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# Intellectual History and the Fascism Debate: On Analogies and Polemic

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*Over the last few years, scholars have intensely debated whether the contemporary radical right should be described as fascist. While some have insisted that its ideology, political strategy, and social basis strongly echo fascist precedents, others have insisted they substantially diverge from them. This essay explores the content and rhetoric of this dispute. It claims that the key fault line between proponents and opponents of the fascist label was not their intellectual or political agenda, but instead in their approach to political polemics. While some operated within the tradition of polemical writings and believed that the invocation of fascism was necessary for political mobilization, others remained skeptical of its value. The essay therefore situates the “fascism debate” in the long history of arguments over the value and limits of historical analogies and polemical writing.*

Writing from his prison in the early 1930s, the Italian philosopher and journalist Antonio Gramsci lamented Europe’s fall into what he called “caesarism.” Social upheavals across the continent, he claimed, empowered Julius Caesar-like figures: ambitious autocrats who claimed to represent their nation’s popular will while destroying its democratic institutions. Even though the concept was coined in the nineteenth century to describe figures like Napoleon III, many thought that it aptly depicted the nascent dictatorships of the interwar era. Gramsci invoked it to analyze Mussolini’s fascist state, and journalist Jay Franklin expanded it to depict Hitler’s and Stalin’s tyrannies.<sup>1</sup> Caesarism, however, also proved controversial, as other thinkers dismissed it as inadequate. Political theorist Karl Loewenstein, for example, believed that analogies to Roman times obscured the new regimes’ unprecedented ambitions to remake human nature. Only a novel term, like “totalitarianism,” could really capture their extreme terror, utilization of new technologies, and desire to colonize citizens’ minds. The latter camp ultimately emerged victorious,

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader*, ed. David Forgacs (New York, 2000), 265–74; Jay Franklin, “Great Caesar’s Ghosts,” *Vanity Fair* 41 (1934), 31, 72–3. On the term’s genesis see, for example, Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2018), 156–93. On its long career, including the interwar years, see, for example, Dieter Groh, “Caesarismus,” in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon ur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1972), vol. 1, 726–71.

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and the totalitarian label proliferated in speeches and publications. Even though “caesarism” remained in scholarly circulation in the 1940s and 1950s, “totalitarianism” was far more popular, and served as the basic term to describe the dangers and nature of modern politics.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, the debate’s most noteworthy aspect is not whether “caesarism” or “totalitarianism” better defined the era’s evils. Both Gramsci and Loewenstein had a point: interwar dictators clearly built on previous historical models, but also broke with them. Instead, the disagreement over terminology merits attention because it illuminates contemporary anxieties, hopes, and self-conceptions. It helps us grasp how historical figures understood their times and their place in history, how they struggled to articulate what was familiar and what was uncanny. Indeed, the competing terminologies and analogies shed light on the struggles of scholars to develop a response to the era’s frightening realities. Their countless books and essays were not a pedantic exercise in historical accuracy, but an effort to isolate modern dictatorships’ defining features with the hope of arresting their spread.

If there was one debate in recent years that generated similar heat, it was probably the controversy over the fascist analogy. With the far right’s spectacular rise, scholars endlessly debated: are we facing the rebirth of Mussolini and Hitler’s violent ideology? Or are we witnessing a profoundly different beast, for which new terminology is needed? Strikingly, the value of the fascist epithet was contemplated less in Europe, where nationalist and xenophobic movements had obvious ideological and personal links to fascism. Instead, the dispute raged most intensely in the United States, where writers endlessly pondered whether Donald Trump’s shocking political career marked the flourishing of fascism on a new continent. The Trump administration’s never-ending transgressions made the issue of permanent interest. From its imposition of xenophobic travel restrictions in 2017 to its incitement of violence against Congress in 2021, the administration’s actions generated countless books, magazine essays, and op-eds that analyzed its relations to dark historical precedents.

With the Trump years now in the rearview mirror, the fascism debate is quickly losing urgency. Yet perhaps this means that, like the history of caesarism, it can now offer new insights about contemporary political thinking. Instead of litigating the merits of the term “fascism” for describing our times, we can wonder why doing so was so important, and what was at stake in getting the definition right. After all, many of the participants in this debate did not differ all that much from one another politically. They all condemned the right’s racism, sexism, and plutocracy, and all hoped that it would be replaced by bold egalitarian policies. In fact, they even echoed each other’s claim that the goal of comparing today’s right to fascism was to expose the evils that have long plagued liberal democracy, especially in the United States. The greatest difference between the two camps was not so much their take on contemporary affairs, but their approach to polemic, its value for both intellectual exploration and political mobilization. Rather than a

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Loewenstein, “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights I,” *American Political Science Review* 31/3 (1937), 417–32. The best account of the evolution of the totalitarianism theory is Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford, 1995).

clash over definitions, it was a disagreement about the role of language and history in shaping political agendas.

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It was not surprising that the radical right's rise in Europe after the 2008 economic calamity would generate anxious talk of resurgent fascism. After all, the continent's most prominent nationalist movements often expressed admiration for their fascist predecessors, and openly emulated their xenophobia, love of violence, and sexism. The most grotesque example was Greece's Golden Dawn movement, which in 2012 surged to become the country's third-largest party. With its murderous beating of political opponents, torch-led marches, and open adoration of the Nazis—one of its candidates promised to once again “turn on the ovens” for “foreigners”—scholars were quick to label it fascist.<sup>3</sup> Others cases may have been less extreme, but their links to the fascist past were still evident. In France, for example, the far-right National front was founded by former Vichy sympathizers and brazen anti-Semites, and its agenda did not change radically by the 2010s. Even after its new leader, Marie Le Pen, waged a campaign against Holocaust denial (culminating in the expulsion of her own father Jean-Marie from the party's ranks), her followers' racism and antics against “cosmopolitan elites” led scholars like Ugo Palheta to designate it “fascism by another name.”<sup>4</sup> The label seemed to capture the radical right's departure from the conservative agenda, and its menacing threat to legal equality and political pluralism. And these fears seemed to be confirmed when Europe's most vocal extremist, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, came to power in 2010, and unleashed a successful campaign to dismantle independent media, restrict religious practice, and solidify an authoritarian regime. As former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt put it, this was no longer a conservative democracy, but full-blown “fascism.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps less expected was the term's rising popularity in the United States, not just as a superficial moniker to delegitimize opponents (as it has long been) but as a category of scholarly analysis. Trump's racism and sexism clearly had roots in recent American politics, but many also saw in his boorish style, open threats to punish political opponents (“Lock her up!”), and relentless lies an alarming departure; could it be that fascism was also making headway in the country that once defeated it? The most resounding “yes” to this question came from historian Timothy Snyder, who in a flurry of publications compared Trump's campaigns

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, *The Golden Dawn's “Nationalist Solution”: Explaining the Rise of the Far Right in Greece* (London, 2015); Helena Smith, “Rise of the Greek Far Right Raises Fears of Further Turmoil,” *The Guardian*, 16 Dec. 2011, at [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/16/rise-greek-far-right-turmoil](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/16/rise-greek-far-right-turmoil).

<sup>4</sup>Ugo Palheta, “Fascism by Another Name,” *Jacobin*, 15 Feb. 2017, at [www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/france-national-front-marine-le-pen-fascism-antisemitism-xenophobia](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/france-national-front-marine-le-pen-fascism-antisemitism-xenophobia). Those ideas were further developed in Palheta, *La possibilité du fascisme: France, la trajectoire du désastre* (Paris, 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Verhofstadt is cited in Mick Miller, “Europe's Parliament Irrupts,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Sept. 2018, at [www.smh.com.au/world/europe/neo-fascist-blackmail-coward-europe-s-parliament-erupts-20180912-p5035x.html](http://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/neo-fascist-blackmail-coward-europe-s-parliament-erupts-20180912-p5035x.html). See also Patrick Kingsley, “He Used to Call Viktor Orbán an Ally. Now He Calls him a Symbol of Fascism,” *New York Times*, 15 March 2019, at [www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/europe/viktor-orban-hungary-ivanyi.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/europe/viktor-orban-hungary-ivanyi.html).

of threats to the Nazi propaganda machine. Both regimes, he wrote in *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, sought to psychologically isolate opponents and mold them into submissive sheep, a first step towards the complete destruction of all democratic institutions.<sup>6</sup> A less crude, though no less urgent, comparison came from philosopher of language Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works*, which used the fascist label to describe a broad assembly of political movements, from the antiblack terror in the post-Reconstruction US South to Nazi Germany and the BJP in today's India. The Republicans under Trump in this narrative were but the latest to combine nostalgia for a mythic, orderly past; attacks on thinkers and universities; insistence on hierarchies of ethnicity and gender; and a fixation on "order"—the ultimate fascist cocktail. In Stanley's mind, fascism's different incarnations across time and space demonstrated its ability to spread even in societies with strong liberal institutions. Rather than destroying them outright, as happened in Germany, fascist movements can inject their poison into public life everywhere, weakening democratic cultures from within.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Stanley and others' insistence that fascism is a globe-spanning phenomenon, most of those who found it to be a useful analytical tool remained focused on the Italian and German examples.<sup>8</sup> This was not because Trump was Mussolini or Hitler redux (simplistic analogies *à la* Snyder were fairly rare among writers), but because the comparisons between the interwar years helped bring to light key vulnerabilities in contemporary US society. The economist Raphaële Chappe and sociologist Ajay Singh Chaudhary likened the United States' economy to the Third Reich's monopolistic and oligarchic system. They argued that Donald Trump's success, like Hitler's before him, was made possible by the disintegration of regulatory mechanisms, and the replacement of functioning state institutions with a corrupt alliance between business leaders and state bureaucrats. Historian Ruth Ben Ghat similarly claimed that Trump may not plot to establish a fascist dictatorship, but the similarity between his political style and that of Mussolini was still telling. In several essays, and especially in *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (2020), she explained that the resemblance between the two's repertoires of mass rallies, inflated masculinity, and attacks on the press revealed just how frayed civic ties and trust in authority have become in our own times. Perhaps the most original effort to use the 1930s to explain Trump's hypnotic presence was made by historian Peter Gordon, who drew on Theodor Adorno's psychological and social theories. Trump, Gordon claimed, fulfilled the same function that Adorno attributed to Mussolini and Hitler: providing the masses with a fantasy of transgression (through violent rhetoric and never-ending spectacle) while reinforcing the oppressive hierarchies of bourgeois capitalist society.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2017); as well as Snyder, "The Reichstag Fire," *New York Review of Books*, 26 Feb. 2017, at [www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/26/reichstag-fire-manipulating-terror-to-end-democracy](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/26/reichstag-fire-manipulating-terror-to-end-democracy).

<sup>7</sup>Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York, 2018).

<sup>8</sup>An important voice in this effort was historian Federico Finchelstein, who claimed that the frame of reference should be not Europe, but Latin American dictatorships, which he defined as fascist. See, for example, his *A Brief History of Fascist Lies* (Berkeley, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>Raphaële Chappe and Ajay Singh Chaudhary, "The Supermanagerial Reich," *L.A. Review of Books*, 7 Nov. 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-supermanagerial-reich>; Ruth Ben Ghat, "An American

In contrast to Europe, however, linking today's radical US right to Europe's darkest historical moment proved controversial to scholars in the United States. Of course, Trump and his minions shared *some* similarities with fascists, several commentators claimed, but those were no deeper than their ideological overlap with monarchists or Christian democrats; ultimately, the differences were far more important. Victoria de Grazia, among the leading historians of Italian fascism, pointed to a profound divergence in the two movements' approach to war. While interwar fascism was born in the trenches of World War I and always defined itself as a project of imperial mobilization, the US right was led by a draft dodger who called for reducing the country's endless military entanglements. Historian Helmut Walser Smith similarly insisted in the *Washington Post* that violence has an overwhelmingly different function for nationalists in the past and present. The Nazis used mob violence and secret police to swiftly crush Germany's entire political and legal system, while the Trump administration, for all the president's hyperbolic threats, left the country's institutions standing. Its cruelty towards immigrants, sexual minorities, and other groups was ultimately not that radically different to that of its predecessors. Others added that the analogies obscured the distinctive social constellations that fed the fascists and the Republican Party, thus requiring different responses. To name one, fascism's most enthusiastic agents were impoverished youth who were the modern economy's main casualties, while the backbone of today's right is the propertied old, who grew up into welfare and are now trying to guard their privileges. As political scientist Sheri Berman noted, not all social upheavals are the same, and what weakened democracies in the interwar years was not what erodes them today.<sup>10</sup>

Yet for all its occasional intensity, the debate's most striking feature was the two sides' conceptual and rhetorical similarities. A case in point is the peculiarities of United States history, and its significance (or lack thereof) for grasping Trump's meaning. Philosopher Alberto Toscano pointed to African American thinkers' long utilization of the fascist label to describe the country's racist carceral system. When Angela Davis decried the United States as "fascist," Toscano explained,

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Authoritarian," *The Atlantic*, 10 Aug. 2026, at [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/american-authoritarianism-under-donald-trump/495263](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/american-authoritarianism-under-donald-trump/495263) Ruth Ben Ghat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York, 2020); Peter E. Gordon, "The Authoritarian Personality Revisited," in Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky, *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Studies* (Chicago, 2018), 45–83. For similar utilization of the analogy see, for example, Christopher Browning, "The Suffocation of Democracy," *New York Review of Books*, 25 Oct. 2018, at [www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/25/suffocation-of-democracy](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/25/suffocation-of-democracy).

<sup>10</sup>Victoria de Grazia, "Many Call Trump a Fascist. 100 Days In, Is He Just a Reactionary Republican?" *The Guardian*, 30 April 2017, at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/30/donald-trump-fascist-republican-100-days](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/30/donald-trump-fascist-republican-100-days); and de Grazia, "What We Don't Understand about Fascism," *Zocalo* (August 13 2020), at [www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2020/08/13/understand-fascism-american-history-mussolini-hitler-20th-century/ideas/essay](http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2020/08/13/understand-fascism-american-history-mussolini-hitler-20th-century/ideas/essay); Helmut Walser Smith, "No, America Is Not Succumbing to Fascism," *Washington Post*, 1 Sept. 2020, at [www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/09/01/no-america-is-not-succumbing-fascism/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/09/01/no-america-is-not-succumbing-fascism/); Sheri Berman, "Donald Trump Isn't a Fascist," *Vox.com*, 3 Jan. 2017, at [www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/1/3/14154300/fascist-populist-trump-democracy](http://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/1/3/14154300/fascist-populist-trump-democracy). For similar sentiments see also Jan-Werner Müller, "Populism and the People," *London Review of Books* 41/10 (2019), at [www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n10/jan-werner-mueller/populism-and-the-people](http://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n10/jan-werner-mueller/populism-and-the-people); Elias Bures, "Don't Call Donald Trump a Fascist," *Foreign Policy*, 2 Nov. 2020, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/02/donald-trump-fascist-nazi-right-wing>.

she correctly illuminated how superficial talk of the United States' democratic genius was. Peter Gordon, in an impassioned defense of the fascist analogy, similarly insisted that those who opposed it "have merely inverted the idea of American exceptionalism." Their dismissal of the country's similarity to the regimes it once fought was "a convenient trick" that absolved the country from its persistent injustices.<sup>11</sup> Yet the exact same logic informed those who were skeptical of the label's value. They warned that labeling Trump fascist was akin to blaming his victory on Russian Internet bots: it painted him as a foreign imposition or aberration, diverting attention from his deep American roots. This was the main complaint fielded by historian Samuel Moyn, who lamented that "abnormalizing Trump disguises that he is quintessentially American, the expression of enduring and indigenous syndromes." It distracted Americans from exploring "how we made Trump over decades," and how his rise was conditioned by the country's "long histories of killing, subjugation, and terror," most recently in the form of mass incarceration and endless foreign wars.<sup>12</sup>

The same was the case with warnings of complacency. Proponents of the fascist label advised that only grasping the right's truly demonic potential could unleash the mobilization required to defeat it. As Stanley and two other historians put it in the *New Republic*, if supporters of democracy recognize the "possibility that we are witnessing a fascist regime in the making," they would be more likely to shake off their inaction and address the sources of democracy's weakness, "unequal policies and the demonization of others." Gordon took a sharper tone, and admonished the refusal to call Trump fascist as an elitist detachment from democracy's fate. It was "a game of privilege," he scoffed, "those who would burn the whole house are not the ones who will feel the flames."<sup>13</sup> Yet as if in a mirror image, skeptics responded that it was the fascist label itself that fostered uncritical lethargy. Not only was it politically useless, as historian David Bell suggested, since for most voters it sounded like hysterical hyperbole that undermined its speakers' message, but it also isolated Trump as a unique figure whose defeat was enough, instead of recognizing the plethora of policies that made him, and for which both conservatives and liberals were responsible. Few made this point as pointedly as Moyn, who remarked that comparisons to Hitler implied that the United States' cruelty and violence before Trump's ascent were "somehow less worth the alarm and opprobrium." As he acidly noted, "selective outrage after 2016 says more about the outraged than the outrageous."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Alberto Toscano, "The Long Shadow of Racial Fascism," *Boston Review*, 28 Oct. 2020, at <http://boston-review.net/race-politics/alberto-toscano-long-shadow-racial-fascism>; Peter Gordon, "Why Analogy Matters," *New York Review of Books*, 7 Jan. 2020, at [www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/07/why-historical-analogy-matters](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/07/why-historical-analogy-matters).

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Moyn, "The Trouble with Comparisons," *NYRB Daily*, 19 May 2020, at [www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/05/19/the-trouble-with-comparisons](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/05/19/the-trouble-with-comparisons). Similar sentiments can be found in Corey Robin, "Triumph of the Shill: The Political Theory of Trumpism," *n+1* 29 (2017), at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-29/politics/triumph-of-the-shill>.

<sup>13</sup>Frederico Finchelstein, Pablo Piccato, and Jason Stanley, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Right to Warn of 'Fascism in the United States,'" *New Republic*, 20 Aug. 2020, at <https://newrepublic.com/article/158999/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-right-warn-fascism-united-states>; Gordon, "Why Analogy Matters."

<sup>14</sup>David Bell, "Trump Is a Racist Demagogue. But He's Not a Fascist," *Washington Post*, 26 Aug. 2020, at [www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/26/trump-not-fascist](http://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/08/26/trump-not-fascist); Moyn, "The Trouble with Comparisons."

Historian Daniel Bessner, one of the term's most vocal critics, similarly warned that talk of fascism was not likely to empower democratic mobilization. As was the case in the 1940s and 1950s, he noted, it was bound to foster elitist and technocratic policy making, which in turn would only deepen the antielitist sentiments and bolster populism's electoral success.<sup>15</sup>

Even when it came to political substance, the rhetorical jabs veiled a fundamental agreement. Commentators' stances in this debate did not map onto the center-left political divide, and writers of similar political inclinations were found on different sides. Indeed, despite Moyn and others' warning that the fascist label's main function was to bolster centrism and repress more progressive alternatives (by blaming their backers for sabotaging the immediate task of defeating evil), reality was much messier. Some of the fascist analogy's most forceful advocates, such as Stanley, included pleas for progressive reforms, from bolstering unions and ending mass incarceration to combating militarism, while more centrist commentators, like Sheri Berman, rejected the epithet. And whatever their take, almost all reflections on the topic agreed that overcoming the right's ugly challenge would require ambitious reforms to tackle soaring inequalities across gendered, economic, racial, and religious axes. It was therefore hard not to sometimes wonder: what was the source of the debate's persistence and heat? Clearly something more than arcane squabbles over definitions was at play, but if not historical accuracy or political visions, then what was it?

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When proponents of the "caesarist" analogy insisted on its value in the interwar period, what they often had in mind was polemic. They believed it was not only analytically clarifying, but also emotive and rhetorically effective. By invoking the specter of the Roman tyrant (then a foundational reference point in the north Atlantic political imagination), they hoped to foster discomfort and spark rage. Like most works in the polemical genre, their purpose was not to open the eyes of autocracy's supporters to their alleged folly, a conversion that they assumed was tragically improbable. They rather envisioned something akin to Jonathan Swift's famous depiction of Ireland's English rulers as the devourers of babies in *A Modest Proposal* (1729): to enrage the already persuaded and to deepen existing fault lines. Caesarism, in short, was not only part of the history of political theory, but also linked to the long tradition of polemic. Ironically, this was also one of the causes for its eventual decline: after the twentieth century's mass atrocities, Caesar's place as an epitome of evil was severely diminished, eclipsed by polemical invocations of Stalin and Hitler.

Indeed, a crucial trope of modern polemic has been its reliance on historical analogies. Whenever polemical writers of the last two centuries launched attacks on new movements, ideologies, or regimes, they utilized familiar historical precedents to clarify their sense of urgency. Nineteenth-century Catholics, for example, who

<sup>15</sup>Daniel Bessner and Udi Greenberg, "The Weimar Analogy," *Jacobin*, Dec. 2016, at [www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/trump-hitler-germany-fascism-weimar-democracy](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/trump-hitler-germany-fascism-weimar-democracy).

lambasted the spread of new liberal ideas and institutions, often explained them as the rebirth of the Protestant Reformation. This was the crux of Catalan Jaume Balmes's *Catholicism and Protestantism Compared in Their Influence on the Civilization of Europe*, one of the era's most popular and translated polemical texts: in his telling, Luther's assault on the church's mediating authority demolished Europeans' respect for authority, which directly led to the French Revolution and all subsequent political upheavals.<sup>16</sup> A century later, when liberal writers began their campaign against communism, they often compared it to Catholicism. Having loomed for so long as liberalism's ultimate enemy, the church, in the mind, clarified communism's nature: it was not merely an alternative economic system, but an all-encompassing value system that required total submission, not only of body but also of mind. Arthur Schlesinger Jr, to take one example, believed that only by comparing the Communist Party to the Catholic Church could he impress on his readers its demands for fanatical devotion. As he put it in *The Vital Center*, one of Cold War liberalism's foundational texts, both systems make their followers "so dependent emotionally on discipline" that they lack any capacity for independent thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Fascism, too, ultimately got entangled in the work of polemical mobilization. And though this fact was only rarely mentioned in the debates after 2016, among its most consequential uses as historical analogy was not the campaign against the far right, but against Muslims. Especially in the years following 2001, journalists and thinkers warned of fascism's rebirth among radical Muslim groups, a phenomenon they dubbed "Islamofascism." Repackaging old Islamophobic tropes, Christopher Hitchens, Norman Podhoretz, and others mused that Osama bin Laden's followers embodied the Nazis' blind fanaticism, glorification of violence, hatred of feminism, and opposition to "Western freedoms." Such claims infused not only trivial slogans, but also considerable scholarly production. Jeffrey Herf, a prominent historian of Nazi thought and propaganda, warned that "radical Islam's" anti-Semitism and hatred of the Enlightenment made it a "variant of totalitarian ideology politics." For Herf, as for most who utilized the epithet, the historical analogy clarified why al-Qaeda and similar organizations should not be understood as fringe groups whose terrorism was an expression of weakness. Rather, they were an existential threat to democracy, and as such had to be preemptively bombed into oblivion.<sup>18</sup> (Strikingly, Herf was also one of the first to systematically analyze the similarities and differences between the fascist dictators and Trump. In one of the more

<sup>16</sup>Jaume [Jaime] Balmes, *European Civilization: Protestantism and Catholicity Compared in Their Effects on the Civilization of Europe* (1842) (London, 1849).

<sup>17</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, 1949), 105–6. The link between anti-Catholic and anticommunist ideas is explored in Jennifer Miller and Udi Greenberg, "From Mental Slavery to Brainwashing: Anti-Catholic Legacies and Anticommunist Polemics," in Todd Weir and Hugh McLeod, eds., *Defending the Faith: Global Histories of Apologetics and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2020), 119–40.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Hitchens, "Of Sin, the Left, and Islamic Fascism," *The Nation*, 24 Sept. 2001, at [www.thenation.com/article/archive/sin-left-islamic-fascism](http://www.thenation.com/article/archive/sin-left-islamic-fascism); Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle against Islamofascism* (New York, 2007); Jeffrey Herf, "The Totalitarian Present," *American Interest*, 1 Sept. 2009, at [www.the-american-interest.com/2009/09/01/the-totalitarian-present](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2009/09/01/the-totalitarian-present). Similar invocations of totalitarianism and fascism can be found in Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight* (New York, 2006).

nuanced reflections on the topic, he noted that Trump's civilian background made him obviously different from Mussolini and Hitler's militarist fixation, but that he nevertheless shared their cruel hatred of the weak, association of democracy with feminine weakness, and nativist xenophobia.)<sup>19</sup>

Proponents of the fascist analogy over the last few years, then, have built on a long tradition. This is not because they share any of their predecessors' political or intellectual agendas—they did not aim to protect traditional hierarchies like Balmes, and most certainly did not seek to protect American global violence like Schlesinger and Hitchens—but because of their mutual belief in history's mobilizing power. In their eyes, fascism captured our present so much more powerfully than authoritarianism or ethno-nationalism not only for its analytical insights, though these are crucial. Just as important was its unique place in our society's historical memory. The best articulation of this logic appeared in Stanley's *How Fascism Works*, which concluded with a statement about the term's potential for foiling the normalization of evil. In Stanley's telling, the right's most hideous crime was to “transform the morally extraordinary into the ordinary.” Whether through their actions or through lethargic apathy, nationalist leaders have made mass shootings, mass incarceration, or anti-immigration persecution a recurring fact of life and have aimed to numb their opposition into submission. Recognizing these policies as part of the fascist repertoire could thus remind us of their truly unusual nature. “The charge of fascism will always seem extreme,” he noted, but this is only because “the goalposts for the legitimate use of ‘extreme’ terminology continually move.”<sup>20</sup>

For all its popularity, this rhetorical tradition has always faced some skeptics. Even those who sympathized with the polemicists' agenda sometimes worried that the price of successful mobilization could alienate political allies and distract from necessary self-examination. In the nineteenth century, for example, Catholic theologian Ignaz von Dollinger admonished those who, like Balmes, blamed the world's evils on lurking Protestantism. If the church's opponents were to see the light and return to its fold, he proclaimed in a major 1871 address, “the narrow polemic spirit must give way to one of compromise and reconciliation,” in which Catholics highlighted their *similarities* to other groups.<sup>21</sup> The same logic informed the Swiss thinker Emil Brunner's skepticism about some cold warriors' anti-communist rhetoric. While hardly a communist sympathizer himself—he routinely decried Marxist ideology as “poison”—he warned that combative denunciations forestalled potential engagement, which was the only path out of anti-Christian persecutions.<sup>22</sup> And after 2001, even vocal supporters of the so-called “war on terror” like the conservative historian Niall Ferguson complained that the “islamo-fascist” label was a deeply misleading. The analogy to World War II, he scoffed, “is being used mendaciously” to dismiss legitimate objections to the United States'

<sup>19</sup>Jeffrey Herf, “Is Donald Trump a Fascist?”, *American Interest*, 7 March 2016, at [www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/07/is-donald-trump-a-fascist](http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/03/07/is-donald-trump-a-fascist).

<sup>20</sup>Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 190.

<sup>21</sup>Cited in Thomas Albert Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Dollinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age* (Oxford, 2017), 190.

<sup>22</sup>See, for example, Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (New York, 1949).

foreign relations as “appeasement,” and had an infantilizing effect on public discourse.<sup>23</sup>

As was the case in all these internal disputes, today’s misgivings about the fascist analogy are usually not about political or intellectual substance. The skeptics’ hesitancy is not a proxy for other disagreements, but an expression of their judgment of the term’s usability: they doubt that it in fact fosters the mobilization and self-reflection that its proponents promise. A telling example is Moyn’s objection to the analogy, which appeared towards the end of Trump’s presidency. Comparisons to the Reichstag fire, he claimed, were always self-serving. “If you say the world is about to end,” he wrote, “either it will grimly confirm your prophecies or you will say your warning saved it.” But their most important failure was their political impotence. They may have sparked donations by anxious liberals, but they hardly peeled support from the right, nor did they help build new coalitions. “What we have learned,” Moyn concluded, “is that our politics of comparison *doesn’t do the work we hoped it would.*” It only deepened attachment to existing institutions, and thus legitimized “a terrifyingly normal future.”<sup>24</sup> Bessner went even further to warn that the panic caused by fascism’s invocation was likely to serve the right’s interests. Almost all of the United States’ pathological inequalities, he claimed, were deepened by the country’s culture of permanent anxieties, and calming fears required rhetorical de-escalation.<sup>25</sup>

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Judged by its political efficacy, it is hard to tell what value the fascist label had. Was it a powerful mobilizing tool, or just another rhetorical exaggeration in a political culture prone to hyperbole? On the one hand, the term’s soaring popularity in publications and speeches indicates that, at least for some, it was useful. If politicians as varied as Madeleine Albright and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez invoked it to describe right-wing nativism and xenophobia, it was because they assumed it would generate a response that other terms would not. The intense coverage those invocations received indicates that they were not wrong. Albright’s *Fascism: A Warning* became a best seller, while Ocasio-Cortez’s warning of a “fascist threat” routinely generated breathless headlines.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, not everyone believed that confronting the radical right benefited from the specter of militias-backed dictatorship. Figures like Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden instead claimed that electoral mobilization was best achieved by focusing on concrete policies, whether in policing, health care, or climate change. This was why both, despite their considerable differences, spent their campaigns in 2020 avoiding the term “fascism.” Even when pressed by

<sup>23</sup>“Harry Keisler in Conversation with Niall Ferguson,” the Institute of International Studies, UC-Berkeley, 19 Oct. 2006, transcript available at <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people6/Ferguson/ferguson06-con5.html>.

<sup>24</sup>Moyn, “The Trouble with Analogies,” original emphasis.

<sup>25</sup>Daniel Bessner, “Trump Is Threat to Democracy. But That Doesn’t Mean He’s Winning,” *Jacobin*, 15 Jan. 2021, at [www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/trump-capitol-riot-fascist-coup-attempt](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/trump-capitol-riot-fascist-coup-attempt).

<sup>26</sup>Madeline Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: 2018); Tessa Stuart, “AOC: November Is about Stopping Fascism in the United States,” *Rolling Stone*, 19 Aug. 2020, at [www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/aoc-dnc-biden-sanders-104582](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/aoc-dnc-biden-sanders-104582).

journalists, they usually deflected the question, assuming it did little to further their causes.

The most revealing thing about the fascism debate is therefore not so much the strengths and limits of each side's claims, but the fact that it took place at all. Like the dispute about caesarism a century ago, it shows the content of contemporary political imagination: what people envision as their darkest collective experiences, and how far or little they believe society has traveled from them. The right's incessant radicalization therefore means that the debate is likely to continue. After all, as media scholar Moira Weigel recently noted, it is clear that right-wing formations today are both similar to and different from their fascist predecessors. Both are devoted to racialized notions of organic unity, "natural" hierarchies, a violence as the core of politics. But they substantially diverge in their understanding of women's role in the public sphere, and they operate in a radically different media landscape (fascists focused on the homogenizing effects of mass publications and radio broadcasts, while contemporary activists work in the privatized and individualized world of social media).<sup>27</sup> This blend of continuities and changes therefore likely means that the fascist debate is far from over. It may remain here until, like the eclipse of "caesarism" by "totalitarianism," new horrors lead to new neologism.

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<sup>27</sup>Moira Weigel, "The Authoritarian Personality 2.0," *Polity* 54/1 (2022), 146–80.