, its causes, and specifically the interplay of longer-term structural and short-term agential factors at play in bringing it about, this article fills this lacuna. Any potential future attempts at reframing Britain's relationship with Europe should consider this delicate interplay to be successful.

Conclusion

This article discussed David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership, announced in his (in-)famous Bloomberg speech in January 2013. This policy has been discussed ever since, not least owing to the ensuing prominence of 'Brexit' in British politics. Specifically, this article debated whether the referendum was the inevitable conclusion of Britain's sometimes conflictual, often difficult EU membership – or whether it resulted from political and strategic choice. The article argues that a more comprehensive approach and focus on the interactions between long-term structural factors in Britain's relationship with the European project and short-term political contingencies of the twenty-first century is crucial. Its findings provide critical implications for the study of Brexit, future UK-EU relations, and (British) political leadership.

To answer the question, the article first outlined Britain's EU membership historically, emphasising its absence at the ECSC's creation as well as its arm's-length relationship after EEC accession in 1973. Its selective participation is illustrated by its several opt-outs – including from the EU's single currency – and general emphasis on intergovernmental co-operation as opposed to supranational integration.

The article discussed the Eurozone crisis of the late 2000s/early 2010s as a critical juncture given the integrationist dynamics which it introduced, and as the point which illustrated the challenge of its status as macro-economic 'outsider'. Therefore, the Eurozone crisis revealed pre-existing structural fault-lines of Britain's membership. This created domestic challenges for Cameron – with UKIP's rise and Conservative rebellions – which incentivised a strategic response, such as a referendum, both to secure Cameron's premiership and his party's electoral fortunes. Therefore, the short term provided a very conducive environment for a referendum, strategically and topically.

However, the focus on Cameron's personality, convictions and beliefs, and party-leadership strategies emphasised the contingencies of his personal perception of inevitability, positive view of referenda, and preference for bold strategic choices hoping to clear difficult debates. Thus, while the Eurozone crisis and domestic strategic environment compounded long-running structural fault-lines, thereby making the referendum inexorably more likely, it was only called because Cameron evaluated and responded to the decision-making environment as he did. This was not inevitable, and other Conservative politicians – such as George Osborne, Cameron's closest political partner – drew different conclusions in the self-same situation and strategic environment. Only a combination of historical semi-detachment, short-term domestic saliency, and Cameron's personal analysis made the Bloomberg speech – and, thus, the referendum – a reality.

Notes

1. Craig Oliver, *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 2016), p. 9.
2. e.g. Martin Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum', in Martin Westlake, *Brexit: Sociological Responses* (Anthem Press: London, 2017), pp. 3-18.
3. For a review, see for example: Julie Smith, 'David Cameron's EU Renegotiation and Referendum Pledge: A Case of Déjà Vu?', *British Politics* 11, no. 3 (2018): pp. 324-346.
4. Helen Thompson, 'Inevitability and Contingency: The Political Economy of Brexit', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): pp. 434-449.
5. John Erik Fossum, 'Can Brexit Improve Our Understanding of "Wicked Problems"? Reflections on Policy and Political Order', *European Policy Analysis* 5, no. 1 (2019): pp. 99-116.
6. David Cameron, quoted from 'The Cameron Years: A Huge Fight On My Hands', British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary, directed by Ian Leese, last accessed online (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m0008kk7/the-cameron-years>), on 18 November 2024.
7. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum'.
8. Nathaniel Copsey and Tim Haughton, 'Farewell Britannia? "Issue Capture" and the Politics of David Cameron's 2013 EU Referendum Pledge', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, Annual Review (2014): pp. 74-89.
9. Julie Smith, 'Gambling on Europe: David Cameron and the 2016 Referendum', *British Politics* 13, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-16; Brendan Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (Penguin: London, 2018).
10. e.g., Christopher Hill, *The Future of British Foreign Policy: Security and Diplomacy in a World after Brexit* (John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, 2019).
11. Matthias Matthijs, 'David Cameron's Dangerous Game: The Folly of Flirting with an EU Exit', *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (2013): pp. 10-16, here p. 12.
12. Thompson, 'Inevitability and Contingency'.
13. Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, *Cameron at 10: The Inside Story, 2010-2015* (William Collins: London, 2015), p. 263; David Phinnemore, 'Brexit: Should We Be Surprised?', *European Political Science* 19, no. 1 (2020): pp. 692-693.
14. Smith, 'David Cameron's EU Renegotiation and Referendum Pledge: A Case of Déjà Vu?', here p. 326; Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe!: The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018).
15. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum'.
16. Vernon Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit: Towards a British Constitution* (IB Tauris: London, 2019).
17. Jim Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom: An Interpretation*. (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1983).
18. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum'.
19. David Cameron, 'This morning, I want to talk about the future of Europe', Speech at Bloomberg (2013), last accessed online (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>) on 16 November 2024).
20. Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1990); Arguably, despite its useful parsimony in summing up some of the crucial fault-lines in Britain's membership of the European Communities, George's thesis and its continuing dominance in contemporary debates about Brexit have been influential in driving the ultimately incomplete long-termist views of inevitability in Brexit, which this article seeks to counter-balance; cf. Peter John, *British Politics: An Analytical Approach* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2022).
21. Nicholas Sowels, 'From the "Thatcherisation of Europe" to Brexit', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique/French Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 4 (2019): pp. 1-19.
22. Richard Hayton, 'British Conservatism After the Vote for Brexit: The Ideological Legacy of David

- Cameron', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2018): pp. 223-238.
23. Peter Dorey, 'Towards Exit from the EU: The Conservative Party's Increasing Euroscepticism since the 1980s', *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 2 (2017): pp. 27-40.
 24. Hayton, 'British Conservatism After the Vote for Brexit'.
 25. SOWELS, 'From the "Thatcherisation of Europe" to Brexit
 26. Kevin Hickson and Jasper Miles, 'Social Democratic Euroscepticism: Labour's Neglected Tradition', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 4 (2018): pp. 864-879.
 27. Parliamentary sovereignty is described by the constitutional theorist AV Dicey as parliament's right to 'make or unmake any law whatever' (AV Dicey, 'Parliamentary Sovereignty and Federalism', in: *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): pp. 138-180), for discussions of how this relates to (British debates on) European integration: see Chris Gifford, 'The UK and the European Union: Dimensions of Sovereignty and the Problem of Eurosceptic Britishness', *Parliamentary Affairs* 63, no. 2 (2010): pp. 321-338; Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit*, pp. 51-86.
 28. Anthony Forster, *Euroscepticism in Contemporary British Politics: Opposition to Europe in the Conservative and Labour Parties since 1945* (Routledge: London, 2003).
 29. Keith Alderman, 'Legislating on Maastricht', *Contemporary British History* 7, no. 3 (1993): pp. 499-521.
 30. It is important to note here that Britain's was the only opt-out from the Social Chapter; Kate Fall, *The Gatekeeper: Life at the Heart of No. 10* (HQ/Harper Collins: London, 2020), p. 271.
 31. Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, 'The Same Ol' Story ... or Not? Patterns of (Dis)continuity in David Cameron's European Policy', *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2017), pp. 56-71.
 32. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum'.
 33. Smith, 'Gambling on Europe', p. 2.
 34. Oliver Daddow, 'The UK Media and "Europe": From Permissive Consensus to Destructive Dissent', *International Affairs* 88, no. 6 (2012), pp. 1219-1236.
 35. Dorey, 'Towards Exit from the EU'.
 36. Thompson, 'Inevitability and Contingency', p. 436.
 37. David Cameron, *For the Record*, Updated Paperback Edition (William Collins: London, 2020).
 38. Thompson, 'Inevitability and Contingency', p. 440.
 39. Ivan Rogers, 'David Cameron', in Andrew Adonis (ed.), 'Half In, Half Out – Prime Ministers on Europe' (Biteback Publishing: London, 2019), pp. 168-197, here: p.170.
 40. David Cameron, quoted from 'The Cameron Years: A Huge Fight on My Hands' (BBC).
 41. Cameron, *For the Record*
 42. Rogers, 'David Cameron', p. 171.
 43. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 406.
 44. *ibid.*, p. 322; emphasis in original.
 45. A rich and detailed description is presented by David Cameron's Europe Adviser in: Rogers, 'David Cameron'.
 46. Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of Brexit*, Revised and Updated Paperback Edition (William Collins: London, 2017), p. 9.
 47. Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, p. 176.
 48. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 401.
 49. It is, for example, a prominent feature of Cameron's autobiography – for reflections on using political memoirs as data sources, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2010); cf. Nick Clegg (Cameron's Deputy Prime Minister, 2010-2015) in 'The Cameron Years: A Huge Fight on My Hands' (BBC).
 50. Two examples to be considered in this context are the EU's Financial Transaction Tax and bankers' bonuses cap, both opposed by the Cameron government; Philip Lynch, 'Conservative Modernisation and European Integration: From Silence to Salience and Schism', *British Politics* 10, no. 2 (2015): pp. 185-203, here: p.199.

51. Thompson (2017), p. 439.
52. Copsey and Haughton, 'Farewell Britannia?', p. 86.
53. This is reflected – besides the aforementioned 'awkward partner' thesis articulated by George – in Bulpitt's description of the UK as the 'permanent minority member': Jim Bulpitt, 'Conservative Leaders and the Euro-Ratchet: Five Doses of Scepticism', *Political Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1992): pp. 258–275, here: p. 269.
54. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 406.
55. Oliver, *Unleashing Demons*, p. 9.
56. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. xix.
57. SOWELS, 'From the "Thatcherisation of Europe" to Brexit'.
58. Simon Bulmer, 'New Labour, New European Policy? Blair, Brown and Utilitarian Supranationalism', *Parliamentary Affairs* 61, no. 4 (2008): pp. 597–620.
59. Jim Buller, 'The Importance of Being Autonomous: Understanding the Blair Government's Policy Towards the Single Currency', *British Politics* 9 (2014): pp. 318–345; see also Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour* (Penguin: London, 2010).
60. Thompson, 'Inevitability and Contingency', here: p. 438.
61. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. xxi.
62. Rogers, 'David Cameron', p. 170; Karl Pike, 'Reform to Conserve: Europe and David Cameron's Conservatism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, online first: pp. 1–20, here: p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2045459>.
63. Fall, *The Gatekeeper*, p. 243.
64. Tim Bale, 'Who Leads and Who Follows? The Symbiotic Relationship Between UKIP and the Conservatives – And Populism and Euroscepticism', *Politics* 38, no. 3 (2018): pp. 263–277.
65. *ibid.*, p. 265.
66. Oliver Daddow, in Brusenbauch Meislová, 'The Same Ol' Story', p. 59.
67. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 65.
68. Dorey, 'Towards Exit from the EU'.
69. cf. Nicholas Dickinson, 'Advice Giving and Party Loyalty: An Informational Model for the Socialisation Process of New British MPs', *Parliamentary Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2018): pp. 343–364; Hugh Berrington and Rod Hague, 'Europe, Thatcherism and Traditionalism: Opinion, Rebellion and the Maastricht Treaty in the Backbench Conservative Party, 1992–1994', *West European Politics* 21, no. 1 (1998): pp. 44–71.
70. Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 235.
71. Lynch, 'Conservative Modernisation and European Integration'.
72. Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, p. 259.
73. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 593.
74. Hayton, 'British Conservatism After the Vote for Brexit', p. 225.
75. cf. Iain McLean, "England Does Not Love Coalitions": The Most Misused Political Quotation in the Book', *Government and Opposition* 47, no. 1 (2012): pp. 3–20; Sir Graham Brady (MP and Chairman of the backbench 1922 Committee), quoted in: 'The Cameron Years: The Best Is Yet To Come, BBC Documentary, directed by Ian Leese, last accessed online (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/mooo8kk7/the-cameron-years>) on 18 November 2024.
76. Fall, *The Gatekeeper*, p. 253.
77. Dorey, 'Towards Exit from the EU', p. 27; for a more general discussion of the role of the backbench 1922 Committee in Conservative Party politics, see Philip Norton, *The 1922 Committee: Power Behind the Scenes* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2023), especially Part III.
78. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 9.
79. Seldon and Snowden, *Cameron at 10*, p. 260.
80. Kenneth Clarke, *Kind of Blue: A Political Memoir* (Macmillan: London, 2016), p. 473; Matthijs, 'David Cameron's Dangerous Game'; Pike, 'Reform to Conserve'.

81. Hayton, 'British Conservatism After the Vote for Brexit'; Smith, 'Gambling on Europe'; Michel Barnier, *Aux Origines Du Référendum*, in: Michel Barnier, *La Grande Illusion: Journal Secret du Brexit, 2016-2020* (Gallimard: Paris): pp. 27-29.
82. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum', p. 13.
83. Vicente Valentim, 'Parliamentary Representation and the Normalization of Radical Right Support', *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 14 (2021): pp. 2475-2511; it is important to note, however, that the use of different electoral systems for European elections as opposed to general elections in the UK only heighten the generally observed patterns of vote switching between first- and second-order parliamentary elections...: see Robert Ford et al., 'Strategic Eurosceptics and Polite Xenophobes: Support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2009 European Parliament Elections', *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 2 (2012): pp. 204-234;...and that translating opinion polls into actual seat outcomes is much less straightforward in a country with majoritarian electoral rules, which is not to say that the strategic implications of UKIP's rising success in opinion polls cannot still have an effect on politicians' strategic calculi: Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 10.
84. Lynch, 'Conservative Modernisation and European Integration', p. 185.
85. Bale, 'Who Leads and Who Follows?', p. 264.
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87. Copsey and Haughton, 'Farewell Britannia?' -
88. Lynch, 'Conservative Modernisation and European Integration', p. 196.
89. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. xxii.
90. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum'.
91. Fall, *The Gatekeeper*, p. 257.
92. Westlake, 'The Increasing Inevitability of That Referendum', p. 13.
93. Fall, *The Gatekeeper*, p. 257.
94. Matthijs, 'David Cameron's Dangerous Game', p. 10.
95. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 13.
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97. David Laws, *Coalition Diaries, 2012-2015* (Biteback Publishing: London, 2017).
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102. Smith, 'Gambling on Europe'.
103. Ibid.
104. Dorey, 'Towards Exit from the EU'.
105. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 611.
106. Richards, 'David Cameron', p. 338.
107. Fall, *The Gatekeeper*
108. Cameron, *For the Record*, pp. 287f.
109. David Cameron denies that the decision to hold the referendum was reached in this manner; Cameron, *For the Record*, p. 408.
110. Clarke, *Kind of Blue*, p. 477.

111. Richards, 'David Cameron', p. 341.
112. David Laws (Liberal Democrat Minister during the 2010-2015 Coalition), quoted from: 'The Cameron Years: The Best Is Yet to Come' (BBC).
113. Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 592.
114. Smith, 'Gambling on Europe', p. 3.
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INTERVIEW SECTION

Rita Abrahamsen

Interview by Kye Allen

*Rita Abrahamsen is a Professor at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa and, between 2017 and 2023, Director of the Centre for International Policy Studies. She was recently appointed to the Professorship of African Studies in the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies and the African Studies Centre, and will be joining the University of Oxford as a fellow of St Anthony's in January 2026. Professor Abrahamsen holds a PhD from the University of Swansea, and prior to joining the University of Ottawa in 2009 she was a faculty member at the Department of International Politics at the University of Aberystwyth. Professor Abrahamsen is currently Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Birmingham, Nelson Mandela Visiting Professor at Rhodes University in South Africa, and a Fellow of the Centre for International and Comparative Politics and Stellenbosch University. Professor Abrahamsen has published widely on African politics, security and development, security privatization, and postcolonial theory. In addition to her output in leading peer-reviewed outlets, she has published *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*, co-authored, alongside Michael C. Williams, *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics*, as well as co-edited the Routledge Handbook of Private Security Studies with Anna Leander. Most recently, Professor Abrahamsen has co-authored *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order*. Against the backdrop of this timely book, Professor Abrahamsen has kindly agreed to an interview with the St. Antony's International Review to unpack some of its core themes and the wider implications of a resurgent global Right.*

You have published extensively on African politics and security, alongside issues related to private security actors in international politics. More recently, you have written on far-right politics and co-authored the newly released *World of the Right* with Cambridge University Press. What brought you towards studying the global Right?

The journey from African politics and security to the global Right is not as long or unlikely as it might seem. I've always been interested in how ideas travel and in the intersection of the local and the global. My first book *Disciplining Democracy*, for example, looked at how the ideas and practices of multi-party democracy were exported and imposed on African countries, and much of my other work also deals with the relationship between the local and the global. In other words, one of the things that intrigued me about the rise of the radical Right, apart from its obvious importance for democracy and world politics, was how these ideas spread, where they came from, and how they could find footholds in seemingly very different locations and among very different populations. More directly, *World of the Right* began in lunch-time conversations with my colleague and partner Michael Williams. Listening to the news, we began to notice how the rise of various right-wing populist movements was presented almost exclusively as a series

of distinct nationalist movements, and very few picked up on their interest in foreign policy and their international networks. This was back in 2015, early 2016, before the first Trump Presidency and before Brexit, and together with other colleagues at the University of Ottawa and at Queen Mary, University of London we decided to apply for a research grant which was actually already then called World of the Right. What was great about this research team was that we all brought different strengths to the project, and the book reflects that breath of expertise. I should perhaps also add that Africa is not without significance or relevance to the radical Right, and in the book, we trace some of the alliances between African actors and the radical Right in other parts of the world.

In both “World of the Right” and an earlier co-authored article in International Political Sociology, you have referred to the idea of an ‘international political sociology’ held by the New Right. Why is it analytically useful to describe the international thought of the Right in such terms?

One of the main issues we want to highlight in the book is the need to take the radical Right seriously. It's been too easy and perhaps too tempting for academics and commentators to dismiss the Right as merely populist, or worse, as stupid and emptyheaded knuckle draggers. We wanted to challenge that perception, arguing that we underestimate the Right at our peril. It may seem counterintuitive to speak of an international political sociology of the Right, but there are good reasons to do so. What this term captures, is the fact that the radical Right has not only developed a distinct political ideology, but they have also succeeded in translating it into a more practical political sociology that can connect and mobilise people. It is not, in other words, merely abstract philosophy or social theory, but also a form of politics with the power to mobilise identities, affinities and alliances across national boundaries. At the heart of this is what we call a managerialist sociology and an opposition to the ‘New Class’. According to this perspective, the unequal experiences of globalisation and late modern politics are not the unavoidable consequences of anonymous market dynamics or economic modernisation. Instead, specific, identifiable agents and institutions – the New Class – are to blame. This provides the radical Right with a common enemy – the global liberal elite. While the elite has different faces in different geographical locations, they all are part of the liberal managerial class that is generating economic and cultural dislocation in societies around the globe. In this way, managerialist sociology provides the Right with an identifiable enemy that can be used to mobilise diverse groups in very different settings, convincing them to see themselves as part of the same global struggle against the destructive forces of liberalism.

Two intellectual influences on the New Right stand out within World of the Right: Antonio Gramsci and James Burnham. How have these thinkers, inadvertently or otherwise, influenced the political and international thought of the contemporary Right?

Yes, one a left-wing icon, the other a once-forgotten ex-Trotskyist conservative thinker. Of the two, Gramsci is the most surprising, and it is quite striking how the radical Right

in many parts of the world has turned to Gramsci for inspiration on political strategy and tactics. This turn to Gramsci goes right back to the formation of the French Nouvelle Droite in the 1960s, which abandoned old-style right-wing politics and fascism in favour of a meta-political struggle. Basically, the main insight they took from Gramsci is that ideological hegemony is a precondition for political victory. One of the first to point this out was Dominique Venner, one of the founding members of the Nouvelle Droite, who came to this conclusion while serving an 18-months prison sentence for involvement in the far-right paramilitary Organisation armée secrète (OAS) in Algeria. Reflecting on his experiences, Venner argued in the book *For a Positive Critique* that militant street politics was bound to fail without the prior construction of 'a revolutionary consciousness'.

But the French were not alone; we also find frequent references to Gramsci amongst the 'paleoconservative' forerunners of the American New Right, such as Sam Francis, and in recent years the Italian Marxist has been invoked by right-wing intellectuals and activists all over the globe, including in India and Brazil. They seize on Gramsci's ideas of a counter-revolution and counter-hegemony, and the insight that political power relies to a significant extent on cultural dominance and the 'common sense' of how people think and feel. The Right has appropriated these insights to wage a 'war of position' through cultural institutions, seeking to change the dominant 'liberal' culture and ideas that they see as dominating contemporary societies. This is a prior step to winning power at the ballot box. This understanding of a broader cultural struggle is one of the main reasons why the radical Right has been so busy not only on social media and various online platforms but also engaging strategically and deliberately in the battle of ideas by starting new publishing houses, think tanks, and even new universities. In this way, they seek to build counter-hegemonic movements and to educate and train the new elite; an elite that is fully immersed in the worldviews of the radical Right and that will go on to re-create the world in their image. Turning Gramsci on his head, radical Right forces from France to Brazil and from the US to India have explicitly adopted 'Gramscian' ideas in their effort to overturn left-wing cultural hegemony, create new historic blocs, and mobilise counter-hegemonic movements.

The thought of James Burnham enters into the radical Right first on the American side, and I should emphasise that the two experts on Burnham are my co-authors Michael Williams and Jean-François Drolet. Burnham brings us back to the managerialist sociology we spoke about earlier. Burnham was an ex-Trotskyite, who published *The Managerial Revolution* in 1941. There, he analysed the emergence of new mass societies and the ever-increasing concentration of industrial and financial power. He saw similarities between the United States under Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism and the political-economic formations of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany, and he argued that since 1914 an emerging social group or New Class of technically skilled managers, administrators, engineers, and bureaucrats of all sorts had come to dominate society. In effect, they had become the ruling class, taking over power from the traditional bourgeoisie that lacked the technical expertise to govern complex twentieth-century societies. In this emerging order, the distinction between the ruling elite and the masses no longer hinged on the actual ownership of the means of production, but on the ability of the new elite to control, manage, and influence society. And in contrast to the 'hard'

authoritarian strands of managerialism in communist and fascist regimes, Burnham argued that elites in liberal democratic societies tended to rely on the manipulation of cultural symbols, desires, and material incentives rather than on direct coercion, and that through the state, they destructively sought to “improve” traditional cultures through the imposition of liberal norms and values. These, once nearly-forgotten ideas of Burnham have been picked up by the radical Right and extended to the global level, generating a fully-fledged critique of liberal globalisation.

The introductory chapter to World of the Right touches on the ‘risks’ accompanying the study of the global Right, in particular the dangers of inadvertently amplifying, over-intellectualising, or legitimising the ideas of the Right. Could you please elaborate on the trade-offs in studying the Right. How may scholars mitigate these adverse risks in studying the political and international thought of the Right?

This is an important question, and one we as co-authors discussed at considerable length. But it is perhaps also an issue that has already changed since we finished the book. There is a danger that the mere act of writing about the radical Right and drawing attention to their ideas and political thought gives them a degree of legitimacy and academic credibility that they did not have before. Increasingly, however, I fear this is a moot point. Given the electoral successes of right-wing parties and their growing support in so many parts of the world, ignoring them is quite frankly no longer an option. Arguably, they also no longer need academics to give them credibility or legitimacy, so we may be flattering ourselves here. All that said, as scholars we do of course have to think carefully about our ethical responsibilities and how we position ourselves vis-à-vis the Right and their agendas. This was important to all of us when writing the book, and among other issues, we need to keep in mind how discursive shifts have narrowed the space for the most explicit expressions of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, and so on. Today these and similar attitudes are articulated in more a sanitised vocabulary of, for example, the ‘Judeo-Christian West’. Drawing attention to the genealogy and content of such terminologies, is one way of avoiding a normalisation and legitimisation of their policies. However, I believe firmly that at the present moment in time, scholars need to engage with the radical Right, we need to understand their ideas and we need to understand their appeal to substantial sections of the population. This ought to mean more than reading their social media feeds and then dismiss them as dislikable or ‘deplorable’, to use Hillary Clinton’s infamous description. This is by no means easy, and involves not only questions of ethics and politics, but a great deal of reflexivity about the conditions of knowledge production and our own social and political position within its production.

World of the Right clearly distinguishes the contemporary global Right from interwar manifestations of fascism. How does the challenge of the latter towards international order and liberal democracy alike differ from the former? Is there any utility in applying the F-word to the current global Right?

That’s an interesting and important question, and one that has become increasingly

pressing in light of recent events in the United States especially, including both Elon Musk and Steve Bannon making what all but the most generous (or gullible) observers would recognize as fascist salutes. It is also a huge question, and one I can only touch on briefly here. There are differences between the contemporary radical Right and the fascism of the interwar period. In the book, we use the term radical Right to refer to positions that accept democracy but are anti-liberal or illiberal in their worldviews and transformative ambitions. They can be reformist or revolutionary, but they tend to acknowledge the importance of institutional means to attain and maintain power. The extreme Right, by comparison, reject democratic institutions and often embrace violence. In terms of the challenge to world order, fascism often cast its positions in terms of overt national or racial superiority. While the radical right is far from immune to these tendencies, it generally prefers to advocate 'differentialism' – the idea that all cultures are valuable and that none should seek to impose themselves on others. This is also often tied to a vision of a multipolar world of Great Powers, each dominating their own region. There are clearly significant tensions, to put it mildly, between claims to support difference and the tendency to support regional Great Power dominance that primarily privileges the diversity of those countries. And while there are certainly resemblances between this vision of world order and some fascist ones, there are also important differences.

Another issue with the 'fascism' label is that while it can provide valuable historical warnings, it can also lead us to underestimate the novelty of the radical Right today. We need to ensure that we are not trapped inside existing categories while the world is moving in new, often very troubling directions. Finally, we need to remember that definitions are tricky and always political, especially when it comes to the Right. It's important to recognize that this is a sliding scale and the definition of what counts as the Right is itself a space to be struggled over – and that space is global as much as it is local. It is important to keep this space of struggle in mind, as definitions can also become an obstacle to understanding, and it seems that sometimes dismissing someone as a fascist is used as an excuse not to engage the positions advanced, as if the label itself says everything we need to understand.

Multipolarity is a concept readily familiar to students of International Relations. This is also a recurrent term in the writings of New Right thinkers. How does its usage by the latter differ from conventional understandings within disciplinary IR?

In most conventional IR renditions multipolarity indicates a situation where states as 'like units' of roughly equal coalitions form strategic balances of power. The multipolar world of the radical Right is quite different and is connected to the differentialism I mentioned earlier. It is not defined by 'like units' but built around different civilizational states. Their worldview is civilizationalist, and they see civilizations as incommensurable, and none has a claim to supremacy. There are different versions of this, with some speaking of civilizational states such as China, Russia, India, and Iran, others speaking of a Judeo-Christian civilization or a Western Civilization. It's never an abstract or universalist idea as in the 'civilized world', however, but concrete, distinctive cultures and identities. As such, it is strongly anti-globalist, envisioning a world divided into different civilizations

where each is allowed to evolve according to its own cultural and epistemic beliefs. This vision of multipolarity, and critique of global liberalism, intersects in interesting ways with elements of the Global South's opposition to Western liberalism and with China and Russia's desire for a more multipolar world. Civilizational themes figure prominently in the foreign policy visions of both China and Russia, and combined with the civilizational multipolarity of the radical Right it provides a powerful challenge to the liberal international order.

One of your specialisms is in the study of African politics. In what ways has the international political sociology of the New Right, in particular the critique of liberalism and its universal applicability, found a receptive audience amongst factions on the continent?

There are many who would dismiss the suggestion that the radical Right has an audience and an appeal in Africa and other parts of the Global South, but that risks badly underestimating and misunderstanding their influence and reach. As your question indicates, key themes here are anti-liberalism and anti-universalism, plus ethno-nationalism and recognition. The radical Right is often associated with white supremacy – and there is no doubt that this description fits many of its followers – but it is important to recognize that their ideology is profoundly anti-universalist. In brief, they argue that liberalism has destroyed the distinctiveness of cultures and that the liberal, imperialist drive to spread human rights and impose democracy around the world is the great tragedy of modernity. Against this liberal modernity, they hold that cultures or civilizations are incommensurably different, but that none have a claim to universal or global superiority.

In this sense, they are nativist or ethno-nationalist, arguing that all cultures have a right to their difference (providing, of course, that difference is elsewhere). It is this anti-universalism and anti-imperialism that facilitates the Right's inroads and alliances with many individuals, activists, groups, and governments in Africa and other parts of the Global South that also feel dominated or oppressed by the demands of global liberalism. We are looking at complex entanglements, not unified and uniform alliances, but converging interests or what we call equivalences. So, we see African cultural nationalists finding friends and allies among the global Right. A good example is the friendship between the radical pan-Africanist Kemi Seba, the éminence grise of the French Nouvelle Droite Alain de Benoist, and the Russian radical Right ideologue Alexander Dugin. In *World of the Right*, we explore these types of relationships through the concept of 'recognition' and show how transversal alliances join together very diverse forces from the radical Right, religious organisations, African politicians and activists around the notion of the 'natural family' in opposition to the promotion of liberal rights such as abortion and LGBTQ+. There is much, much more to be said about this topic, but it is important to recognize that the anti-universalism and ethno-nationalism of the radical Right allow for and facilitate often surprising alliances with various kinds of actors in Africa and the Global South. Too often actors in Africa are seen merely as puppets of the North, or the continent is reduced to a pawn in a new geopolitical, cultural struggle. But there are powerful domestic actors that mobilise and activate anti-liberal narratives and alliances to claim recognition for their identities and

to serve their interests and agendas, be they traditionalist, conservative, religious, or sometime simply opportunistic.

World of the Right successfully bridges a detailed focus on the international and political thought of the Right with broader introspection on the ramifications of a resurgent global Right for the so-called liberal international order. What do you view to be the possible impact of the global Right's 'counter-hegemonic' strategy on the extant order?

Right now, in the midst of President Trump's barrage of assaults on international institutions and conventions, it would be foolhardy to predict what will happen to what we have come to call the liberal international order. I do think, however, that we will see some dramatic changes, and that some of these are already underway, partly as a result of radical Right efforts, and partly as a result of how the Right's agendas intersect with China and Russia's visions of multipolarity. As we stress in the book, there is not one unified radical Right view of world order, but many different perspectives. Nevertheless, there are key similarities and points of convergence, and one thing we can say with a high degree of certainty is that the Right envisions a more sovereigntist order. This is already evident within policies and actions of the EU and the UN. We already spoke about multipolarity and civilizationalism, and we may well be moving towards a world of different Great Powers dominating 'their' regions. This world will be more tolerant of illiberalism, allowing exclusionary forces to operate with fewer international constraints, be they in the Global North or the Global South. I wish I could end on a more optimistic note, but it seems to me that liberal democratic values and the struggle for a more equal world order is in for a rough ride in the years ahead.

Michael Freeden

Interview by Kye Allen

*Michael Freeden is Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford and Emeritus Professorial Fellow at Mansfield College. Between 2013 and 2015, he was Professor of Political Theory at the University of Nottingham, after which he was appointed as Professorial Research Associate at SOAS University of London from 2016 until 2019. Professor Freeden is a leading authority on the study of ideology. He is the former Director of the Centre for Political Ideologies at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Oxford, as well as founding editor of the Journal of Political Ideologies. Amongst an extensive list of publications on the subject is his seminal *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (1996). Freeden has also contributed volumes on *Ideology* (2003) and *Liberalism* (2015) to the Oxford University A Very Short Introduction series, alongside co-editing *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (2013). His most recent book, *Concealed Silences and Inaudible Voices in Political Thinking* (2022), was published by Oxford University Press. STAIR was fortunate to interview Professor Freeden. In the vein of this theme section, the following explores Professor Freeden's research and his thoughts with a particular focus on the rise of the far right.*

One of your most substantive scholarly contributions has been the introduction of a particular morphological approach to the study of ideologies. Could you please briefly explain to readers the central tenets of this approach?

Ideologies are the ineliminable port of call through which political thought enters the world and obtains its shape, impact, and purpose. They are ubiquitous, multi-layered assortments of loosely-patterned but decipherable mental processes common to all societies at diverse levels of articulation, from the sophisticated and complex to the colloquial and simplistic. They can either be consciously held or concealed even from the groups that are propelled by them. The morphological approach holds that a fruitful way of analyzing ideologies is to focus on their micro-structure, namely on the interrelationships of the many concepts that constitute a given ideology, the particular fluid combinations it continuously produces, and the permeability of its boundaries.

Ideological architecture displays long-term cores and more specific adjacent and peripheral components that anchor them in cultural, temporal, and spatial contexts and in shifting patterns. They compete over the control of public political language by attempting to assign definite interpretations to the concepts they promote—that is, by decontesting their inevitably contestable meanings with the aim of justifying, changing or contesting the socio-political arrangements of a society (or sectors within it).

Pursuant to your morphological theory, ideologies retain an 'ineliminable core'. In your view, what is the core of fascism as an ideology?

Like most ideologies, the core of fascism comprises more than one linked idea or concept. It includes a strong element of national superiority or uniqueness; verbal or physical aggressiveness or violence against rivals, whether real or imagined; a belief in powerful guiding leadership, a pseudo-scientific, hence ostensibly decontested, narrative about racial or imperial destiny, and the self-assumed appropriation of a revolutionary moment in time from which an invigorated nation will emerge.

To what extent is it valuable to deploy the 'fascist' label to describe contemporary manifestations of the far right, such as the alt-right, New Right, or neo-reactionary thought?

'Fascist' has become a borrowed term with strong emotive force utilized to condemn various manifestations of state power and violence (especially internally, e.g. the police) and to express revulsion for extremist world views that block greater equality, the protection of minorities, or assimilationist social policies. It's one of frequent instances where a snappy and facile label—politically very expedient, of course—elides the subtleties that relate to the original meaning and connotation of a concept or phenomenon ('genocide' being another example).

In a 2018 editorial for the Journal of Political Ideologies, you introduced the concept of 'ideolonoids' to describe the ostensible rise of 'shapeshifters' that, while ostensibly lacking intellectual substance, make a pretence to genuine ideological claims. In your opinion, what factors are fuelling the rise of the ideolonoids?

I used the term 'ideolonoid' because weighty causes and ideas are increasingly subjected to faking in order to bestow punch and gravitas on them. The social media are out of control, potentially accessible to all and hence assigning equal and indiscriminating merit to any voice, while easily susceptible of being exploited to weave fictions or untruths masquerading as facts. Consider the phrase 'alternative facts', an improvised rhetorical masterstroke launched a few years ago by Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to President Trump during his first term. Not for her a ruthless totalitarian suppression of more than one viewpoint. How about, rather, conjuring up the language of mock epistemological pluralism—or if you wish, parallel universes of validating knowledge. Invent the facts you like most. Once 'alternative facts' entered the lexicon, no fact was secure from being doubted. The authority of the word 'fact' was deftly subverted by the fact-deniers, while scholars who pursued conceptual accuracy were forced to greater effort in order to eliminate the ambiguity now employed to undermine the worth of any statement, opinion, or value. In addition, the term ideolonoid evokes the spectres or phantoms to which Marxists used to refer: will-o'-the wisps, gaunt, menacing, lacking concrete grounding, and doing their job as form without substance. Democracies are impatient precisely because they hold their countries to account with growing frequency. They prefer fast food to slow cooking and seize the opportunity, however chimerical, if a quicker fix is marketed by this or that political/ideational entrepreneur. Ideolonoids

are almost costless to create and diffuse.

As a leading figure in ideology studies, you have published multiple introspective pieces in the Journal of Political Ideologies on the state and direction of the field. Since your 2019 article on the 'coming realignment of ideology studies', are there any salient developments that you have observed? To what extent has the field effectively grappled with and explored the resurgence of the global right?

First and foremost, ideologies are increasingly in pieces for some of the reasons just mentioned. We find them dismantled, fragmented, sporadic, discontinuous, even scavenged. There will of course be submerged continuities, discernible to scholars and researchers more than to the general public. But means of communication have been revolutionized and the short-termism of discourse undermines durable styles of argument in open societies. What seems to be happening? The traditional macro-ideologies have become unfashionable. Ideologies as national visions are in short supply; their moral rallying power has fizzled out; and their comprehensive reach as solutions for major political challenges such as social justice or individual-state relationships has continued its slide.

Even academic fashions are unstable: the obsession with populism has waned somewhat, the attractiveness of the alt-right for researchers has passed its peak. The traditional left is quiescent; feminism, too, has fewer emphatic, new arguments that vie for the public eye. In the UK a Labour government is doing its utmost to tiptoe around anything that might appear as social democracy. The old red herring that we are witnessing a non-ideological politics refuses to go away, even though it's belied on both large and small scales all the time. And all that means that we have to refine our analytical tools as students of ideology.

The so-called 'global right' comes in various guises and occupies multiple locations. It is therefore difficult to pin down as a theme. In part, because mainstream parties have been pressed against the wall on migration, welfare benefits, internationalism, or national pride, and have adopted positions that incorporate right-wing elements. Italy, France, Austria and now even Germany have repackaged and modulated fascist rhetoric so that the unspeakable has become whisperable, hintable, and ultimately speakable. The aberrations of Trump (part two) and co. have been shouted from the bastions of American economic power so often that what has been shocking and deranged for many may be routinized and legitimated as a new normal. It adopts the languages of resentment, frustration, hubris, venom, and negative, make-believe utopianism—a veritable potpourri or, if you prefer, a seething cauldron.

Researchers and practitioners focused on countering violent extremism have frequently made recourse to the idea of a 'salad bar ideology' to characterise the eclectic range of seemingly antithetical beliefs professed by extremist actors, from misogynistic incels to environmentally concerned neo-fascists. Do you find any utility in this concept?

A salad bar sounds too appetizing. I prefer the idea of a constant rhythm of disaggre-

gation and reassembly as typifying the ideological scene in the 21st century, as a sign of the individuation of politics. Choice and diversity have much to recommend themselves but with benevolent aforethought sprinkled over the nutriment. Audi alteram partem should be a sound guideline for cross-ideological conversations.

In your estimation, are populist and nationalist ideological assemblages more amenable to conspiratorial thinking?

Most probably, if only because they appeal to individual and social groups who are resource- and status-anxious and furnish a shared solidarity for self-defined underdogs. But fantasizing about the risks and dangers others might pose (as well as the support and love they can provide) are endemic to the human condition.

In an interesting article originally published in 2010, 'Liberalism in the Limelight', you reflected on the controversy surrounding the appearance of Nick Griffin, then leader of the British National Party, on the BBC's prestigious Question Time. The article concludes with the following observation: 'The Nick Griffins of the world are out to destroy liberalism; they certainly are sent to test it and they sometimes gnaw at its edges; but they may also goad liberals into improving the quality and sophistication of their defences.' Against the backdrop of recent developments, especially the litany of invitations to far-right speakers across US universities, do you believe that liberals have marshalled improved or otherwise sound arguments in their efforts to counter such individuals?

Liberalism is more pervasive than meets the eye, and one of liberalism's greatest successes is the way in which so many of its values have been absorbed—sometimes unknowingly—into other ideologies, including in areas generally thought to be outside the realm of politics and ideology. So here's a little story. A couple of years ago I addressed a Berlin conference dedicated to contemporary liberalism. In the discussion that followed I was met with incredulity by suggesting that a strong sense of enlightened liberalism could be gleaned through reading recent intelligent teenage literature as much as, if not more than, by poring over constitutional documents, parliamentary debates, or party manifestos. That literature was packed with insights concerning challenging the rigidity of authority, dealing with diversity, coping with failure and loss, testing the limits of persuasion, or addressing personal choices in a sea of uncertainty. Cultivating liberalism by nurturing a thriving and tolerant culture of raising questions and pondering possible answers as pivotal to human interaction begins and ends in everyday life, not in the granite towers of the establishment.

Roger Griffin

Interview by Armin Safavi; edited by Elena Frogameni

*What exactly is fascism? Roger Griffin, Professor Emeritus in modern history at Oxford Brookes University has spent the better portion of his long and celebrated career defining the phenomenon. He is most well-known for his theory of palingenetic ultranationalism, developing an ideal type of fascism as a revolutionary form of nationalism driven by palingenetic myth – myth of rebirth. The theory, first introduced in his 1991 monograph *The Nature of Fascism*, has had a major impact on comparative fascist studies. His more recent work, including *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Violence* (2012) has focused on the relationship between modernity and violence stemming from forms of political and religious fanaticism. He was a founding editor of the journal *Fascism* as well as COMFAS, the international Association for the Comparative Study of Fascism, Editor-in-Chief Armin Safavi spoke with Mr. Griffin via video call in December 2023. This is a re-publication of this interview, first featured in “The Global Guide” STAIR’s podcast.*

To probe the idea of a fascist minimum, one place you could begin might be from a standpoint of methodological agnosticism: There's all these different definitions. Why don't we just stitch as many of them together as possible until they start contradicting each other? How can people who lived through fascism come to such radically different conclusions about what it is? How do you come about with the idea of Palingenetic Ultranationalism from the middle of all this?

The first thing I had to do in my doctorate was try to make sense of what I call the Babel effect. Which is: the more people who look at a thing, the more theories you get. The more “-isms”, the more definitions. And there were two things that helped me. One was Max Weber, who struggled with the same problem in the late 19th century, trying to work out what goes on when you create a generic concept. So he’s going: why are there so many different definitions of capitalism? That’s his example. And he comes to a very elegant theory, which is that there is no objective definition of anything in the human sciences. In fact, if you push an astrophysicist, cosmologists – they would say the very similar thing about the natural world as well, though it’s a bit more limited in its speculative power by empirical data and experiment.

You can’t really experiment on the definition of feudalism. But nevertheless, there is the same problem of many minds theory, which is that the more people who look at something, the more different definitions you get.

How do you cut the Gordian knot of this methodological problem? You arbitrarily indulge in a process he calls idealizing abstraction. My metaphor for students is to take the tube map in London. The map is not a topological map. It's an artificially simplified map. In fact, the topology of where Paddington relates to Waterloo is irrelevant when you're on a tube train, because you can't see anything anyway. You cannot do research on an "-ism: without having a working definition, which is called a heuristic device, and you cannot resolve it in an absolute way. You have to review the different definitions. And you have to take the plunge. And what Weber says is you shouldn't feel guilty about this. This is the only way you're going to move forward. You have to create what he calls an idealized abstraction from and he calls it a utopia. Suddenly I was happy. You create your own utopia. You obviously as an academic and not as a poet, you actually try to have an informed, idealized abstraction. You have to say, look, this is too big for my little life. I'm going to talk about feudalism like this.

When I was around in the 1980s, people assumed that fascists' opinion of what fascism was to be irrelevant. They defined it as destructive, nihilistic, backward looking, anti, you know, reactionary or whatever. Whereas, actually fascists didn't see it like that. So all I did was define fascism in the light of how fascists themselves saw it, and they specifically and definitely saw it as revolutionary. A revolutionary attempt to create an alternative modernity to both liberal democracy, which they saw as part of the spenglerian collapse of civilization, and Marxism, which was even worse, because it was going to destroy the nation. This is true if you read the fascists, which very few experts on fascism have ever done because they can't be bothered: because they already assume that it has no ideology. But if you read Quisling In Norway, if you read Per Engdahl in Sweden, if you read all these people, the pattern leaps out of the page: which is that they are obsessed with a binary cosmology, dividing the world into decline and decay and decadence. The world is null and void, in this state of amorphousness. The revolution is to create form, to create a new era, to create a new society not based on anti-nationalism, but on extreme nationalism, which will reroute people with a sense of identity and a sense of future. And with this mythic energy of the reborn nation, society will regenerate, embracing technology, embracing all sorts of aspects of the local culture. But the ethos will be one of revolution.

Can a scholarly methodology of empathy be extended to contemporary politics, meaning we not only read what fascists have written historically with an open mind but go one step further and try and sympathize with and understand today's followers of fascism?

There's a lot of confusion about revolution. Revolutions are always led by a small elite, a small vanguard. You don't have a total mass popular uprising. Fascists see themselves an elite, but their task is to awaken the people. And the people who relate to fascism are those who suffer from a sense of loss of identity, chaos, decadence, confusion, etc. If you want to make this concrete, think of the average German in 1929 after the second collapse of the German economy. Not the hyperinflation of 1923-1924, but the massive collapse in 1928-29 after the Great Depression and the Wall Street crash. Now there were millions of disoriented people, or to put it in Durkheimian terms, they were suffering from an acute attack of Anomie, not knowing who they were, not knowing what was going on.

And here was this leader figure telling them what was wrong, whose fault it was, and what to do about it. And at that moment, a magic empathy is created between a leader and a segment of the population. Never a majority. I've never, ever seen an example of a majority response to a visionary, revolutionary leader. In fact, the vast number of people, I would say, are survivors. There's a small number of fanatical opponents, and then there's a small number of fanatical adherence, and the vast mass just want to get through the day.

Fascism was not a mass popular movement. It was made a mass popular movement after 1925 when Mussolini declared that liberal democracy was dead in Italy, and therefore that he was going to create a totalitarian state – which was for him a positive word. He made himself popular. Don't forget, he controlled the media. He was a journalist. The trains did run on time, and there were new motorways built, and there were better maternity wards – and he made people feel good. He was like a successful Trump figure. He was making Italy great again.

But the greatness of the previous time was not some equivalent of the American dream in Italy. It was the Roman era. Italians were made aware of a heritage which is very similar to the way Hitler made Germans aware of a spurious, Aryan heritage. So he created a sense of Italy not being made up of mediocre, sort of marginalized people on the fringe of great power Europe, with failed attempts together. There was a famous defeat by Ethiopians in 1896, the famous defeat at Adwa. Italy was just suffering from an inferiority complex; they didn't even know there was an Italian state. And what fascism started doing after 1925, in the next 10 years up to the conquest of Ethiopia, was to give millions of ordinary Italians a massive sense of belonging to a great nation again. And there are parallels with Trump there in that sense, even though I will argue that Trump is not a fascist.

So that is where you get what's called, technically, 'the years of consensus' where fascism became popular – but it was not swept into power in the equivalent way that Nazism was with the election of Hitler. There are many routes to a fascist takeover. But there must be a time at which fascism, in order to work, becomes populist. The ideal of fascists is that the rebirth, the regeneration, the renewal, becomes a popular force. Lenin faced a very similar problem with communism. He realized that communism was not going to get into power through a proletarian movement, a mass movement of proletarian heroism. He needed a vanguard to take power and then 'socialize' Russians.

And there is a problem being a revolutionary. Because by definition, you're a minority and you're probably going to get killed, and most people are just trying to survive. So my point is that the fascist aspiration is for it to be a populist movement. I'm often misunderstood to be claiming that fascism was popular. No, I'm saying the aspiration of fascists is for it to become the basis of a mass popular movement. By then comparing what fascism did in Italy and Germany, very different fascist nations, is where things start falling into place. Because when both Hitler and Mussolini got into power, they didn't just sit around, they actually undertook a huge program of reform and renewal and policy making in order to actualize this populist fantasy of a reborn, totalizing nation.

In an article in JSTOR daily from July 2016 you're quoted as saying something that I think is reminiscent of this, where you "note the failure of contemporary opposition to fascism to understand the 'genuine affective hold which the prospect of revolutionary change' promised by Mussolini and Hitler 'came to exert on the imagination, emotions and hopes for the future.'" Is there a version of this effect which a regular reader could relate to? How can we know what it felt like to be swept up in a fascist movement if we are not fascists ourselves?

I would go to a rave or a rock concert and experience that moment of melting. If you want to start getting close to the fascist conversion experience, then think of watching a football match. If you're a Manchester United fan like me, we're losing yet again, but there's a sense of identification with something beyond yourself. That sense of losing yourself in some sort of higher experience is the heady experience you can actually witness in films of people at the Hitler rally.

Watch Havana Moon, an extraordinary film about a Rolling Stones concert in Havana where you can see the disassembled crowd of curious. By the end of the concert, Mick Jagger has completely created this ecstatic crowd of people who are absolutely into the music. And that is what fascism, when it works, was able to do. If you look at what they were called in Italian fascism: "oceanic assemblies". Just look up the speech of Mussolini to the crowd in Rome after the so-called "victory", massacre, in Ethiopia. He says "Ethiopia e Italiana", the simple phrase is "Ethiopia is Italian" – you can't stage that level of enthusiasm. It's an ecstasy. It's standing outside your individual ego in this demonic version of a rave, like an evil rave.

I think another thing people have got to realize is that in the 1920s and 1930s, there was no internet, no social media, no TV. There weren't rock concerts, there wasn't Band Aid. If you look at a film of a 1930s house that people were living in, even if you're quite rich, it was totally Spartan. It was awful. The boredom must have been cosmic.

If you talk to people who were fascists in any country, the first thing that comes out is this sense of excitement, of hope, of a sense of belonging. It doesn't matter about your personal life, as long as you're part of this bigger thing. It's just being catered for differently now in an age of video games and millions of people playing Grand Theft Auto, or whatever. It's been internalized, and everybody's sitting fragmented in little rooms.

Moving on to Donald Trump and other contemporary issues related to fascism. In 2016, in Vanity Fair, Dylan Matthews references your theory of Paleogenetic Ultranationalism and writes: "Definitional hair splitting is of limited use. At the end of the day, fascism is just shorthand for right wing tyranny, and that can come in many varieties." Could you contrast that idea with something you said in October 2020, to Vox, about Trump: "His relationship to democracy is the key to answering whether he's a fascist or not. Even in four years of incoherent and inconsistent tweets, he's never actually done a Putin and tried to make

himself a permanent president, let alone suggest any coherent plan for overthrowing the constitutional system. And I don't even think that's in his mind." You say, "He is an exploiter. He is a freeloader. He's a wheeler and dealer. And that is not the same as an ideologue. He's absolutely not a fascist. He does not pose a challenge to constitutional democracy. He certainly poses a great challenge to liberalism and liberal democracy." But after January 6th, after his insistence now that he might invoke the Riot Act, after telling Sean Hannity he'll be a dictator, but only on Day One. What's the historiography of Professor Roger Griffin thoughts on Trump?

I would have to make some revisions in light of the fact that he toyed with the idea of "doing a Putin" to the extent that he was prepared to put pressure on tellers to fiddle [with] the vote, to actually make him legally a president for a second term. And certainly his language to his own supporters was sufficiently ambiguous. A side of him was tempted by that, if you like, the fascist temptation. The temptation to say, "screw the constitution, I will be your president." But I still think he was trying to bend everything he could, to discredit the vote and gain more votes and do it constitutionally.

Now note the contrast with Italian fascism. In January 1925, after the 'Matteoti crisis,' where his socialist deputy had been killed by his own party, Mussolini waits to see if he's going to be deposed, etc. When nothing actually happens, he stands up in parliament in 1925 and says: "The age of liberal democracy is over; I'm now going to create a fascist state," which he then does.

Whether the Reichstag Fire was a reality or not, it was brilliantly milked by Hitler, who had enough knowledge of the German obsession with legality and constitutionalism to actually pass an act which suspended indefinitely the constitution. So technically, Nazism was never illegal or unconstitutional because he'd actually used the democratic process to suspend the Constitution. Now that points to both pragmatic intelligence and an understanding of the situation, and a long term goal to destroy liberal democracy.

I see no evidence [of that in the case of Trump] whatsoever, even though some of his supporters definitely wanted him [to]. Definitely, his language is ambiguous. Look at the way he didn't condemn - or he condemned it with an even hand - the Unite the Right [rally] in Charlottesville. He never disowns it. But I believe what is fascinating about the sixth of January was that he had the chance at that point to basically adopt his fascist supporters. And I would say some of them (even though, in a very sort of counter revolutionary, confused way, not disciplined at all) were looking to him to be that fascist. But when push came to shove, he held back from that. His first default was to have a second term.

If we set aside the question of whether, strategically, the long term goal of either Trump or Bannon or anyone else in that movement is to destroy liberal democracy, one thing seems absolutely clear, at least to me – which is that Trump is not an ideologue much at all about anything. So can you be a fascist without being an ideologue? Is that possible?

This is where it gets very interesting. Now, I don't think Putin is a fascist. I think he's been massively influenced by Eurasianism, as it's called, and a particular form of ultra-nationalism. But what I find fascinating is the lengths he's gone to, even now, to retain his power within the framework of Russian constitutionalism. So nominally, he is a Democrat – even though he has perverted democracy, and he certainly dropped all the liberalism. A source of a lot of confusion these days is to equate democracy with liberal democracy. The liberal component of liberal democracy is extremely precious and fragile.

To compare inter-war Hungarian fascism with Orban is just nonsense, historically and ideologically. Orban is quite happy to take EU money and to be voted in periodically and to hold a sway over the Hungarian population, which is quite deeply racist, and has never been de-racified after the Communist rule of Hungary. Let's go to Modi in India. Modi has dangerously played with the idea that you can only be a true Indian if you are a Hindu. And he's persecuted indirectly and directly Muslim Indians, and he's an anti-pluralist – but he's not a fascist. Because Fascism is a revolutionary form of ultra-nationalism. Whereas once you've stripped out the liberalism from liberal democracy, you can have a nationalist democracy without all that trouble of having a revolution and having expansionist nationalist policies.

So what you do as a right wing populist, is to de-liberalize liberal democracy. And that, for me, is categorically, qualitatively, different from fascism. Fascism is revolutionary. Neo-Nazis are fascist. The great replacement theory is actually usable by fascists and by populists. The idea that the American white pseudo-Christian population is being gradually replaced by otherness is, of course, beautifully ambiguous. But what you do about it really does demarcate fascism from populism. Populists don't need to be radical ideologues. They need to just basically be populist racists, which is why populism is the right term. I believe that if you had a popular vote on, say, the death penalty or on immigration, et cetera, you would reveal a massive right wing constitution. I mean [that] a majority of ordinary voters in the country being anti-liberal wouldn't make them revolutionary nationalists.

So I insist that a lot of American journalism and even some academics who should know better, incidentally, who have no qualifications in the subject at all. People like Jason Stanley, or dear old [Madeleine] Albright – [who has written] a great book about 'fascism,' but it's not about fascism. It's about the de-liberalization of liberal democracy. If you look at the history of democracy, it's taken hundreds of years to liberalize democracy through feminist movements and socialist movements, etc, etc. And all this could be torn up in a couple of decades. So we end up with a lot of nationalist democracies fighting it out and adopting policies on freedom of thought, freedoms which are really a bit like [those in] China rather than what we call liberal ideas.

So I insist on the fact that most of the journalists who talk about Trump's fascism are – I'm sorry to say, and this sounds very smug in Oxford – deeply ignorant. I'm happy if they use the word, but, but they should be aware. And they should at least acknowledge there is a technical, social scientific use of the term. Which means that they are using it as a slur word, and not technically.

You told Radio Free Europe in April 2022 Putin is “trying to recreate a modified version of the Soviet Union.” I wanted to put to you something written by Vladislav Surkov, a former assistant to Putin until February 2020, in Nezvisimaya Gazeta in February 2019, called “Putin's Lasting State.” He writes “...the political system made in Russia is suitable not only for [our] domestic future, it clearly has significant export potential... Foreign politicians blame Russia for interference in elections and referendums around the globe. But in fact, the matter is even more serious - Russia interferes in their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness. Once our country, after the failed 90s, abandoned ideological loans, it began to produce meanings and switched to an information counter-offense against the West... [The West] taught us that there is nothing of nineteenth century values to hold on to, but we must bravely step into the twenty-first century, where no sovereign nations and national governments would exist. However, the twenty-first century turned out our way. The English Brexit, the American “#greatagain”, anti-immigration fencing of Europe are only the first items of an extensive list of ubiquitous manifestations of de-globalization, reattainment of sovereignty and nationalism... the westerner begins to twist his head in search of other patterns and modes of existence. And he sees Russia..” Does that qualify as a ‘revolutionary palingensis,’ in your mind?

Well, okay, I'm going to get pedantic here. For me, a revolution is a structural change at an institutional level, but also an ideological change, a change of cosmology. If you compare Romanov Russia to Soviet Russia, by the end of the 1920s there has been a massive, radical change. If you compare the French Revolution and the shift from the absolute monarchy to where it was by 1820 – you know that even though it's a mess, it's such a radically different sort of thing. What I see in Russia is an extraordinary mishmash of continuity, a mix of Soviet Russia with a travesty of liberal democracy in Russia, but also a strange continuity with Romanov Russia, or Peter the Great. It's a mixture of avatars, it's sort of syncretic. I think Russia is drawing on various totems of greatness, of power, because of a very deep ambivalence about the West that has always been there. There's always been a sense in which Russia partly had a foot in the West. So you had Russian intellectuals in the Romanov era going to Germany and Paris, etc, and absorbing. Somebody like Dostoevsky was deeply aware of what was going on in the West, but at the same time, had a sense of ‘specialness,’ of [Russian] exception, that it was the home of dulce, of soul, of depth. People don't often realize that Dostoevsky dreamt of Moscow becoming a Third Rome, that it was the home of a spirituality being ‘lost in the west’ so very reminiscent of why the Germans justified the First World War, that it was a war of culture against civilization. In fact, Russian intellectuals are far more impressed by German thought than they were by French or British or American enlightenment thought. So Russia has always been very divided about its identity as partly Asian, as a sort of stewardship of soul and depth, which Europe trashes, especially in its American version, but also at the same time, simultaneously, part of the West. So I see that sort of speech you've got [by Vladislav Surkov] as very interesting, but I don't think it constitutes something revolutionary. I do think that it constitutes something

that retrospectively, we might look back on in a couple of decades time and say, actually, Brexit and Trump are different symptoms of a sort of involution of countries so that they turn back on themselves and start valorising their own ethnic, cultural, historical tradition.

Look at the rhetoric, say, of the Rassemblement Nationale [in France] or what's going on in Sweden now, or especially Slovakia and Hungary. I hope this gets reversed, but I see a sort of 'turning in,' a sort of cultural isolationism, which is a real threat to the future of the world. And I mean, you could even say that's happening in Israel, that the election of an extreme far right wing version of 'Israelism' – which combines religious radicalism with an extremely right wing nationalism. I have a lot of dealings with Israel, and I swear to your [readers] that the majority of Israelis are anti-Netanyahu. And a lot of them are fighting like heck for a liberal version of a two-party, or even single-party solution, which would actually somehow fuse [sic] Palestinians.

But of course, that's not what we see – any more than people by 1940 saw Germans as anything but Nazis. But of course, every far right government is a government of occupation, of a mass of people – the majority of whom are not fanatical ideologues in any sense at all. Do I see a dangerous de-liberalization throughout the world? Absolutely, yes. I was born in 1948 into a world where liberalism seemed to be a progressive movement that would gradually create a sort of top-down liberalization from enlightened elites down into [the population] via education, via access to education, via social mobility, etc. But gradually societies will get better and better. That is a dream, and it's gone. I think that there is a terrifying rear-guard action now by liberals in every country I've encountered, even in countries like Switzerland. Certainly in Italy, we've got Meloni in power. I'm sitting in Italy at this moment. We have somebody who's part of a party called Fratelli D'Italia, which is a phrase from the Italian national anthem, where some of her own party members two years ago were pictured on Holocaust day doing a fascist salute. Now that really is quite retrograde, you know.

So I think that there might be a turning point towards the de-liberalization of democracy that is still not fascism. In fact, what's interesting about Neo-Nazism is it's now cellular, it occasionally produces terrorists. In 1932 there were 500,000 public members of the SA. There is no way that any Nazi or fascist movement in the world today has anything more than a few 1000 members. Even in Germany. So we're dealing with totally different social dynamics. Where journalists are correct is, I would argue simplistically, is that radical right wing populism is the equivalent now of interwar fascism. That actually the people who in the interwar period would have become fascist are now turning to radical right wing populism as the outlet for their sense of identity crisis. And to that extent, you can see it as a sort of modern form of fascism without abusing a term which does have a specific, demarcated academic meaning now. [There is] a working non-Marxist definition of fascism, which is used by academic communities throughout the world... even in Japan, etc, to demarcate conservative nationalism, from religious nationalism or democratic right wing nationalism, and it is in the terms I've described.

But I would hate to be associated with somebody who thinks that this is objectively true or it's the only definition, etc. I just wish that big books written by journalistic minds

on fascism stop telling readers that there is “no definition of fascism so I'm going to define it like this.” There is a definition of fascism. There's an international industry of scholars working on a quite fairly precise definition - which may not be of interest to journalists - but unfortunately, Fascism is both a technical term and a slur word, a put down word, or expletive. You know, “[my] parents are bloody fascist” or whatever. So it is intrinsically tricky work, and if all I've done is allow a lot of younger scholars to put the debate behind themselves, so they can get on with their research... I'm still waiting for it to be superseded. It's been massively refined by other people but it works. It's a heuristically valuable way of approaching it, and it does mean, if you apply it, that right wing populism, à la Trump, Orban, Modi, Duterte, Erdogan, is recognizably distinct in its ideological DNA from fascism.

Now, if you just say: “well, it's all far right, and therefore it's all fascist,” it might make you feel good and it might produce very good headlines. But I don't think it gets you very far when you actually look at history. I'll give you one trivial historical example. It's very common for Franco to be called a fascist, even in Spain. And Spaniards are quite shocked when I tell them, well, actually no. He used fascism, he used the Falange, he used the support of fascism and Nazism. But when push came to shove, he got rid of the fascism in his authoritarian state, and he replaced it with the Catholic Church. And that's why he could survive into the post war period and have NATO bases. Can you imagine Hitler having NATO bases in Germany? There's a real distinction between a fascist who is viscerally against liberal pluralism because it means decadence, it means chaos, it means anarchy, and viscerally against socialism, and certainly anti-American (unless you're an American fascist). And so I just think if you start actually taking history seriously and political science seriously, you'll end up understanding why my theory is useful because it allows you to get on with it.

So if you're trying to rally socialist or liberal support against a horrible person – sorry, I'm going to sound terrible here – but I mean if you're trying to really rally support against a racist position – and I consider Brexit to be a racist form of politics, even though it's not radical – then maybe Fascism is a useful word as a sort of rabble-rouser. But I think it's dangerous. It's a dangerous slope, because you start falling into the realm of populist rhetoric and demonization. And one of my last little humanistic stands in my old age is to say: if you use the weapons of demonization to attack demonization...I mean, there's a phrase in Bob Dylan's “It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)” where he talks about politicians who “gargle in the rat race choir...cares not to come up any higher... but rather get you down in the hole that he's in.” They're trying to get you down to their level. And I think the value of having politically informed liberals is to get people up and not to put people down.

What do you think the relationship is on a deeper level between the historical scholarship and international affairs of fascism. It's no secret that a lot of far right parties in Europe and North America are collaborating with each other. There's some interesting exceptions. The far right in Ukraine is quite anti-Russian, unlike maybe the far-right in Hungary. Where do you think the field of Fascist Studies has gone in the past 10 years because of this. There's a lot of scholarship that talks about

this in a policy-oriented way, thingst things like democratic backsliding and democratic deficits and misinformation and disinformation, as if populism is an aberration, a thing that we just need better tools and technical capability to control.

It's because people from the political sciences tend to underestimate the power of myth. If you come to fascism via literature and anthropology, then you realize that the power of fascism is not in its ideas, but in its mythic power to dangle in front of disaffected, confused, anomic people, a vision – to that extent, it's like a religious movement. It's like the Taliban, or... al Qaeda. It's a radical solution to an experience of modernity as chaotic and out of control. And it gives people a sense that they can contribute. They can do something, they can act. They have agency. And the thing about populism is that it's deeply rooted in an existential crisis created by modernity. It's been partly fixed by video games, social media, and consumerism and all sorts of things. But there's a huge problem just being a human being now, and populism is wonderful. Imagine being a disaffected German and you're told that Islam doesn't belong to Germany. You say: well, yeah, that's right, and we don't need migrants, because we can have more white children. If you look at the poster campaign of the AfD in the last elections – incredibly powerful with massive echoes of Nazis. And there's a picture of a white woman who's one of the party members with her baby, saying 'we don't need migrants to create more Germans.' Well, that is terrifying. I mean, that's populism. It's mythic. You get great replacement theory, you get fear of the other. And here's a poster saying 'just be white and have children and let's be German.' It's the mythic power of that which matters, it's not about better educational systems, etc. Unfortunately, liberalism is a very weak ideology when it comes to giving people an identity. It is rare for people, spontaneously, maybe children of a certain age, to feel that all human beings are their brothers and sisters.

I do want to ask you more, actually, explicitly, about the relationship between fascism and modernity. But for the moment, if you wanted to put your tactician hat on: imagine you're a politico, and you could speak with a mouthpiece to the progressive movement and you're urging them not to make the mistake that the interwar Comintern Congresses did, where they forego the Popular Front for as long as they did. A lot of leftists, a lot of progressive liberals, even, have a bit of an aversion to someone like Liz Cheney trying to go on Stephen Colbert and say: 'I know you don't like us, but look, we think Trump is bad and we should be on the same team.' Is Liz Cheney our friend? Or, from an academic perspective, if there were to be a modern surrogate of a popular front, who would be a part of it?

Wow. What a question. Well, look, all the popular fronts failed. The Front Populaire didn't stop Vichy and the Spanish left lost. Look at the Spanish Civil War and then ask yourself, how do people who belong to such different constituencies of idealism and humanism actually glue together? I think it's a fantasy. And I don't even think that these struggles play themselves out anymore in public space. I think about the whole relationship between inner space, virtual reality, news machines, the fact that the vast

majority of people in the world today no longer get their news from news media or from newspapers or from respectable things like the BBC – but they're basically in silos, the siloization of ideology. I think this world is terrifying, and I regard myself as a sort of dinosaur because I'm still addicted to BBC Radio Four.

Now I'm a sort of typical academic moral coward – white male Oxford-educated parasite of people who are actually out there doing things. And when I hear the enormous heroism of real humanists who are now in Israel or in Palestine trying to actually keep field hospitals together, I feel deeply ashamed about my inertia. I've at least helped define one of the enemies of liberalism, and I just wish people would stop generically using fascism as a blanket term for every aspect of society that they hate. So you get: health fascism and fashion fascism and anything that is vaguely authoritarian or totalitarian becomes fascist. I just think that's very unhelpful, because one of the great dictums is: know your enemy. And actually we've got lots of enemies – religious fanaticism, all sorts of things – and it's useful keeping them apart in your head. But I cannot convince myself that I have done anything particularly useful by doing this.

Most of Oxford is sort of handicapped in terms of action, almost paralyzed by the complexity of the world of ideas. In a way, it probably would have been better if I got a second and been forced into a real job, as people define it, and might have ended up in an agency trying to do something humanitarian or being a campaigning journalist. That probably would make me feel less guilty. But as it is, I got a first, which is a sort of curse, and it made me feel empowered to contribute to academia, which I've tried to do in my own way. But I don't con myself into thinking that I've achieved anything spectacular there. And when I'm faced with real life issues and problems, I surrender with a white flag, hoping not to be shot like the hostages a few days ago.

Clearly there is a question of purpose, and how to find your purpose in modern life. What is the social psychology of fascists, in your opinion?

I don't know whether there's an answer to that. I think there are many ways to be a fascist, many routes into fascism. Even just the Nazi leadership, is an extraordinary spectrum of different personalities and belief systems. Different levels of anti-semitism, different levels of commitment to modernity. You know for me, existence itself is a massive mystery, and I feel very weird of the fact that I've been born into an age where the fund of human knowledge based on a disenchanted view of the world of science and inquiry, non-religious categories in astrophysics, in cosmology and quantum Science, in every area of human sciences is reaching extraordinary levels of understanding of phenomena which have never been achieved before in human history. And yet, at the same time, the paradox that we are destroying ourselves, that we are possibly amongst the last generations of civilized humanity. Simultaneously, I have seen the world destroy itself and expand in knowledge.

As Proust says, when you get to this sort of age, you look down and you feel you're on stilts, you can see all the geological strata of your life going down into this unknown person that you were when you were in your early childhood. And for me, life remains a massive mystery. I live in Oxford. I mean, how about that for failure in terms of staying in

the womb? It's Freudian almost. I have avoided conflict. I've avoided even confrontation with sheer poverty. I mean, I've seen it in Sri Lanka and and one or two other countries, but I've sort of withdrawn back into my tortoise shell, so I have no nothing wise to say to anybody about how to live at all. I've been very lucky. I think I lived my life in a bubble of illusory comfort and stability, which was a luxury just for me. It's becoming increasingly a luxury in the world. The vast majority of the world's population is living in conditions that I find unimaginable, and it's going to get worse. So I had the luxury to think about useless things. And then, in a way – fascism is a useless thing to think about. Because even by my own verdict, it's really a marginal force in the world. I mean, it's around, but the main threat to human life, ideologically, is autocratic versions of communism: North Korea, China, rogue states like Russia or Syria, and the contamination of liberal democracy.

I think my great message to people is the idea of methodological empathy. If you want to understand thinking and ideology, you read. You study the context of the people who are creating that ideology, and try to get into their mindset and place that mindset within its specific historical context with an openness to art and politics and history and events. And try to actually understand the fragility of the sense of reality of most people, which you can't get from the Banbury Road in Oxford. You can't, you just can't. Go beyond the ring road, go to certain bits of Oxfordshire. But try to get out of this ivory tower mentality and open yourself up to the world, and you can do that not through academia, but just through living.

If I have my life again, I think I'd get away from Oxford to use my degree to get into an area where I could actually concretely help people who are less fortunate than me. But that sounds very pious – but I don't think I've really done that academically. But having said that, well, it's nice to be recognized as not having completely wasted my time.

Deacon Dawit Muluneh

Interview by Julia Hoffmann

Deacon Dawit Muluneh is a multifaceted scholar, author, and religious leader whose work bridges the gap between Ethiopian history, culture, and contemporary issues. Born in Ethiopia, Dawit immigrated to the United States at the age of seven. He later earned a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Virginia Tech. At age 27, Dawit took a transformative journey to Ethiopia's Dabre Libanos monastery, where he immersed himself in traditional church teachings. He was subsequently ordained as a deacon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Dawit is currently a Ph.D. student of African Studies at Howard University. He is dedicated to reclaiming and retelling Ethiopian history, challenging long-held misconceptions, and addressing the impact of colonial narratives on contemporary Ethiopian society. His book, "Hopeless Romantic: The Untold History of Ethiopia", exemplifies his commitment to presenting a more authentic narrative of Ethiopia's rich past and complex present by challenging conventional historical accounts, particularly scrutinizing the influence of fascist Italian researchers from the 1930s on Ethiopian historiography. Dawit has agreed to an interview with St Antony's International Review. The discussion will explore his work uncovering historical distortions introduced by fascist-era Italian scholars, and Dawit's efforts to reclaim and present a more faithful history of Ethiopia.

Can you tell us more about your journey from Ethiopia to the United States at age seven? How did this experience shape your perspective on Ethiopian culture and history?

I grew up hearing about the wonders of American life and was thrilled at the thought of moving to the United States. When I arrived, my focus was on assimilating into American culture. While I appreciated Ethiopian culture and history, my connection to Ethiopian life was largely limited to enjoying Ethiopian food and listening to Ethiopian music. The only exception was my connection to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The church had always fascinated me, and during my early childhood, I was deeply involved in serving within it. Thanks to the church, I was able to maintain my ability to read and write in Amharic, one of Ethiopia's languages.

My first significant re-encounter with Ethiopian culture after moving to the U.S. came in December 2006 when I returned to Ethiopia for a vacation. I visited several historical sites, including Gondar and Lalibela, but the experience that left the biggest impression on me was seeing the large number of beggars on the streets. It was then that I truly recognized the stark differences between life in America and the poverty experienced by many in Ethiopia and across much of the world. This realization sparked my curiosity about the cultural differences and similarities between the two nations, and has shaped my ongoing interest in Ethiopian history and its relationship to broader global contexts.

Could you describe your experience at the Dabre Libanos monastery in Ethiopia? What motivated you to take such a significant step in your life and how did that experience inform your interest in the history of fascism in Ethiopia?

I often say that Debre Libanos allowed me to truly see the church I used to preach about. The virtues of ascetic living, prayer, fasting, and spiritual discipline were no longer abstract concepts but a way of life I fully embraced and practiced. On a deeper level, my time at the monastery gave me a firsthand understanding of Ethiopian society, an experience that profoundly informed my later graduate studies.

Many figures depicted in Ethiopic hagiographies, which are widely studied by Western scholars, resembled the individuals I engaged with daily at Debre Libanos. This unique perspective gave me a deeper, more nuanced understanding of those texts and enabled me to critically evaluate the interpretations found in Western scholarship. So, while my time at the monastery did not directly ignite my interest in the history of fascism in Ethiopia, it did provide me with a unique perspective on Ethiopian history, allowing me to critically evaluate Western scholarship.

Turning now to your scholarly pursuits, your work reveals how Italian fascist researchers like Carlo Conti Rossini and Enrico Cerulli profoundly shaped what is considered the authoritative history of Ethiopia. Could you describe their approach to studying Ethiopian religion, ethnicity, and language, and explain how their findings have influenced historical narratives about Ethiopia? What key elements of their constructed history have persisted in academic discourse about Ethiopia?

Both Carlo Conti Rossini and Enrico Cerulli played significant roles in advancing the Italian fascist regime's colonial agenda in Ethiopia. Cerulli, for example, was accused of war crimes and listed in the United Nations War Crimes Commission archive for atrocities including systemic terrorism, mass killings, ethnic cleansing, and the use of chemical weapons. Ethiopian scholar, Tadesse Tamrat, highlighted Cerulli's complicity, noting:

"There seems to be no doubt that Cerulli's consummate scholarship on Ethiopia and Somalia lent itself so handsomely to the formulation of high-level colonial policies in Rome."

Conti Rossini, meanwhile, openly admitted that his study of Ethiopian society was intended to serve colonial governance. He stated that the goal of studying "the native" was to learn how to govern him effectively. Both scholars contributed to the promotion of a pseudo-scientific racial hierarchy, framing the so-called Mediterranean race as superior to others.² Karla Mallette, in *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean*, highlights how scholars like Cerulli claimed that Ethiopians of the highlands descended from South Arabians – members of this supposed superior race – who migrated to northern Ethiopia about 2,000 years ago.³ This migration was said to have catalyzed the rise of the Aksumite kingdom, with one Western scholar claiming:

“Numerically the South Arabian leaven was not significant, but its superior quality revolutionized life in the Abyssinian highlands and infused into the predominant Cushitic element that peculiarly Semitic ingredient which has throughout the ages given Ethiopian civilization its special character.”⁴

This theory served to justify Italian colonial ambitions by asserting a shared ancestral connection between Italians and Ethiopians. According to fascist ideologues, Italy was not colonizing a foreign people but rather reuniting with distant kin. This narrative not only supported colonialism but also shaped the foundation of Ethiopic studies, leading to an overemphasis on Ethiopia's connections to the Mediterranean world while undermining the indigenous historical knowledge Ethiopians had cultivated for millennia, and de-Africanizing the region.

The works of Cerulli and Conti Rossini are rife with biases and condescending rhetoric. For instance, Rossini described Ethiopians as

“In his barbaric and uncritical, superstitious spirit, the Abyssinian will believe everything.”⁵

Such overt prejudice casts serious doubt on the reliability of their findings. As Verena Krebs demonstrated in her book, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*, Cerulli falsely attributed the remains of a local Ethiopian church to Italian origins due to their “unusual mastery”, relying on second-hand accounts rather than direct evidence.⁶ This exemplifies how their scholarship often lacked rigor and reinforced colonialist narratives.

Beyond their biases, Cerulli and Conti Rossini sought to position their work as the authoritative account of Ethiopian history, often excluding Ethiopian voices. Conti Rossini expressed a desire to end Eritreans' reluctance to consult foreign works, which he deemed “authoritative.”⁷ Tragically, this vision has materialized. In Ethiopia today, history programs for graduate students are virtually non-existent, and history is often studied only through philology departments which were instituted in 2004 by Paolo Marrassini, a student of Cerulli.

This dismissal of Ethiopian historiography is evident in the continued disregard for Ethiopian-language secondary sources by Western scholars, even those fluent in Amharic. While these scholars often master multiple languages for their work, they exclude Ethiopian voices, perpetuating a hierarchy in which Western interpretations dominate. Moreover, Western publications are often replete with Latin phrases and European linguistic references, creating barriers for Ethiopian scholars who must abandon their indigenous knowledge systems to engage with these works. This dichotomy exemplifies how Western scholars have established themselves as the gatekeepers of Ethiopian history.

Ethiopian scholars publishing in English also face exclusion. For example, the 2012 volume, *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopian*, included three articles by Conti Rossini and Cerulli but failed to reference any works by Ethiopian authors.⁸ This reflects a broader trend of sidelining Ethiopian contributions while celebrating

the works of colonial-era scholars. One leading scholar even described Cerulli's involvement with fascism as "controversial" and argued that his scholarship should be the focus rather than his political affiliations.

The consequences of this scholarship are far-reaching. The theory of South Arabian superiority de-Africanized Ethiopia, framing northern Ethiopians as more advanced than their southern counterparts, who were often described as barbaric. This narrative justified Ethiopian territorial expansion during the Scramble for Africa, portraying the country as an active participant of the Scramble for Africa rather than an attempt to expand its territorial lines. Today, ethnic-based politics in Ethiopia often draw on the works of Conti Rossini and Cerulli, perpetuating divisions rooted in colonial era ideologies.

How have these distorted historical accounts influenced modern Ethiopian politics, particularly in relation to ethnic federalism and recent conflicts? Can you provide specific examples of how these narratives have shaped political discourse, policy-making, or inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Ethiopia?

The distorted historical narratives created by scholars like Cerulli and Conti Rossini have profoundly influenced modern Ethiopian politics. These narratives have redefined historical terms and identities, fuelling divisions and shaping political discourse in ways that have destabilized the nation.

Historically, terms like "Amhara" and "Tigray" referred to regions, much like "New York" or "Virginia" in the United States, rather than ethnic identities. However, during the fascist occupation of Ethiopia, policies were introduced to divide communities along linguistic and religious lines. Christians were encouraged to learn Amharic, while Muslims were directed to learn Arabic or other local languages. This policy created divisions between religious groups, exacerbating tensions that persist today. In conversations with elders in northern Ethiopia, I learned that "Amhara" was often understood to mean "Christian", while "Tigray" referred to "merchant". These definitions even appear in historical Ge'ez lexicons. It was largely through the works of Cerulli and his peers that these terms morphed into markers of ethnic identity. Subsequent scholars, building on these colonial ideologies, created the illusion that ethnic identities were constant throughout Ethiopian history.

For example, Ezekiel Gebissa, a scholar associated with Oromo studies, has claimed that ethnic identity has always been a defining feature of Ethiopian society. However, this claim is contradicted by historical evidence. Among thousands of surviving Ethiopic manuscripts, there is no indication that ethnicity was a point of contention before the 17th century. Instead, historical tensions revolved around governance and regional disputes. The failure to distinguish between historical realities and modern constructs has contributed to Ethiopia's adoption of an ethnic-based federal system, further entrenching divisions.

Ethiopia's linguistic and cultural history highlights the complexities of these divisions. During the Aksumite Empire, Ge'ez was the literary language. As the empire declined,

Amharic and Tigrinya replaced Ge'ez as the spoken languages, though Ge'ez retained its literary role. During the Zag^we dynasty, the Agäw people, believed to have ruled the empire, adopted Ge'ez as a literary language, despite their own grievances with the Aksumite rulers. As Marie-Laure Derat notes, this choice reflected a desire to embrace Aksumite heritage, illustrating how monolingual policies can be adopted willingly when they serve broader cultural or administrative goals.

However, during the fascist occupation, language policies were weaponized to undermine Ethiopian unity. Fascist authorities recognized that Ethiopia's monolingual policies, particularly the use of Amharic as the administrative language, fostered national cohesion and pride. To weaken this unity, they implemented multilingual policies to fragment the population and reduce the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), which had been a key factor in Ethiopia's victory at the Battle of Adwa. Unlike South Africa's multilingual policies, which sought to uplift marginalized African languages, Ethiopia's multilingual policies aimed to divide communities and weaken national identity.

The long-term effects of these policies are evident in Ethiopia's current political dynamics. Language remains central to ethno-national tensions, particularly for groups like the Oromo, who feel their language was historically suppressed in favour of Amharic. These tensions have contributed to a fragmented political landscape, with ethnic federalism reinforcing divisions. For instance, Oromo political leaders often cite historical grievances, some rooted in the distorted narratives promoted by Cerulli and his peers, to advocate for autonomy. Meanwhile, Amhara minorities living in Oromo-dominated regions face marginalization, highlighting the practical challenges of ethnic federalism.

The politicization of language has also impeded state-to-state interactions within Ethiopia and with neighbouring countries, as marginalized groups struggle to engage in a unified national framework. These dynamics reflect broader challenges across Africa, where multilingual policies can both empower and divide, depending on their implementation.

In summary, the colonial-era redefinitions of Ethiopian history, language, and identity have had a lasting impact on the nation's political discourse and inter-ethnic relations. By transforming regional terms into rigid ethnic identities and using language policies to fragment communities, these narratives have shaped Ethiopia's ethnic federalism system and contributed to its recent conflicts.

Dawit, your work aims to uncover and reclaim Ethiopia's history from the distortions introduced by fascist-era Italian scholars. How do you approach the challenge of writing an authentic account of Ethiopian history? In what ways, if at all, have the dominant narratives constructed by Italian scholars shaped your own understanding of Ethiopian history, and how do you navigate and critically examine your biases that may stem from engaging with these narratives?

Writing an authentic account of Ethiopian history is an immense challenge, requiring

both humility and intellectual honesty. I approach this task with a recognition that history is complex and that my understanding is always subject to revision. I leave room for error, acknowledging that I may be wrong, but I demand evidence to prove otherwise. For example, since publishing my book, my position on religious tensions in Ethiopia has evolved. Initially, I believed these tensions were minimal, but further research has revealed they were far more pronounced than I had assumed. This willingness to revisit and revise conclusions is essential in the pursuit of historical accuracy.

Another key aspect of my approach is recognizing the complexity of history and remaining committed to presenting multiple perspectives in any historical debate. Intellectual honesty is essential, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as the 16th-century Oromo migrations into the Ethiopian highlands. The only primary source we have from this period is the work of Aba Bahrey, who portrayed the Oromo people in a negative light. Today, those who resonate with the narrative of Oromo victimization often point to the polemical rhetoric in Aba Bahrey's writings, which was produced while he served in the imperial court, as evidence of their historical mistreatment. Conversely, others argue that Bahrey's accounts are factual, first-hand records of the events. However, the truth likely lies somewhere in between. Aba Bahrey's house was raided and burned during the migration period, which likely influenced his anger toward the Oromo community. It is not difficult to imagine how his personal experiences could have biased his portrayal of the group, and this bias may be reflected in his writings.

Engaging with the works of fascist-era Italian scholars, like Cerulli, is unavoidable in this process. Their writings, while deeply flawed and biased, are a significant part of the historical record. Some assume that my work is an attempt to "audit" or completely dismiss these scholars, but that would be misguided. Instead, I approach their work critically, understanding that it can still provide valuable insights when carefully contextualized. For instance, reading Cerulli's accounts is akin to reading the notes of slave masters to understand the realities of slavery. It is essential to acknowledge who these writers were. Cerulli was a fascist, and we should read his work with that understanding firmly in mind.

Early in my academic journey, I was unconsciously influenced by some of the frameworks established by these scholars. I often gave preference to Western narratives of Ethiopian history over traditional ones, assuming that traditional narratives which are often rooted in oral traditions were "uncritical". However, I have since shifted my approach, taking the time to analyze oral traditions critically and thoughtfully, rather than defaulting to Western narratives. This allows me to appreciate the depth and nuance of Ethiopian perspectives while challenging assumptions about their validity.

In your book, "Hopeless Romantic: The Untold History of Ethiopia", you discuss aspects of Ethiopian history that have been overlooked or misrepresented. Which of these do you think have the greatest potential to debunk harmful historical myths that have distorted Ethiopian politics?

In *Hopeless Romantic: The Untold History of Ethiopia*, one of the most significant aspects I address is the overlooked fact that Ethiopia is an African country. While this may seem obvious, it has been consistently disregarded or minimized by Western scholars. There is a pressing need for more research on Ethiopia's relationship with the rest of Africa, as this connection remains understudied and underappreciated. Many African students are deeply aware of colonial impacts on their nations, but Ethiopian students, relying on Western narratives, often perceive Ethiopia as uniquely immune to colonial influence. This misconception reinforces the idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism and obscures the colonial legacy in Ethiopian studies.

Now, as part of the African Studies program at Howard University, I have begun applying the principles I've learned about colonialism to decolonize Ethiopic studies. It is shocking that, nearly a century after Cerulli's work, there has been no serious attempt to critically examine the colonial legacy embedded in Ethiopic studies. Instead, resistance and silencing have been the default responses. I have personally experienced this resistance; when I began highlighting the colonial impact on Ethiopic studies, I became a pariah within the academic community. A faculty member at Hamburg University informed me that a directive had been issued within the Department of Ethiopic Studies, home to leading scholars of Ethiopian history, instructing them not to engage with me or my work. This intentional isolation underscores the entrenched resistance to acknowledging colonial influences.

Such resistance only highlights the importance of integrating Ethiopic studies into African studies. By adopting methodologies developed within African studies, we can better illuminate the colonial legacy within Ethiopic studies. This integration allows for a more critical and comprehensive examination of Ethiopia's history in the context of Africa, debunking harmful myths of Ethiopian exceptionalism and exposing how colonial narratives continue to shape Ethiopian politics and academic discourse.

Your book also introduces the concept of being a “hopeless romantic” for Ethiopia as a way to approach the country’s complex history and current challenges. Could you elaborate on what this concept means to you, particularly in the context of your research on Ethiopian history?

Being a *hopeless romantic* for Ethiopia means recognizing that history is complex and cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives. Typically, there are two extreme approaches to Ethiopian history: one that idealizes it, emphasizing only its stability and grandeur, and another that focuses solely on periods of tension and conflict. I believe both perspectives are incomplete. If we examine the history of any region, we find both moments of strife and moments of reconciliation, and Ethiopia is no exception.

A balanced approach requires acknowledging both the challenges and the triumphs of Ethiopia's past. Confronting historical mistakes is essential for national healing but so is recognizing the resilience and accomplishments that have shaped it. Both perspectives are necessary for a more truthful and constructive understanding of the nation's history.

Moreover, my research has shown me that Ethiopia has endured periods of conflict and division before, yet it has always found ways to mend and move forward. This gives me

hope that, despite the current political turmoil, better days lie ahead. While the present situation may seem dire, history suggests that Ethiopia has the capacity to overcome its challenges, just as it has done in the past.

How do you see this historical re-examination influencing relationships among Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups? In your view, how might a more comprehensive understanding of Ethiopia's shared past contribute to current efforts for conflict resolution and reconciliation?

A historical re-examination of Ethiopia's past can play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation among the country's diverse ethnic groups. A practical example of this can be seen in the ongoing debates about the legacy of Emperor Menelik II.

For many, particularly those who identify with the Amhara ethnic group, Menelik II is regarded as a national hero who unified Ethiopia and led the country to victory against the Italians in the late 19th century. Conversely, many within the Oromo ethnic group view him as a figure responsible for forcibly expanding Ethiopia's borders into Oromo regions, often through violent means. This polarized view of Menelik has contributed to tensions and deepened ethnic divisions.

However, both perspectives contain elements of truth. Menelik II's leadership was instrumental in Ethiopia's historic defeat of the Italians, securing the nation's sovereignty at a time when much of Africa was being colonized. At the same time, his territorial expansion into the southern regions brought significant upheaval, including taxation policies that affected the populations now recognized as Oromo. Rather than framing his legacy in absolute terms, as either a hero or a villain, it is more productive to acknowledge the complexity of his actions, recognizing both his achievements and the harm that resulted from his policies.

That said, it is also important to distinguish between genuine historical critique and narratives that are deliberately engineered to fuel ethnic tensions. In emotionally charged discussions, baseless claims about Menelik II, which are often unsupported by historical evidence, are sometimes used as political tools to deepen divisions rather than promote understanding. Such approaches are not only intellectually dishonest but also counterproductive to efforts toward reconciliation.

A more comprehensive understanding of Ethiopia's shared history, one that embraces both its triumphs and its flaws, can contribute to national healing. By moving beyond one-sided narratives, Ethiopians can engage in more constructive conversations about their past, fostering a shared historical consciousness that promotes unity rather than division.

Finally, your work on uncovering historical distortions in Ethiopian history raises intriguing questions about the broader implications of your research. How do you see your work contributing to the ongoing discussions about decolonizing fascist studies? Specifically, how does your research on Ethiopia's history illuminate the connections between

colonialism, imperialism, and fascism, and what insights does it offer for understanding fascism as a global phenomenon rather than just a European one?

Eurocentric historical revisionism has often obscured pre-colonial African narratives, leaving scholars struggling to reconstruct African societies that have been overshadowed by European documentation. However, my approach to history provides a valuable method for studying African societies in a way that challenges Eurocentric assumptions and asserts the agency and creativity of African peoples in shaping their religious and literary traditions. By doing so, my research contributes to the broader discussions on decolonizing fascist studies, revealing how colonialism, imperialism, and fascism are interconnected global phenomena rather than merely European ones.

One of the critical ways my research advances this discussion is by re-examining Ethiopic studies within the broader framework of African history. Traditionally, Ethiopic studies have been treated as an isolated field, detached from African studies, which has obscured Ethiopia and Eritrea's historical connections with the rest of the continent. This artificial separation has prevented a full understanding of Ethiopia's role in African history, particularly in the precolonial era. By addressing this gap, my work integrates Ethiopic studies into African studies, reinforcing Ethiopia's place within the continent's broader historical and cultural narratives.

Additionally, my study challenges the long held Eurocentric claim that African languages lacked written traditions before European influence. By highlighting Ethiopia's vast literary heritage, I advocate for reintegrating Ethiopic studies into the broader African historical conversation. This approach not only deepens our understanding of African intellectual traditions but also provides a model for recognizing the contributions of African societies to global history.

The implications of this work extend beyond African studies and resonate across the humanities. To fully grasp the essence of human history, we must embrace the full diversity of human experiences and knowledge, including the profound contributions of African civilizations. Only through such inclusive scholarship can we construct a more accurate and complete understanding of our shared human heritage.

Notes

1. Taddesse Tamrat, "Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988): In Appreciation of His Great Ethiopian Scholarship," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, no. 23 (1990): 89–92.
2. Carlo Conti Rossini, "Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree," *Estratto della Biblioteca Geografica De Agostini*, no. 1, *L'Eritrea Economica* (1930): 90.
3. See the fifth chapter for details: *The Life and Times of Enrico Cerulli*, p.132-161.
4. Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 51.
5. Carlo Conti Rossini, "Ethiopian Hagiography and the Acts of Saint Yiifqeranna-Egzi' (14th Century)" ("L'agiografia etiopica e gli Atti de! santo Yiifqeranna- Egzi' [secolo XIV]"), *Atti de/ Regio Istituto Veneto di scienze, lettere e arti*, 96 (1937): 403–33. Reprinted in Alessandro Bausi, ed., and Iante Roach, trans., *The Worlds of Eastern Christianity, 300–1500*, no. 4. *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopian* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 331.
6. Verena Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 91–292 (see ch. 4, n. 43).
7. Carlo Conti Rossini, "Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree," *Estratto della Biblioteca Geografica De Agostini*, no. 1, *L'Eritrea Economica* (1930): 90.
8. Robert Hoyland, "General Editors' Preface," Alessandro Bausi, ed., *The Worlds of Eastern Christianity, 300– 1500*, no. 4. *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopian* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), XIV.

Pablo de Orellana

Interview by Kye Allen

Pablo de Orellana is a Senior Lecturer at King's College London (KCL). He completed his PhD at KCL in 2015, prior to which he studied the MPhil in International Relations (IR) at the University of Cambridge and French and Italian at the University of Oxford. Dr de Orellana is an expressly interdisciplinary scholar drawing on, among other sources, political philosophy, history, literary analysis, and aesthetics. His research explores the constitutive effects of diplomatic communication on the representation of political identities and policymaking, the relationship between art and conflict, and historical and contemporary manifestations of nationalism. Dr. de Orellana's research has appeared in such leading, peer-reviewed journals as the European Journal of International Relations, Resilience, RUSI Journal, International Relations, and the Review of International Studies. Drawing on the aforementioned research into diplomatic communication, his first book, The Road to Vietnam: France, the US and the First Vietnam War, was released by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2020. Dr de Orellana's most recent book, Hand of the Prince: How Diplomacy Writes Subjects, Territory, and Norms, was published by Manchester University Press in March 2025. Given the nature of the current theme section, Dr de Orellana has kindly agreed to an interview with the St Antony's International Review. The following focuses on his research into, amongst other topics, an emergent form of reactionary internationalism, insights available in his edited volume Global Nationalism: Ideas, Movements and Dynamics in the Twenty-First Century, published by World Scientific in 2022.

Much of your recent research has centred on the reactionary right. When did you begin to explore this subject and were there any particular catalysts or intellectual influences that brought you towards it?

I began researching contemporary reactionary ideas around 2013. Even though their resurgence became much more obvious and global in 2016, I was already concerned by the re-emergence of ethnic nationalist politics in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. I came to explore the history as well as the functioning of ethnic nationalist ideas because I believe that it is nationalist ideas themselves that wield exceptional power, much more than any given individual like Trump. Beyond dismissing it as a moment of populist madness, as some progressives have done over the last decade, it must be recognised that ethnic nationalism is a powerful idea. Its diagnoses of real-world issues and resulting discontents, from unemployment to the ravages of neoliberal globalization, are seductive and approachable, while the revolutionary and uncompromising aggressiveness of its proponents often outflanks all other political offerings.

More frequently their diagnoses concern not only migration, but indeed any dissent from nationalist politics. This is how in their discourse, the very presence of foreigners or

progressive ideas that would give foreigners equal rights becomes an existential danger to the nation's survival. On a more personal note, I am aggravated by how nationalists claim culture as resulting from birth and blood—does my love of making pasta mean that I am a fascist? There we find the entire crux of ethnic nationalism: the claim that my birth determines my behavioural, linguistic, political, and even culinary existence.

In a recent article that you co-authored in *International Relations*, it was argued that a 'Reactionary Internationale' has cohered around what Nicholas Michelsen and yourself had previously dubbed 'reactionary internationalism'. What are the key attributes of this strand of internationalism, what type of actors comprise this loose assemblage, and to what extent does it pose a challenge to the norms and institutions of international society?

Liberalism has long monopolized the very idea of internationalism. However, reactionary thought has been present, as a rival alternative, since the very start of liberalism in the French Revolution. They are the oldest pair of political rivals, mutually loathing yet born together. Opponents of the French Revolution were called reactionaries, and all nationalist ideas descend from this fraught relationship with liberalism. On the one hand, they take key liberal categories such as democracy and rights. On the other, they limit their universality to those born into the nation. Nicholas Michelsen and I investigate how ethnic nationalists seek to create an international order that is, however, based on birth, the allocation of rights based only on nationality, the rejection of human universality, and the reinstatement of struggle and transactionalism as the dominant forms of international relations. This is why for members of what we call the Reactionary Internationale, from Trump to Xi Jinping, human rights are the wrong basis for any international system and amount to a betrayal of one's nation.

Reactionary internationalism is therefore a rival internationalism. It seeks to remove liberal universalities and reshape the world on the basis of the sovereign power of a birth-culture (where participation and belonging in a national culture is limited by the biological conditions of one's birth) and its right to struggle to the death against others, without being forced to betray themselves by giving their ethnic enemies equal rights. Each birth-culture, as in all other strands of ethnic nationalist thought, is seen as locked into an inevitable struggle for survival against all other birth-cultures. I call this conceptual mechanism the 'ethnic bind': the common feature of all ethnic nationalist thought from the 19th century to the present. In the ethnic bind, nations are theorized as separate species struggling to survive. This is most visible in how contemporary ethno-nationalists like Putin or Netanyahu claim that criticism of their right to conquer others amounts to calling for the genocide of Russia and Israel, and is why nationalists argue that migrants inevitably seek to destroy and replace their host nations—the "great replacement" is written into the very core theories of reactionary internationalism.

This has made it possible for a Reactionary Internationale to emerge: a loose global assemblage of reactionary actors united in their desire to end rights, democracy, equality for humans, international norms, and increase their power or wealth at the expense of others, with rights replaced by transactionalism. These include actors such

as Putin's Russia, Trump's US, Modi's India, Xi's China, and Orbán's Hungary, divided on some issues but acting together to end liberal rights. Some of these actors, like Saudi Arabia, are not ethnonationalist, but share these goals and collaborate in changing international norms. Their ultimate goal is to replace human rights, multilateralism, and postwar limitations on conquests and ethnic cleansing with new norms: birth-cultural sovereignty, transactionalism, and zero-sum struggle for survival and success.

Where the human is claimed as the core subject of liberal internationalism, the nation defined by birth is the core subject of reactionary internationalism. This has several important practical consequences: firstly, since the human does not exist, the state should only have obligations to those born into its birth-culture; secondly, states do not deserve rights either, they only deserve as much as their power can secure against other nations. Competition, including violent competition, comes to be recast as the natural mode of interaction in international relations. War, transaction, and zero-sum competition becomes the defining mode of international interaction as advocated by actors of the Reactionary Internationale, while rights and equality come to be seen as betrayal of the nation's right to survive.

When and where are the intellectual roots of New Right internationalism thought to be located? What key thinkers stand out in this regard?

New Right is the name that many contemporary ethno-nationalists use for themselves in Europe, while in the US they tend to call themselves Alternative Right. They take it from the 1980s neoliberal right of Thatcher and Reagan, claiming their legitimacy as revolutionary change-makers while critiquing the globalization that their reforms engendered. Its origins lie in the 1980s French *Nouvelle Droite* led by thinkers like Paul Gottfried, Alain de Benoist, and Guillaume Faye. This group, who called themselves 'The Research and Study Group for European Civilization', made some of the key ideological and philosophical advances that define the New Right today.

The New Right blends together four distinct political philosophy traditions. It is in this combination that their political philosophical and discursive innovations are to be found.

The first and most important origin of New Right thought lies in the work of French nationalist Maurice Barrès. In the late 19th century, he created the term 'nationalism', pioneered its rejection of foreign migration, and became famous as the subject of Emile Zola's celebrated 'J'accuse', which referred to Barrès' conviction that Dreyfus must have been a traitor to France because his birth-culture was Jewish, not French. Barrès theorized the link between land, biology, and culture, in which birth determines who belongs, who might belong, and who cannot belong. This belief in birth as the basis of culture also leads to a political theory that structures all of society on the basis of one's birth, which Barrès called national integrationism. We can see the modern expression of this belief in the New Right's obsession with transsexuality, which they justify based on their belief that cultural, sexual, and social identities are determined by birth.

The second major influence is Spengler and Carl Schmitt's critique of progressivism as

a betrayal of the nation. Spengler called this the Faustian Mind: a pact with the devil to give rights to others, who (due to the ethnic bind) will only use them to abuse and destroy Europeans through their own generosity. The influence of this theory is best exemplified in claims by contemporary nationalists that the generosity and kindness of their nations has been abused to ultimately destroy and replace them, with the resulting call for survivalist selfishness.

The third and fourth key influences on the New Right are much less obvious. From the New Left, specifically the work of Antonio Gramsci, the New Right takes the insight that political change necessitates prior cultural change. This is where the New Right takes its famous dictum, oft quoted by Adrew Breitbart, that political change lies downstream from cultural change. From neoliberalism, initially another enemy of the New Right, they take their methodology for reform. Where previous generations of ethnic nationalists wanted to restructure society and compel their preferred hierarchies into being, the New Right practice social reform in a way that is strikingly similar to Thatcher and Reagan's. That is, removing regulations and barriers, particularly equal rights, to allow the strongest to triumph and 'natural' birth-cultural hierarchies to reemerge. A good example is the legalization of domestic violence in Russia in the context of marriage as a means to 'protect the family'. What we are seeing here is the unleashing of male physical power so that it might achieve its just deserts—power over women. In the same way, Trump's war on DEI, like the wider movement to strip migrants of rights, seeks to remove 'artificial' barriers to the supremacy of white men.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the New Right is currently divided on the question of whether it is too late to save western civilization from 'the great replacement'. The defensive New Right, led by Alain de Benoist, believes that if we elect New Right leaders like Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni and many others, western civilization can yet to be saved. This window is narrow, only 10 years before western collapse according to former British Prime Minister Liz Truss. The other wing of the New Right, best represented by the thinker Guillaume Faye, believes that it is too late and that the only possible political action is, while the West still has some strength left, to accelerate towards the inevitable global race war that will pit the West against the nations that want to replace it. This not only encourages followers to start a global race war, but also fantasise about how the post-apocalyptic world might be reconstructed by surviving European nations led by Russia, the only country that in Faye's view is currently ethno-nationalist enough to survive the onslaught. These two wings collaborate to fight liberalism but are practically divided by their pessimism as to the chances of survival.

You have previously discussed how reactionary actors affiliated with the alt-right harness the rhetoric of indigeneity. What is significant about the use of such language in reactionary right-wing discourse?

Indigeneity, not unlike culture, tradition, or difference and identity, does not need to equate to ethnic struggle. What matters is how it is politicized. For the New Right, the very existence of difference is proof that ethnicity exists, and therefore indigeneity is proof of a struggle for survival. Here indigeneity has less to do with "I come from here"

or “I practice so and so culture” than with “those that come from here are locked in a struggle for survival against those that are coming to replace us”. This was explicitly claimed by the British far-right activists that in the summer of 2024 caused a series of riots in the UK. Indigeneity, in the logic and discourse of New Right nationalism, is only one part of the ethnic bind: the struggle for survival. In a similar rhetorical twist, nationalists make every effort imaginable to monopolize the language, significance, and practical reality of patriotism. Like with indigeneity, only one interpretation is possible: if you love your country you will struggle to save it. It is worth adding that this is disingenuous: love of a nation, or indigeneity, does not entail belief that nations must struggle to the death amongst one another.

Michelsen and yourself have emphasized the need to disentangle the contemporary New Right from interwar fascism. In your view, why is it important not to reduce the former to a mere variant of the latter? What are the distinguishing characteristics of each?

While it is common amongst liberals, the left, or most progressives, to use anti-fascist rhetoric to point to the New Right, our research into the history and mechanisms of New Right nationalist ideology suggests that this is misguided and amounts to a rhetorical flourish. There are of course important similarities, underwritten by the common philosophical mechanism underwriting both: the ethnic bind, the belief that nations are species struggling among one another for survival. This means that some rhetorical, political, and conceptual mechanisms are similar, particularly when concerning the struggle for survival, as is the resulting politicization of population, birthrates, migration, space, gender, and the very existence of non-nationalist politics. Another vital similarity is how populism as a mode of political action is used to both legitimize the movement and brand opponents as national traitors, resulting in a conceptualization of politics where only populist nationalism may exist.

However, there are important differences. The first and most important is how they theorize identity. Fascism believed in a theory called ‘Razza-Spirito’, from fascist thinkers Giulio Evola and Giovanni Gentile, that conceptualised the spirit and identity of the nation as emanating from its race, where each individual body is an expression of its immutable and eternal racial spirit. The New Right’s core concept of identity, called birth-culture, is based on a biological frame where one’s birth (whom one is born of and into what body) determines which culture one belongs to, and one’s place in society and its hierarchies. Conveniently, this means that the New Right does not need to speak of race and instead claims culture as the subject of its struggle, calling itself “European” not “white”, even though it retains—more discreetly—a biologically-determined ontology of identity.

The second difference concerns how they plan to change society: where fascism envisaged centralised authoritarian regimes energetically shaping society and establishing hierarchical structures, the New Right seeks to unleash ‘natural’ hierarchies much like neoliberalism seeks to unleash business: by removing regulations and barriers (such as human rights or equality legislation) to the struggles and behaviours (racism, sexism, discrimination) that result in hierarchies. Thirdly, the New Right rejects fascism’s

characteristic political centralization in favour of a far looser coalition that allows for different and sometimes contradictory groups, from those focusing on opposing migration to those that want power over women, to retain their separate concerns while acting together to fight liberalism in the hope of eventually enacting their preferred hierarchies. The greatest of these divisions concerns neoliberal economics, with anarcho-capitalist nationalists like Peter Thiel campaigning to increase domestic economic inequality, while others hope to replace it with increased inequality among ethnicities and genders.

It is vital not to reduce the New Right to a mere variant of fascism. In my view, the rhetorical move to delegitimise the New Right by accusing them of being the evils of WWII represents a double failure. On the one hand, it has not succeeded in slowing down the success of these movements. Calling their supporters fascists might well have resulted in both a devaluation of the categorical impact of the term, radicalization of supporters, and, more recently, a creeping re-valorisation of fascism as one of several nostalgically romanticized predecessors, joining the 'lost cause' of the American Civil war and Apartheid South Africa as patriots defending their cultures repressed by liberalism. On the other hand, and from my perspective far more dangerous, dismissing the New Right as fascists in political analysis and scholarship makes it impossible to appreciate the gaping fractures in the movement, as well as the power, innovation, and influence of its innovations—particularly its approach to culture, social reform, and political action—and how its conceptualization of culture amounts to a powerful reframing of biology as the core determinant of national identity.

Whether it is absurd conspiracy theorists in the style of Infowars, the pedalling of pseudoscientific dogma by the Human Biodiversity Institute, or the promulgation of New Right thought by online publishers such as Arktos or Counter-Currents, the landscape of the contemporary far right is exceedingly diverse. To what extent does this messiness pose challenges in studying the stance of the reactionary right towards international politics? How have you sought to grapple with this complexity in your research?

The biggest difference between the New Right and most ethnonationalist predecessors is its staggering heterogeneity. In politics, the New Right is in practice a coalition of various movements, each defined by the specific birth-determined inequality they wish to enact, but united in the claim that biology justifies natural hierarchies. Some are anti-women's rights, others are anti-gay, some are anti-abortion, some are anti-tax, some are even anti-state, while others want to increase state power so that it can establish the hierarchies they dream of. As aforementioned, these various tribes can't even agree on whether the West is irreversibly doomed yet. Most of these imply serious contradictions and are therefore not possible all at the same time. Broadly speaking, only anti-transsexuality, anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, and anti-immigration are fully common positions in the New Right.

In my research, I do not try to pretend that it is a monolithic movement. Rather, I focus on what they have in common not just in their critiques of liberalism, but also in their

theories and plans for reform. For example, all the examples I have just mentioned are united by the belief that biology should underwrite inequality. Likewise, they are united in their explanations of how liberalism is destroying nations and, most importantly, the ethnic bind: the belief that politics should be based on ethnic identity because ethnic identities are races struggling to survive. It is important to highlight that somebody that believes that women should be under the control of men *does* share theoretical and political affinity with somebody that believes that just like women are determined by their biological birth, nation is too. I would go as far as saying that despite its visible anarchism, diversity, disagreements, and even contradictions, the New Right is united by a common philosophy based on birth-determined difference. This is why I believe that analysing the theories they have in common, most of which draw heavily on de Benoist's birth-cultural framework, is so important.

You have been described as an interdisciplinary scholar. Indeed, your wider research encompasses a range of topics, from the study of diplomatic communication to the relationship between art and international conflict. Whether it is the trivialisation of far-right views via memes or recourse to cinematic pop culture references (e.g., red pill), it would seem that an appreciation of the relationship between popular culture, visual media, and reactionary politics is important to understanding the latter. How has this interdisciplinarity ethos guided your research into the reactionary right and how may the 'visual turn' and related developments in IR help inform research into the reactionary right?

Interdisciplinarity is key to how I research reactionary internationalism. In the first instance I have looked into its history, which is important because its absorption and combination of various historical theories of ethnic nationalism is key to how it works today. This has meant conducting history of ideas, retrieving specific mechanisms, where they come from, tracing the genealogies of these ideas, understanding what was inherited but also what was not, which in turns reveals changing politics. The most distinct concept of the New Right, birth-culture, is in fact a combined recasting of a late 19th century concept of identity by Maurice Barrès, updated by the *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1980s and 90s. Researching the New Right has also necessitated substantial philosophical analysis, which made it possible to understand how each specific iteration of the theory worked, why the inclusion of a concept from elsewhere might have made such an important difference. Philosophy is ultimately how I make sense of ethnonationalist thought. For ethnonationalism is no less than a philosophy of humanity that informs how our societies and international relations should work.

Researching contemporary ethnonationalism has also required delving into its aesthetic and artistic expressions. Firstly, this is because some of these theories are developed in art and culture. For example, a key New Right referent as to what will happen if we do not stop migration is a novel called *The Camp of the Saints*. In another important example, the vision of what the future after a global race war might look like is developed in a short story set in the future in the last chapter of Guillaume Faye's book *Archeofuturism*. Secondly, a lot of New Right critique of liberalism is developed in discussions about

popular media. For example, I recently participated in a documentary about Alexander the Great, whom New Right activists online claimed had been “made gay” by “woke” producers, which they saw as part of liberalism’s conspiracy against true masculinity and its history. Thirdly, aesthetics is vital to the New Right because they make it possible to quite simply ignore science in their populist political discourse: if something looks or sounds like something else it could be linked. In such a little move looks have replaced science, and we must therefore study those looks.

Reactionary internationalism is ultimately a theory of how human life and societies are and should behave. This is why it intervenes in so many fields, from Trump’s claims that woke policies cause aircraft to crash, to online alt-right panic that a girl Jedi heralds the end of western civilization. Its study must therefore analyse its intervention into and impact on all these realms.

Lilia Moritz Schwarcz

Interview by Julia Hoffmann

Professor Lilia Moritz Schwarcz is a distinguished Brazilian historian and anthropologist whose work has profoundly shaped our understanding of Brazil's complex social and political landscape. As a Professor of Anthropology at the University of São Paulo and a Visiting Professor at Princeton University, Professor Schwarcz has dedicated her career to exploring the intricate relationships between race, culture, and power in Brazilian society. Her pioneering research spans the history of slavery, racial theories, the Brazilian Empire, and contemporary authoritarianism. Professor Schwarcz's scholarly contributions include seminal works such as "The Spectacle of Races" (1993), which examines the development of racial theories in 19th-century Brazil, and "Brazil: A Biography" (2015), co-authored with Heloisa Starling. Her recent book, "Brazilian Authoritarianism: Past and Present" (2019), provides crucial insights into the historical roots of far-right politics in Brazil. A seven-time winner of the prestigious Jabuti Prize and newly elected member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Schwarcz's influence extends beyond academia through her regular contributions to major Brazilian newspapers and her role as co-curator for History at the São Paulo Museum of Art. Professor Schwarcz has agreed to an interview with St Antony's International Review. The discussion will explore her insights on contemporary Brazilian politics, drawing from her extensive research on the historical roots of authoritarianism and racial ideologies in Brazil.

How do you interpret the results of the 2024 Brazilian municipal elections which saw a decline in support for Lula's Workers' Party (PT), and the emergence of a more diverse right-wing landscape in the context of Brazil's recent political polarization? Do these results indicate a shift towards a more complex, multi-polar political system in which voters are seeking alternatives beyond Lula and Bolsonaro, or are they primarily reflective of local political dynamics?

The results of the 2024 Brazilian municipal elections show that Bolsonaro is, and is not, a central part of our political agenda. On the one hand, the results of the 2024 Brazilian municipal elections show how Bolsonaro himself is not a part of our political agenda anymore. On the other hand, we see an increase of the central right, of central right politicians. However, they are at the same time and in a way very much connected with Bolsonaro. One thing that we can say is that the centre right and the extreme right are creating more and more opportunities, and more and more other names.

The same thing is not happening with the left in Brazil. I think that one of the problems is that Lula is not creating new alternatives and that explains a common situation, not just in Brazil, but in the United States for example. At the same time, we can see, like

you suggest in your question, that there is a more complex situation in Brazil, but I would not define it as a multipolar political system because in my opinion, the Brazilian population is very much polarised. So, for example in São Paulo, which is a kind of laboratory of Brazil because of state's importance, what we could see was that left-side candidate, Guilherme Boulos, could not touch the heart of the general population in São Paulo. Meanwhile, one can see how conservative São Paulo is and is becoming, how São Paulo has one agenda very much connected with, not the extreme right I would say, but the centre right. To conclude, I agree that civil society in Brazil is seeking alternatives beyond Lula and Bolsonaro. At the same time, they are still there, both of them, Lula and Bolsonaro, even if Bolsonaro cannot be re-elected at the next national elections.

Bolsonaro's Liberal Party (PL) emerged as a significant winner in the 2024 municipal elections, securing victories in major cities and expanding its presence in city councils. Does this success indicate that "Bolsonarismo" has successfully transformed from a personalist movement into an enduring political force, or are there other factors at play?

Your second question is a very good one because the results of the 2024 municipal elections challenge the notion that Bolsonaro is the sole option for the extreme right, while also demonstrating his continued influence. The events of January 2023 were an attempted coup d'état, and the general population recognizes its connection to militias and Jair Bolsonaro's leadership. Recent national polls showed that 57% of Brazilians found Bolsonaro guilty and closely linked to the January 8th events. The latest documents from the federal police demonstrate this connection to the core of the Bolsonaro movement.

Simultaneously, Bolsonarismo is growing and transforming into an enduring political force. The movement is deeply associated with ideas of heteronormative family structures, gun rights, conservative Catholic and Evangelical values, and opposition to abortion, feminism, and black movements. While this conservative social movement is undeniably expanding, we can't directly compare this to the situation in the United States yet. While Trump had numerous choices within his group for leadership roles, a similar situation is only now emerging in Brazil: Tarcísio de Freitas from São Paulo, Romeu Zema in Minas Gerais, and others are potential options. I'm not suggesting they're fully prepared for the 2026 elections, but Bolsonarismo is creating multiple alternatives, whereas Lulismo isn't developing the same kind of diverse political agenda.

This presents a significant challenge in Brazil, as the social phenomenon of polarisation, though not new, is intensifying. The lack of dialogue and bridges between opposing groups is deeply concerning. Nevertheless, Bolsonarismo is indeed transforming from a personalist movement into a broader political force, we have two years ahead to see how this will unfold.

Lula's presidency has been framed as a return to democratic normalcy after Bolsonaro's tenure. How would you assess Lula's efforts to strengthen Brazil's democratic institutions so far? What key challenges

remain in consolidating Brazilian democracy?

Lula was seen as a pathway to restoring democratic normality in Brazil, especially in contrast to Bolsonaro, who represented dictatorship and the military regime. Bolsonaro was unafraid to discuss coup d'états and openly supported individuals involved in the violence of the military regime, as General Ustra. Lula's election came during a challenging time; he did not have Congress or the Senate on his side. Instead, he faced significant opposition from both chambers, making it difficult for his government to implement democratic reforms. Democracy, as we know, is a very good regime exactly because it is incomplete and requires constant attention and vigilance. On one hand, new rights continue to emerge, which a robust democracy must be prepared to address. On the other hand, we must remain vigilant regarding our democratic institutions.

The situation in Brazil is complex. Lula needs to deliver more on critical issues such as health, education, and public transportation. Economically, Brazil is also facing numerous challenges: For example, the civilian population is complaining about the inflation in food prices, while the government is facing a clear issue with social communication. Currently, Lula is not in a favourable position because he must deliver the improvements he promised, while negotiating with politicians closely aligned with Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo. Despite this, the latest Quest research showed that he is well positioned for 2026. For now, Lula must demonstrate his commitment to consolidating democracy in Brazil after the anti-democratic presidency of his predecessor. We are now in the midst of the third term of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, navigating through this process. In my opinion, 2025 will be a crucial year for him to prove his dedication to strengthening Brazilian institutions.

In “The Spectacle of the Races”, you examine how Brazilian intellectuals adapted European racial theories to Brazil’s mixed-race reality between 1870 and 1930. How, if at all, do you see the legacy of these ideas manifesting in contemporary Brazilian politics? What continuities and changes do you observe in how racial discourse is used to shape national identity and policy in Brazil today compared to the period you studied?

Brazil has the second-largest black population in the world. According to the IBGE, the National Institute of Geography and Statistics in Brazil, when considering both the Pardo and black populations together, they account for approximately 55.1% of the total population. Thus, black people in Brazil are not a minority as they are in the United States; they represent a majority that is underrepresented in various aspects of society. If I may use the term, they are a “major minority” in representation because they continue to be marginalized in public life, culture, politics, and private institutions.

In my book, “Spectacle of Races,” I explore how, at the end of the slave system, various racial theories entered Brazil that tried to reestablish social hierarchy in biological terms, showing that whites were superior, that blacks were inferior, and that mestizos were degenerated. While these ideas were once considered scientific in the 19th century, today they are more understood as a form of common sense that remains deeply entrenched in Brazilian society. For a long time, people of European origin

have perceived their achievements as universal, even if only subjectively, and, as a result, have not racialized themselves; that is, they have failed to study their own race. While other ethnic groups are immediately linked to their skin colour, phenotypes, and origins, white people tend to represent themselves as “neutral”, which they certainly are not. This social phenomenon, developed in both national and international social literature, known as “whiteness”, also shapes standards of beauty and sociability while being a major producer of images and, consequently, of national imaginations that are inscribed in maps, allegories, paintings, monuments, pamphlets, advertisements, and photographs. In this vast operation of visual culture, Europeans appear as models of civilization, while other peoples are depicted as exotic, barbaric, or primitive.

While blackness refers to a social movement of self-affirmation, white people normally resist accepting their designation (whiteness), as it points to the specificity of its social position and privilege. Whiteness, more attributed than self-designated, thus corresponds to an internalized system of material and symbolic privileges that are rooted in the past but exercise their prerogatives in the present. In Brazil, a large part of white society tends to naturalize the monopoly of spaces of power. That is why, the white minority hold competitive jobs, occupy high positions in private and public institutions, live in neighbourhoods with better infrastructure, regularly have greater purchasing power, are the most frequent clients of clubs, top hospitals, and private schools, and are not prime targets of police actions. This situation is internalized through the concept of “meritocracy”, a notion detached from time or social context, perpetuated across generations without consideration of the historical, political, and social circumstances that have often placed this group in a position of structural advantage.

Paradoxically, whiteness, as a social representation, takes on an invisible form that does not provoke self-reflection. It is the norm that does not need to be named, the category that classifies and studies the “Other” while remaining unclassified itself. Despite white society being a relative category intersected by other social markers of difference such as race, gender/sex, region, generation, and social class, belonging to it generally functions as a kind of passport to privilege.

For instance, Bolsonaro launched a public propaganda campaign called “Our Colour in Brazil”, which prominently featured white children with blonde hair. While there are many white people in Brazil, this representation is not the only colour in Brazil. Bolsonaro’s rhetoric has echoed eugenics and promoted the idea of whitening as a form of superiority. He initiated a cultural war rooted in historical narratives supported by groups like Brasil Paralelo, which perpetuate a Eurocentric, evangelical and masculine view of history while neglecting the significant contributions of indigenous and African peoples to nation-building. This kind of public representation remains prevalent in Brazil today. It’s important to emphasize that these views are no longer considered scientific theory but have become accepted as common sense that often goes unchallenged.

On a positive note, there is a vibrant and active black movement in Brazil, alongside black and some white intellectuals who are challenging these narratives. They argue that we must confront our history and discuss the legacy of slavery openly. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery and received the largest number of Africans forcibly

taken from their continent. According to records from the Slave Voyages project, approximately 12 million people left Africa; out of those, about 10 million arrived in the Americas, with around 4.8 million coming to Brazil across various regions. The legacy of slavery has created a hierarchical social, political, and cultural language within Brazilian society, a language that continues to exert significant influence even today. Brazil is changing but continues to be the sixth most unequal country in the world.

Brazil's racial discourse has undergone significant shifts, from the "racial democracy" myth popularized by Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s to more recent acknowledgments of racial inequalities, as well as a rise of explicitly racist rhetoric in politics. How do you interpret this evolution? Specifically, how do you view the emergence of overt racial "othering" in contemporary Brazilian politics in light of the country's long-standing narrative of racial harmony?

Brazil has created lots of myths. These include the myths of racial Darwinism and whitening during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the 1930s, Gilberto Freyre and others introduced the idea of racial democracy. This concept was merely rhetoric, as it emerged in a highly unequal country built on hierarchy, authoritarianism, and language inherited from the slave system. Freyre propagated this national myth, portraying Brazil as an exemplar of perfect racial democracy for other countries: A melting pot that was not reflected in the numbers; numbers of employment, numbers of incarceration, numbers of health and education. This influential myth persisted strongly until the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of black activism, and the strength of civil rights movements in Brazil challenged this romanticized interpretation, exposing the country's deep-seated inequalities.

Today, with the emergence of far-right and radical right movements, we're not only seeing a continuation of the long-standing narrative of racial harmony but also more explicitly racist interpretations. These newer views argue that black people lack the same intellectual capacities as others. The contemporary version of racial democracy is the concept of meritocracy, the idea that people's social positions in Brazil are solely due to merit. While I'm not denying that white people have merit, it's impossible to speak of universal values in such an unequal society. In my opinion, meritocracy is a modern reincarnation of the racial democracy myth from the 1930s.

Professor Schwarcz, your book "Brazilian Authoritarianism: Past and Present" examines how Brazil's authoritarian tendencies are deeply rooted in its 500-year history, shaped by colonial and postcolonial violence, racism, and inequality. In your view, what is the most crucial insight gained by adopting this long-term historical perspective when analyzing Brazil's contemporary politics? Conversely, what significant aspects of Brazil's current political landscape do you think are most misunderstood or overlooked when analysts fail to consider this deep historical context?

I do not believe in historical determinism; that's not my position. I just believe that

every country has some scars, and we must deal with these scars if we want to have a different nation. Take racism in Brazil, for example. We have to consider our past, how the slave system was deeply entrenched throughout the country, from north to south. Brazil tried to naturalize the slave regime as if it were normal and would never end. As I mentioned, Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery, only in 1888, with a very conservative law that did not prevent inequality or propose any social or cultural reforms. The idea was to continue racial hierarchy, now based on social determinism and the perpetuation of inequality. In my book, I also discuss the *latifúndio*, which roughly translates to “plantation”. Brazil was founded on the concept of vast properties that functioned like states. We still have many *latifúndios* across the country. In the past, the owners were all-powerful; they were the heads of state, religion, and economy. They were the law. While it's not exactly the same today, we still have many families across Brazil who are essentially chiefs in their states, wielding significant control. We call this familism in Brazil, the idea of using family connections to perpetuate economic, social, and religious power. We also call this social phenomenon “*patrimonialismo*” –the non-republican habit of mixing public and private spheres.

So, we have scars, foundations, and structures that resonate in the present. However, I'm not saying this is Brazil's destiny. History isn't destiny, but it can reveal things you might not want to see, things rooted in the past. History always remembers, it remembers what we cannot forget. I begin my book by stating that our present is full of pasts. I call this the “present past”, the idea that Brazilians must confront our foundations to become a more democratic and pluralistic country.

Your work also examines how governments, particularly authoritarian ones, frame historical narratives to serve their interests. In Brazil's current political climate, where far-right movements have increasingly infiltrated cultural, educational, and political institutions, what role do you believe these institutions should play in resisting such narratives? How can they navigate the tension between reinforcing established histories and actively pushing back against the far-right's attempts to reshape Brazil's collective memory?

As a historian and anthropologist, I firmly believe in the power of these disciplines to improve our country. History and different narratives of history are at the centre of public debates, and crucial for separating a mythical history, so to speak, from a history based on sources, records, and primary documents, rather than on preconceived interpretation. However, we're facing challenges not just in Brazil, but globally. We can see this with Meta, where the idea of free speech is being used to justify the spread of misinformation. Fake news is not an expression of freedom; it's simply a lie.

Many countries dealing with far-right politicians are experiencing a battle of narratives and histories. In Brazil, the new far-right is attempting, for instance, to rewrite the history of the military regime. They want people to believe it was a kind of paradise period: no inflation, no political problems, no conflicts, just innovation and progress. But the truth is very different. The regime was marked by torture, killings, disappearances, and severe censorship. We had 17 institutional acts that effectively ended freedom of speech.

Even in economic terms, they delivered a country with high inflation, incomplete roads, and proven corruption practices at the core of the state apparatus. This revisionism is particularly problematic because many who didn't live through the military regime tend to believe these myths, such as the idea that the military was responsible for Brazilian democracy. In reality, every time the military intervened in Brazilian history, it was to undermine democracy, not reinforce it.

So, what can we do? We have to work, we have to lead, we have to spread good information. We have to talk to people – in books or on Instagram or whatever you want – but we have to try to disseminate not the myth of the far-right but another kind of collective memory based on data, based on good information, based on documents. And we have to tell those stories in order to create this community of good information.

The ongoing global debate about the applicability of “fascism” to contemporary political movements is particularly relevant to Brazil’s current situation. Given recent events, including the January 8, 2023 attacks on government buildings in Brasília and the November 2024 indictment of former President Jair Bolsonaro for an alleged coup attempt, how do you assess the appropriateness of using this term to describe elements of Brazil’s current political landscape?

In my opinion, we must be very careful when using the term “fascism” to describe contemporary political movements. Fascism is widely recognized as a difficult term to define. If we consider fascism after World War I, we can highlight how it was a regime based on the concentration of power in the hands of a charismatic leader; one that relied on nationalist rhetoric, had no hesitation in using violence, turned opponents into enemies, aimed for territorial expansion and control of mass communication, and thrived on polarization fuelled by a sense of revenge. These regimes were also based on supremacy and xenophobia. In these terms, the governments of Trump, Netanyahu, Orbán (and previously Bolsonaro) share many similarities with fascism – despite a contemporary context which brings its own differences.

For instance, the far-right party in Germany could be considered fascist because their platform aligns closely with fascist ideologies: advocating for a strong, militarized state, and opposing minorities. They even evoke Nazi inspirations while attempting to reframe history, claiming their movement is social democratic rather than fascist. In Brazil, I would characterize Jair Bolsonaro as a fascist politician. He engaged the public with authoritarian rhetoric, glorifying a past of “order”, emphasizing strong patriarchal and religious values, and promoting obedience. Bolsonaro strongly supports gun ownership, opposes minority rights, and uses anti-communist rhetoric to create a non-existent common enemy – a very old formula for political engagement.

So, I agree with researchers who argue there's no such thing as “Light Bolsonarismo”. While I don't believe we should label all movements as fascist, Bolsonaro's approach represents a radical, ultra-right movement that at times even evoked eugenic theories reminiscent of 1930s and 1940s Germany. I'm deeply concerned about the connection between this past that some seek to emulate and our present, not just in Brazil but

also in countries like the United States, Hungary, and Israel. They represent a type of “democratic coup”. They rise to power through regular electoral processes, but once “in office”, they begin to weaken institutions.

Looking ahead to 2026, I believe Brazil's democratic institutions are holding up well. They're currently prosecuting those involved in the January 8, 2023 attacks on government buildings. While it is certain that the far right has been hijacking the concept of amnesty to justify its coup-related actions, however, in my opinion, we are well-equipped to counter this distortion of the concept, especially as the connections between the coup-mongering camps and military terrorist groups – as well as former president Jair Bolsonaro, his wife, and his children – become increasingly clear.

The fact that Brazilians are rejecting military dictatorship and refusing to tolerate coup attempts is crucial for our democracy. This stance strengthens our democratic institutions, enabling them to stand against the spectres of fascism and military dictatorship. Never again. Thank you.



BOOK REVIEWS

Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, pp. 527. 978-0-156-70153-2

Alexander Barder

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a complex work. It is complex not only in terms of the substance of the numerous claims and arguments that makes up its almost 500 pages; its complexity also lies in terms of just trying to situate what kind of work it is to begin with. Originally published in 1951 – in the United Kingdom it was originally released as *The Burden of Our Time* – it was first read during the early Cold War as a window into Stalinism's radicality and its profound threat to Western liberalism. Its larger contribution to an understanding of the crisis of the West and the descent into Nazi genocide would only become apparent decades after. In part, the inability to discern what Arendt was trying to accomplish was a consequence of the fact that it appears to contain three different books into one. It is often read as a strange *mélange* of narrative history with with exceptionally trenchant philosophical reflections. Its methodology is never entirely spelled out; though in a response to Eric Voegelin's review of the book from 1953, Arendt had to clarify that the title itself was somewhat of a misnomer. She wasn't attempting to elucidate the "origins" of totalitarianism's novelty. Rather, she sought to "give a historical account of the elements which crystalized into totalitarianism...." Nor is her narrative meant to be a history of totalitarianism as such; rather, a conceptualization of totalitarianism through a particular historical genealogy of the present.

It is, nonetheless, hard to imagine how such a book could be published in today's academic environment for numerous reasons. First, it straddles many different disciplines in ways that may make it now appear dilettantish. Historians have certainly taken issue with a great many of Arendt's claims and sources. The section on Antisemitism has solicited some of the strongest critique: her uncritical acceptance of antisemitic sources tends to render her account of the political salience of antisemitism tendentious at best. At worst, she falls into blaming the Jews themselves for the rise of political antisemitism. Her usage Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* to illuminate Western colonialism in Central Africa appears odd. It becomes even more problematic in her jarringly racist representation of Africans as not entirely human. The descriptions of totalitarianism,

especially in the latter appended essay, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government” also tends to read like a dystopian novel à la Orwell’s 1984.

For a book that was originally published almost 75 years ago and with such issues, it then begs the question of its continued relevance for us today? Firstly, because rather than being relegated to the dustbin of history, the reappearance of proto-fascistic political movements and ideas circulating in the West certainly renews a need to understand the conjunction of elements that give rise to it. To be sure, Arendt was focused on outlining a genealogy of totalitarianism, which is not necessarily the same as fascism – a much more variegated phenomenon, I would suggest. But the two certainly share a common descent as a profound reaction against liberal democracy and the Enlightenment. Secondly, Arendt developed her historical analysis of totalitarianism as part of a larger narrative about the catastrophic decline of nation-state and a state-system during the interwar years; The European state-system was “incapable of either devising new rules for the handling of foreign affairs that had become global affairs or enforcing a Pax Romana on the rest of the world” (xxi). Today we are possibly experiencing tectonic shifts in the global order with the decline of American hegemony. How this transformation in global politics animates proto-fascistic movements needs to be better understood. And then third, relating to my earlier point, I think the continued salience of Arendt’s book is indeed its messiness and interdisciplinarity: it is able to capture political changes happening at different temporal frequencies and in different spatial levels, resonating in ways that create new forms of domination that seem to appear out of nowhere. Precisely because Arendt’s work is so idiosyncratic and not something that contemporary academics tend to produce, it contains a wealth of crucial philosophical insights into the larger questions about the crisis of the West, the conditions for the destruction of human plurality and spontaneity and its implications for being in the world politically that remain pertinent to our own moment.

Here I want to focus on two crucial insights Arendt develops that I think are deeply relevant today: first, on the subject of the mob as an important element in the crystallization of a fascist movement. For Arendt, the mob is the “*déclassés* of all classes” (10), the amalgamation of a group clamoring for a great leader to represent them against an upper-class society that it despises (107). Arendt’s notion of the mob isn’t akin to Hegel’s notion of the rabble or Marx’s lumpenproletariat. The mob can comprise the petit bourgeoisie who increasingly feel displaced in a world in which the expansion of capital across the globe treats everyone as increasingly superfluous. Thus, the mob calls for an authoritarian solution to short-circuit the legal restraints of political power to address this. The call for plebiscitary rule becomes one way for demagogues and “crackpots” to cutout the hidden forces of corruption at work in suppressing the people. Indeed, as Arendt importantly shows, the mob “is inclined to seek real forces of political life in those movements and influences which are hidden from view and work behind the scenes” (108). The mob assumes that the institutions of the political world are a mere façade and that the locus of true power always remains hidden. Thus, it is apt to believe all sorts of conspiracy theories, including the most prominent of the early 20th century, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as an authentic representation of global politics and of Jewish domination.

This leads me to my second point concerning the salience of such conspiratorial representations of global politics and the exhaustion of the state-system. The mob internalizes counternarratives such as *The Protocols* as the basis of a fictitious world of the fascist movement in order to recreate a world without “its accidental, incomprehensible aspects...[and] in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations” (352-3). Arendt's point, however, is that this attempt to grab onto an ideology of consistency provided by conspiracy theories reflected a foundational crisis of the nation-state and the state-system that resulted from the conjunction of imperial and capital expansion. Arendt identifies contradictory impulses of unlimited expansion and the finitude of political community that would explode into the First World War. The crisis of the state-system in the aftermath of the First World War would then be embodied in the phenomenon of statelessness: the political geography of Europe transformed with the fall of four continental empires rendered many populations, especially Jews, refugees. The consequence of this, for Arendt, was that “The representatives of the great nations knew all too well that minorities within nation-states must sooner or later be either assimilated or liquidated” (273).

To be sure, our world today is different than the interwar period of the 20th century. And yet, there are echoes: the emergence of populist demagogues in the West pushing for an authoritarian politics by weakening the liberal state is apparent. The proliferation of conspiracy theories such as Qanon or “Great Replacement” specifically targeting immigrants, made easier with social media technologies is also quite evident in constituting the contemporary mob. And what perhaps gives this authoritarian moment impetus is that we are possibly living through the decline of the American empire and its neoliberal foundation. The result is the shifting sands of a global political leading to proliferating ideas of retrenchment, fear of immigration and the intensification of violence across the world from Ukraine to the Middle East. While the present always rhymes different from the past, there are crucial works that help us think about our present historically. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is one of these texts that continues to help us decipher our present crisis.

Alberto Toscano. *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*. New York: Verso Books, 2023, pp. 158. 978-1-839-76020-4

Luis Prenninger

Inquiries into the predicament of our political present commonly rely on historical analogy. Yet, conceptualising fascism as an aberration of liberal progress has not made us any wiser about our current condition. Instead of asking ‘Is this fascism?’, Alberto Toscano’s book *Late Fascism* takes historical analogy as a starting point and critical target of analysis.¹ Toscano argues that historical analogies “fail to define what is unique about our current predicament.”² Ironically however, Toscano cannot explain the uniqueness of our political present either. If a fascist logic underpins all politics under which capitalism can thrive, as he posits, Toscano’s argument against analogy works from an implicit critique of liberalism – which, if articulated, would provide for a more fruitful reading of *Late Fascism* as I argue. Present-day liberalism is in crisis not due to rival fascisms. Rather, fascism is a latent virus our society has long been infected with.

The ‘late’ in *Late Fascism* alludes to Toscano’s ambition to name a political problem that varies across its socio-economic contexts. In a 158-page long tour de force from Bataille and Bloch to Césaire, Davis, Deleuze and Du Bois, across Marcuse to Robinson and Rodney, Polanyi and Poulantzas, *Late Fascism* weaves together a theoretical web that finds an inextricable nexus between fascism, colonialism, and (racial) capitalism. Toscano’s intervention into the current discourse around ‘fascism’ is two-fold. Animating readers to think fascism beyond analogy, *Late Fascism* theorises fascism as both a result of and an anti-emancipatory politics inherent to socio-economic crises. For one, the historical analogy-tale conceptualises fascism as a distinctly political phenomenon separate from its socio-economic context. Any reanimation of democracy as we to early 20th century European fascism is, however, Toscano argues, functional to the invisibility of capitalism’s fascistic logic. As he writes, “late fascism cannot be understood without the ‘fascisms before fascism’ that accompanied the imperialist consolidation of a capitalist world-system.”³ A racial contract has been constitutive of capitalism’s flourishing. Thus, for Toscano, the essence of fascism is not only racial but also capitalist. It is a politics of socio-economic crises. This establishes a second argument: Fascism consolidates such

crises by accelerating its fascistic foundations. Observing uneven development across social classes, or what Bloch describes as heterogeneity, Toscano argues that the condition of the working class under capitalism is fundamentally antagonistic. A correlative urge for homogeneity is achieved either by a false totality – that is, a racial phantasm that establishes coherence by positing ‘the other’ – or class consciousness and thus a revolutionary struggle against antagonism. The former systematically manipulates the sedimentation of social life by supplying fake content to uneven development. As such, racialised totalities become a quick fix to heterogeneity, effectively replacing class divisions with racial ones. By contrast, Toscano argues, class struggle does not find fake homogeneity in a racialised imagination. This, he writes, makes fascism a “preventive counter-revolution to the socialist transformation of society.”⁴

Late Fascism's challenge against historical analogy emphasises that fascism is part and parcel of the political structures that accommodate capitalism. Usually, such arguments are embedded in a critique of liberalism or, at least, how liberal thought was instrumental to illiberal projects. Understanding the ‘other’ as backwards, paired with a commitment to progress, liberty and dignity was foundational to liberalism's imperial urge. Its epistemic superiority and a self-conscious claim for universality made the Empire a political demand of liberal progress.⁵ As such, imperialism – not Hitler, or any other archetypal fascist – gave birth to fascism. Fascism is not a stray bullet of a liberal teleology but its predestined development. As Césaire writes, Europeans tolerated “Nazism before it was inflicted on them, [...] they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples [...]”⁶ While Late Fascism certainly operates from and adopts such a critique of liberalism, it is only implicitly articulated. Note, Toscano makes only a single (!) mention of liberalism throughout the book.⁷ Why is that the case? Crucially, making explicit Toscano's underlying critique of liberalism is not merely pedantic nitty gritty-theorising but implies that fascism may not deserve its conceptual limelight.

My suggestion to read Late Fascism from this perspective shifts Toscano's concern away from fascism (as a unique political phenomenon) towards liberalism (and its fascistic underpinnings). I believe such a re-framing does not detract from the general validity of Toscano's argument. Much to the contrary, it provides for greater theoretical clarity: Fascism is not an antithesis to liberalism but its latent virus. From this view, the current rise of the far-right is an intensification of what has been present all along. This reading of Late Fascism aligns well with a Marxist critique of liberalism, which theorises the liberal state and its authority's moral legitimacy as irreconcilably hypocritical. As long as the liberal state is subjected to the forces of capital, any talk of rights, freedom and equality before the law is meaningless.⁸ Toscano writes, the “total power of contemporary capitalism to intensively shape and homogenise desires and everyday life” hides beneath “the appearance of difference, choice, and freedom [...]”⁹ His argument against historical analogy thus relies on the following premise: When liberalism claims its subjects to be free, its conceptual antithesis (of fascism) posits its subjects as unfree.

Yet, as Toscano argues, the assumption that fascism is fundamentally at odds with ‘freedom’ is mistaken. This conceptual juxtaposition against illiberalism works to hide liberalism's fascistic socio-economic underpinnings. To illustrate that conceptions of

freedom are neither alien to nor incompatible with fascism, Toscano quotes Mussolini: "If liberty is to be the attribute of living men and not of abstract dummies invented by individualistic liberalism, then Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State."¹⁰ How do Toscano's elaborations on fascist freedom inform an analysis of our political present that goes beyond historical analogy? In his recent inauguration speech, Trump promises a return of freedom: „My recent election is a mandate to completely and totally reverse a horrible betrayal [...] and to give the people back their faith, their wealth, their democracy, and, indeed, their freedom."¹¹ This concept of 'freedom' finds its true embodiment in authoritarian rule. In 2023, Trump said he would be a dictator on Day 1 of his second term if re-elected as president.¹² At this point, one may insist that his usage of 'freedom' amounts to a category mistake. What Trump understands to be 'freedom' is a fascistic smokescreen for illiberal oppression, critics might say. However, this reply fails to explain why Trump and other far-right politicians get elected. Has the demos really lost its mind? As a prominent commentator diagnoses, "what [Trump] tapped into is what the founders most feared when they established the democratic republic: the popular passions unleashed."¹³

Moving beyond positing liberalism as an antithesis to fascism, Late Fascism helps us find a novel position against a disoriented liberal discourse of analogy. Toscano helps us see that there is some cynical revelation in what Trump says. While liberals insist on Trump voters' irrationality, Toscano's perspective is majorly instructive to analyses of present fascisation. 'Mainstream' politics is infected with the fascist virus too. Its capitalist structure operates a differential treatment of citizens along axes of class, race, and gender. In his earlier work, Toscano argues that liberalism neutralises politics by separating reason from passion. The label of 'fanaticism' has historically been used to mark as irrelevant what is not encompassed by liberalism's self-asserted rationality.¹⁴ By postulating fascism as an antithesis to liberalism, we are conceptually blinded to the political demands of the 'popular passions'. While liberalism is ignorant of its heterogeneous condition, fascism calls it out and then establishes homogeneity through a racialised coherence against the 'other'.

Late Fascism is a refreshing contribution to a saturated discourse that fails to explain what fascism is and what it is not. As our current system is built upon class antagonism and racialised underpinnings, fascist politics subverts this differentialized experience by introducing alternative totalities that rely on the homogeneity of some against 'the other'. Ironically, while Toscano claims that "the analogy of fascism" cannot "define what is unique about our current predicament," Late Fascism also cannot explain the uniqueness of our political present.¹⁵ Most-implicitly Toscano tells us that fascism is not exceptional but foundational to and deeply ingrained in our current politics. This I believe, however, establishes a productive reframing of our current discourse. Present-day liberalism may not be a remedy to but is itself infected with a latent virus of fascism.

Notes

1. Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2023).
2. Ibid, 28.
3. Ibid, 156.
4. Ibid, 36.
5. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).
6. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 1972), 36.
7. Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 57: “[...] the Mussolini of 1921-22 was emphatic about the fundamentally *liberal* economic philosophy of fascism: [...] ‘[O]nly now is the true history of capitalism beginning, because capitalism is not only a system of oppression, but also a selection of values, a coordination of hierarchies, a more amply developed sense of individual responsibility’”
8. Karl Marx, „50. On the Jewish Question“ In *Democracy: A Reader*, edited by Ricardo Blaug and John Schwarzmantel, 268-273. Columbia University Press, 2016.
9. Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 8.
10. Quoted in Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 214.
11. The White House, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.
12. Quoted in Michael Gold, “Trump Says He Wouldn’t Be a Dictator, ‘Except for Day 1’” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/05/us/politics/trump-fox-news-abuse-power.html>.
13. Robert Kagan, “This is how fascism comes to America,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/this-is-how-fascism-comes-to-america/2016/05/17/c4e32c58-1c47-11e6-8c7b-6931e66333e7_story.html.
14. Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (Verso, 2017), 24.
15. Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 28.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt.
How Democracies Die. Penguin Books,
2018, pp. 312, ISBN: 978-0-241-43878-7

Syaza Shukri

A couple of years after the watershed moments of 2016—when Brexit occurred and Donald Trump won his first term as US president—Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two prominent political scientists at Harvard, published *How Democracies Die*. Levitsky and Ziblatt made a wise decision to encapsulate the zeitgeist at the time, as observers and analysts grappled with the swiftly unfolding events. Now, after a few years, Donald Trump has secured his second term in office, leaving no doubt about his support, as he obtained the popular vote with a majority of more than 2 million votes. Therefore, it is pertinent for us to revisit the work of Levitsky and Ziblatt to gain a deeper understanding of Donald Trump's increasing popularity and its implications for American democracy and other countries around the world.

The concept of so-called democratic decline has been in circulation since at least 2015 when Larry Diamond suggested that the world has been experiencing a democratic recession since the early 2000s¹. Despite the existence of cautionary tales to guide us in preventing democratic backsliding, it appears that the alarms may not have been loud enough. Trump's win in 2024 makes Levitsky and Ziblatt's work still highly relevant six years after its publication. Other authors continue to publish similar works, such as Jason Stanley's *Erasing History*², in which he argues that the manipulation of school and university curricula by fascist authoritarian regimes is an inherent danger that requires our attention today.

The central argument of *How Democracies Die*—which is both simple yet profound in its simplicity—is that democracy may gradually decline rather than abruptly collapse. Furthermore, the actions of those within the system, rather than those outside, could be the cause of the decline. The authors claim that democracy's survival depends on both institutions and norms. While it's essential to have institutions that contain power-crazed authoritarians, such as separating the government into three branches, it's the norms that have the potential to make or break democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt

explicitly refer to the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance as the key. Mutual toleration is when “rivals play by constitutional rules, [and] they accept that the other has an equal right to exist, compete for power and govern.” (p. 102) On the other hand, forbearance is about “patient self-control.” (p. 106) Populists who claim to represent the ordinary people against the elite or establishment are known to lack both norms, and they justify it by the widespread support they receive.

As comparativists, Levitsky and Ziblatt use historical examples not only to caution but also to instil hope that democracies can endure if they implement life-saving measures promptly. They do so by looking at and comparing the United States with the rise of authoritarianism in 1940s Germany and 1990s Latin America. Based on these precedents, they argue that Trump exemplifies the four characteristics of an authoritarian leader: (1) dismissing democratic institutions, (2) questioning the legitimacy of political adversaries, (3) supporting or inciting violence, and (4) restricting civil liberties. *How Democracies Die* has two strengths in developing this checklist: firstly, it is well-researched and packed with historical examples. This enables readers to recognize the “rhymes” (p. 10) inherent in history. In other words, America is not as exceptional as we have been led to believe. The book’s second strength is its readability, which enables it to surpass the boundaries of academia, a challenging feat to accomplish. More people should be aware of contemporary world events because, after all, the people are the first line of defence in a system of government that is for the people and by the people.

When writing a book review, most commentators would highlight the limitations of the work, specifically the areas or topics it did not cover in depth. There are, of course, many probable angles to explain democratic decline, including the issue of foreign intervention, limited civil society movement, capitalism and its effect on inequality, the role of the media, and rising misogyny due to increasing female participation, to name a few. In my opinion, we should judge a work by what it contains rather than what is missing. This book focuses on the role of institutions and political elites. Of course, this has its problems. Democracy is, and should continue to be, more than a game for the elites. Therefore, rather than relying on party leaders to improve their screening of future candidates, as suggested by the authors, it might be more effective to provide the public with appropriate education about the expected norms of democracy as outlined.

I do believe that a more detailed exploration of economic factors in democratic decline warrants further attention. The book argues that polarisation has led to the current state of affairs in America, and we must recognise and accept the reality of this polarisation and the feelings of inadequacy towards the government. Despite proudly having a democratic system in place since independence, the American people believe themselves to be suffering, especially economically³. It doesn’t matter if the data indicates otherwise. The people need to see and feel the advantage of rising GDP and increasing FDI in their wallets and bank accounts. Failure to recognise this is likely one of the most significant lessons the Democratic Party learned after Kamala Harris’s unsuccessful presidential bid.

What I would like to argue here is that Trump is not an outlier in 2024. Unfortunately, the risk of populist authoritarianism has spread far and beyond. While fascism

may outwardly promote violent nationalism, populism is a political approach that manipulates people's enfranchisement to support a leader who may or may not have the best interest of the people at heart. Populism adeptly manipulates emotions, particularly fear, to persuade people to perceive "the others" (which can be based on class, nationalism, race, or religion) as illegitimate political actors⁴. Using this measurement, we can observe the dangerous spread of populism to other countries, such as Malaysia, where I currently reside.

Malaysia is far away from the other countries discussed by Levitsky and Ziblatt. It is located in Southeast Asia and has been considered to be experiencing further democratisation, especially following its first change in government in 2018. However, as I have argued elsewhere⁵, there has been a rise in populism, not necessarily from a single leader like Trump or Narendra Modi of India, but rather from an Islamist political party. In Malaysia, various ethnic groups coexist side by side, yet they must contend with Islam's status as the official religion of the federation. This implies that while others have the freedom to practice their religion, Islam holds a dominant position in public spaces. During the 2018 government change, Islamists and their allies employed a populist strategy, instilling fear in the populace that non-Muslims, mainly Chinese, were strategically assuming control of the economy and politics, with the aim of "replacing" the majority Malay-Muslim population, if not in numbers then in power. This approach bears a striking resemblance to the "Great Replacement Theory" promoted by the Republican Party in the US.

These Malaysian populists tick some of the boxes proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt, including dismissing democratic institutions, such as through their claim that redelineation to fix malapportionment would benefit non-Malays. They also questioned the legitimacy of political adversaries by questioning their loyalty to the country and their commitment to the unique position of the Malay "natives." Party leaders have not supported violence, but their rhetoric has led to their supporters inciting violence online, especially after the 2022 elections in which they failed to form a government. Therefore, Malaysia, a country still developing democratic norms, faces a heightened risk of populist authoritarianism. The Islamist party currently holds the largest number of seats in Parliament for a single party. Thus, it is time for elites to step up and educate the masses, mainly through civic education, which is currently lacking in Malaysia.

Interestingly, Tom Nichols made the same argument in *Our Own Worst Enemy*⁶, published three years after *How Democracies Die*. Instead of blaming the failures of institutions or economic liberalism, Nichols argues that disillusioned and egocentric citizens have given rise to authoritarian and populist leaders who thrive on anger and resentment. Therefore, the solution is to educate citizens on their civic rights and duties. Similarly, Gideon Rachman argues in *The Age of the Strongman*⁷ that the figure of authoritarian leadership has grown in recent years due to people's longing for a glorious past following the inability of liberal democracy to fix everyone's problems. The book, similar to Levitsky and Ziblatt's, also concludes on an optimistic note: without delivering on promises, the cult of the personality cannot keep authoritarian leaders in power.

It has been more than twenty years since the military coup in Fiji, the rise of Vladimir Putin in Russia, and that of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Today, populist leaders who have gained power through popular votes, rather than violence and coups, are primarily responsible for the rise of authoritarianism and the subsequent decline in democracy. In early 2016, people laughed at the prospect of Trump at the White House. Years later, he successfully made a triumphant return to his second term as the so-called Leader of the Free World. But if America fails to defend its democracy, the consequences will be far-reaching. One of them is that America will no longer be able to lecture the world about the glory of democracy, given that its institutions have allowed a populist like Trump to win twice. As they say, 'Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me'. However, instead of throwing blame all around, advocates of democracy should understand and address the current threats to democratic systems worldwide. Instead of cowering, we should be exposed to works such as *How Democracies Die* to increase our understanding of the current path and prevent unintended consequences.

Notes

1. Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141-155.
2. Jason Stanley, *Erasing History: How fascists rewrite the past to control the future* (Footnote, 2024).
3. The biggest concerns on social media on the eve of Trump's victory centred around the unaffordable housing market and rising inflation. This is despite data showing unemployment was going down in 2024. See Lucia Mutikani (2025, January 11). US labor market exits 2024 with strong job gains, drop in unemployment rate. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/us/us-job-growth-beats-expectations-december-unemployment-rate-falls-41-2025-01-10/>
4. Uri Kidron & Piki Ish-Shalom, "The Populist Name Game: About Populism and Naming," *Political Studies Review* (2024), 1-22. DOI: 10.1177/14789299241242259
5. Syaza Shukri, "In Limbo: Islamist Populism and Democratic Stagnation in Malaysia," in *Democratic Recession, Autocratization, and Democratic Backlash in Southeast Asia*, eds. J. Ockey & N. Talib (Singapore Springer Nature, 2023); Syaza Shukri, "Populism as a Strategy in Malaysia," in *Faces of Populism*, ed. S. Wang (Routledge, 2024). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003399780-5>
6. Tom Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The assault from within on modern democracy* (Oxford, 2021).
7. Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman: How the cult of the leader threatens democracy around the world* (Vintage, 2021).