

What is Fascism and Where does it Come From?

by Geoff Eley

This essay was completed at the end of September 2020, at the height of an extraordinarily divisive United States presidential election, amid a rare concurrency of devastating national emergencies (the festering crisis of racial injustice and inequality, an unchecked pandemic, a widening paralysis of the economy), several weeks before election day itself on 3 November 2020. It contains both a reflection on the usefulness of a portable concept of fascism for making sense of contemporary political phenomena and a snapshot of rapidly moving events. The direction of its argument – particularly regarding the dynamics of a rightwing political coalescence – was distressingly confirmed by subsequent developments. The election outcome gave Democrats a finely poised victory, promising significantly greater impedance against further fascization. On the other hand, an insurgent network of far-Right pro-Trump white nationalists planned the kidnap, trial, and execution of the Democratic Governor of Michigan (not by accident a woman); a motley coalition of Trumpists, white nationalist militants, state-based Republicans, and Congressional Republicans sought with remarkable persistence to overturn the certified results of a legitimately conducted presidential election; and a rag-tag insurgency of especially angry Trump partisans stormed the Congressional seat of government on 6 January 2021, directly incited by the outgoing President himself. These were only the most dramatic flashpoints in a far more pervasively distributed climate of anxiety, endangerment, and disorder.

I decided not to update the text in light of those intervening events. Too much is happening too quickly for too much of the time. I hope my discussion, both in its framing and particular direction, proves helpful in seeing a way forward politically. Its closing sections do seem dismayingly prescient. I am grateful both to the editors of *History Workshop Journal* for wanting to run this essay so quickly and to Gavriel Rosenfeld and Janet Ward, the editors of the volume on *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, where it will also appear. My many debts in grappling with these questions are acknowledged in the footnotes. They include most immediately my fellow contributors to *Fascism in America*, along with Julia Adeney Thomas and our fellow contributors to the volume *Visualizing Fascism: the Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right* (Duke University Press, 2020). Each of

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those volumes, as well as my own thinking, presupposed exceptionally valuable long-maturing collective conversations.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the early 2000s, after a notable resurgence of interest among historians and other scholars mostly in the humanities, 'fascism' rejoined an active political lexicon. For some, mostly on the Left, it had never exactly been dropped: sloganeering and glibness apart, it signified well-understood meanings, simultaneously historic – located firmly in a very particular past – and urgent, a warning of present dangers. The main renewed impetus came from the pervasive racialization of western European politics since the 1970s. Responding to the growth of a violently anti-immigrant and xenophobic Right, its activist left-wing opponents reached easily for a familiar language of 'anti-Nazi' and 'anti-racist' equivalence. As migrancy grew from the early 1990s into a permanent fixture of socio-political life, rightwing anger against immigrants then intensified, driven by the disruptions of globalization, ethno-political violence in the Balkans and Caucasus following the end of Communism, and the 'freeing' of labour markets in the European Union.¹ But outside the Left, appeals to anti-fascist principles and solidarities were not often made. In tacit recognition of its leftwing ownership, not least during the Cold War, liberals and conservatives had largely vacated such language: earlier anti-fascist associations were shed, disqualified by their use in official Communist discourse.² But by the turn of the new century, in contrast, moved by a no less instrumental demonizing of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and other regimes targeted by the George W. Bush Presidency, 'fascist' was reclaimed across the political spectrum as an extremely mobile mainstream pejorative. In the febrile aftermath of the Iraq War, it crept back into public discourse.³

Further re-emphasizing the term's mobility, a second contemporary usage gathered around the militant Islamist politics attaching to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, asserting their affinities with the earlier twentieth-century appearance of fascism in Europe. Militarist violence, Jihadist warmaking, exclusionary ideology, and a totalizing vision of social organization and moral order were all cited in support of this conflation. Similarities were found most plausibly in the shared fascist/Islamist antipathy to 'the entire legacy of the Enlightenment' considered foundational to 'Western civilization' with 'its belief in reason, toleration, open-ended inquiry, and the rule of law'. The resulting coinage, 'Islamofascism', was quickly taken up by advocates of the 'global war against terror', who regarded radical Islamists as channelling earlier Nazi hatred of the Jews. If Islamist enmity against Israel was paradigmatic, these voices insisted, then a chain of equivalence could join radical Islamism by means of anti-Zionism to those earlier forms of antisemitic belief.⁴ Among recognized German historians, such claims were made most vehemently by Jeffrey

Herf, who connected Islamist discourse directly to Nazi antisemitism of the Second World War.⁵

Beyond these specific usages emerged a more generalized, still nascent, but increasingly vocal dismay regarding U.S. political developments, ranging from the consequences of the 2001 Patriot Act (reauthorized under Barack Obama in 2010 and 2011) to the racialized politics of mass incarceration and the criminalizing – actual and potential – of political dissent. Anxieties about this rightward drift, varying from the alarmist to the merely perturbed, settled around the dangers of the entangled political logics now energizing far-Right politics. Some of these were patently transnational. The worsening postcolonial crises of race inside European, North American, and other advanced capitalist societies continuously roiled perceptions of social health and disorder, chronically fixating on ‘immigrants’ and the threats they allegedly posed. As state sovereignties collapsed across a vast swathe of the Global South, from West Africa and the Sahel through the Horn of Africa to the Middle East and Central Asia, the resulting refugee movements and economic displacement of peoples kept those enmities stoked. If neoliberal globalization was the engine of that process, then the privatizing of the means of coercion – via mercenaries and profit-making security corporations, ruinous civil wars, warlord-driven systems of economic extraction, and the post-1991 international arms trade – was its fuel.⁶ The results re-entered metropolitan societies through the growth of private security industries, the new societal paradigm of gatedness, expansion of the carceral state, and the militarizing of police.⁷ Amid these turmoils, a major climate-related catastrophe, Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, placed their implications on brutal display: discriminatory, racialized rescue; abandoned and disposable populations; armed vigilantes and non-state paramilitaries patrolling the waters; the fortress-like gatedness of suburbs. Joined to the disasters in Afghanistan and Iraq, in their home as well as overseas reverberations, from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo, this spectacle of apparently punitive governmentality triggered still more heightened awareness.⁸

Fast-forwarding ten years, we find a much changed discursive landscape. From being a loosely defined, free-floating derogatory signifier, commonly deployed in polemics on the Left, with more recent adoptions on the Right (liberal fascism, Islamo-fascism), ‘fascism’ has become a name for the present danger. Beginning in 2011–12, developments quickened in multiple interconnected arenas. Presaged by the 2009 EU elections, far-Right parties across Europe sustained unprecedented levels of popularity, bringing new influence and even government power. During 2009–10 in the United States, the Tea Party movement sparked wider activity that pulled the Republican Party markedly to the right. The fallout from the Arab Spring in 2011 destabilized the entire North African and Middle Eastern region, most disastrously through the Libyan, Yemeni, and Syrian civil wars, and propelled a global refugee crisis with its crescendo in 2015–17. While ravaging the Middle East, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, Islamist terrorism

struck spectacular blows inside western Europe's metropolitan core. Gun massacres repeatedly left U.S. society reeling, including a series of mass shootings in schools: whether in a reactive politics of anti-immigrant fear or through versions of racist, misogynist, and white nationalist fury, these actions exposed one hodgepodge after another of far-Right ideology and affiliations. The dramatic global simultaneity of such events, borne instantaneously from one place to another, was essential to their impact. From Anders Behring Breivik in Oslo, Norway on 22 July 2011 to Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019, far-Right race warriors were enacting each other's manifestos, travelling the common websites, envying the same violence, imagining a shared white nationalist and racially purified future.⁹

The sheer, frenetic intensity in the reportage and dissemination of these events has been essential to their effect. The current rapidity in growth of all types of hate crimes helps translate such news into an archive of the usable spectacle. The Right's cultivated nightmare of a ceaseless and corrupting 'invasion' of refugees, asylum-seekers, migrants, and many kinds of foreigners lays down the soil where a militantly racialized nationalism can be tilled. Certain common and convergent histories enable this political formation across Europe, going back to the postcolonial and racialized labour regimes of the postwar boom and beyond, even as national particularities shape the society-by-society variation. Although the frontlines have moved ever further inside the continent, countries on the territorial perimeter (Greece, Italy, Balkans, Hungary) process the xenophobia differently from those further away (Germany, western seaboard, Scandinavia), just as Brexit gave Britain pathologies all of its own. Equivalent genealogies also define such sentiment in the United States, where anti-immigrant anxieties spur the virulence of right-wing political insurgency, interconnected as ever with racism against people of colour.¹⁰ In each context, the surge in hate crimes – verbal abuse, physical assaults, trolling, arson, bombings, murder, public and hidden intimidation of every kind – inexorably shapes the prevailing socio-political climate, often in complex collusion with security forces and police.¹¹ Assassinations in Britain of Labour Party MP Jo Cox (16 June 2016) and in Germany of local CDU politician Walter Lübcke (2 June 2019), each chosen for their well-known pro-refugee advocacy, can be matched by the attempted murder in the United States of District Judge Esther Salas (19 July 2020).¹²

FASCISM IN THE GLOBAL INTERWAR

For many commentators, speaking of fascism has come to make sense. At first slow and uneven, by 2016 such talk was everywhere. As concerned democrats in the United States worried about the meanings of the new Trump Presidency, 'fascism' and 'anti-fascism' were constantly in play – as warning and slogan; as emotional rallying-point; as viscerally resonant historical reminder; as a language of recognition and abuse; as a boundary of

legitimate political thinking and action – but only rarely as a carefully informed argument or conceptual claim. Indeed, the most widely circulating treatments preferred some version of a vaguely descriptive typology, equating fascism to dictatorship, authoritarianism or ‘tyranny’.¹³ Those possibilities were loosely conceptualized around a few core symptoms: extreme nationalism; political intolerance; an attack on the governing arrangements of constitutional democracy; a reliance on propaganda; and the steady erosion of democracy’s institutional safeguards, from the free press to the courts and an independent judiciary. For definition, the dictatorial proclivities of a few main exemplars often sufficed, from Viktor Orbán to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Jarosław Kaczyński to Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin to Donald Trump. In Madeleine Albright’s version, for example, fascist leaders deem themselves the embodiment of the nation; they are indifferent to the rights of others; they pursue goals by whatever means possible, including violence.¹⁴

One leading skeptic is Dylan Riley, Marxist sociologist and author of a major comparative study of fascism in the early twentieth century.¹⁵ In a non-sense refusal of historical parallels of the kind mentioned above (‘bad historical analogies will not aid in dealing with the present crisis’), Riley pleads for ‘a properly comparative and historical perspective’, which alone can deliver ‘greater theoretical and political clarity about the situation today’. He supplies this by ‘systematically contrasting the era of classical fascism – roughly from 1922 to 1939 – with the present period’, using ‘four comparative axes: geopolitical context, economic crisis, relations of class and nation, and, finally, the character of civil society and of political parties’.¹⁶ In marking the difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’, in the terms he chooses, Riley is fully persuasive. If ‘fascism’ is a label to be tied directly and essentially to a distinctive political formation produced by the dynamics of the European interwar, in the four dimensions he describes, then it seems clearly unsuitable today. Particular elements in Riley’s argument might be vulnerable – for example the exact and varying nature of the symbiosis between dominant classes and fascist regimes, or the volatile dynamics of class, party, and nation. But the main point still stands: given the vital disjunctions and specificities, fascism of the classical kind will not reappear.

After this historicizing critique, Riley offers a typology of his own, drawn from Max Weber’s ‘three forms of rule, each with its own apparatus of domination and logic of legitimation: the charismatic, the patrimonial, and the bureaucratic’. In this deft and succinct application, Trump’s governing approach emerges as an idiosyncratic and dysfunctional patrimonial reversion. For Trump, the office of state is a household, ‘with little if any distinction between the public and private interests of the ruler’:

The patrimonial office lacks above all the bureaucratic separation of the ‘private’ and the ‘official’ sphere. For the political administration, too, is treated as a purely personal affair of the ruler, and the political power is

considered part of his personal property, which can be exploited by means of contributions and fees.¹⁷

This renders some primary features of Trump's regime heuristically intelligible – most obviously the arbitrary personalistic excess, use of patronage, and incorrigible nepotism, but also the consequent shallowness of the pool of governing competence practically available to his administration. It also makes sense of his government's endemic internal contentiousness, because 'the conflict between Trump and the bureaucracy' runs not 'between an authoritarian president and the bearers of "democratic norms"' (for example James Comey, Robert Mueller, Christopher Wray, Rod Rosenstein; FBI, CIA, Pentagon), who are barely democratic in other than inertly institutional ways, but with the upholders of the legal-rational state, the bureaucracy in its typologically Weberian guise.¹⁸ Trump's rule is a misfit in that sense.

In the same vein, its legitimacy can only be charismatic. Lacking either the procedural stabilities of the legal-rational order or the symbolics of 'the weight of tradition' (his entire political thrust denigrates both), Trump can only appeal directly to his supporters. He does so with the bullying swagger and macho taboo-breaking of his trademark demotic, using his signature media of Twitter, television, and campaign rally. As Riley says, 'he breaks with the boring routines of official power: ripping up speeches, insulting foreign dignitaries, calling out the Bush family as a collection of mediocrities, and so on'. And there is the rub. Trump's need of charisma cuts *against* his patrimonial style. He commands neither a coherent ideology, 'creating a layer of disciples who can spread the central message outward and downward', nor an organized political instrument. There is 'no Trumpian ideology or "cause" to which loyalists might commit themselves when he leaves office'. So his rule remains volatile and arbitrary, a once-off fluke without 'staying power'. It makes no sense 'to assign him any general classification like fascism, authoritarianism or populism, even though he may exhibit traits of at least the third, if not the second – as well as nationalism, racism, and sexism'. Calling him a fascist merely confuses the necessary ground.¹⁹

These are salutary cautions. The conjunctural circumstances of interwar Europe were indeed glaringly different from those we encounter today. From any empirical description of 1918–22, the differences will quickly emerge: no First World War and its outcomes; no total war; no Bolshevism; no revolutionary insurgency across most of Europe; no ascendant mass trade unionism; no Communist or social democratic parties; no pan-European democratization. A similar bundle of distinctiveness also surrounds the rise of the Nazis in 1928–34. The temporalities are profoundly different too. The scale and intensity of the state/society and state/economy transformations accompanying the First World War, in the context of the preceding decades of capitalist industrialization, have no counterpart in the fallout from capitalist restructuring since the 1970s. With disjunctions of this magnitude – with a different set of state/society relations, different

categories of political actors, different types of possible political agency – we could never expect to find the political constellation of the 1920s replicated in our later time. In that case, how can it make sense to use the parties and regimes of Mussolini and Hitler as our measure of fascism today?

In insisting on comparison, Riley is surely right. To enable an effective politics, we need historically informed analysis that can avert tendentious conflations, easy surface similarities, and direct linkages that seem outwardly plausible and may be emotionally satisfying, but stop short of showing how fascism is able to gain its purchase and build its appeal. To think effectively about the dangers of fascism today, we need to sort through the appropriate distinctions as carefully as possible. We need to grasp not just the distinctive ideas and practices that separate fascists from others on the Right and justify using the term, but also the particular contexts that give fascists popularity and a credible claim on power. What enables fascists to offer themselves as a desirable ‘extra-systemic’ solution for urgently perceived problems, as an alternative to the pluralism, negotiation, and coalition-building associated with democratic constitutionalism? What kind of crisis brings fascism onto the agenda? What is the character of the ‘fascism-producing crisis’?

To justify using the term for present political purposes – to make it precisely useful rather than just an emotionally satisfying slogan or the expression of a justified democratic angst, to bring it fully into the realm of theory and strategy – we need a double procedure. We need *first* to contextualize: we need to historicize fascism by being as specific as possible about its early twentieth-century dynamics of emergence, by isolating its characteristics as a locatable, historically specific formation (Italian Fascism, German National Socialism), one that took form under the impact of those particular crisis conjunctures of interwar Europe (1917–23, 1929–34) emphasized by Riley. But we cannot stop there. We need a *second* step. Having first contextualized, we then need to *de-contextualize* in the historian’s sense of freeing the term from those immediate markers of time and place. Only then can we get to the process of abstraction that delivers the really useful knowledge we need for today.

FASCISM THEN, FASCISM NOW

Focusing too literally on the two primary interwar cases traps us into too narrowly drawn an understanding. For one thing, we need to widen the comparative frame. If Riley’s ‘geopolitical context’ is to be taken seriously, then what he calls ‘the imperialist goal of geopolitical revision’ has to embrace more than just the making of Italian and German foreign policy.²⁰ By the 1930s, the interlinked global setting of fascism’s emergence was distributed among multiple centres with multi-directional flows. That new and menacing globality marked destructive distance from the international order ratified in 1918–19 by Versailles. For the rivalrous coexistence of established empires had now dissolved into a watchful protectionism defended against newly energized, aggressively insurgent imperialisms: Nazi Germany, Italian

Fascism, Imperial Japan. Just as the coming world war vastly exceeded a merely European framework of clashing national states, so did these fascist disruptions come from plural and varied origins. Fascism began from East Asia as well as Europe, from Africa as well as the Americas.²¹ These fascisms displayed similar political dynamics, ideological outlook, and practices, with convergent political effects. Their partially and unevenly secured access to state power hardly disqualifies them from significance, whether inside their immediate region or in wider transnational political fields. We miss a great deal without this carefully specified global understanding.

Such a global perspective suggests another limitation of the German and Italian examples. By recognizing multiple *origins*, we can also see multiple *forms*. By pluralizing the picture, whether in fascism's movement or its regime phases, we can explore the diverse departure points and trajectories of national and regional cases rather than simply assuming the Italian and German progenitive primacy. Fascists, and the ideas and methods they represented, came to power by variable strategies and means. Fascism sought governing authority via stealthful manoeuvres and elite-mediated brokerage as well as by the full-frontal challenge of a Nazi *Machtergreifung* or Mussolini's March on Rome. It laid a claim on power by more diffuse plebiscitary appeals in addition to the highly organized, party-based mobilizing of the Nazis during 1928–32. It could use backdoor institutional leverage rather than dramatic and violent popular disorders. Nor were these modalities ever mutually exclusive or simply a binary choice. The presence of a mass party on the Nazi pattern is not in itself the *sine qua non* for using the fascist category; it was missing before 1922 in the formative Italian case, after all. Coming to full governing realization should not be the deciding criterion: fascisms could just as frequently fail or be held successfully at bay. The really important point is to dethrone the Nazi and Italian examples – not remotely to diminish their importance, but to see more clearly the broader political space they occupied. The interwar years revealed convergent circumstances of political polarization and societal crisis in many diverse parts of the globe, for which 'fascism' then supplied the shared political language, whether as readily embraced self-description or as the label that opponents bestowed.

There is a complicated question here. If fascism's emergence during the 1920s and 1930s was globally dispersed, rather than issuing only from the Italian and German starting points, taking variable forms and multiple paths, it also settled only gradually and unevenly into generic existence. It developed cumulatively rather than unfolding from an already assembled ground of principles comparable in coherence to liberalism or conservatism and other previously formed political ideologies. 'Fascism' as an everyday term preceded fascism as a category of socio-political analysis.²² But it soon named the commonalties of newly emergent radical right formations around the world, whose heterogeneous qualities caution against any restrictive typology of those movements held to qualify for the name or not. *First* came the

loose and frenetically mobile repertoire of departures we now call 'fascism', borne by all of the discursive noise and visual tactics surrounding Mussolini's and similar movements, whether as viscerally unreflected sloganeering and images or as the consciously chosen terminology and stagecraft of party intellectuals and strategists. Only *then* came fascism as the stabilized category of political understanding with its formalized programmes and codified outlook. That being the case, a broader definition seems more helpful and appropriate.

To become portable as a concept – usable across different times and places – 'fascism' needs to be defined by its politics: by the ideas that appealed to its activists and thinkers, inspired its leaders, and ran through its programmes; by its hatreds and negativities; by its stylistics, practices, and organizing modalities; by its activist preference for violence over civility, argument, and debate. Underlying all of those ideas, indeed constitutive for fascism as a distinctive political formation, were the early twentieth-century dynamics and consequences of mass democratization: on the one hand, the rise of labour movements and the electoral surge of radicalized socialist parties; on the other hand, the massive transnational convulsion of World War I and its disruptions. In grasping the resulting deadly particularity of fascism's arrival, moreover, we need not only the critical dissection of its ideas in the philosophical and programmatic senses, along with interpretive readings of its key texts and studies of the fascist outlook or mentality, but also analysis of fascists' popular appeal.

In a dangerously doubled context of popular democratic insurgency and liberal paralysis after 1917–18, when postwar constitution-making registered utterly unprecedented democratic gains, fascism offered itself as an extreme political remedy, a counter-revolutionary strategy of order. Fascists proposed an audaciously untrammelled activism, in a new synthesis joining radically authoritarian rule to militarized activism and coercively enforced conformity, infused with a radical-nationalist, imperialist, and racialist creed. This politics was shaped from violent antipathy against liberals, democrats, socialists, and above all Bolsheviks. It was not organized around a codified core of texts or doctrine. It was never 'a closed canonical apparatus' or an elaborately 'articulated system of belief', although individuals could certainly perform such coherence and more intricately developed self-consciousness. Rather, it formed a matrix of common dispositions. For Mussolini it was a 'common denominator', 'a set of master tropes' ordered around 'violence, war, nation, the sacred, and the abject'.²³

Inside this new fascist ensemble, it was the turning to political violence – to repressive and coercive forms of rule, to guns rather than words, to assaulting and killing one's opponents rather than debating them on the speaker's platform – that marked the distance from earlier versions of the Right. Coercion as such was not the issue. Use of force, from ordinary policing and riot control to states of emergency, is an entirely conventional part of legally constituted governing authority, whether liberal,

authoritarian, or democratic. The state's coercive capacities are always potentially at hand, whether for routinely protecting property and persons, maintaining law and order, or curtailing civil liberties under pressure of a national emergency, as during wartime or a major strike. Privately organized coercion was likewise common to the politics of societies undergoing capitalist development in the later nineteenth century: workplace compulsion, strike-breaking, vigilantism, employment-based paternalism, and servile labour, especially in the countryside, could all richly be found. Yet precisely when measured against such precedents, fascist violence was shockingly new. In Germany this contrast was clear. The Anti-Socialist Law of 1878–90 and similar legislation, the harassment, deporting, and imprisonment of left-wing activists, the unleashing of police or troops against strikers and demonstrators – all these were one thing. But *terror*, first by means of a militarized and violently confrontational style of politics, then as a principle of state organization, was quite another.

Thus *killing* socialists rather than just arguing with them, or at most legally and practically restricting their rights, was the most startling of departures. The brutality of that break can never be exaggerated. Before 1914 attacks on democracy had unfolded only within normative legal and political contexts that gradually brought extra-democratic violence under significant constraint. The liberal-constitutionalist politics that became generalized across Europe as a result of the 1860s made arbitrary authority increasingly accountable to representative government, parliamentary oversight, and liberal practices of the rule of law. Moreover, as the European socialist parties gained in electoral strength and parliamentary influence from the 1890s they brought the older systems of repressive policing under further review. Although during the 1900s a fresh process of polarized contention could be seen gathering pace, this incremental strengthening of constitutional politics made it possible in much of Europe for political life to stabilize significantly on the given parliamentary terrain.²⁴ And it was *this* political culture of ritualized and respectful proceduralism that the massive disruption of the First World War so badly disordered. *This* was the history of cumulative progressivism that fascists now violently disavowed. The democratic constitutions of 1918–19 ratcheted forward the previous decades' hard-won and patiently consolidated gains. It was that practical consensual ground of political civility that fascists in Italy and Germany decided so aggressively to desert and then destroy.

A PORTABLE DEFINITION

What can we take away from this history? If fascism began as a radically distinct politics of the Right in the wake of World War I, essentially a response to the revolutionary turmoil surrounding democratization, how might we recognize it elsewhere, in a different place and time? As a politics, I have suggested, fascism can be distilled into the following: it wants to silence and even murder its opponents rather than arguing with them; it

prefers an authoritarian state over democracy; it pits an aggressively exclusionary idea of the nation against a pluralism that values and prioritizes difference. On that basis, we can separate fascism's substance from the generative time of its beginnings, whose massive particularities will never be closely replicated. This came not merely from an unrepeatable conjuncture – the big violence and societal changes of World War I – but from other vital determinations too, from the sociology of the main collective actors and their forms of possible political agency to the differing modalities of publicness and the changing social ecologies of capitalism. Yet if we build our comparison structurally around these factors as we find them in the 1920s (for example using Riley's four axes), we risk foreclosing the findings: if the originary context was so fundamentally different, how can we find the same politics now? It indeed makes no sense to look for direct equivalences between far-Right politics today and the movements calling themselves fascist then. But the absence today of some exact counterpart for Mussolini's *squadristi* or Hitler's NSDAP hardly precludes our use of the term, providing we say very carefully what we mean.

By focusing on the substance of what fascists wanted, we can explore how the distinctively fascist relation to politics might work in the present. *Pace* Dylan Riley, we *can* gain valuable insights by posing a differently constructed comparative question. *Mutatis mutandis*, how far do the ideas, methods, programmes, and stylistics of a contemporary far-Right begin to resemble those of the classical fascists? Where do present-day movements converge with those predecessors and where do they differ or depart? For such a discussion, there should be no pre-given conclusion. In the critical reading of potentials and tendencies, particular outcomes are not to be inscribed. Seeking the spaces where far-Right politics may be acquiring specifically fascist inflections presumes no predetermined political strategy in response. But likewise, such convergences may well point us to other helpful connections. In an ever-intensifying atmosphere of crisis, when the language of fascism comes promiscuously into play, we urgently need more careful explications to guard against ill-conceived and precipitous calls for action. In other words, can we detect any dynamics of radicalization that seem to be fostering the kind of politics outlined above? Where do we find a far-Right politics that openly celebrates the use of political violence, the need for authoritarianism, the dismantling of juridical democracy, and the virtues of coercively exclusionary forms of patriotism and radical nationalism?

How far is Trump himself a fascist? Critical readings of his rhetoric – from Twitter feed and Fox News phone-ins to press briefings and campaign stumps – show very easily his indebtedness to explicitly fascist or neo-Nazi tropes and ideas. The fact that he retweets this or that Nazi slogan or meme and uses the exact language the Nazis or Italian Fascists used is damningly revealing.²⁵ When he rails against the Beltway and the establishment and the rottenness of the party system, or talks about 'draining the swamp', he uses a vocabulary of 'anti-politics' coming directly out of early twentieth-century

German history. When he descends from the sky into an airport rally, Leni Riefenstahl is instantly evoked. The aggressive jut of the jaw, the looming posture, the grim scowl – these come palpably from Mussolini's body language. A key henchman during the Presidency's first year, Steve Bannon, reads widely in the political writings of Julius Evola and other earlier twentieth-century fascist thinkers, warms to their ideas, and works them into his thinking. Similar applies to the longest-serving non-family member of the presidential coterie, Stephen Miller.²⁶ We can go further to map the wider topography of neo-Nazi, white-supremacist, militia-styled Alt-Right activism through its networks, writings, and websites to develop an elaborate picture of the Trump-aligned far-Right constituency. This is the actively mobilized part of his vaunted 'base', who style themselves consciously as fascist, whether by U.S. descent or vicarious attachment to Nazi or Italian Fascist models. After the 2016 presidential campaign itself, this visible, organized far-Right presence coalesced vociferously around free-speech scandalizing across college campuses, while organizing the Charlottesville 'Unite the Right' rally of August 2017. Three years later, in the paramilitary protests against COVID-19 restrictions, via the polarized anger against Black Lives Matter (BLM), and through the pre-election rumbling against the Left, that militancy has hardened into extremely threatening anti-democratic form.²⁷

Yet, the growth of neo-fascist networks may not be our best guide: invariably quite small in membership, they seldom record more than occasional local success in electoral terms, as against the notoriety gained from publicity-grabbing provocations. Their public legitimacy has often been stealthfully secured – by precisely *not* calling themselves 'fascist', while insisting on democratic credentials. They typically waver between observing the liberal protocols and giving their militancy rein. Those initiatives with greater staying-power, like Richard Spencer's National Policy Institute (NPI) or Jared Taylor's New Century Foundation, exemplify the syndrome. From the preferred political stylistics and organizational forms to the ideological affiliations and propensities, they bear the influence of fascism in much of its early twentieth-century guise. In the cumulative record, there is no dearth of explicit affirmative statements on Nazi ideals and accomplishments, though often with idiosyncratic variance (as in Taylor's distancing from antisemitism). Yet they profess at the same time adherence to democratic rules.

Two questions immediately arise. How might this balancing act between formal democratic legality and physical-force militancy begin to break down? And: how might a logic of coalescence toward the non-fascist Right occur? In August 2017, Charlottesville supplied provisional answers. On the one hand, white-supremacist militancy tipped easily into physical violence, with pitched *melées* between attendees and anti-racist counter-demonstrators and the dramatic murder of one of the latter, Heather Heyer. If the rally elicited mainly condemnation from the conservative sector of the

Right, on the other hand, Trump's very public equivocation (there were 'very fine people on both sides') was universally seen as a muted white-nationalist endorsement. Until this point, with various maverick and wider grassroots exceptions, Republicans had stayed officially armoured against significant white-supremacist collaboration. But with Trump's prevarication, a first chink had appeared.²⁸

In the meantime, beneath the impact of the continuing war against immigration, the Trumpification of the Republican Party, the polarizing catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sustained BLM mobilization, and the 2020 presidential election, the barriers between far Right and conservatives have been decisively breached. Not only have Congressional Republicans swallowed any remaining misgivings about Trump's lack of basic presidential competence: his volatile and personalist style of leadership; his utterly shameless corruptions; his breaching of long-established protocols of governing, including most of the hallowed constitutional norms; his flouting of accountability; his lying; and his extraordinary vacating of governance during the unprecedented emergency of the pandemic. They have ceased worrying about the far Right too.

This dissolving boundary can be variously noted. In preserving their lock on judicial appointments, Senate Republicans sacrifice their remaining distance from Trump and open themselves to his supporters. This was a devil's bargain sealed during the impeachment: protection for the President in conformity with his agenda, whether aggressively open or cravenly silent, was straightforwardly the price to be paid. By that time, the trenches were dug. So the pandemic and its consequences polarized the divisiveness further again, hardening the allegiance of Trump's core supporters, while draining much of his wider vote back to the Democrats. With the stakes ratcheted ever upwards, politics devolving into the streets, and the confrontational language of law and order polarizing the political choice, any Republican inhibitions against the far Right were dangerously down.

If fascism requires a mobilized politics of anti-democratic political violence aimed at dismantling the given democratic frameworks of institutions, procedures, and law, then these present circumstances come threateningly close. What makes this politics seem attractive, effective, and morally justified? What kind of crisis produced these departures? How far do its characteristics resemble those of 1918–22 or 1928–34? Asking this question requires no exact equivalences. Nor do all the same elements have to be present. The crisis may not have fully arrived. But do its features display the same kind of potentials? Might these logics combine to produce outcomes of comparable severity? An especially forthright answer to these questions, borne by an extreme historicist skepticism, is Dylan Riley's: the interwar conjuncture was so essentially different, with so distinctive a set of political actors in such specific relations with geopolitical and societal forces, that analogy make no sense. But short of an entirely contextual nominalism, how might these two conjunctures be brought helpfully into conversation?

A WARNING FOR THE PRESENT

Crises that are structurally alike never mirror each other exactly. But certain features of the crises of Weimar and liberal Italy do resonate with the circumstances of now:

- a. We might begin with the *specifically constitutional* aspect: namely, the paralysis of governance and the far-reaching consequences of the post-1930 democratic impasse, combined with the autonomy and non-accountable independence of executive power.
- b. In the same vein, moving now from the specifically German to the European and wider geopolitical arena, we might emphasize the *profoundly non-accountable quality* of the crucial economic decision-making, including the particular power of the bankers and finance capital (in present terms, 'Wall Street'). This was not just a matter of unaccountable decision-making as such, but of the *untouchable authority of the dominant economic expertise*.
- c. Next we might mention the accelerating turn after 1930 to tariffs and *economic protectionism*.
- d. Next, the escalating political anxieties of 1930–32 were fuelled not only by direct experience of the economic hardships of job loss, hunger, destitution, and lack of relief, but also by the *generalized climate of social fear*. The scale and breadth of electoral support for Nazism came not necessarily from direct experience of unemployment, household collapse, business failure or bankruptcy, but from the *widening perceptions of a societal crisis with no apparent exit*.
- e. Finally, the eventual outcome of that crisis, brokered during the intensifying political deterioration of December–January 1932–33 was *not* a fascist seizure of power, but the formation of an appointed coalition government, a *regime of stabilization*, charged with restoring social and political order by authoritarian means, as the perceived prerequisite for economic recovery. In this initial Hitler government, only two ministries were held by the Nazis themselves. Government was otherwise continuous with the preceding cabinets of experts who were already non-accountable to the legislature and its party majority – especially regarding the economy, finance, justice, foreign affairs, the armed services, and defence. Indeed, the *most* notable feature of this first Hitler government was precisely its *coalition character*: in the cause of restabilizing society, establishment conservatives from across the power elites now revealed themselves *ready to ally with the fascists*.

If we view the crises tending toward fascism between the wars structurally (Italy in 1919–22, Germany in 1930–33 or 1918–20, and for that matter France in 1934–37, Spain in 1931–36), it helps to distinguish between two clear dimensions – namely, the institutional cohesion of the national polity and the popular legitimacy of the existing governing arrangements. From the perspective of the Right, pluralist and parliamentary methods of political

negotiation and containment had demonstrably exhausted their efficacy, guaranteeing neither the smooth political representation of the dominant classes nor the mobilizing of adequate popular support. In those circumstances, fascism now began offering itself, persuasively, as a violent, extra-systemic solution.²⁹

Fascism prospered from a paralysis of the state's capacity for dispatching its key organizing functions, whether in the economy or for the larger tasks of keeping cohesion in society. At the worst points of the crisis, that paralysis encompassed the entire institutional machinery of politics, including the parliamentary and party-political frameworks of representation. This was so in two ways. On the one hand, sufficient co-operation could no longer be organized among the major economic interests using the given mechanics of parliamentary representation and party-based government. Parliamentary coalition-building became unbearably complicated, so that politics became factionalized into a series of manoeuvres for influence over the high governmental executive.³⁰ This widened the gap between a nakedly unaccountable governing practice, disastrously severed from any stable popular consent, and a febrile popular electorate, increasingly mobilized for action but with no evident place to go. On the other hand, accordingly, the popular legitimacy of the same institutional framework also crumbled into disarray. The complex entanglement of these interrelated crises defined Germany's predicament between the suspension of normal parliamentary government in March 1930 and Hitler's appointment in January 1933. Amid the severity of this crisis, continuing adjustments inside the given arrangements looked more and more futile. More radical solutions beyond the bounds of the system altogether consequently became more and more appealing.³¹

This was the 'fascism-producing crisis': twin crises of cohesion and legitimacy. The political unity of the dominant classes and their major economic fractions could no longer be accomplished by the given methods of parliamentary representation and party government. And popular legitimacy for the same institutional arrangements fell concurrently into shreds. To widening circles of political actors – journalists, political theorists, party intellectuals, civil servants, businessmen and lobbyists, parliamentarians, power brokers of all kinds – tinkering with the given governing arrangements seemed increasingly unproductive. Governance as usual seemed no longer tenable. More radical solutions beyond the boundaries of the existing system altogether started coming into focus.

THE FASCISM-PRODUCING CRISIS

How might this help for the present? If 'fascism' is more than just a polemical weapon or everyday pejorative, then how should we use it responsibly? What is distinctive about the contemporary crisis and the politics it inspires? Once we historicize, what does this language enable us to see? What does it obscure? What can we take from the *histories* of fascism in the form of *theory*? If we approach fascism as a type of politics – the coercively

nationalist recourse to political violence and exclusionary authoritarianism under worsening pressures of governing paralysis and democratic impasse – then we can explore its very particular appearances today. What might we learn from the generative contexts of a specifically fascist politics in the early twentieth century in the form of abstraction that can aid political understanding now?

With dynamics already apparent from the early 2000s, but sharply worsening since 2008–10, the U.S. polity has entered a steadily escalating version of the dual crisis outlined above, one suddenly magnified and massively jolted by COVID-19: crisis of cohesion, crisis of legitimacy. Not only is the polity broken, but very large masses of people have stopped believing in its repair. On the one hand, we have the extreme atrophy of democratic practices in the state, whether inside the legislature or in the relations of Presidency, Congress, and Supreme Court; or in the attack on voting rights, voting access, and the conduct of elections; or in the curtailment of civil liberties and the scale and character of the carceral state. On the other hand, there is now a default conviction among the citizenry that government consists only in burdensomeness, corruption, incompetence, and non-accountability – a still widening popular belief in what I would call *the non-intelligibility of power*, the belief that power is exercised in a distant place, behind closed doors and opaque glass, by conspiracies of elites who are beholden to no one and *simply do not care*.

When these two crises occur together – crisis of representation, crisis of consent; government paralysis, democratic impasse – the prospects can be severe indeed. If we add the fields of structural determination outlined briefly at the very start of this essay, whose ruinous consequences are now immeasurably expanded and sharpened by the intervening calamity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the severity grows further again. The deeper structural setting will need to be fully filled in, proceeding from the huge transformations begun in the 1980s. Here, we need to talk about *fundamental capitalist restructuring* – deindustrialization and neoliberal globalization. We need to talk about *drastic class recomposition*, including the reorganization of work and labour circuits, the rewriting of the labour contract. We need to talk about the *global environmental catastrophe*, climate change in particular, which now challenges effective and accountable governance at every possible level, whether in the transformations of economic life, the immiseration of working people, and the brokenness of the polity, or in the worsening of international instability.

Big climatic events and unrelentingly arduous environmental changes will stretch the resources of already disabled national states, even as they strain the co-operative capacities of societies divisively organized around widening class inequalities. Global effects of environmental deterioration – competition among nations for basic needs, including water and all manner of natural resources; struggles to contain economic migrancy and the massed refugee populations fleeing endemic shortages, droughts, and floods;

rivalries over sources for energy – are likely to reshape the language of national security ever more divisively. Fortress mentalities, emotional appeals to nativism and the necessity of protectionist barriers, idioms of politics organized by anxiety, *gatedness* as the emerging societal paradigm – these already drive the authoritarian and violent proclivities of contemporary governmentality. The new dialectics of international conflict and societal crisis cannot fail to boost calls for economic protectionism, for greater authority in governing, for a strengthening of law and order, for upholding ‘American values’, for the entire white nationalist programme of a racialized social order. As such a drive gathers momentum, a politics resembling fascism can easily coalesce.

Global disruptions feed *back* into the metropolitan societies through the politics galvanized so effectively by the 2016 Trump campaign and then institutionalized under the presidency. The effects are driven restlessly along by Trump’s embattled white nationalism, shamelessly racist dog-whistling (by now more like a fog horn), and chauvinist sloganeering: America First, MAGA (Make America Great Again), Build the Wall, American Carnage. His rhetoric plays brazenly on fears of immigration. The creation of a borderless world (in the now-understood neoliberal sense), the collapse of state sovereignties in a vast belt of territory from West Africa through the Middle East to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the unstoppable continuance of the crisis of global migrancy all generate the materials for virulent popular anxieties about boundaries *inside* the societies of the advanced capitalist countries. The resulting dynamics can only become more and more destabilizing as rivalries over resources grow more and more unpredictable and extreme (hence the powerful impact exercised by climate change). Anxieties about borders, boundaries, protectiveness, and ‘difference’ drive a great deal of the white nationalist vehemence channelled by the Trump campaign and the analogous politics in Europe.

In the USA, an inwardly facing far-Right patriotism always sees itself in avowedly racialized terms, as a nationalism that is always-already ‘white’. For the toxicity of that syndrome, from his demonizing of the Central Park Five in May 1989 through his championing of the ‘birther movement’ during 2010–16, Donald Trump had long been a walking and talking exhibit.³² In the 2016 campaigning itself, the animus was aimed first and foremost against migrants entering the USA from Mexico, beginning with his descent from the Trump Tower escalator to declare his candidacy on 16 June 2015 (‘They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people’), and continuing into the final days of the campaign: ‘They’re coming in illegally. Drugs are pouring in through the border. We have no country if we have no border . . . We need the wall . . . We’re going to get them out. . . we have some bad hombres here and we’re going to get them out’.³³ But his wider scaremongering inflamed the familiar white supremacist imagery of African-American danger, pitting ‘the suburbs’ against the disparaged ‘inner-city’ wastelands of urban delinquency

and decay. In pledging to ‘take our country back’, Trump conjured not only Mexican immigrants and Muslim terrorists, but also the despised black urban underclass. From these viciously interconnected negatives is then forged the protectionist white nationalist positive.

Inside these reserves of anti-immigrant anger, Islamophobia, and racial grievance are equally virulent patterns of misogynist vituperation, as the abuse hurled at Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign (‘Burn the Witch’, ‘Hang the Bitch’, ‘Lock her Up’) so dismally confirmed.³⁴ Explicitly anti-feminist, brutally graphic, and often obsessively detailed, the attacks on Clinton bespoke visceral presumptions of masculine entitlement – entitlement to resources, to sexual access, to the use of violence, to a claim on truth, to a presumed ownership of authority – whose expression invariably took white nationalist or racialized form. Indeed, this may be the ground where Trump’s appeal bridges most directly and effectively between the organized networks of self-consciously far-Right activists and his broader voting constituency of MAGA-enthused patriots.

Masculinist grievance against the human and societal wreckage left by deindustrialization and the gutting of earlier forms of well-paid, long-term, secure, and even reasonably rewarding employment goes far in explaining the affective registers of a Trump campaign rally, while the rhetorics of victimhood, score-settling, and backlash against an array of anathematized ‘others’ travel easily back and forth between those ordinary supporters and the alt-Right websites. From the deep well of masculine insecurities and dismay come many distinct manifestations, often circulating through the debased and counterfeit publicness of the web-based registers of opinion, with a graphically unchecked viciousness that wildly escapes older protocols of lawful speech and behaviour, let alone earlier constraints of respect, tolerance, and civility. A tipping point came in later 2014 with Gamergate, the misogynist extravaganza of hate speech and harassment among video-gamers that helped normalize new boundaries of linguistic violence, online behaviour, and practical spillage.³⁵ If this netherworld topography remains murky, its porousness to the alt-Right is clear enough.³⁶ For anyone remembering earlier presumptions of political civility, the heedless violence and hate-mongering of this discourse are a truly dismaying discovery. Here, too, are echoes of that classical time, in this case the Nazi misogyny of 1928–34.³⁷

This is a striking particularity of the early twenty-first century. The internet’s everyday diatribes and sloganeering act as a vital bridging medium – back and forth between the programmatic white-terrorist manifestos of a Breivik or a Tarrant and the watered-down bluster of Trump’s common-sense translations, and from the plebiscitary noise of the campaign rally to the armoured masculinity in the streets. In its penchant for seizing and repurposing imagery, whatever the provenance – what Julia Thomas calls its distinctive counter aesthetic of undisciplined eclecticism, mobile symbols, and aggressive negations – contemporary far-Right inventiveness

replicates that of the fascists of the interwar years.³⁸ But with the dramatic reconfiguring of publicness underway since the 1990s, this presents itself very differently now than before.

Presaged by the global diffusion of television since the 1960s, followed by the mass spread of fax-machines, computers, and early forms of the internet, the classical public sphere has become irretrievably subsumed. The startling rapidity of new electronic communications, digital techniques, and information technologies – DVDs, cable and satellite TV, laptops, cell phones, Skype, streaming, smartphones, social media, Zoom – now enables not only novel forms of web-based organizing and agitation, but also incomparably wider and easier access. Increasingly under this new dispensation, *violence* means not just physically harming and murdering one's opponents (as in the interwar), but also coercively overriding democratic civility and its constitutional safeguards. It no longer relies as much on street fighting, pitched confrontations, imposing displays of paramilitary strength, and the spectacle of uniformed massed force. It operates, rather, by verbal onslaughts, internet trolling, instantly produced and transmitted visual incitements, and all the other virtual means of displaced but no less brutal assault.

Earlier patterns of politics never entirely vanish. They recede, transmute, regroup, reinspire, redeploy. For the current far Right, the fascist past delivers a highly serviceable resource, which the new electronic means also render all the more readily retrievable. In the structured characteristics of far-Right thinking, whatever the glaring specificities (for instance the relative salience of antisemitism, or the absence now of any counterpart to Bolshevism and the Soviet Union), there persist evident continuities and equivalences with the 1930s, whether in the wilful or overt indebtedness of the self-avowed neo-Nazis and white supremacists themselves, or in the more amorphously expanding gray zone of ideas aligning Republicans and conservatives with the Trump campaign. Making all due allowance for intervening differences of context and the resulting inflections, there are clear repetitions of tropes and repertoires and familiar patterns of rhetoric – in the masculine nation, the soldierly nation, the rageful nation, the misogynist nation, the racialized and racially armoured nation, and so forth. Finally, the current absence of either a Nazi Party or Socialist and Communist Parties on the model of the 1920s does not preclude finding their counterparts: that is, equivalent political actors within comparable fields of dangerously polarized political force. If hating one's liberal and democratic opponents meant something very different in 1920 or 1932, then doing so now brings its own means of organized and discursive expression, just as suppressing those opponents requires very different kinds of allowable violence.

CONCLUSION

In thinking about fascism, I have always found the immediate crisis the best place to begin – whether paradigmatically in the years 1917–23 and

1929–1934 in Italy and Germany, or now in the portal to fascism in the United States today.³⁹ The most obvious difference between these two moments is in the organized social and political strength of the Left. Fascism in the 1920s was a violently counter-revolutionary backlash against an unprecedented wave of democratic enlargement in Europe after 1917–18 that registered remarkable gains all across the continent for popular citizenship, access, and participation. Neither 1922 nor 1933 could be imaginable without this prior advance of the Left. The politics coalescing a hundred years later around Trump, in contrast, confronts nothing remotely resembling that self-confidently ascendant, elaborately organized, institutionally bunkered mass movement of democratization. Instead, it comes after several decades of historic defeat of an older Left (in any case far weaker in USA than in most parts of Europe) during the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s. The conditions of possibility that brought substantial democratic gains during the 1960s and 1970s were lost, indeed systematically taken away.

Those conditions had enabled a political presence for the Left during the mid twentieth century that sustained meaningful political effects. From the 1990s what remained of that presence was steadily eroded. Concretely, there are no organized collective solidarities of comparable staying-power on that earlier model of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century any more. Their loss came systemically from each of the big processes whose impact cumulatively composed the materials of the present danger: the fiscal crisis of late-capitalist restructuring; the recomposition of class; the breaking of the polity. In fact, the transformations of the past four decades have been so destructive that the political capacities for organizing democratic agency on a sufficiently sustained, and efficaciously collective scale may have ceased being available. Before 1922 in Italy, and before 1933 in Germany, could be found the strongest Socialist and Communist parties under capitalism; but in 2020 in the United States there is ...what?

At inception, Trump's regime lacked an overall plan. Its general goals – radical deregulation throughout the economy; drastically shrinking the civil state; tax revisions; dismantling 'Obamacare'; packing the judiciary; destroying *Roe vs. Wade*; assaulting public goods of whatever kind – were imposing enough. But these were the pre-existing aggregate of conservative Republican ambitions. Only in course of the presidency have they acquired additional binding force, with the sharpened political edge that justifies current fascism talk. With opportunity, Trump's visceral authoritarianism and inventive if capricious venality – his personal despotism – has duly uncoiled. With time, aided both by executive segmentation and determined action of a few especially driven ideologues (such as Steven Miller or Betsy DeVos), a more coherent wish has materialized for maximizing executive power. As 2020 drew closer, this always promised to concentrate Trump's ambitions into more centralist form, for which the abortive impeachment supplied the accelerant. But some further adversarial challenge was needed, an indictment of Trump from the Left, firing his anti-democratic white nationalist

appetites. The events of the campaign year itself – the crisis of racialized policing amid the COVID-19 emergency, followed by sustained mobilization around BLM and polarization in the streets, with the Presidency alternately watching and colluding, Congress deadlocked, and central government all but vacated – then delivered the fuel.

This case should not be overstated or misconstrued: the 2020s will not be the 1920s. To dissect the lineaments of an evolving crisis is not to declare it altogether formed, with no way out. Its logics and potentials have no already-established single direction. There is no preset outcome. But if fascism in that fully realized sense has not yet arrived, its tendential proximity is apparent. In this emergent crisis the following elements stand out:

1. The national polity and its central governing arrangements stay locked in an astonishing stalemate, with no glimmerings of cross-branch good-faith conversation, let alone any policy-making exchange or constructive crisis-related collaboration. In eschewing any national co-ordination or decisive central response to the pandemic, the Presidency has vacated the space of governing, while the Senate likewise withdraws.
2. Supplying neither continuity of administrative expertise nor a context for collective decisions, Trump's governing executive is united only by indifference to the established rules and practices. For the normative proceduralism of U.S. governance, it has active contempt.
3. Combined with the polity's paralysis and the incoherence of government during the COVID-19 emergency, this non-accountability continuously undermines any popular confidence in the state's operating competence and reliability.
4. While the Left offers no political challenge remotely comparable to the European democratic insurgencies of 1918–19, the BLM protests unleashed by the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis on 26 May 2020 attained a genuinely national resonance, with momentum lasting throughout the summer. Whether in the scope and diversity of the activism and generalized popular support, in the coherent militancy of the demands (Defund the Police, racial justice), in the closeness with a broadening progressive tendency inside the Democratic Party, and in the surprising staying power of the support, this movement confronted the Trump Presidency in terms that called the system actively to account.
5. The Trump regime responded in kind. On the one hand, it used the executive power of the White House and Justice Department for the purposes of re-establishing 'law and order', deploying troops on the streets (drawn from diverse federal agencies, including Homeland Security and Secret Service), ordering aerial surveillance, assaulting citizens, kidnapping protesters into unmarked vans, and using a full array of counter-insurgency weaponry and techniques. Trump threatened to override city and state jurisdictions, mobilize the U.S. military to suppress demonstrations, and invoke the 1807 Insurrection Act. On the other

hand, his rhetoric consistently escalated the tensions, giving police unqualified support, embracing confrontations, even endorsing vigilantism (and on one occasion summary execution), while stoking conspiracy theories and demonizing protesters as criminals and extremists (antifas, anarchists, marxists, socialists, extreme leftists).

6. Already apparent in armed protests against state-level COVID-19 lockdown measures, a convergence of far-Right militias and paramilitary groups (Proud Boys, Three-Percenters, Boogaloo, Oath Keepers, neo-Confederates, miscellaneous white nationalists) spawned a significant counter-mobilization, whether in principal sites of BLM protests and smaller towns or across the web-based political landscape.⁴⁰ Under the plebiscitary aegis of Trump's press audiences, Fox News interviews, and inflammatory tweets, the nascent coalescence of White House Trumpians, Congressional Republicans, and far-Right networks came palpably closer. Senator Tom Cotton (Arkansas), a leading Trump loyalist, called for paratroopers to be used against the protests ('Antifa terrorists'), tweeting 'No quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters'.⁴¹
7. These confrontational escalations pitched U.S. society into a novel and uncharted conjuncture. Executive measures to preserve public order are not in themselves so unusual, providing we overlook the particular BLM context and overall discursive environment. But a U.S. President's readiness to incite the staging of armed protests against lawfully issued state-level lockdown precautions, along with his race-baiting demagoguery, law-and-order appeals, and white nationalist rabble-rousing, was an unprecedented departure. Here we come closer than ever to the single most important fascist breach: the turning to political violence as a solution for worsening society-wide difficulty.

Amid this creeping radicalization, the white supremacism of the overtly fascist groups commingles not only with anger against the Left, but with the wider right-wing contentiousness surrounding cross-border migrancy and the refugee crisis, fear of foreigners, Sinophobia, and generalized Islamophobia. For this broader far-Right militancy, contemporary notations of 'race' as cultural belonging, social entitlement, angry intolerance of others, and a narrowly conceived conception of skin and birth-based citizenship supply a main mobilizing animus. These two phenomena increasingly converge: the ideologically self-conscious fascist formations and a broader-based right-wing populism centred around beliefs about race. On the shared authoritarian ground of law and order, they increasingly absorb elements of the Trumpified conservative sector too, while gathering up many petty bourgeois and working-class voters damaged by austerity and the societal dislocations from capitalist restructuring and long-run economic change. Demonstrable sympathies inside the police and security apparatuses also play a part. The ability of an ever-broadening right-wing coalescence to

shift the basic terms of political discourse decisively to the right then becomes troublingly real.

The duality of the fascism-producing crisis – crisis of cohesion and crisis of legitimacy or consent – opens that political space. The governing institutions have ceased functioning effectively: a sufficiently predictable consensus can no longer be ensured inside the institutional complex of polity and state. Nor can the needed breadth of popular consent any longer be won. On the contrary, politics is driven not only by an angry, disappointed, and disbelieving alienation from the long-accepted governing practices; popular hopes are being polarized increasingly violently. In interwar Europe, the right-wing coalescence and radicalization were driven by vociferous anti-Bolshevism, for which the enemy was simultaneously *internal* (a mobilized working class, Communist and Socialist parties, agencies of racial corruption and degeneration, including especially the Jews) and *international* (Bolshevik Revolution, international Jewish conspiracy).

In the early twenty-first century, there are no longer Communist and Socialist parties any more. Instead, the danger is more completely exteriorized around foreigners, illegal migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and interlopers of all sorts. The body politic and the national body are no longer thought to be threatened primarily by Communists and Jews, but rather from the outside, from the exotic and distant elsewhere, and especially from alien people who self-evidently *do not belong*. As always, that amorphously expandable category of the foreign outsider, the dangerously alien other, then becomes effortlessly elided to the racialized populations inside. This anxiety about borders will only become more and more acute as the global ecological catastrophe ('climate change') continues worsening the geopolitical rivalries through which the metropolitan countries seek to protect ever-diminishing resources against the needs and demands of those coming from elsewhere.

Conducive to the fascist temptation is a far-reaching collapse of publicness, civility, and the pluralist generosity in a common culture, the encroaching paralysis of any trustworthy relationship to a normative set of practices whose older habituations and guiding intuition used to be far more reliably democratic. *This* is what distinguishes the present. It contains a profoundly different order of crisis than the originary ones of the interwar, with a different set of state/society relations, different categories of political actors, different types of possible political agency, different forms and processes of publicness (of the possible ways of becoming public), and a different surrounding environment of capitalism, all of which have the effect of calling up a different set of coercively authoritarian political interventions and modalities than before. But if we theorize fascism as an exceptional set of relations to politics made feasible and compelling by the intensifying of a particular type of crisis, then we can surely make use of the term.

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5 For a sampling, see Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle against Islamofascism*, New York, 2008; Christopher Hitchens, 'Defending Islamofascism', *Slate*, 22 Oct. 2007: www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2007/10/defending_islamofascism.html, accessed 4 Nov. 2012; Walter Laqueur, 'The Origins of Fascism: Islamic Fascism, Islamophobia, Antisemitism', OUP blog: http://blog.oup.com/2006/10/the_origins_of_2/, accessed 4 Nov. 2012; Jeffrey Herf, 'Killing in the Name', *The New Republic*, 8 April 2010. For commentary, see A. Dirk Moses, 'Paranoia and Partisanship: Genocide Studies, Holocaust Historiography, and the "Apocalyptic Conjuncture"', *Historical Journal* 54: 2, 2011, pp. 581–3; Tony Judt, 'The Silence of the Lambs: On the Strange Death of Liberal America', in Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, New York, 2008, pp. 384–92.

6 See the arguments in Eric Hobsbawm, *On the Edge of the New Century: In Conversation with Antonio Polito*, New York, 2000, pp. 31–2, 36, 13–15.

7 See above all Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: the Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (London 2007), rev. edn, Nation Books, New York, 2008; also Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, New York, 2005; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York, 2010; Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: the Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge MA, 2017; James Forman, Jr., *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, New York, 2017; *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Jordan T. Camp, London, 2016.

8 See Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, New York, 2006; and for theoretical commentary, Margaret R. Somers, 'Genealogies of Katrina: the Unnatural Disasters of Market Fundamentalism, Racial Exclusion, and Statelessness', in Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights*, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 63–117.

9 See Sindre Bangstad, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, London, 2014; Joel Achenbach, 'Two Mass Killings a World Apart Share a Common Theme', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2019; Lizzie Deardon, 'New Zealand Attack: How Nonsensical White Genocide Conspiracy Theory Cited by Alleged Gunman is Spreading Poison Around the World', *Independent*, 16 March 2019: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/new-zealand-christchurch-mosque-attack-white-genocide-conspiracy-theory-a8824671.html>, accessed 24 Sept. 2020; Taylor Lorenz, 'The Shooter's Manifesto was designed to Troll', *The Atlantic*, 5 March 2019: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/the-shooters-manifesto-was-designed-to-troll/585058/>; accessed 24 Sept. 2020; David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Massacre Suspect Traveled the World but Lived on the Internet', *New York Times*, 15 March 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/new-zealand-shooting-brenton-tarrant.html>, accessed 24 Sept. 2020.

10 In the Southern Poverty Law Center's annual reports on *The Year in Hate and Extremism*, Montgomery, Alabama, aggregate hate groups rose steadily after 1999, doubling by 2010 to 1,052, with a peak of 1,020 in 2018. If those numbers dipped slightly in 2019 to 940, their overall membership, resonance, and activity continued to grow, particularly online. During 2017–19, numbers of white nationalist groups grew by fifty-five percent; in 2018–19, anti-LGBTQ groups by forty-three percent.

11 See here, paradigmatically, Mark McGovern, *Counterinsurgency and Collusion in Northern Ireland*, London, 2019.

12 Cox was shot and repeatedly stabbed by fifty-two-year-old far-Right extremist Thomas Mair. Attached to U.S. neo-Nazi group National Alliance, Mair shouted 'This is for Britain. Britain will always come first'. Lübcke was shot in the head by forty-five-year-old Stephan Ernst, supporter of the far-Right National Democratic Party (NPD) and associate of British Neo-Nazi terror group Combat 18. Salas was targeted by seventy-two-year-old Roy Den Hollander, an anti-feminist attorney known for his extreme right-wing racist and misogynist views. After presenting himself at the Salas family home, Den Hollander shot and killed Salas's son Daniel and severely wounded her husband Mark; Salas herself escaped injury.

13 See Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: a Warning*, New York, 2018; Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: the Politics of Us and Them*, New York, 2018; Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Ti Duggan Books, New York, 2017; *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein, New York, 2018. More recently: Marsha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2020; Eric A. Posner, *The Demagogue's Playbook: the Battle for American Democracy from the Founders to Trump*, All Points Books, New York, 2020.

14 Albright, *Fascism*,

15 Dylan Riley, *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870–1945* (2010), 2nd edn, London, 2019.

16 Dylan Riley, 'What Is Trump?', *New Left Review*, 2nd Series 114, November–December 2018, pp. 6, 7.

17 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, transl. Ephraim Fischhoff and others, Berkeley, 1968, vol. 2, pp. 1,028–9.

18 Riley, 'What Is Trump?', p. 26.

19 Riley, 'What Is Trump?', p. 28.

20 Riley, 'What Is Trump?', pp. 7, 11.

21 Continentally, Africa contained at least one highly developed, if complex, 'indigenous' or 'native' fascism, namely in South Africa. But colonial theatres were crucial to the hardening of European fascist ambitions, in Portugal and Spain no less than Mussolini's Italy. Europe's war was initiated in Ethiopia and Franco's Nationalist rebellion was launched from Morocco, just as Japan's rightward march began from Manchuria. See Reto Hoffmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952*, New York, 2015, and Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945*, Durham NC, 2010. For a broader manifesto: *Visualizing Fascism: the Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right*, ed. Julia Adeney Thomas and Geoff Eley, Durham NC, 2020, especially Thomas, 'Introduction: a Portable Concept of Fascism', pp. 1–20.

22 The same had been true of its major political rivals. Liberalism, conservatism, and socialism all developed cumulatively as heterogeneous formations during the nineteenth century, before settling into more stable identities, with portable application and resonance across societies. The difference was the speed and intensity of fascism's coherence, arriving during years rather than decades or even centuries.

23 Federico Finchelstein, 'On Fascist Ideology', *Constellations* 15: 3, 2008, pp. 321, 322, 323.

24 See Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: the History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, New York and Oxford, 2002, pp. 62–118.

25 <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/02/28/donald-trump-retweets-post-likening-him-to-mussolini/>: – @ilduce2016: 'It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep' – @realDonaldTrump #MakeAmericaGreatAgain', 7:13 AM – 28 Feb. 2016.

26 Jason Horowitz, 'Steve Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists', *New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/bannon-vatican-julius-evola-fascism.html>. See Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency*, New York, 2017; Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: Inside Bannon's Far-Right Circle of Power Brokers*, Day Street Books, New York, 2020; Jean Guerrero, *Hatemonger: Stephen Miller, Donald Trump, and the White Nationalist Agenda*, William Morrow, New York, 2020.

27 See especially Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2019; David Neiwert, *Alt-America: the Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, New York, 2017; Ross, *Against the Fascist Creep*; Bray, *Antifa*; Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House*, London, 2018; George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, New York, 2017, and *The Alt-Right*; Burley, *Fascism Today*; *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres: Gender and Race in the 2016 Presidential Election*, Rochester, 2017.

28 Trump addressed the Charlottesville events successively on 12, 14, and 15 August 2017. His initial statement condemned 'this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides', laying first emphasis on the 'swift restoration of law and order'; his unwillingness to name KKK, Neo-Nazi, and other white supremacist groups was exceptional amid the outpouring of bi-partisan public censure. Next day a spokesperson briefly rectified the omission. After massive public criticism, Trump then reluctantly delivered his own perfunctory direct condemnation. On 15 August, during impromptu remarks, he took that back, saying there were 'very fine people on both sides', while denouncing what he called the 'very, very violent alt-left' (15 August). Next day, White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon called this a 'defining moment' of the presidency: Trump had chosen to break with the 'globalists' and commit himself to 'his people'. Bannon left the White House amid the surrounding controversy on 18 August 2017. See Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman, 'Trump's Remarks on Charlottesville Violence are Criticized as Insufficient', and 'Bannon in Limbo as Trump Faces Growing Calls for the Strategist's Ouster', *New York Times*, 12 and 14 August 2017. For Unite the Right, see Hawley, *Alt-Right*, pp. 138–45; Burley, *Fascism Today*, pp. 223–7; Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity*, 235–47.

29 This way of formulating the problem – as the conjunction of a dual crisis, a crisis of representation and a crisis of hegemony or popular consent – derives from the work of Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, London, 1979.

30 For example David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis* (Princeton 1981), New York, 1986, p. 287:

Could no bourgeois political force organize the political unity of the dominant economic fractions out of the factiousness and diversity of their economic interests? Was no political unity available and no mass political support available within the Republic, despite the single-mindedness of the dominant classes' anti-socialism? Was the maintenance of capitalist economic relations and political democracy so antithetical in *this* conjuncture that abandonment and undermining of the Republic were self-evident necessities for the dominant classes?

31 Production of fascist potentials in Germany occurred in two instalments (1918–23, 1929–33), whereas Italy had only one (1917–22). Spain (1917–23, 1931–6) and Austria (1927–34) came close, while France (1934–7) showed similar potentials. Other interwar societies with significant fascist movements (e.g. Hungary, Finland) experienced similar polarized breakdown after World War One.

32 The Central Park Five were teenagers of colour wrongly convicted of raping a white female jogger in Manhattan in April 1989. Then a property developer cultivating his celebrity status, Trump purchased full-page statements in four New York newspapers demanding the death penalty:

I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer. . . How can our great society tolerate the continued brutalization of its citizens by crazed misfits? Criminals must be told that CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS.

See Natalie P. Byfield, *Savage Portrayals: Race, Media, and the Central Park Jogger Story*, Philadelphia, 2014. Originating around 2004, birther conspiracy theories alleged that Barack Obama's published birth certificate was a forgery, exploding into prominence during the 2008 presidential campaign. Trump endorsed them while declaring his interest in running for President in an interview on ABC's *Good Morning America* in March 2011. See John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: the 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, Princeton, 2018; for deeper context, Alan I. Abramovitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, New Haven, 2018.

33 See Joshua D. Martin, 'The Border, Bad Hombres, and the Billionaire: Hypermasculinity and Anti-Mexican Stereotypes in Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign', in *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres*, ed. Kray, Carroll, and Mandell, pp. 62, 68. The second statement was made in the Third 2016 Presidential Debate with Hillary Clinton on 20 Oct. 2016.

34 See Jane Caputi, 'From (Castrating) *Bitch* to (Big) *Nuts*: Genital Politics in 2016 Election Campaign Paraphernalia', in *Nasty Women and Bad Hombres*, ed. Kray, Carroll, and Mandell, pp. 30, 33. As an archive, Caputi uses '(unofficial) commercial paraphernalia – bumper stickers, buttons, caps, T-shirts – many of which were then exchanged in images sent via email and posted on websites and social-media platforms', p. 26.

35 See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Zero Books, Alresford, 2017; Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*, pp. 97, 93–110; Adam Klein, *Fanaticism, Racism, and Rage Online: Corrupting the Digital Sphere*, Cham, Switzerland, 2017; Adrienne Massanari, 'Gamergate and the Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', *New Media & Society* 19: 3, 2017, pp. 329–46. The same year disclosed another online phenomenon, the socio-political derangement of the 'incel' (involuntary celibate) who rages against the women who deprive him of sex. On 23 May 2014, shortly before his Santa Barbara killings (six dead, fourteen wounded), twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger emailed his 107,000-word manifesto, 'My Twisted World: the Story of Elliot Rodger', to his parents, ex-teachers, therapist, and childhood friends. In it he railed against African-American, Hispanic, South Asian, and East Asian men for their attractions to white women. Having circulated via now defunct Amazon-owned self-publishing service Createspace (2014, ISBN 978-1499679649), Rodger's manifesto may be read at <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/1173619/rodger-manifesto.pdf>, accessed 9 Nov. 2020.

36 In late 2017, Reddit closed down its 40,000-member 'Incel' support group for those 'who lack romantic relationships and sex', where users raged against women and the 'noncels' and 'normies' who get to sleep with them, frequently advocating rape and other forms of physical violence. A second incel Reddit group, 'Truecels', was also banned.

37 See Eley, 'Missionaries of the *Volksgemeinschaft*: Ordinary Women, Nazification, and the Social', in *Nazism as Fascism*, pp. 91–130.

38 Julia Adeney Thomas, 'Introduction: a Portable Concept of Fascism', pp. 10–15.

39 I wrote directly about fascism in 'What Produces Fascism? "Pre-industrial Traditions" or a "Crisis of the Capitalist State"?' *Politics and Society* 12: 1, 1983, pp. 53–82, reprinted in Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past*, London (1990), repr. 2020, pp. 254–82.

40 For example Jason Wilson and Robert Evans, 'Revealed: Pro-Trump Activists Plotted Violence Ahead of Portland Rallies', *Guardian*, 23 Sept. 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/23/oregon-portland-pro-trump-protests-violence-texts>, last accessed 23 Sept. 2020. Members of the paramilitary Patriots Coalition discussed using bats, knives, mace, stun guns, paintballs, and firearms in confrontation with Antifa protesters, along with political intimidation and terror tactics against elected officials and judges, including assassination.

41 Colin Kalmbacher, 'Republican Senator Called for "No Quarter": Military Response to "Looters": Lawyers Note That's a War Crime', *Law & Crime*, 1 June, 2020: <https://lawandcrime.com/george-floyd-death/republican-senator-called-for-no-quarter-military-response-to-looters-lawyers-note-thats-a-war-crime/>, accessed 23 Sept. 2020. See also Jeffrey Toobin, 'Trump's Inheritor: Tom Cotton and the Future of the G.O.P.', *New Yorker*, 13 Nov. 2017, pp. 32–38.