

A Reader for the Audience of

*Catarina and the Beauty of
Killing Fascists*

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Texts selected by

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1. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, Part II (1969-1970)
2. Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" (1935)
3. Robert O. Paxton, "What is Fascism?", from *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2004)
4. Andrew Marantz, "Why We Can't Stop Arguing About Whether Trump Is a Fascist", *The New Yorker*, 27 March 2024

Hannah Arendt

ON VIOLENCE



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L M N O P Q R

[Part 2 of a three-part essay]

II

IT IS against the background of these experiences that I propose to raise the question of violence in the political realm. This is not easy; what Sorel remarked sixty years ago, "The problems of violence still remain very obscure,"⁵¹ is as true today as it was then. I mentioned the general reluctance to deal with violence as a phenomenon in its own right, and I must now qualify this statement. If we turn to discussions of the phenomenon of power, we soon find that there exists a consensus among political theorists from Left to Right to the effect that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power. "All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence," said C. Wright Mills, echoing, as it were, Max Weber's definition of the state as "the rule of men over men based on the means of legitimate, that is allegedly legitimate, violence."⁵² The consensus is very

⁵¹ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, "Introduction to the First Publication" (1906), New York, 1961, p. 60.

⁵² *The Power Elite*, New York, 1956, p. 171; Max Weber in the first paragraphs of *Politics as a Vocation* (1921). Weber seems to have been aware of his agreement with the Left. He quotes in the context Trotsky's remark in Brest-Litovsk, "Every state is based on violence," and adds, "This is indeed true."

strange; for to equate political power with “the organization of violence” makes sense only if one follows Marx’s estimate of the state as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the ruling class. Let us therefore turn to authors who do not believe that the body politic and its laws and institutions are merely coercive superstructures, secondary manifestations of some underlying forces. Let us turn, for instance, to Bertrand de Jouvenel, whose book *Power* is perhaps the most prestigious and, anyway, the most interesting recent treatise on the subject. “To him,” he writes, “who contemplates the unfolding of the ages war presents itself as an activity of States *which pertains to their essence.*”⁵³ This may prompt us to ask whether the end of warfare, then, would mean the end of states. Would the disappearance of violence in relationships between states spell the end of power?

The answer, it seems, will depend on what we understand by power. And power, it turns out, is an instrument of rule, while rule, we are told, owes its existence to “the instinct of domination.”⁵⁴ We are immediately reminded of what Sartre said about violence when we read in Jouvenel that “a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will,” which gives him “incomparable pleasure.”⁵⁵ “Power,” said Voltaire, “consists in making others act as I choose”; it is present wherever I have the chance “to assert my own will against the resistance” of others, said Max Weber, reminding us of Clausewitz’s definition of war as “an act of violence to compel the opponent to do as we wish.” The word, we are told by Strausz-Hupé, signifies

⁵³ *Power: The Natural History of Its Growth* (1945), London, 1952, p. 122.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

“the power of man over man.”⁵⁶ To go back to Jouvenel: “To command and to be obeyed: without that, there is no Power—with it no other attribute is needed for it to be. . . . The thing without which it cannot be: that essence is command.”⁵⁷ If the essence of power is the effectiveness of command, then there is no greater power than that which grows out of the barrel of a gun, and it would be difficult to say in “which way the order given by a policeman is different from that given by a gunman.” (I am quoting from the important book *The Notion of the State*, by Alexander Passerin d’Entrèves, the only author I know who is aware of the importance of distinguishing between violence and power. “We have to decide whether and in what sense ‘power’ can be distinguished from ‘force’, to ascertain how the fact of using force according to law changes the quality of force itself and presents us with an entirely different picture of human relations,” since “force, by the very fact of being qualified, ceases to be force.” But even this distinction, by far the most sophisticated and thoughtful one in the literature, does not go

⁵⁶ See Karl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832), New York, 1943, ch. 1; Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Power and Community*, New York, 1956, p. 4; the quotation from Max Weber: “*Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstand durchzusetzen,*” is drawn from Strausz-Hupé.

⁵⁷ I chose my examples at random, since it hardly matters to which author one turns. It is only occasionally that one hears a dissenting voice. Thus R. M. McIver states, “Coercive power is a criterion of the state, but not its essence. . . . It is true that there is no state, where there is no overwhelming force. . . . But the exercise of force does not make a state.” (In *The Modern State*, London, 1926, pp. 222-225.) How strong the force of this tradition is can be seen in Rousseau’s attempt to escape it. Looking for a government of no-rule, he finds nothing better than “*une forme d’association . . . par laquelle chacun s’unissant à tous n’obéisse pourtant qu’à lui-même.*” The emphasis on obedience, and hence on command, is unchanged.

to the root of the matter. Power in Passerin d'Entrèves's understanding is "qualified" or "institutionalized force." In other words, while the authors quoted above define violence as the most flagrant manifestation of power, Passerin d'Entrèves defines power as a kind of mitigated violence. In the final analysis, it comes to the same.)⁵⁸ Should everybody from Right to Left, from Bertrand de Jouvenel to Mao Tse-tung agree on so basic a point in political philosophy as the nature of power?

In terms of our traditions of political thought, these definitions have much to recommend them. Not only do they derive from the old notion of absolute power that accompanied the rise of the sovereign European nation-state, whose earliest and still greatest spokesmen were Jean Bodin, in sixteenth-century France, and Thomas Hobbes, in seventeenth-century England; they also coincide with the terms used since Greek antiquity to define the forms of government as the rule of man over man—of one or the few in monarchy and oligarchy, of the best or the many in aristocracy and democracy. Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such dominion: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody. (If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what

⁵⁸ *The Notion of the State, An Introduction to Political Theory* was first published in Italian in 1962. The English version is no mere translation; written by the author himself, it is the definitive edition and appeared in Oxford in 1967. For the quotations, see pp. 64, 70, and 105.

is being done. It is this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causes of the current worldwide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and to run amuck.)

Moreover, this ancient vocabulary was strangely confirmed and fortified by the addition of the Hebrew-Christian tradition and its "imperative conception of law." This concept was not invented by the "political realists" but was, rather, the result of a much earlier, almost automatic generalization of God's "Commandments," according to which "the simple relation of command and obedience" indeed sufficed to identify the essence of law.⁵⁹ Finally, more modern scientific and philosophical convictions concerning man's nature have further strengthened these legal and political traditions. The many recent discoveries of an inborn instinct of domination and an innate aggressiveness in the human animal were preceded by very similar philosophic statements. According to John Stuart Mill, "the first lesson of civilization [is] that of obedience," and he speaks of "the two states of the inclinations . . . one the desire to exercise power over others; the other . . . disinclination to have power exercised over themselves."⁶⁰ If we would trust our own experiences in these matters, we should know that the instinct of submission, an ardent desire to obey and be ruled by some strong man, is at least as prominent in human psychology as the will to power, and, politically, perhaps more relevant. The old adage "How fit he is to sway / That can so well obey," some version of which seems to have been

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁶⁰ *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Liberal Arts Library, pp. 59 and 65.

known to all centuries and all nations,⁶¹ may point to a psychological truth: namely, that the will to power and the will to submission are interconnected. "Ready submission to tyranny," to use Mill once more, is by no means always caused by "extreme passiveness." Conversely, a strong disinclination to obey is often accompanied by an equally strong disinclination to dominate and command. Historically speaking, the ancient institution of slave economy would be inexplicable on the grounds of Mill's psychology. Its express purpose was to liberate citizens from the burden of household affairs and to permit them to enter the public life of the community, where all were equals; if it were true that nothing is sweeter than to give commands and to rule others, the master would never have left his household.

However, there exists another tradition and another vocabulary no less old and time-honored. When the Athenian city-state called its constitution an isonomy, or the Romans spoke of the *civitas* as their form of government, they had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule or law and command. It was to these examples that the men of the eighteenth-century revolutions turned when they ransacked the archives of antiquity and constituted a form of government, a republic, where the rule of law, resting on the power of the people, would put an end to the rule of man over man, which they thought was a "government fit for slaves." They too, unhappily, still talked about obedience—obedience to laws instead of men; but what they actually meant was support of the laws to which the

⁶¹ John M. Wallace, *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalism of Andrew Marvell*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 88-89. I owe this reference to the kind attention of Gregory DesJardins.

citizenry had given its consent.⁶² Such support is never unquestioning, and as far as reliability is concerned it cannot match the indeed “unquestioning obedience” that an act of violence can exact—the obedience every criminal can count on when he snatches my pocketbook with the help of a knife or robs a bank with the help of a gun. It is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country, and this support is but the continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with. Under conditions of representative government the people are supposed to rule those who govern them. All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them. This is what Madison meant when he said “all governments rest on opinion,” a word no less true for the various forms of monarchy than for democracies. (“To suppose that majority rule functions only in democracy is a fantastic illusion,” as Jouvanel points out: “The king, who is but one solitary individual, stands far more in need of the general support of Society than any other form of government.”⁶³ Even the tyrant, the One who rules against all, needs helpers in the business of violence, though their number may be rather restricted.) However, the strength of opinion, that is, the power of the government, depends on numbers; it is “in proportion to the number with which it is associated,”⁶⁴ and tyranny, as Montesquieu discovered, is therefore the most violent and least powerful of forms of government. Indeed one of the most obvious distinctions between power and violence is that

⁶² See appendix XI, p. 97.

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ *The Federalist*. No. 49.

power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements. A legally unrestricted majority rule, that is, a democracy without a constitution, can be very formidable in the suppression of the rights of minorities and very effective in the suffocation of dissent without any use of violence. But that does not mean that violence and power are the same.

The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All. And this latter is never possible without instruments. To claim, as is often done, that a tiny unarmed minority has successfully, by means of violence—shouting, kicking up a row, et cetera—disrupted large lecture classes whose overwhelming majority had voted for normal instruction procedures is therefore very misleading. (In a recent case at some German university there was even one lonely “dissenter” among several hundred students who could claim such a strange victory.) What actually happens in such cases is something much more serious: the majority clearly refuses to use its power and overpower the disrupters; the academic processes break down because no one is willing to raise more than a voting finger for the *status quo*. What the universities are up against is the “immense negative unity” of which Stephen Spender speaks in another context. All of which proves only that a minority can have a much greater potential power than one would expect by counting noses in public-opinion polls. The merely onlooking majority, amused by the spectacle of a shouting match between student and professor, is in fact already the latent ally of the minority. (One need only imagine what would have happened had one or a few unarmed Jews in pre-Hitler Germany tried to disrupt the lecture of an anti-Semitic professor in order to understand the absurdity of the talk about the small “minorities of militants.”)

It is, I think, a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as "power," "strength," "force," "authority," and, finally, "violence"—all of which refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did. (In the words of d'Entrèves, "might, power, authority: these are all words to whose exact implications no great weight is attached in current speech; even the greatest thinkers sometimes use them at random. Yet it is fair to presume that they refer to different properties, and their meaning should therefore be carefully assessed and examined. . . . The correct use of these words is a question not only of logical grammar, but of historical perspective.")⁶⁵ To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it has also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to. In such a situation it is always tempting to introduce new definitions, but—though I shall briefly yield to temptation—what is involved is not simply a matter of careless speech. Behind the apparent confusion is a firm conviction in whose light all distinctions would be, at best, of minor importance: the conviction that the most crucial political issue is, and always has been, the question of Who rules Whom? Power, strength, force, authority, violence—these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function. It is only after one

⁶⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 7. Cf. also p. 171, where, discussing the exact meaning of the words "nation" and "nationality," he rightly insists that "the only competent guides in the jungle of so many different meanings are the linguists and the historians. It is to them that we must turn for help." And in distinguishing authority and power, he turns to Cicero's *potestas in populo, auctoritas in senatu*.

ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion that the original data in the realm of human affairs will appear, or, rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity.

These data, in our context, may be enumerated as follows:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, "his power" also vanishes. In current usage, when we speak of a "powerful man" or a "powerful personality," we already use the word "power" metaphorically; what we refer to without metaphor is "strength."

Strength unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them. The strength of even the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many, who often will combine for no other purpose than to ruin strength precisely because of its peculiar independence. The almost instinctive hostility of the many toward the one has always, from Plato to Nietzsche, been ascribed to resentment, to the envy of the weak for the strong, but this psychological interpretation misses the point. It is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against independence, the property of individual strength.

Force, which we often use in daily speech as a synonym for violence, especially if violence serves as a means of coercion, should be reserved, in terminological language,

for the "forces of nature" or the "force of circumstances" (*la force des choses*), that is, to indicate the energy released by physical or social movements.

Authority, relating to the most elusive of these phenomena and therefore, as a term, most frequently abused,⁶⁶ can be vested in persons—there is such a thing as personal authority, as, for instance, in the relation between parent and child, between teacher and pupil—or it can be vested in offices, as, for instance, in the Roman senate (*auctoritas in senatu*) or in the hierarchical offices of the Church (a priest can grant valid absolution even though he is drunk). Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed. (A father can lose his authority either by beating his child or by starting to argue with him, that is, either by behaving to him like a tyrant or by treating him as an equal.) To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ There is such a thing as authoritarian government, but it certainly has nothing in common with tyranny, dictatorship, or totalitarian rule. For a discussion of the historical background and political significance of the term, see my "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future: Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, 1968, and Part I of Karl-Heinz Lübke's valuable study, *Auctoritas bei Augustin*, Stuttgart, 1968, with extensive bibliography.

⁶⁷ Wolin and Schaar, in *op. cit.*, are entirely right: "The rules are being broken because University authorities, administrators and faculty alike, have lost the respect of many of the students." They then conclude, "When authority leaves, power enters." This too is true, but, I am afraid, not quite in the sense they meant it. What entered first at Berkeley was student power, obviously the strongest power on every campus simply because of the students' superior numbers. It was in order to break this power that authorities resorted to violence, and it is precisely because the university is essentially an institution based on authority, and therefore in need

Violence, finally, as I have said, is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it.

It is perhaps not superfluous to add that these distinctions, though by no means arbitrary, hardly ever correspond to watertight compartments in the real world, from which nevertheless they are drawn. Thus institutionalized power in organized communities often appears in the guise of authority, demanding instant, unquestioning recognition; no society could function without it. (A small, and still isolated, incident in New York shows what can happen if authentic authority in social relations has broken down to the point where it cannot work any longer even in its derivative, purely functional form. A minor mishap in the subway system—the doors on a train failed to operate—turned into a serious shutdown on the line lasting four hours and involving more than fifty thousand passengers, because when the transit authorities asked the passengers to leave the defective train, they simply refused.)⁶⁸ Moreover, nothing, as we shall see, is

of respect, that it finds it so difficult to deal with power in nonviolent terms. The university today calls upon the police for protection exactly as the Catholic church used to do before the separation of state and church forced it to rely on authority alone. It is perhaps more than an oddity that the severest crisis of the church as an institution should coincide with the severest crisis in the history of the university, the only secular institution still based on authority. Both may indeed be ascribed to "the progressing explosion of the atom 'obedience' whose stability was allegedly eternal," as Heinrich Böll remarked of the crisis in the churches. See "Es wird immer später," in *Antwort an Sacharow*, Zürich, 1969.

⁶⁸ See the *New York Times*, January 4, 1969, pp. 1 and 29.

more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form. From this, it does not follow that authority, power, and violence are all the same.

Still it must be admitted that it is particularly tempting to think of power in terms of command and obedience, and hence to equate power with violence, in a discussion of what actually is only one of power's special cases—namely, the power of government. Since in foreign relations as well as domestic affairs violence appears as a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers—the foreign enemy, the native criminal—it looks indeed as though violence were the prerequisite of power and power nothing but a façade, the velvet glove which either conceals the iron hand or will turn out to belong to a paper tiger. On closer inspection, though, this notion loses much of its plausibility. For our purpose, the gap between theory and reality is perhaps best illustrated by the phenomenon of revolution.

Since the beginning of the century theoreticians of revolution have told us that the chances of revolution have significantly decreased in proportion to the increased destructive capacities of weapons at the unique disposition of governments.⁶⁹ The history of the last seventy years,

⁶⁹ Thus Franz Borkenau, reflecting on the defeat of the Spanish revolution, states: "In this tremendous contrast with previous revolutions one fact is reflected. Before these latter years, counter-revolution usually depended upon the support of reactionary powers, which were technically and intellectually inferior to the forces of revolution. This has changed with the advent of fascism. Now, every revolution is likely to meet the attack of the most modern, most efficient, most ruthless machinery yet in existence. It means that the age of revolutions free to evolve according to their own laws is over." This was written more than thirty years ago (*The Spanish*

with its extraordinary record of successful and unsuccessful revolutions, tells a different story. Were people mad who even tried against such overwhelming odds? And, leaving out instances of full success, how can even a temporary success be explained? The fact is that the gap between state-owned means of violence and what people can muster by themselves—from beer bottles to Molotov cocktails and guns—has always been so enormous that technical improvements make hardly any difference. Textbook instructions on “how to make a revolution” in a step-by-step progression from dissent to conspiracy, from resistance to armed uprising, are all based on the mistaken notion that revolutions are “made.” In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact—that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case, the situation changes abruptly. Not only is the rebellion not put down, but the arms themselves change hands—sometimes, as in the Hungarian revolution, within a few hours. (We should know about such things after all these years of futile fighting in Vietnam, where for a long time, before getting massive Russian aid, the National Liberation Front fought us with weapons that were made in the United States.) Only after this has happened, when the disintegration of the government in power has permitted the rebels to arm themselves, can one speak of an “armed uprising,” which often does not

Cockpit, London, 1937; Ann Arbor, 1963, pp. 288-289) and is now quoted with approval by Chomsky (*op. cit.*, p. 310). He believes that American and French intervention in the civil war in Vietnam proves Borkenau's prediction accurate, “with substitution of ‘liberal imperialism’ for ‘fascism.’” I think that this example is rather apt to prove the opposite.

take place at all or occurs when it is no longer necessary. Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use; and the question of this obedience is not decided by the command-obedience relation but by opinion, and, of course, by the number of those who share it. Everything depends on the power behind the violence. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience—to laws, to rulers, to institutions—is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.

Where power has disintegrated, revolutions are possible but not necessary. We know of many instances when utterly impotent regimes were permitted to continue in existence for long periods of time—either because there was no one to test their strength and reveal their weakness or because they were lucky enough not to be engaged in war and suffer defeat. Disintegration often becomes manifest only in direct confrontation; and even then, when power is already in the street, some group of men prepared for such an eventuality is needed to pick it up and assume responsibility. We have recently witnessed how it did not take more than the relatively harmless, essentially nonviolent French students' rebellion to reveal the vulnerability of the whole political system, which rapidly disintegrated before the astonished eyes of the young rebels. Unknowingly they had tested it; they intended only to challenge the ossified university system, and down came the system of governmental power, together with that of the huge party bureaucracies—“*une sorte de désintégration de toutes les hiérarchies.*”⁷⁰ It was a textbook case of a revolutionary situation⁷¹ that did not develop into a revo-

⁷⁰ Raymond Aron, *La Révolution Introuvable*, 1968, p. 41.

⁷¹ Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*, p. 56, disagrees: “What was so much more apparent than the revolutionary situation [was] the non-revolutionary one.” It may be “difficult to think of a revolution

lution because there was nobody, least of all the students, prepared to seize power and the responsibility that goes with it. Nobody except, of course, de Gaulle. Nothing was more characteristic of the seriousness of the situation than his appeal to the army, his journey to see Massu and the generals in Germany, a walk to Canossa, if there ever was one, in view of what had happened only a few years before. But what he sought and received was support, not obedience, and the means were not commands but concessions.⁷² If commands had been enough, he would never have had to leave Paris.

No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis—the secret police and its net of informers. Only the development of robot soldiers, which, as previously mentioned, would eliminate the human factor completely and, conceivably, permit one man with a push button to destroy whomever he pleased, could change this fundamental ascendancy of power over violence. Even the most despotic domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organization of power—that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters.⁷³ Single men without others to support them never

taking place when . . . everyone looks particularly good humoured," but this is what usually happens in the beginning of revolutions—during the early great ecstasy of fraternity.

⁷² See appendix XII, p. 98.

⁷³ In ancient Greece, such an organization of power was the polis, whose chief merit, according to Xenophon, was that it permitted the "citizens to act as bodyguards to one another against slaves and criminals so that none of the citizens may die a violent death." (*Hiero*, IV, 3.)

have enough power to use violence successfully. Hence, in domestic affairs, violence functions as the last resort of power against criminals or rebels—that is, against single individuals who, as it were, refuse to be overpowered by the consensus of the majority. And as for actual warfare, we have seen in Vietnam how an enormous superiority in the means of violence can become helpless if confronted with an ill-equipped but well-organized opponent who is much more powerful. This lesson, to be sure, was there to be learned from the history of guerrilla warfare, which is at least as old as the defeat in Spain of Napoleon's still-unvanquished army.

To switch for a moment to conceptual language: Power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything. The end of war—end taken in its twofold meaning—is peace or victory; but to the question And what is the end of peace? there is no answer. Peace is an absolute, even though in recorded history periods of warfare have nearly always outlasted periods of peace. Power is in the same category; it is, as they say, “an end in itself.” (This, of course, is not to deny that governments pursue policies and employ their power to achieve prescribed goals. But the power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category.) And since government is essentially organized and institutionalized power, the current question What is the end of government? does not make much sense either. The answer will be either question-begging—to enable men to live together—or dangerously utopian—to promote happiness or to realize a

classless society or some other nonpolitical ideal, which if tried out in earnest cannot but end in some kind of tyranny.

Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy. The common treatment of these two words as synonyms is no less misleading and confusing than the current equation of obedience and support. Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow. Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future. Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defense, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate.

Power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together. Wherever they are combined, power, we have found, is the primary and predominant factor. The situation, however, is entirely different when we deal with them in their pure states—as, for instance, with foreign invasion and occupation. We saw that the current equation of violence with power rests on government's being understood as domination of man over man by means of violence. If a foreign conqueror is confronted by an impotent government and by a nation unused to the exercise of political power, it is easy for him to achieve such domination. In all other cases the difficulties are great indeed, and the occupying invader will try immediately to establish Quisling governments, that is, to find a native power base to support his dominion. The head-on clash between Russian tanks and the entirely

nonviolent resistance of the Czechoslovak people is a textbook case of a confrontation between violence and power in their pure states. But while domination in such an instance is difficult to achieve, it is not impossible. Violence, we must remember, does not depend on numbers or opinions, but on implements, and the implements of violence, as I mentioned before, like all other tools, increase and multiply human strength. Those who oppose violence with mere power will soon find that they are confronted not by men but by men's artifacts, whose inhumanity and destructive effectiveness increase in proportion to the distance separating the opponents. Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power.

In a head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome is hardly in doubt. If Gandhi's enormously powerful and successful strategy of nonviolent resistance had met with a different enemy—Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, even prewar Japan, instead of England—the outcome would not have been decolonization, but massacre and submission. However, England in India and France in Algeria had good reasons for their restraint. Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost; it is precisely the shrinking power of the Russian government, internally and externally, that became manifest in its "solution" of the Czechoslovak problem—just as it was the shrinking power of European imperialism that became manifest in the alternative between decolonization and massacre. To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power. This is especially true when the victor happens to enjoy domestically the bless-

ings of constitutional government. Henry Steele Commager is entirely right: "If we subvert world order and destroy world peace we must inevitably subvert and destroy our own political institutions first."⁷⁴ The much-feared boomerang effect of the "government of subject races" (Lord Cromer) on the home government during the imperialist era meant that rule by violence in faraway lands would end by affecting the government of England, that the last "subject race" would be the English themselves. The recent gas attack on the campus at Berkeley, where not just tear gas but also another gas, "outlawed by the Geneva Convention and used by the Army to flush out guerrillas in Vietnam," was laid down while gas-masked Guardsmen stopped anybody and everybody "from fleeing the gassed area," is an excellent example of this "backlash" phenomenon. It has often been said that impotence breeds violence, and psychologically this is quite true, at least of persons possessing natural strength, moral or physical. Politically speaking, the point is that loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power—in 1968 during the Democratic convention in Chicago we could watch this process on television⁷⁵—and that violence itself results in impotence. Where violence is no longer backed and restrained by power, the well-known reversal in reckoning with means and ends has taken place. The means, the means of destruction, now determine the end—with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all power.

Nowhere is the self-defeating factor in the victory of violence over power more evident than in the use of terror to maintain domination, about whose weird suc-

⁷⁴ "Can We Limit Presidential Power?" in *The New Republic*, April 6, 1968.

⁷⁵ See appendix XIII, p. 98.

cesses and eventual failures we know perhaps more than any generation before us. Terror is not the same as violence; it is, rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control. It has often been noticed that the effectiveness of terror depends almost entirely on the degree of social atomization. Every kind of organized opposition must disappear before the full force of terror can be let loose. This atomization—an outrageously pale, academic word for the horror it implies—is maintained and intensified through the ubiquity of the informer, who can be literally omnipresent because he no longer is merely a professional agent in the pay of the police but potentially every person one comes into contact with. How such a fully developed police state is established and how it works—or, rather, how nothing works where it holds sway—can now be learned in Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, which will probably remain one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century literature and certainly contains the best documentation on Stalin's regime in existence.⁷⁶ The decisive difference between totalitarian domination, based on terror, and tyrannies and dictatorships, established by violence, is that the former turns not only against its enemies but against its friends and supporters as well, being afraid of all power, even the power of its friends. The climax of terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, when yesterday's executioner becomes today's victim. And this is also the moment when power disappears entirely. There exist now a great many plausible explanations for the de-Stalinization of Russia—none, I believe, so compelling as the realization by the Stalinist functionaries themselves that a continua-

⁷⁶ See appendix XIV, p. 99.

tion of the regime would lead, not to an insurrection, against which terror is indeed the best safeguard, but to paralysis of the whole country.

To sum up: politically speaking, it is insufficient to say that power and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; to speak of non-violent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it. Hegel's and Marx's great trust in the dialectical "power of negation," by virtue of which opposites do not destroy but smoothly develop into each other because contradictions promote and do not paralyze development, rests on a much older philosophical prejudice: that evil is no more than a privative *modus* of the good, that good can come out of evil; that, in short, evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still-hidden good. Such time-honored opinions have become dangerous. They are shared by many who have never heard of Hegel or Marx, for the simple reason that they inspire hope and dispel fear—a treacherous hope used to dispel legitimate fear. By this, I do not mean to equate violence with evil; I only want to stress that violence cannot be derived from its opposite, which is power, and that in order to understand it for what it is, we shall have to examine its roots and nature.

Brecht on Theatre

Bertolt Brecht

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[‘The German Drama: pre-Hitler’, translated by Eva Goldbeck,
The New York Times, November 24, 1935, Section 9, p. 1 and p. 3]

John Willett’s translations have been thoroughly revised, and additional texts have been translated, as follows:

Part One Romy Fursland and John Willett with the exception of Steve Giles – ‘Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*’

Part Two and Part Three Marc Silberman and John Willett with the exception of Jack Davis – ‘On the Production of the V-effect’, ‘On the Gradual Approach to the Study and Construction of the Figure’, ‘From Epic to Dialectical Theatre 2’, ‘Relative Haste’, ‘A Detour’, ‘Another Case of Applied Dialectic’, ‘Letter to the Actor Playing Young Hörder in *Winter Battle*’, ‘Mother Courage Played in Two Ways’, ‘Example of a Scenic Innovation Through the Observation of a Mistake’, ‘Something about Representing Character’, ‘Conversation about Coerced Empathy’

Steve Giles and John Willett – *Short Organon for the Theatre* and ‘Appendices to the *Short Organon*’

Victoria Hill – ‘On Experiments in Epic Theatre’, ‘Short List of the Most Frequent, Common and Boring Misconceptions about Epic Theatre’, ‘On Determining the Zero Point’, ‘The Zero Point’, ‘Athletic Training’, ‘On Epic Dramatic Art: Change’, ‘Kurt Palm’

Kristopher Imbrigotta – ‘The Progressiveness of the Stanislavsky System’, ‘On the Art of Spectatorship’, ‘Maintaining Gestures over Multiple Generations’, ‘The Attitude of the Rehearsal Director (in the Inductive Process)’, ‘What Makes an Actor’, ‘Gesture’, ‘About Our Stagings’, ‘The Plot’, ‘On Stanislavsky’, ‘Stanislavsky Studies [3]’, ‘A Few Thoughts on the Stanislavsky Conference’

Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction

A few years back, anybody talking about modern theatre meant the theatre in Moscow, New York and Berlin. Someone might have mentioned a production by Jouvett in Paris or by Cochran in London, or *The Dybbuk* as given by the Habima (which is to all intents and purposes part of the Russian theatre, because Vakhtangov was its director). But broadly speaking there were only three capitals as far as modern theatre was concerned.

Russian, American and German theatres differed widely from one another, but were alike in being modern, that is to say in introducing technical and artistic innovations. In a sense they even achieved a certain stylistic resemblance, probably because technology is international (not just the part that is directly required for the stage but also the part that influences it, film for instance), and because large progressive cities in large industrial countries were involved. Most recently, the Berlin theatre seemed to have taken the lead. For a time everything that is common to the modern theatre found its strongest and, for the moment, most mature expression there.

The Berlin theatre's last phase was the so-called *epic theatre*, and it showed the modern theatre's developmental trend in its purest form. Whatever was labelled topical theatre [*Zeitstück*] or Piscator theatre or learning play [*Lehrstück*] belongs to the epic theatre.

The epic theatre

The term 'epic theatre' seemed self-contradictory to many people because, following Aristotle, the epic and dramatic forms of presenting the plot are held to be basically distinct. The difference between the two forms was never thought to lie simply in the fact that the one was performed by living beings while the other made use of a book; epic works such as those of Homer and the medieval singers were likewise theatrical performances, and dramas such as Goethe's *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred* admittedly achieved their greatest effect as books. Thus Aristotle himself distinguished between the dramatic and epic forms as a difference in their construction, and their laws were dealt with under two different branches of aesthetics. The method of construction depended on the different ways of presenting the work to the public, sometimes on the stage, sometimes through a book; and independently of that there was the 'dramatic element' in epic works and the 'epic element' in dramatic works. The bourgeois novel in the last century

developed much that was 'dramatic', which meant the strong centralization of plot, a mutual dependency of the separate parts. A certain passion of utterance, an emphasis on the clash of forces are hallmarks of the 'dramatic'. The epic writer Döblin provided an excellent description when he said that the epic, as opposed to the dramatic, can, as it were, be cut with a scissors into single pieces that all remain viable.

This is not the place to explain how the opposition of epic and dramatic lost its rigidity after the two had long been held to be irreconcilable. Let us just point out that the technical advances alone were enough to permit the stage to incorporate narrative elements in its dramatic productions. The possibility of using projections, the greater adaptability of the stage due to mechanization, film, all completed the stage's equipment, and did so at a point where the most important transactions between people could no longer be shown simply by personifying the forces that moved them or subjecting the characters to invisible metaphysical powers. To make these transactions intelligible, the *surroundings* in which the people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and 'significant' way.

These surroundings had of course been shown in existing drama, but only as seen from the main character's point of view and not as an independent element. They arose from the hero's reactions to them. They were seen as a storm is seen when we see the ships on the surface of the water unfolding their sails, and the sails filling out. In epic theatre the surroundings were to appear independently.

The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing along with the fourth wall. Not only did the backdrop adopt an attitude to the events on the stage – by recalling on large screens other events that were occurring elsewhere simultaneously, by projecting documents that confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by providing concrete and tangible statistics for abstract conversations, by supporting vivid events whose meaning was unclear with facts and figures – and the actors too refrained from throwing themselves completely into their roles, remaining detached from the characters they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of them.

The spectator was no longer allowed in any way to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the events shown and put them through a process of alienation [*Entfremdung*]: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When things are 'self-evident', we dispense with understanding.

What is ‘natural’ had to have the force of what is *startling*. This was the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People’s activity had to simultaneously be as *it was* and be capable of being different.

These were great changes.

[Editor’s note: The table below is the 1936 version, a reworking of the 1930 ‘Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*’ (see Part One); the lines between slashes (/ /) are editorial revisions made in 1938 for Brecht’s collected works (*Gesammelte Werke*).]

Two Schemes

A few short schemes can show what distinguishes epic from dramatic theater.

1.

Dramatic form

The stage ‘portrays’ an incident
 Involves spectators in an action
 consumes their activity
 enables them to have feelings
 communicates experiences
 Spectators are immersed in an incident
 Suggestion is used
 Emotions are preserved
 Human nature presumed to be common knowledge
 Humankind is unchangeable

/ eyes on the finish /

/ one scene makes another /

Events move in a straight line

Natura non facit saltus

[nature makes no leaps]

The world as it is

What humankind should do

Its drives

/ thought determines being /

Epic form

It narrates an incident
 Turns them into observers but arouses their activity
 forces them to make decisions
 communicates knowledge
 Spectators are put in opposition to it
 Arguments are used and are turned into insights
 Human nature is object of investigation
 Humankind is changeable and able to change things

/ eyes on the course /

/ each scene for itself /

in curves

facit saltus [nature makes

leaps]

the world as it is becoming

What humankind can do

/What humankind must do /

its motives

/ social being determines thought /

2.

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says:

Yes, I have felt like that too. – Just like me. – It’s only natural. – It’ll never

change. – This person's suffering shocks me, because there is no way out. – That's great art: everything is self-evident – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre's spectator says:

I'd never have thought so. – That's not the way. – That's extraordinary, hardly believable. – It's got to stop – This person's suffering shocks me, because there might be a way out. – That's great art: nothing is self-evident. – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

The theatre of instruction

The stage began to be instructive.

Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat-packing industry, all became subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectators about facts they did not know. Films showed a montage of events from all over the world. Projections added statistical material. And as the 'background' came to the fore, people's action was subjected to criticism. Right and wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, at any rate the sort of philosophers who wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, and we had instruction. And where was the amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, treating us like illiterates? Were we supposed to pass exams and be given marks?

There is a general perception that a very sharp distinction exists between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful, but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair.

Well, we can only say that the contrast between learning and amusing oneself does not necessarily exist in nature; it has not always existed and need not always exist.

Undoubtedly there is much that is tedious about the kind of learning familiar to us from school, from our professional training, etc. But let us recall under what conditions and to what end it takes place. That kind of learning is really a purchase. Knowledge is just a commodity. It is acquired in order to be resold. All those who have grown too old for school have to do their learning virtually in secret, for anyone who admits that he still has something to learn devalues himself as a person who knows too little. Moreover the usefulness of learning is very much limited by factors outside the learner's control. There is unemployment, for instance, which no knowledge protects against. There is the division of labour, which makes

comprehensive knowledge unnecessary and impossible. Learning is often among the concerns of those who see no other possibility of getting ahead. There is not much knowledge that leads to power, but plenty of knowledge to which only power can lead.

Learning has a very different function for different social strata. There are people who consider learning to be worthless because there is no prospect for them to utilize what they learn. No one asks them about whatever clever answers they may know. Whatever happens to oil – it's alright, so much the better! If not, what are they supposed to do about it? But there are also people who cannot imagine any improvement in conditions; the conditions are good enough for them. Whatever happens to the oil, they will profit from it. And they feel the years beginning to tell. There can't be all that many years left. What is the point of learning a lot now? They have said their final word: a grunt. But there are also people who have not yet 'had their turn', who are discontented with conditions, who have an immense practical interest in learning, who want orientation at all costs, and who know they are lost without learning; these are the best and keenest learners. Similar differences apply to countries and peoples. Thus the pleasure of learning depends on all sorts of things; but none the less there is such a thing as pleasurable learning, militant and cheerful learning.

If learning could not provide this kind of amusement, the theatre's whole structure would be unfit for instruction.

Theatre remains theatre, even when it is theatre for instruction, and to the extent that it is good theatre, it will amuse.

Theatre and science

'But what does science have to do with art? We know that science can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre.'

I have often been told, when pointing out the invaluable services that modern science, if properly applied, can perform for art and especially for the theatre, that art and science are two estimable but wholly distinct fields of human activity. This is a terrible truism, of course, and we might as well agree quickly that, like most truisms, it is perfectly true. Art and science work in quite different ways: agreed. But, bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along as an artist without the use of certain sciences. This may well arouse serious doubts as to my artistic abilities. People are used to seeing poets as unique and slightly unnatural beings who recognize with a truly godlike assurance things that other people can only recognize after much sweat and toil. It is naturally distasteful to have to admit that one does not belong to this select band. All the same, it must be admitted.

It must at the same time be made clear that the scientific efforts to which I just confessed are not excusable side interests, pursued in the evening after a day's work. We all know how Goethe was interested in natural science, Schiller in history: as a kind of hobby, it is charitable to assume. I have no wish simply to accuse these two of having needed these sciences for their poetic activity, nor would I use them to excuse myself; but I must say that I do need the sciences. And I must even admit that I look askance at all sorts of people who I know do not keep abreast of scientific understanding: that is to say, who sing as the birds sing, or as people imagine the birds to sing. This does not mean that I would reject a charming poem about the taste of flounder or the pleasure of a boating party just because the writer had not studied gastronomy or navigation. But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world of humankind cannot be seen adequately for what they are by people who do not use every possible resource for understanding.

Let us suppose that we have to show great passions or great events that influence the fates of peoples. Today we view the drive for power as such a passion. Supposing that a poet 'feels' this drive and wants to have someone strive for power, how is he to show the exceedingly complicated machinery within which the struggle for power takes place today? If his hero is a politician, how do politics work? If he is a business man, how does business work? And then there are the poets who are much less passionately interested in any individual's drive for power than in business affairs and politics as such! How are they to acquire the necessary knowledge? They are unlikely to learn enough by going round and keeping their eyes open, although even that would provide more than they would get by just rolling their eyes in a fine frenzy. The founding of a paper like the *Völkischer Beobachter* or a business like Standard Oil is a pretty complicated affair, and no one just lets you in on the secrets. One important field for the playwright is psychology. It is taken for granted that a poet, if not an ordinary man, must be able without further instruction to discover the motives that lead a man to commit murder; he must have the 'inner resources' to give a picture of a murderer's mental state. It is taken for granted that you only have to look inside yourself in such a case; and then there's always imagination.... There are various reasons why I can no longer surrender to this agreeable hope of getting a result quite so comfortably. I can no longer find in myself all those motives that the press or scientific reports show to have been observed in people. Like the average judge when pronouncing sentence, I cannot without further ado conjure up an adequate picture of a murderer's mental state. Modern psychology, from psychoanalysis to behaviourism, provides me with insights that lead me to judge the case quite differently, especially if I bear in mind the

findings of sociology and do not overlook economics and history. You will say: but that's getting complicated. I have to answer that it *is* complicated. Even if you let yourself be convinced, and agree with me that a large slice of literature is exceedingly primitive, you may still ask with profound concern: won't an evening in such a theatre be a most alarming affair? The answer to that is: no.

Whatever knowledge is contained in a poetic work must be wholly transformed into poetry. The realization of this knowledge fulfils the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes. And even if it does not provide the pleasure found in science, a certain inclination to penetrate deeper into things and a desire to make the world controllable are necessary to ensure the enjoyment of poetic works generated by this age of great discoveries and inventions.

Is epic theatre a sort of 'moral institution'?

According to Friedrich Schiller the theatre is supposed to be a moral institution. In making this demand, it really never occurred to Schiller that by moralizing from the stage he might drive the audience out of the theatre. In his day audiences had no objection to moralizing. It was only later that Friedrich Nietzsche attacked him for blowing a moral trumpet. To Nietzsche any concern with morality was a cheerless affair; to Schiller it seemed thoroughly enjoyable. He knew of nothing that could give greater amusement and satisfaction than the propagation of ideals. The bourgeoisie was setting about forming the ideas of the nation. Putting your house in order, showing off your new hat, submitting your invoices for payment – all are very agreeable. But having to describe the sale of your house, sell your old hat, pay your bills – all are cheerless affairs, and that was how Friedrich Nietzsche saw things a century later. He was poorly disposed towards morality, and thus towards the previous Friedrich too. Many people also attacked the epic theatre, claiming it was too moralistic. Yet in the epic theatre moral arguments took only second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to study. That is to say, it did study, but then came the rub: the story's moral. Of course we cannot pretend that we began to study just for the fun of it and without any more practical motive, only to be completely taken by surprise with the results. Undoubtedly there were some painful discrepancies in our surroundings, conditions that were barely tolerable, and this not merely on account of moral considerations. Hunger, cold and hardship are hard to bear not only on account of moral considerations. Similarly the object of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such conditions (even if they could easily be felt – although not by all audience members; such objections were seldom felt, for instance, by those who profited by the

conditions in question!), but also to discover means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in the name of the wronged. These truly are two distinct matters, for the wronged are often told that they must put up with their lot, for moral reasons. For such moralists people exist for morality, not morality for people.

At least it should be possible to deduce from the above to what degree and in what sense the epic theatre is a moral institution.

Can epic theatre be performed anywhere?

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theatre. In its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity it is related to ancient Asian theatre. Instructive/didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classical Spanish theatre and also in the theatre of the Jesuits. These theatrical forms corresponded to particular trends of their time and vanished with them. Similarly the modern epic theatre is linked with certain trends. It cannot be practised universally by any means. Most of the great nations today are not disposed to use the theatre for ventilating their problems. London, Paris, Tokyo and Rome maintain their theatres for quite different purposes. Up to now favourable circumstances for an epic, instructive/didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time. In Berlin fascism put a very definite stop to the development of such a theatre.

It demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful movement in society that is interested in seeing vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution, and can defend this interest against every opposing tendency.

The epic theatre is the broadest and most far-reaching experiment in great modern theatre, and it has to overcome all the immense difficulties that confront all vital forces in the sphere of politics, philosophy, science and art.

[‘*Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater?*’, BFA 22/106-16]

Typescript, written about February/March 1935. This is Brecht’s first summary of the theatre for instruction and remained unpublished during his lifetime. Apparently he took the essay to Moscow in April of that year, perhaps in preparation for a conference of theatre producers to which Piscator invited Brecht, and he gave it to Sergei Tretiakov there. The term translated here as ‘alienation’ is *Entfremdung*, as used by Hegel and Marx, and not the *Verfremdung* that Brecht himself was soon to coin and make famous (see the editors’ introduction). The Latin phrase in the left-hand column of the scheme differentiating dramatic and epic theatre is from Aristotle’s *Historia de animalibus*. Alfred Döblin, the friend of Brecht’s referred to

early in the essay, wrote *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (*The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and other novels that critics of the time likened to Joyce and Dos Passos. He too was interested in the theory of epic form. The *Völkischer Beobachter* was the chief Nazi daily paper.

THE ANATOMY OF FASCISM

ROBERT O. PAXTON



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CHAPTER 8

What Is Fascism?

At this book's opening, I ducked the task of offering the reader a neat definition of fascism. I wanted to set aside—for heuristic purposes, at least—the traditional but straitjacketing search for the famous but elusive “fascist minimum.” I thought it more promising to observe historical examples of fascist successes and failures in action, through a whole cycle of development. Exposing the processes by which fascisms appeared, grew, gained power (or not), and, once in power, radicalized into a “fascist maximum” seemed a more promising strategy than to search for some static and limiting “essence.”

Now that we have reached the end of this historical journey, the imperative of definition can no longer be evaded. Otherwise we risk escaping from the nominalism of the “bestiary” only to fall into another nominalism of stages and processes. Generic fascism might disappear in our efforts to pick it apart. But first some other issues need to be considered.

Following fascism through five stages, in each of which it acts differently, raises an awkward question: Which is the real fascism? For some authors, usually those most concerned with fascism's intellectual expressions, the early movements are “pure” fascism while the regimes are corruptions, deformed by the compromises necessary for achieving and wielding power.¹ The regimes, however, for all their pragmatic choices and compromising alliances, had more impact than the movements because they possessed the power of war and death. A definition that does full justice to the phenomenon of fascism must apply to the later stages as effectively as it does to the earlier ones.

Focusing on those later stages requires us to give as much attention to

What Is Fascism?

settings and to allies as to the fascists themselves. A usable definition of fascism must also, therefore, find a way to avoid treating fascism in isolation, cut off from its environment and its accomplices. Fascism in power is a compound, a powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national-socialist and radical Right ingredients, bonded together by common enemies and common passions for a regenerated, energized, and purified nation at whatever cost to free institutions and the rule of law. The precise proportions of the mixture are the result of processes: choices, alliances, compromises, rivalries. Fascism in action looks much more like a network of relationships than a fixed essence.²

Conflicting Interpretations

Now that we have watched fascism in action through its entire cycle, we are better prepared to evaluate the many interpretations proposed over the years. The “first takes” I noted in chapter 1—thugs in power and agents of capitalism³—have never lost their grip. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht even managed to combine them in his Chicago gangster Arturo Ui, who gets power through a protection racket for vegetable sellers.⁴

Both “first takes,” however, had serious flaws. If fascism and its aggressions are simply the evil actions of hoodlums reaching power in an era of moral decline, we have no explanation for why this happened at one place and time rather than another, or how these events might relate to an earlier history. It was difficult for classical liberals like Croce and Meinecke to perceive that part of fascism’s opportunity lay in the dessication and narrowness of liberalism itself, or that some frightened liberals had helped it into power. Their version leaves us with chance and the individual exploits of thugs as explanations.

Considering fascism simply as a capitalist tool sends us astray in two respects. The narrow and rigid formula that became orthodox in Stalin’s Third International⁵ denied fascism’s autonomous roots and authentic popular appeal.⁶ Even worse, it ignored human choice by making fascism the inevitable outcome of the ineluctable crisis of capitalist overproduction. Closer empirical work showed, to the contrary, that real capitalists, even when they rejected democracy, mostly preferred authoritarians to fascists.⁷ Whenever fascists reached power, to be sure, capitalists mostly accommodated with them as the best available nonsocialist solution. We had occasion to see that even the giant German chemical combine

I. G. Farben, whose ascent to the rank of the biggest company in Europe had been based on global trade, found ways to adapt to rearmament-driven autarky, and prospered mightily again.⁸ The relations of accommodation, foot dragging, and mutual advantage that bound the business community to fascist regimes turn out to be another complicated matter that varied over time. That there was some mutual advantage is beyond doubt. Capitalism and fascism made practicable bedfellows (though not inevitable ones, nor always comfortable ones).

As for the opposite interpretation that portrays the business community as fascism's victim,⁹ it takes far too seriously the middle-level frictions endemic to this relationship, along with businessmen's postwar efforts at self-exculpation. Here, too, we need a subtler model of explanation that allows for interplays of conflict and accommodation.

Quite early the "first takes" were joined by other interpretations. The obviously obsessive character of some fascists cried out for psychoanalysis. Mussolini seemed only too ordinary, with his vain posturing, his notorious womanizing, his addiction to detailed work, his skill at short-term maneuvering, and his eventual loss of the big picture. Hitler was another matter. Were his *Teppichfresser* ("carpet eater") scenes calculated bluffs or signs of madness?¹⁰ His secretiveness, hypochondria, narcissism, vengefulness, and megalomania were counterbalanced by a quick, retentive mind, a capacity to charm if he wanted to, and outstanding tactical cleverness. All efforts to psychoanalyze him¹¹ have suffered from the inaccessibility of their subject, as well as from the unanswered question of why, if some fascist leaders were insane, their publics adored them and they functioned effectively for so long. In any event, the latest and most authoritative biographer of Hitler concludes rightly that one must dwell less on the *Führer's* eccentricities than on the role the German public projected upon him and which he succeeded in filling until nearly the end.¹²

Perhaps it is the fascist publics rather than their leaders who need psychoanalysis. Already in 1933 the dissident Freudian Wilhelm Reich concluded that the violent masculine fraternity characteristic of early fascism was the product of sexual repression.¹³ This theory is easy to undermine, however, by observing that sexual repression was probably no more severe in Germany and in Italy than in, say, Great Britain during the generation in which the fascist leaders and their followers came of age.¹⁴ This objection also applies to other psycho-historical explanations for fascism.

Explanations of fascism as psychotic appear in another form in films that cater to a prurient fascination with supposed fascist sexual pervers-

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sion.¹⁵ These box-office successes make it even harder to grasp that fascist regimes functioned because great numbers of ordinary people accommodated to them in the ordinary business of daily life.¹⁶

The sociologist Talcott Parsons suggested already in 1942 that fascism emerged out of uprooting and tensions produced by uneven economic and social development—an early form of the fascism/modernization problem. In countries that industrialized rapidly and late, like Germany and Italy, Parsons argued, class tensions were particularly acute and compromise was blocked by surviving pre-industrial elites.¹⁷ This interpretation had the merit of treating fascism as a system and as the product of a history, as did the Marxist interpretation, without Marxism's determinism, narrowness, and shaky empirical foundations.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch, a Marxist made unorthodox by an interest in the irrational and in religion, arrived in his own way at another theory of “noncontemporaneity” (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*). Contemplating Nazi success with archaic and violent “red dreams” of blood, soil, and a pre-capitalist paradise, utterly incompatible with what he considered the party's true fealty to big business, he understood that vestigial values flourished long after they had lost any correspondence with economic and social reality. “Not all people exist in the same Now.” Orthodox Marxists, he thought, had missed the boat by “cordoning off the soul.”¹⁸ Uneven development continues to arouse interest as an ingredient of prefascist crises,¹⁹ but the case for it is weakened by France's notoriously “dual” economy, in which a powerful peasant/artisan sector coexisted with modern industry without fascism reaching power except under Nazi occupation.²⁰

Another sociological approach alleged that urban and industrial leveling since the late nineteenth century had produced an atomized mass society in which purveyors of simple hatreds found a ready audience unrestrained by tradition or community.²¹ Hannah Arendt worked within this paradigm in her analysis of how the new rootless mob, detached from all social, intellectual, or moral moorings and inebriated by anti-Semitic and imperialistic passions, made possible the emergence of an unprecedented form of limitless mass-based plebiscitary dictatorship.²²

The best empirical work on the way fascism took root, however, gives little support to this approach. Weimar German society, for example, was richly structured, and Nazism recruited by mobilizing entire organizations through carefully targeted appeals to specific interests.²³ As the saying went, “two Germans, a discussion; three Germans, a club.” The fact

that German clubs for everything from choral singing to funeral insurance were already segregated into separate socialist and nonsocialist networks facilitated the exclusion of the socialists and the Nazi takeover of the rest when Germany became deeply polarized in the early 1930s.²⁴

An influential current considers fascism a developmental dictatorship, established for the purpose of hastening industrial growth through forced savings and a regimented workforce. Proponents of this interpretation have looked primarily at the Italian case.²⁵ It could well be argued that Germany, too, although already an industrial giant, needed urgently to discipline its people for the immense task of rebuilding after the defeat of 1918. This interpretation goes seriously wrong, however, in supposing that fascism pursued any rational economic goal whatever. Hitler meant to bend the economy to serve political ends. Even in Mussolini's case, prestige counted far more than economic rationality when he overvalued the lira in 1926, and when, after 1935, he chose the risks of expansionist war over sustained economic development. If Italian Fascism was meant to be a developmental dictatorship, it failed at it. Though the Italian economy grew in the 1920s under Mussolini, it grew substantially faster before 1914 and after 1945.²⁶ In one genuinely aberrant form, the developmental dictatorship theory of fascism serves to label as "fascist" all sorts of Third World autocracies without an iota of popular mobilization and without the prior existence of a democracy in trouble.²⁷

It has also been tempting to interpret fascism by its social composition. The sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset systematized in 1963 the widely held view that fascism is an expression of lower-middle-class resentments. In Lipset's formulation, fascism is an "extremism of the center" based on the rage of once-independent shopkeepers, artisans, peasants, and other members of the "old" middle classes now squeezed between better-organized industrial workers and big businessmen, and losing out in rapid social and economic change.²⁸ Recent empirical research, however, casts doubt on the localization of fascist recruitment in any one social stratum. It shows the multiplicity of fascism's social supports and its relative success in creating a composite movement that cut across all classes.²⁹ His eyes glued on the early stages, Lipset also overlooked the establishment's role in the fascist acquisition and exercise of power.

The notorious instability of fascist membership further undermines any simple interpretation by social composition. Party rosters altered rapidly before power, as successive waves of heterogeneous malcontents

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responded to the parties' changing fortunes and messages.³⁰ After power, membership "bandwagoned" to include just about everyone who wanted to enjoy the fruits of fascist success³¹ — not to forget the problem of where to situate the many fascist recruits who were young, unemployed, socially uprooted, or otherwise "between classes."³² No coherent social explanation of fascism can be constructed out of such fluctuating material.

A multitude of observers sees fascism as a subspecies of totalitarianism. Giovanni Amendola, a leader of the parliamentary opposition to Fascism and one of its most notable victims (he died in 1926 following a beating by Fascist thugs), coined the adjective *totalitaria* in a May 1923 article denouncing Fascist efforts to monopolize public office. Other opponents of Mussolini quickly broadened the term into a general condemnation of Fascist aspirations to total control. As sometimes happens with epithets, Mussolini took this one up and gloried in it.³³

Considering how often Mussolini boasted of his *totalitarismo*, it is ironic that some major postwar theorists of totalitarianism exclude Italian Fascism from their typology.³⁴ One must concede that Mussolini's regime, eager to "normalize" its rapport with a society in which the family, the Church, the monarchy, and the village notable still had entrenched power, fell far short of total control. Even so, Fascism regimented Italians more firmly than any regime before or since.³⁵ But no regime, not even Hitler's or Stalin's, ever managed to pinch off every last parcel of privacy and personal or group autonomy.³⁶

The 1950s theorists of totalitarianism believed that Hitler and Stalin fit their model most closely. Both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, according to the criteria developed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski in 1956, were governed by single parties employing an official ideology, terroristic police control, and a monopoly of power over all means of communication, armed force, and economic organization.³⁷ During the rebellious 1960s, a new generation accused the totalitarianism theorists of serving cold war ends, by transferring the patriotic anti-Nazism of World War II to the new communist enemy.³⁸

While its scholarly use declined thereafter for a time in the United States, the totalitarian paradigm remained important to those European scholars, particularly in West Germany, who wanted to affirm, against the Marxists, that what had really mattered about Hitler was his destruction of liberty, not his relation to capitalism.³⁹ At the end of the twentieth century, after the demise of the Soviet Union had prompted renewed scrutiny of its sins and of many Western intellectuals' blindness to them, the totali-

tarian model came back into vogue, along with its corollary that Nazism and communism represented a common evil.⁴⁰

Thus the totalitarian interpretation of fascism has been as hotly politicized as the Marxist one.⁴¹ Even so, it should be debated on its merits and not with respect to its enlistment by one camp or another. It purports to explain Nazism (and Stalinism) by focusing on their aspiration to total control, and on the tools by which they sought to exert it. No doubt Nazi and communist mechanisms of control had many similarities. Awaiting the knock in the night and rotting in a camp must have felt very similar to both systems' sufferers (Jews and Gypsies apart, of course).⁴² In both regimes, law was subordinated to "higher" imperatives of race or class. Focusing upon the techniques of control, however, obscures important differences.

However similar it might feel, from the victim's point of view, to die of typhus, malnutrition, exhaustion, or harsh questioning in one of Stalin's Siberian camps or in, say, Hitler's Mauthausen stone quarry, Stalin's regime differed profoundly from Hitler's in social dynamics as well as in aims. Stalin ruled a civil society that had been radically simplified by the Bolshevik Revolution, and thus he did not have to concern himself with autonomous concentrations of inherited social and economic power. Hitler (totally unlike Stalin) came into power with the assent and even assistance of traditional elites, and governed in strained but effective association with them. In Nazi Germany the party jostled with the state bureaucracy, industrial and agricultural proprietors, churches, and other traditional elites for power. Totalitarian theory is blind to this fundamental character of the Nazi governing system, and thus tends to fortify the elites' postwar claim that Hitler tried to destroy them (as indeed the final cataclysm of the lost war began to do).

Hitlerism and Stalinism also differed profoundly in their declared ultimate aims—for one, the supremacy of a master race; for the other, universal equality—though Stalin's egregious and barbarous perversions tended to make his regime converge with Hitler's in its murderous instruments. Focusing upon central authority, the totalitarian paradigm overlooks the murderous frenzy that boiled from below in fascism.

Treating Hitler and Stalin together as totalitarians often becomes an exercise in comparative moral judgment: Which monster was more monstrous?⁴³ Were Stalin's two forms of mass murder—reckless economic experiment and the paranoid persecution of "enemies"—the

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moral equivalent of Hitler's attempt to purify his nation by exterminating the medically and racially impure?⁴⁴

The strongest case for equating Stalin's terror with Hitler's is the famine of 1931, which, it is alleged, targeted Ukrainians and thus amounted to genocide. This famine, though indeed the result of criminal negligence, affected Russians with equal severity.⁴⁵ Opponents would note fundamental differences. Stalin killed in grossly arbitrary fashion whomever his paranoid mind decided were "class enemies" (a condition one can change), in a way that struck mostly at adult males among the dictator's fellow citizens. Hitler, by contrast, killed "race enemies," an irremediable condition that condemns even newborns. He wanted to liquidate entire peoples, including their tombstones and their cultural artifacts. This book acknowledges the repugnance of both terrors, but condemns even more strongly Nazi biologically racist extermination because it admitted no salvation even for women and children.⁴⁶

A more pragmatic criticism of the totalitarian model complains that its image of an efficient all-encompassing mechanism prevents us from grasping the disorderly character of Hitler's rule, which reduced government to personal fiefdoms unable to discuss policy options and choose among them rationally.⁴⁷ Mussolini, assuming multiple cabinet ministries himself but unable to impose orderly priorities on any of them, did no better. The totalitarian image may evoke powerfully the dreams and aspirations of dictators, but it actually obstructs any examination of the vital matter of how effectively fascist regimes managed to embed themselves in the half-compliant, half-recalcitrant societies they ruled.

The older concept of political religion—it dates to the French Revolution—was quickly applied to fascism, as well as to communism, and not only by their enemies.⁴⁸ At the level of broad analogy, it points usefully to the way fascism, like religion, mobilized believers around sacred rites and words, excited them to self-denying fervor, and preached a revealed truth that admitted no dissidence. Scrutinized more carefully,⁴⁹ the concept of political religion turns out to encompass several quite different issues. The most straightforward one is the many elements that fascism borrows from the religious culture of the society it seeks to penetrate. With its focus upon mechanisms, this subject tells us more about taking root and about exercising power than about achieving power.

A second element of the political religion concept is the more chal-

lenging functional argument that fascism fills a void opened by the secularization of society and morality.⁵⁰ If this approach is meant to help explain why fascism succeeded in some Christian countries rather than others, it requires us to believe that the “ontological crisis” was more severe in Germany and Italy than in France and Britain in the early twentieth century—a case that might be difficult to make.

It also suggests that established religions and fascism are irreconcilable opponents—a third element of the political religion concept. In Germany and Italy, however, the two had a complex relationship that did not exclude cooperation. They joined forces against communism while competing for the same terrain. While this situation led to a *modus vivendi* in the Italian case, it generated a “destructive mimesis of Christianity”⁵¹ in the Nazi case. At the opposite extreme, fascism could produce something resembling an unauthorized Christian auxiliary in the Romanian, Croat, and Belgian cases and an Islamic auxiliary, if we accept as fascist some extra-European movements I considered in chapter 7.

The fascist leaders themselves, as we observed in chapter 1, called their movements ideologies, and many interpreters have taken them at their word. It is commonplace to see fascism defined by extracting common threads from party programs, by analogy with the other “isms.” This works better for the other “isms,” founded in the era of educated elite politics. I tried earlier to suggest that fascism bears a different relation to ideas than the nineteenth-century “isms,” and that intellectual positions (not basic mobilizing passions like racial hatreds, of course) were likely to be dropped or added according to the tactical needs of the moment. All the “isms” did this, but only fascism had such contempt for reason and intellect that it never even bothered to justify its shifts.⁵²

Nowadays cultural studies are replacing intellectual history as the strategy of choice for elucidating the attraction and efficacy of fascism.⁵³ As early as World War II, the American ethnographer Gregory Bateson employed “the sort of analysis that an anthropologist applies to the mythology of a primitive or modern people” to pick apart the themes and techniques of the Nazi propaganda film *Hitler Youth Quex*. Bateson believed that “this film . . . must tell us about the psychology of its makers, and tell us perhaps more than they intended to tell.”⁵⁴ Since the 1970s and increasingly today, decoding the culture of fascist societies by an anthropological or ethnographical gaze has become a fashionable intellectual strategy. It shows vividly how fascist movements and regimes presented

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themselves. The main problem with cultural studies of fascist imagery and rhetoric is their frequent failure to ask how influential these were. This rule has important exceptions, such as Luisa Passerini's study of the popular memory of Fascism in the Italian city of Turin in the 1980s.⁵⁵ Generally, however, the study of fascist culture by itself does not explain how fascists acquired the power to control culture, nor how deeply into popular consciousness fascist culture penetrated in competition with either preexisting religious, familial, or community values or with commercialized popular culture.

In any event, culture differs so profoundly from one national setting and one period to another that it is hard to find any cultural program common to all fascist movements, or to all the stages. The *macho* restoration of a threatened patriarchy, for example, comes close to being a universal fascist value, but Mussolini advocated female suffrage in his first program, and Hitler did not mention gender issues in his 25 Points. Since Mussolini favored the avant-garde, at least until the 1930s, while Hitler preferred conventional postcard art, it is unlikely that we can identify a single immutable fascist style or aesthetic that would apply to all the national cases.⁵⁶

A less-often-mentioned problem with cultural studies of fascism arises from their failure to make comparisons. Comparison is essential, and it reveals that some countries with a powerful cultural preparation (France, for example) became fascist only by conquest (if then). The effect of fascist propaganda also needs to be compared with that of commercial media, which was clearly greater even in fascist countries. Hollywood, Beale Street, and Madison Avenue probably gave more trouble to fascist dreams of cultural control than the whole liberal and socialist opposition put together.⁵⁷ The handwriting was on the wall for those dreams one day in 1937 when Mussolini's oldest son, Vittorio, gave his youngest brother Romano a picture of Duke Ellington, and started the boy down the road to a postwar career as a rather good jazz pianist.⁵⁸

All in all, no one interpretation of fascism seems to have carried the day decisively to everyone's satisfaction.

Boundaries

We cannot understand fascism well without tracing clear boundaries with superficially similar forms. The task is difficult because fascism was widely

imitated, especially during the 1930s, when Germany and Italy seemed more successful than the democracies. Borrowings from fascism turned up as far away from their European roots as Bolivia and China.⁵⁹

The simplest boundary separates fascism from classical tyranny. The exiled moderate socialist Gaetano Salvemini, having abandoned his chair as professor of history at Florence and moved to London and then to Harvard because he could not bear to teach without saying what he thought, pointed to the essential difference when he wondered why “Italians felt the need to get rid of their free institutions” at the very moment when they should be taking pride in them, and when they “should step forward toward a more advanced democracy.”⁶⁰ Fascism, for Salvemini, meant setting aside democracy and due process in public life, to the acclamation of the street. It is a phenomenon of failed democracies, and its novelty was that, instead of simply clamping silence upon citizens as classical tyranny had done since earliest times, it found a technique to channel their passions into the construction of an obligatory domestic unity around projects of internal cleansing and external expansion. We should not use the term *fascism* for predemocratic dictatorships. However cruel, they lack the manipulated mass enthusiasm and demonic energy of fascism, along with the mission of “giving up free institutions” for the sake of national unity, purity, and force.

Fascism is easily confused with military dictatorship, for both fascist leaders militarized their societies and placed wars of conquest at the very center of their aims. Guns⁶¹ and uniforms were a fetish with them. In the 1930s, fascist militias were all uniformed (as, indeed, were socialist militias in that colored-shirt era),⁶² and fascists have always wanted to turn society into an armed fraternity. Hitler, newly installed as chancellor of Germany, made the mistake of dressing in a civilian trenchcoat and hat when he went to Venice on June 14, 1934, for his first meeting with the more senior Mussolini, “resplendent with uniform and dagger.”⁶³ Thereafter the *Führer* appeared in uniform on public occasions—sometimes a brown party jacket, later often an unadorned military tunic. But while all fascisms are always militaristic, military dictatorships are not always fascist. Most military dictators have acted simply as tyrants, without daring to unleash the popular excitement of fascism. Military dictatorships are far commoner than fascisms, for they have no necessary connection to a failed democracy and have existed since there have been warriors.

The boundary separating fascism from authoritarianism is more subtle, but it is one of the most essential for understanding.⁶⁴ I have already

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used the term, or the similar one of traditional dictatorship, in discussing Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Vichy France. The fascist-authoritarian boundary was particularly hard to trace in the 1930s, when regimes that were, in reality, authoritarian donned some of the decor of that period's successful fascisms. Although authoritarian regimes often trample civil liberties and are capable of murderous brutality, they do not share fascism's urge to reduce the private sphere to nothing. They accept ill-defined though real domains of private space for traditional "intermediary bodies" like local notables, economic cartels and associations, officer corps, families, and churches. These, rather than an official single party, are the main agencies of social control in authoritarian regimes. Authoritarians would rather leave the population demobilized and passive, while fascists want to engage and excite the public.⁶⁵ Authoritarians want a strong but limited state. They hesitate to intervene in the economy, as fascism does readily, or to embark on programs of social welfare. They cling to the status quo rather than proclaim a new way.⁶⁶

General Francisco Franco, for example, who led the Spanish army in revolt against the Spanish republic in July 1936 and became the dictator of Spain in 1939, clearly borrowed some aspects of rule from his ally Mussolini. He called himself *Caudillo* (leader) and made the fascist Falange the only party. During World War II and after, the Allies treated Franco as a partner of the Axis. That impression was fortified by the bloodiness of the Franquist repression, which may have killed as many as two hundred thousand people between 1939 and 1945, and by the regime's efforts to close down cultural and economic contact with the outside world.⁶⁷ In April 1945 Spanish officials attended a memorial mass for Hitler. A month later, however, the *Caudillo* explained to his followers that "it was necessary to lower some of the [Falange's] sails."⁶⁸

Thereafter Franco's Spain,⁶⁹ always more Catholic than fascist, built its authority upon traditional pillars such as the Church, big landowners, and the army, essentially charging them instead of the state or the ever-weaker Falange with social control. Franco's state intervened little in the economy, and made little effort to regulate the daily life of people as long as they were passive.

The Estado Novo of Portugal⁷⁰ differed from fascism even more profoundly than Franco's Spain. Salazar was, in effect, the dictator of Portugal, but he preferred a passive public and a limited state where social power remained in the hands of the Church, the army, and the big landowners. In July 1934, Dr. Salazar actually suppressed an indigenous

Portuguese fascist movement, National Syndicalism, accusing it of “exaltation of youth, the cult of force through so-called direct action, the principle of the superiority of state political power in social life, the propensity for organizing the masses behind a political leader”—not a bad description of fascism.⁷¹

Vichy France, the regime that replaced the parliamentary republic after the defeat of 1940,⁷² was certainly not fascist at the outset, for it had neither a single party nor parallel institutions. A governing system in which France’s traditional select civil service ran the state, with enhanced roles for the military, the Church, technical experts, and established economic and social elites, falls clearly into the authoritarian category. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 brought the French Communist Party into open resistance and obliged the German occupation to become much harsher in order to support total war, Vichy and its policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany faced mounting opposition. Parallel organizations appeared in the fight against the Resistance: the *Milice* or supplementary police, “special sections” of the law courts for expeditious trials of dissidents, the Police for Jewish Affairs. But even though, as we saw in chapter 4, a few Paris fascists were given important posts at Vichy in the last days of the regime, they served as individuals rather than as chiefs of an official single party.

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The moment has come to give fascism a usable short handle, even though we know that it encompasses its subject no better than a snapshot encompasses a person.

Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.

To be sure, political behavior requires choices, and choices—as my critics hasten to point out—bring us back to underlying ideas. Hitler and Mussolini, scornful of the “materialism” of socialism and liberalism, insisted on the centrality of ideas to their movements. Not so, retorted

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many antifascists who refuse to grant them such dignity. “National Socialism’s ideology is constantly shifting,” Franz Neumann observed. “It has certain magical beliefs—leadership adoration, supremacy of the master race—but [it] is not laid down in a series of categorical and dogmatic pronouncements.”⁷³ On this point, this book is drawn toward Neumann’s position, and I examined at some length in chapter 1 the peculiar relationship of fascism to its ideology—simultaneously proclaimed as central, yet amended or violated as expedient.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, fascists knew what they wanted. One cannot banish ideas from the study of fascism, but one can situate them accurately among all the factors that influence this complex phenomenon. One can steer between two extremes: fascism consisted neither of the uncomplicated application of its program, nor of freewheeling opportunism.

I believe that the ideas that underlie fascist actions are best deduced from those actions, for some of them remain unstated and implicit in fascist public language. Many of them belong more to the realm of visceral feelings than to the realm of reasoned propositions. In chapter 2 I called them “mobilizing passions”:

- a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;
- the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether individual or universal, and the subordination of the individual to it;
- the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment that justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against its enemies, both internal and external;
- dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effects of individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences;
- the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary;
- the need for authority by natural chiefs (always male), culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s historical destiny;
- the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason;
- the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success;

- the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group's prowess within a Darwinian struggle.

Fascism according to this definition, as well as behavior in keeping with these feelings, is still visible today. Fascism exists at the level of Stage One within all democratic countries—not excluding the United States. “Giving up free institutions,” especially the freedoms of unpopular groups, is recurrently attractive to citizens of Western democracies, including some Americans. We know from tracing its path that fascism does not require a spectacular “march” on some capital to take root; seemingly anodyne decisions to tolerate lawless treatment of national “enemies” is enough. Something very close to classical fascism has reached Stage Two in a few deeply troubled societies. Its further progress is not inevitable, however. Further fascist advances toward power depend in part upon the severity of a crisis, but also very largely upon human choices, especially the choices of those holding economic, social, and political power. Determining the appropriate responses to fascist gains is not easy, since its cycle is not likely to repeat itself blindly. We stand a much better chance of responding wisely, however, if we understand how fascism succeeded in the past.

85. Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, pp. 273–83, concludes that while the charismatic bond between Long and Coughlin and their publics recalled fascism, their aims—individual liberty from plutocrats more than the triumph of a national *volk*—were quite different. The classic T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), pp. 760–62, dismisses the fascist charges.

86. Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The “New Right” and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

87. For the importance of guns in the macho symbolism of both Mussolini and Hitler, see chapter 8, note 61.

88. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Blacklash,” *The New Yorker*, May 17, 1993, p. 44.

89. Payne, *History*, pp. 16, 490, 516.

90. The Iraqi dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, considered by some to “come closer than any other dictator since 1945” to reproducing the Third Reich (Payne, *History*, pp. 516–17), was based on the secular Ba’ath Party and tried to crush Shi’ite fundamentalism. Samir al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), portrays the pair of huge arms, created from casts of Saddam’s own arms, holding swords to form triumphal arches over a Baghdad avenue. He does not use the word *fascism*.

91. Quotations from interview with General Effi Eitam, representative of the National Religious Party and minister without portfolio in the government of Ariel Sharon, *Le Monde*, Paris, 7–8 April 2002.

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1. For example, Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Left nor Right: Fascist Ideology in France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 270.

2. Wolfgang Schieder characterizes the early Fascist Party as “a loose bundle of person-oriented power groups who scuffle for power,” in “Der Strukturwandel der faschistischen Partei italiens in der phase der Herrschaftsstabilisierung,” in Schieder, ed., *Der Faschismus als soziale Bewegung* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 1976), p. 71.

3. See chapter 1, pp. 7–8.

4. Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui* (London: Methuen, 2002, orig. 1941).

5. See chapter 1, p. 8.

6. A few thoughtful Marxists avoided such dogmatism, among them the Italians Antonio Gramsci, with his reflections on the conditions and limits of Fascist cultural hegemony, and Palmiro Togliatti, *Lectures on Fascism* (New York: International Publishers, 1976) (orig. pub. 1935), who recognized authentic popular appeal on pp. 5–7, 120, though both made fascism more class-specific than most contemporary commentators would. Among Germans there was the philosopher Ernst Bloch (p. 209). After 1968, younger Western Marxists were critical of the Stalinist line. E.g., Nikos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: Verso, 1979) (orig. pub. in France in 1970).

7. See chapter 3, pp. 66–67; chapter 4, p. 100; and chapter 5, pp. 145–46.

8. See chapter 5, p. 146.
9. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 238, say that Nazi Germany “ceases to be capitalist” when fear replaces confidence. The “fundamental incompatibility” between capitalism and fascism (Alan Milward, quoted approvingly by Payne, *A History of Fascism*, p. 190) might perhaps apply to the final apocalyptic paroxysm of Nazism, but fits poorly the way fascist regimes functioned in more normal times.
10. Ernst von Weizsäcker, the senior official of the German Foreign Office, recalled Hitler treating British ambassador Neville Henderson to a furious tirade on August 23, 1939, only to slap his thigh and laugh as soon as the door closed behind the ambassador: “Chamberlain won’t survive that conversation. His cabinet will fall this evening.” Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams, 1952), p. 484. Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 281, agrees that such scenes were “often contrived.” Richard Nixon is said to have wanted the North Vietnamese to think he was crazy.
11. See examples in the bibliographical essay, p. 223.
12. Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, p. xxvi and *passim*.
13. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, ed. Mary Higgins and Chester M. Raphael (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978) (orig. pub. in 1933).
14. See the bibliographical essay, p. 226, for examples.
15. For example, Luchino Visconti, “The Damned.” For Pasolini, see David Forgacs, “Days of Sodom: The Fascist-Perversion Equation in Films of the 1960s and 1970s,” in R. J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, eds., *Italian Fascism: History, Memory, and Representation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), pp. 195–215. In a somewhat different register, Saul Friedländer assailed the treatment of Nazi brutality as spectacle in *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper, 1984).
16. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), probes the astonishing capacity of doctors involved in the selection process at Auschwitz to isolate their normal family lives from their gruesome daytime duties.
17. Talcott Parsons, “Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany,” in Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, rev. ed. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954), pp. 104–23 (orig. pub. 1942). In general, see Stephen P. Turner, *Sociology Responds to Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1992).
18. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephan Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), part II, “Non-Contemporaneity and Intoxication,” pp. 37–185 (quotations from pp. 53, 57, 97).
19. The theory of uneven development and survival of pre-industrial elites was powerfully restated by Jürgen Kocha, “Ursachen des Nationalsozialismus,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (Beilage zur Wochenzeitung *Das Parlament*) 21 (June 1980), pp. 3–15. See the reply by Geoff Eley, “What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Traditions or a Crisis of the Capitalist State?” *Politics and History* 12 (1983), pp. 53–82.
20. See the discussion in chapter 3, pp. 68–73.
21. The classic statement is William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*

(Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959). A precursor was Peter Drucker, in *The End of Economic Man: A Study of the New Totalitarianism* (London: John Day, 1939), p. 53: “Society ceases to be a community of individuals bound together by a common purpose and becomes a chaotic hubbub of purposeless isolated monads.” This approach has been convincingly refuted by Bernt Hagtvet, “The Theory of Mass Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic: A Re-Examination,” in Stein U. Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Petter Myklebust, eds., *Who Were the Fascists: Social Roots of European Fascism* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), pp. 66–117.

22. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), esp. pp. 305–40 on “the masses” and “the mob.”

23. Horst Gies shows how the Nazis successfully penetrated and used existing agrarian organizations in “The NSDAP and Agrarian Organizations in the Final Phase of the Weimar Republic,” in Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., *Nazism and the Third Reich* (New York: Quadrangle, 1972), pp. 45–88. Particularly relevant here are the studies by Rudy Koshar, cited in the bibliographical essay, p. 225, of how the Nazis took over a rich fabric of “apolitical” associations in German towns.

24. William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single Town, 1922–1945*, rev. ed. (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), p. 17. Allen is particularly revealing about the parallel worlds of socialist and nonsocialist organizations and how the Nazis exploited that polarity. See pp. 15ff, 55, 298.

25. See chapter 1, note 49.

26. Jon S. Cohen, “Was Italian Fascism a Developmental Dictatorship?” *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 41:1 (February 1988), pp. 95–113. Rolf Petri, *Von der Autarkie zum Wirtschaftswunder: Wirtschaftspolitik und industrieller Wandel in Italien, 1935–1963* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2001), agrees that the Fascist war economy was a “disaster” but finds it impossible to tell whether Italian emergence as an industrial society in the 1960s was impeded or hastened by the Fascist autarky stage.

27. For example, Anthony J. Joes, *Fascism in the Contemporary World: Ideology, Evolution, and Resurgence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978); A. James Gregor, *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

28. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), chap. 5, “Fascism—Left, Right, and Center.” Arno Mayer, “The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem,” *Journal of Modern History* 75:3 (October 1975), pp. 409–36, takes class seriously but examines this category critically.

29. For statistical work on the German case, now quite sophisticated, see the bibliographic essay, pp. 227–28. The much shakier Italian data are studied by Jens Petersen, “Ellettorato e base sociale del fascismo negli anni venti,” *Studi storici* 3 (1975), pp. 627–69. William Brustein, “The ‘Red Menace’ and the Rise of Italian Fascism,” *American Sociological Review* 56 (October 1991), pp. 652–64, applies rational choice theory to the election of 1921 and finds that Fascist voters chose that party not solely out of fear of socialism but because they preferred the Fascists’ defense of private property.

30. Hans Mommsen, in “Zur Verschränkung traditioneller und faschistischer Führungsgruppen in Deutschland beim Übergang von der Bewegung zur Systemphase,” in Mommsen, *Der Nationalsozialismus und die Deutsche Gesellschaft: Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Lutz Niethammer and Bernd Weisbrod (Reinbeck bei

Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991), p. 47, claims that before September 1930 only about 40 percent of party members were relatively permanent.

31. Philippe C. Schmitter contrasts movements that “vacuum up” discontent from a wide variety of sources with regimes that attract “bandwagoners” in his penetrating article “The Social Origins, Economic Bases, and Political Imperatives of Authoritarian Rule in Portugal,” in Stein U. Larsen et al., *Who Were the Fascists*, p. 437.

32. Mathilde Jamin, *Zwischen den Klassen: Zur Sozialstruktur der SA-Führerschaft* (Wuppertal: P. Hammer, 1984); Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, pp. 238, 255; Christoph Schmidt, “Zu den motiven ‘alter Kämpfer’ in der NSDAP,” in Detlev Peukert and Jürgen Reulecke, eds., *Die Reihe fast geschlossen: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alltags unterm Nationalsozialismus* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 1981).

33. Jens Petersen has explored the term’s origins thoroughly in several works, most recently “Die Geschichte des Totalitarismusbegriffs in Italien,” in Hans Meier, ed., *‘Totalitarismus’ und ‘Politische Religionen’: Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), pp. 15–36. In English see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 14–16.

34. E.g., Arendt, *Origins*, p. 257–59, 308.

35. Dante L. Germino, *The Italian Fascist Party in Power: A Study in Totalitarian Rule* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), and Emilio Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo: Il partito e lo stato nel regime fascista* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1995), make the strongest claims for the authentically totalitarian nature of Fascist rule in Italy.

36. Edward N. Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler’s Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). For an approach to the Soviet Union that refuses to reduce everything to impulses from above, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and *Stalin’s Peasants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

37. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship*, p. 22.

38. Benjamin R. Barber, “The Conceptual Foundations of Totalitarianism,” in Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis, and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

39. Karl Dietrich Bracher, for example, preferred the totalitarian to the fascist concept because the latter, he thought, obscured the difference between dictatorial and democratic political systems, which, for Marxists, were just alternate forms of “bourgeois hegemony.” See Bracher, *Zeitgeschichtliche Kontroversen: Um Faschismus, Totalitarismus, Demokratie* (Munich: R. Piper, 1976), chaps. 1 and 2, *Schlüsselwörter in der Geschichte: Mit einer Betrachtung zum Totalitarismusproblem* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1978), pp. 33ff, *Zeit der Ideologien: Eine Geschichte politischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1982), pp. 122ff, 155ff. A West German example of the other side is Reinhard Kühnl, *Formen bürgerlicher Herrschaft* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1971).

40. It informs Michael Burleigh’s brilliant indictment of Nazi viciousness, *The*

Third Reich (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 331, dismisses fascism as a category.

41. Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, traces the entire debate lucidly.

42. Margareta Buber-Neumann experienced both, and wrote a classic memoir about it: *Under Two Dictators* (New York: Doubleday, 1949). We refer here, of course, to concentration camps like Dachau rather than to extermination camps like Auschwitz.

43. Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism*, trans. from the French by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 15, argues that Stalin was responsible for four times as many deaths as Hitler, though it denies that it seeks to establish a “hierarchy of cruelty” based on a “macabre comparative system.”

44. In addition to Jews, candidates for elimination included Slavs, Gypsies, the insane or chronically ill, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Homosexuals are often included in this list, but although the Nazi regime enforced Article 175 of the German penal code vigorously and jailed thousands of homosexuals, it did not execute them systematically. Hitler himself, though he justified his murder of Ernst Röhm in June 1934 as an action against homosexuality, had, at earlier times, declined to censure Röhm’s notorious lifestyle. Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, 348.

45. Even *The Black Book*, p. 168, reviews with skepticism the genocide charge brought by some Ukrainian historians.

46. Alan Bullock refuses to equate the two kinds of killing in *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: HarperCollins, 1991): “Nowhere was there a [Soviet] counterpart to the Holocaust in which mass murder became not an instrument but an end in itself” (p. 974).

47. Hans Mommsen criticizes totalitarianism theory in these terms, with acerbity in “The Concept of Totalitarianism versus the Comparative Theory of Fascism,” in E. A. Menze, ed., *Totalitarianism Reconsidered* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1981), pp. 146–66, and more serenely in “Leistungen und Grenzen des Totalitarismus-Theorems: Die Anwendung auf die nationalsozialistische Diktatur,” in Meier, ed., “*Totalitarismus*” und “*Politische Religionen*,” pp. 291–300. The change reflects the relative calming of German academic conflicts after the extreme tensions of the 1970s.

48. Hitler himself referred as early as 1926 to “our religion.” Philippe Burrin, “Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept,” *History and Memory* 9:1 and 2 (Fall 1997), p. 333.

49. Burrin, “Political Religion,” provides by far the most complete and thoughtful analysis. Emilio Gentile, “Fascism as a Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 190 (25), pp. 321–52, and Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, pp. 5, 9–14, and 252–55, defend the concept (Burleigh cites many works on this subject on p. 816, n. 22). See also Meier, “*Totalitarismus*.”

50. Nazism, writes Burleigh, *The Third Reich* (p. 255), “sank a drillhead into a deep-seated reservoir of existential anxiety, offering salvation from an ontological crisis.”

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51. Burrin, “Political Religion,” p. 338.
52. See chapter 1, pp. 15–19.
53. Roger Griffin, “The Reclamation of Fascist Culture,” *European History Quarterly* 31:4 (October 2001), pp. 609–20, sees it as the “key” to understanding fascism. For some of the many studies of fascist culture see the bibliographical essay, p. 236.
54. Bateson quoted in Eric Rentschler, “Emotional Engineering: Hitler Youth Quex,” in *Modernism/Modernity* 2:3 (September 1995), p. 31.
55. Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
56. Susan Sontag made an interesting effort to extract the elements of a fascist aesthetic from the work of Leni Riefenstahl: “Fascinating Fascism,” in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), but that mixture of virile heroism, ruralism, and anti-intellectualism may apply best to Germany.
57. R. J. B. Bosworth is one of the rare authors to make this point. See *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 159, 162, 179.
58. Murray Kempton, “Mussolini in Concert,” *New York Review of Books* 30:6 (April 24, 1983), pp. 33–35. For Nazism’s failure to eradicate jazz from Germany, see Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
59. For Bolivia, see chapter 7, note 69. For China, see Payne, *History*, pp. 337–38; Marcia H. Chang, *The Chinese Blue Shirt Society: Fascism and Developmental Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), and Fred Wakeman, Jr., “A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism,” *China Quarterly* 150 (June 1997), pp. 395–430. Wakeman does not consider the Blueshirts authentically fascist. I thank him for advice on this point.
60. Gaetano Salvemini’s Harvard lectures, published in *Opera de Gaetano Salvemini*, vol. VI, *Scritti sul fascismo*, vol. I, p. 343.
61. For guns as a “love object” of Fascist militants, see Emilio Gentile, *Storia del partito*, p. 498. “As long as I have a pen in my hand and a revolver in my pocket,” said Mussolini after breaking with the Socialists in 1914, “I don’t fear anyone.” In the early 1920s, he kept a revolver and a couple of grenades on his desk. By the 1930s the revolver had migrated into a desk drawer of his grand office in the Palazzo Venezia (Pierre Milza, *Mussolini* [Paris: Fayard, 1999], pp. 183, 232, 252, 442). Hitler preferred dog-whips (Kershaw, *Hitler*, vol. I, p. 188), but he told his lunch guests on April 23, 1942, that “The bearing of arms contributes to a man’s pride and bearing.” (*Hitler’s Table Talk*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953], p. 435.)
62. Colored shirts come from the Left, probably from Garibaldi’s “Thousand,” the red-shirted volunteers who conquered Sicily and Naples for a united, liberal Italy in 1860. The title *Duce* also came from Garibaldi.
63. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, rev. ed. (London, Harper & Row 1962), p. 297.
64. Juan J. Linz has made the classic analysis of authoritarianism as a distinct

form of rule: “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,” in Erik Allardt and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Mass Politics: Studies in Political Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1970), pp. 251–83, “From Falange to Movimiento-Organización: The Spanish Single Party and the Franco Regime, 1936–1968,” in Samuel P. Huntington and Clement Moore, eds., *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Societies: The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), and “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes,” in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), vol. III, esp. pp. 264–350.

65. The authoritarian-fascist border is blurred here, for, in practice, neither gets its wish. Faced with aroused publics, authoritarians as well as fascists may attempt to create a Durkheimian “mechanical solidarity.” See Paul Brooker, *The Faces of Fraternality: Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). Even fascists may achieve no more than a “superficial” and “fragile” consent. Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 20, and chap. 8, “The Limits of Consent.” The most meticulous study of German public opinion under Nazism, Martin Broszat’s “Bavaria program,” concluded that it was discontented but atomized, fragmented, and passive. See Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Dissent in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 110, 277, 286, 389.

66. See the interesting comparison by Javier Tusell Gomez, “Franchismo et fascismo,” in Angelo Del Boca et al., *Il regime fascista*, pp. 57–92.

67. Michael Richards, *A Time of Silence: Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco’s Spain, 1936–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), shows how economic and cultural autarky fit with internal repression. The estimated number of dead appears on p. 30. Paul Preston, *Franco* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), makes the fascism charge in another way, emphasizing Franco’s close relations with the Axis until at least 1942.

68. The indispensable study of the Falange is Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism in Spain, 1923–1977* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) (quotation on p. 401).

69. See chapter 6, pp. 149–50.

70. See chapter 6, p. 150.

71. Quoted in Stanley Payne, *History*, p. 315. Gregory J. Kasza, “Fascism from Above? Japan’s *Kakushin* Right in Comparative Perspective,” in Stein Ugelvik Larsen, *Fascism Outside Europe* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 2001), pp. 223–32, working from the Japanese example, proposes a distinct category of one-party regimes that suppress fascist movements while adopting some fascist devices, such as youth movements and corporatist economies, thus falling between traditional conservatism and fascism. His examples are Japan, Portugal, Poland in 1939, Estonia, and Lithuania. One might add Vargas’s Brazil.

72. See above pp. 112–13.

73. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 39. Skepticism about fascist ideology is not limited to the Left. Cf. the famous denunciation by the former Nazi president of the Danzig senate, Hermann Rauschning, *Revolution of*

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Nihilism (New York: Alliance/Longman's Green, 1939). See also Hannah Arendt's remarks quoted in chapter 2, p. 38.

74. See chapter 1, pp. 15–19.

Bibliographical Essay

1. Renzo De Felice, *Bibliografia orientativa del fascismo* (Rome: Bonacci, 1991). About two thousand of the entries refer to generic fascism and the history of World War II.

2. The final volume, still incomplete, was published posthumously by his students.

3. R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 1998), p. 7.

4. Raoul Girardet, sympathetic himself to the far Right but scrupulously self-effacing in his elegant work, used “impregnation” in almost exactly the same way with impunity in his pioneering “Notes sur l'esprit d'un fascisme français,” *Revue française de science politique* 5 (July-September 1955), pp. 529–46.

UNDER REVIEW

WHY WE CAN'T STOP ARGUING ABOUT WHETHER TRUMP IS A FASCIST

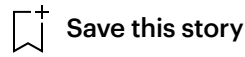
*In a new book, "Did It Happen Here?," scholars debate what the F-word
conceals and what it reveals.*

By Andrew Marantz

March 27, 2024



Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux



At this point, we know everything there is to know about Donald Trump. His diehard admirers—not all seventy-four million people who voted for him in the 2020 election but his immovable base, maybe thirty per cent of Republicans—admire him still, now more than ever. Is he a racist? Sure, by many definitions. Is he a sexual abuser? Yes, according to at least one jury. Is he corrupt? Cartoonishly so. Would he like to be a “dictator”? Perhaps, if you take him at his word, although, on second thought, his word is famously unreliable. Yet he is his party’s presumptive nominee, without even having to sweat for it, and, if you believe most polls, he is favored to win in November.

Among the nonadmirers, the debate continues. Not about whether all of this is no-good, very bad news but about how, exactly, Trump and Trumpism are bad—how to put the man and the movement in historical context. “He is an authoritarian personality devoid of any commitment to the rule of law, political tradition, or even ideology,” the emeritus Columbia historian Robert O. Paxton wrote, in 2017, in *Harper’s Magazine*. “Are we therefore looking at a fascist? Not really.” Paxton, one of the preëminent scholars of twentieth-century European Fascism, acknowledged that many elements of Trump’s rhetorical style and political program were “fascist staples.” Still, the dissimilarities, in his view, outweighed the similarities.

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But history keeps happening, and historians' minds can change. Here's Paxton again, a few days after January 6, 2021, contra himself. The headline, in *Newsweek*, was "I've Hesitated to Call Donald Trump a Fascist. Until Now." "Trump's incitement of the invasion of the Capitol," Paxton wrote, "crosses a red line. The label now seems not just acceptable but necessary."

The latter piece is collected in the new volume "Did It Happen Here?: Perspectives on Fascism and America" (Norton), which brings together a lot of short essays like Paxton's: scholars and journalists writing in an urgent (sometimes breathless) persuasive mode. It would be a stretch to call it light reading, but it does go quickly, in part because it's full of such reversals. Spend a few pages with Sarah Churchwell, an Americanist at the University of London, and it's easy to entertain the possibility that the shoe fits ("It matters very little whether Trump is a fascist in his heart if he's fascist in his actions"). Flip to Richard J. Evans, an emeritus Cambridge historian, and suddenly the clown shoes look several sizes too big ("American democracy is damaged, but it survives"). The collection starts with what it calls "classic texts" (Umberto Eco's "Ur-Fascism," Hannah Arendt's "The Seeds of a Fascist International") before turning to contemporary concerns (climate change, social media) and reconsiderations of the classics, with every side citing Arendt for its purpose. "Arendt cautioned against prematurely crying totalitarianism in a U.S. context," the writer Rebecca Panovka notes, quite reasonably, although, of course, Arendt also wouldn't have wanted us to sound the alarm too late. The Princeton philosopher Jan-Werner Müller is not convinced (at least so far) that Trumpism is a species of fascism—he prefers to call it "far-right populism"—yet he concedes the simple point that "it would be foolish to start reflecting on fascism only when it is fully fledged." Gaze at the whole picture for long enough, and you can will yourself to see the line drawing as either a rabbit or a duck; trying to see both perspectives at once is a good way to expand your dystopic imagination, or to give yourself a headache. Did it happen here? To misquote another democratically elected, democratically impeached President, it depends on what the definition of "it" is.

Does it matter? Or is this just semantic hairsplitting—a coterie of blinkered progressives trying to police one another's language? Many of the writers in the collection are deceased, European, or ensconced at elite universities in Connecticut or Massachusetts—not exactly key swing demographics in the 2024 election. There are no Never Trump Republicans represented in the book, much less full-throated Trump apologists. Yet the purpose of a collection like this is not representation but analytical precision. Historical context is indispensable, but Trumpism is not mere history. It shapes our present, and it could dominate our future. *Something* happened here. If we can't be clear-eyed about what it was, then how can we prepare for what might happen here—maybe again, maybe anew—in a few months?

If Fascism is a distinctly historical phenomenon, something that took place only in Western Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, then it can't happen here, by definition. (As the old Internet joke goes, it's only true fascism if it comes from Italy; otherwise, it's just sparkling authoritarianism.) As soon as you allow for a broader definition, though, the debate becomes more subjective. In the nineteen-teens, Benito Mussolini adopted the fasces, a bundle of sticks with an axe at its center, as a symbol of military might and unity of purpose. Even in its original form, fascism represented a bunch of conflicting impulses bound together—"a beehive of contradictions," in Eco's words. (Some have claimed that Trumpism is too devoid of consistent ideological content to be mapped onto any previous movement; others have countered that its fluidity makes it *more* like fascism, not less.) The sociologist Dylan Riley, in the *New Left Review*, writes that "the interwar fascist regimes were a product of inter-imperial warfare and capitalist crisis, combined with a revolutionary threat from the left." He argues that the structural conditions in the contemporary U.S.—no military draft, a "smaller, weaker" left, and a relatively stable two-party system—do not justify the comparison. "Preparing for war," Evans points out, "defined fascist theory and

praxis.” Trump does enjoy a military parade, but, Evans continues, “there is no indication . . . that he has been consumed by a desire for foreign conquest.”

Paxton, in his canonical 2004 book, “The Anatomy of Fascism,” attempts to define fascism in one overbrimming sentence: “a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline . . . in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues . . . internal cleansing and external expansion.” A nation in decline, which only one man can make great again? Trumpism clearly checks that box. Most of the others are more ambiguous. Death camps and *Lebensraum*—that’s internal cleansing and external expansion, of the prototypical fascist variety. But Manifest Destiny and forever wars? Is that fascism, or just America? When Trump told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by,” was he trying to collaborate with committed nationalist militants, or just mouthing off? Was Trump’s brutal approach to the southern border a step toward “internal cleansing,” or a more callous version of politics as usual?

Had the fascism question stayed on this plane, it could have been a passionate but relatively straightforward debate about what is or isn’t true. Instead, like everything else, it passed through the negative-polarization filters of American politics, becoming both an ontological question and a sociological signifier. Once mainstream Democrats like Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden started talking about Trump as a unique threat to American democracy—presumably both because they believed it and because they believed it to be electorally advantageous—the question of whether Trumpism represented a democratic emergency got all mixed up with the question of whether you wanted to be the kind of person who agrees with mainstream Democrats. And so, even before Trump took office, and long before he started publicly musing that he might not leave, the debate became an overdetermined meta-debate, and it’s been stuck at a what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about level of abstraction ever since. Where you stand on it is sometimes

understood to be a proxy for where you stand on a range of other questions—to begin with, the question of what got us into this mess in the first place. For people who fundamentally think of Trump as an aberration, a bronzed blimp that floated in on an ill wind and will one day drift away, the main thing to avoid may be normalizing Trumpism, allowing it to become the new status quo. For those who are more disposed to see Trump's policies as continuous with, say, those of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the greater danger, as the Yale historian Samuel Moyn puts it, would be to normalize “the status quo ante Trump,” distracting us “from how we made Trump over decades.” There are good-faith and bad-faith versions of this debate. (If you want to participate in the worst version, there's an app for that, now called X.) Yet even the most high-minded forms still include a surprising amount of straw-manning and motivated reasoning. In truth, not even the most stolid skeptic maintains that Trump is a perfectly normal politician, and not even the most histrionic #Resistance foot soldier believes that Trump is literally Orange Hitler.

“The way forward is to put the fascism debate to rest,” Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, a historian at Wesleyan and the editor of “Did It Happen Here?,” writes in his introduction—a bit like welcoming guests to a dinner party by promising them that it will be over soon. If the goal of the book is to settle the fascism debate once and for all, then it's not clear that it succeeds. Humanities scholars are people who can answer any yes-or-no question with a protracted “maybe,” and the collection is an engaging exercise in getting there. But academics have their leanings, and Steinmetz-Jenkins angles his volume so that it inclines away from alarmism and toward what can be called deflationism. The heart of the book is a section titled “On Fascism Analogies,” and the heart of that section is a 2020 essay by Moyn, “The Trouble with Comparisons.” (If the book were a dinner party, Moyn would be its middler, with the rest of the table nodding to or recoiling from his provocations.) “The only real question is whether, when the stirrings of fascism are redefined *as the thing itself*, there is an analytical cost,” he writes. He thinks that there is a cost, and that it's not worth bearing, because “abnormalizing Trump

disguises that he is quintessentially American, the expression of enduring and indigenous syndromes.”

Moyn writes that, in the early days of the Trump Administration, “I confess I found the *reductio ad Hitlerum* annoying.” It’s not much of a confession. In August, 2017, Moyn co-authored a *Times* op-ed under the headline “Trump Isn’t a Threat to Our Democracy. Hysteria Is,” writing, “The sky is not falling and no lights are flashing red.” He was building on “Tyrannophobia,” a seminal paper by two law professors who contend that overreaction to the threat of tyranny in the United States has done more damage than tyranny itself. Moyn’s piece happened to be published hours before hundreds of white supremacists held a violent rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This coincidence may not have debunked his argument—after all, the neo-Nazis did not topple the American republic—but it did not endear him to many *Times* commenters. Yet needling the *Times*’ commentariat, from the left, appears to be one of Moyn’s favorite pastimes. (In December, he did it again, arguing that the Supreme Court should unanimously overturn the Colorado decision barring Trump from the state’s Presidential primary ballot, which is, of course, what the Court eventually did. “I’m still miffed they closed comments at 3,900,” he tweeted. “Just kidding.”)

Moyn is an erudite and prolific writer (and blurber—he is to the scholarly monograph what the author Gary Shteyngart once was to the debut novel). In addition to being an intellectual historian, he is a law professor, and he has a way of reframing the questions presented so that the opposing counsel’s theory of the case seems slightly ridiculous. Watch him dispatch an essay by Tamsin Shaw, a political theorist at N.Y.U., in a single sentence: “William Barr is the reincarnation of Carl Schmitt, the evil genius of National Socialism, Tamsin Shaw wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, except that our attorney general has done his worst by letting some louts out of their lies and pursuing causes with roots deep in American history.” But “reincarnation” and “evil genius” are Moyn’s caricatures, not Shaw’s. She does not say that Barr and other Trump officials were

plotting a Thousand-Year Reich. Rather, she argues that they adapted Schmitt's "primally political distinction between friend and enemy" to their present-day purposes, extending "the protection of the rule of law" to their friends but not their enemies. Nor is she blind to Trumpism's roots in mainstream American history; she identifies a Schmittian strain on the American right at least as far back as the nineteen-nineties, when Barr, as George H. W. Bush's Attorney General, helped clean up the mess from the Iran-Contra scandal. Shaw could have emphasized even deeper roots. According to "Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law," by James Q. Whitman, the Nazis got some of their worst ideas from us; "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents," by Isabel Wilkerson, dilates on the resemblances between the Nuremberg laws and anti-miscegenation laws in Texas and North Carolina; "Prequel: An American Fight Against Fascism," by Rachel Maddow, quotes Hitler telling an American reporter, in 1931, "I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration." In "The Anatomy of Fascism," Paxton suggests that the Ku Klux Klan in the post-Civil War South could be thought of as a proto-fascist movement; he was echoing a claim laid out years earlier, and more forcefully, by Amiri Baraka. A forthcoming book about conservatism in the early nineties, John Ganz's lively and kaleidoscopic "When the Clock Broke," also presents fascist sympathies as quintessentially American. (In a chapter on Sam Francis, a proponent of "respectable racism" and an influential Washington *Times* columnist, Francis is quoted, in the late eighties, referring to himself as " 'a fascist,' pronounced the Italian way.") When American politics is compared to European fascism, the standard deflationist impulse is to reduce the analogy to a reductio, lest American readers use it as an excuse to treat Trump as exotic and let the rest of us off the hook. But perhaps the comparison should have the opposite effect, urging us toward deeper self-reflection by linking what is most shameful in our past to what is most galling in our present. "Interpretation is just what historians do," the Harvard professor Peter Gordon argues in another essay. "Those who say that we must forgo analogies . . . are not defending history; they are condemning it to helpless silence."

One classic text not anthologized in “Did It Happen Here?” is “What Is Fascism?,” the oft-quoted essay published by George Orwell in 1944. “As used, the word ‘Fascism’ is almost entirely meaningless,” he wrote. “I have heard it applied to farmers, shopkeepers, Social Credit . . . astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else.” (This is as true today as it was then. I have seen the F-word applied to Russia, Ukraine, Hamas, Israel, the Catholic Church, academia, and London’s Metropolitan Police—and that was just from one recent perusal of X, and not a very thorough one.) Orwell later pointed out that many such words, including “*democracy, socialism, freedom,*” had been similarly distorted. (Bernie Sanders, Barack Obama, and Mitch McConnell have all been maligned as socialists; Sweden calls itself a democracy, but so does North Korea.) Yet Orwell was clear that semantic confusion was no excuse for quietism: “Since you don’t know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this.”

Right now, if I had to take a binary position on whether Trump is a fascist, I would lean toward no. Even though his repertoire is still full of what Paxton called “fascist staples”—arguably, the staples grow only more deranged and draconian over time—I worry that the epithet, as used, often obscures more than it illuminates. But there are plenty of disconcerting labels, such as “competitive authoritarianism,” that don’t seem like a stretch to me. Besides, history keeps happening, and I’d be willing to change my mind. By another binary metric, deflationism versus alarmism, I suppose this would make me relatively open to alarmism, or at least not reflexively averse to it. We live in a weird and contingent world, and I’d prefer to have a wide enough dystopic imagination to be ready for whatever comes next.

Trump’s bluster is famously unreliable, but, since 2021, he has called for the “termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution”; he has referred to his political opponents as “vermin”; and he seems prepared to wield the levers of state more ruthlessly in a second term (including,

among many other proposals, potentially using the Insurrection Act and other emergency powers to militarize the border). Doesn't some of this sound a little fascist, at least aspirationally? Alarmists often come off as wild-eyed and silly; deflationists, in contrast, get to seem coolheaded and dignified. But "Tyrannophobia," the law paper Moyn cites, notes that "rational actors should update their risk estimates in the light of experience." When does a commitment to deflationism risk turning into denialism?

To be clear, Moyn and other skeptics are making a keen and necessary intervention. There certainly are people—in the media, in Congress, on the speaking circuit—who find it convenient to "scapegoat Trump, as if he were an alien in our midst," as Moyn puts it. Anyone who watches too much cable news might get the impression that we're always moments away from a brave knight who will finally lance the bronze blimp (James Comey! Robert Mueller! Impeachment! Second impeachment! The Supreme Court! Fani Willis!), at which point the skies will clear, the seraphim will sing, and we'll go back to the good old days of Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill. But Moyn is skeptical, both that the MAGA saga will have a tidy deus-ex-machina ending and that our political culture was so healthy before Trump came along. Earlier this month, at a rally in Ohio, Trump, during a riff on import tariffs, used the word "bloodbath," prompting a flurry of frantic headlines. This, I have to confess, brought out my inner deflationist. It was an admittedly macabre way to talk about trade policy, but I cannot, no matter how many times I rewatch the clip, interpret it as a threat of a guerrilla uprising. Yet it seems to me that Trump's flagrant glorifications of vigilante violence are frequent enough that there is no need to puff up new ones. That very rally began with him scowling and saluting sharply while listening to a recording of the national anthem as performed by the J6 Prison Choir, a group of January 6th rioters locked up for insurrection-related charges. Trump called them "hostages" and "unbelievable patriots," and implied that he might pardon them on "the first day we get into office." Now *that's* collaboration with committed nationalist militants!

If we're going to be intellectually honest about the ways in which the fascism analogy doesn't hold, then we should also be willing to acknowledge the ways in which it does. A few times last year, Trump repeated the talking point that immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country." How can we promise to stop making comparisons to Hitler when the leading candidate for President keeps paraphrasing Hitler? (Trump, for his part, claimed to "know nothing about Hitler," although, according to a piece in *Vanity Fair*, he once kept the Führer's collected speeches next to his bed.) In August, 2022, when Biden referred to the Trumpian "philosophy" as "semi-fascist," he got a lot of pushback for the term, but I've come to think that "semi-fascist" might be as apt a description as any. Qualify it how you want: semi-fascist, proto-fascist, would-be authoritarian, "fasc-ish." Moyn uses the phrase "the stirrings of fascism"—I'm fine with that one, too. What I like about all these qualifications is that they accurately connote instability. To refer to a proto-something, or to the stirrings of something, is to imply that the phenomenon has not reached its final form; it might resolve on its own, or it might get worse. In short, Moyn is right that there is an analytical cost when "the stirrings of fascism are redefined *as the thing itself*," but he is wrong that this is the only real question. Another question is whether there is an analytical cost when the stirrings of fascism are redefined as nothing at all, or at least as nothing to worry about.

In 2021, the podcast "Know Your Enemy" conducted its own tour of the fascism meta-debate. One of the co-hosts, Sam Adler-Bell, said that he found a lot of the discourse frustrating because "so much of it is a sublimated conflict over present-day political strategy." If Trump was just putting a more vulgar face on Republican politics as usual, some pundits argued, then maybe the best way to oppose him was to take a risk on a leftist insurgent such as Bernie Sanders; if Trump truly represented a unique democratic emergency, though, then maybe the left needed to pipe down, join the popular front, and support the establishment Democrat. Second-order considerations like this obscured the first-order question of what was actually happening. They also flattened long-standing policy debates

into more immediate markers of factional affiliation. The anti-Trump tent is a big one, and the F-word came to be seen as a dividing line running down the middle. In some circles, emphasizing the discrepancies between Trumpism and fascism became a way to stay safely on the left side of the tent; to emphasize too many similarities was to risk drifting toward the other side, where Bill Kristol and James Comey eat canapés and reminisce about the war on terror. (Madeleine Albright, who served as a Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, published a book titled “Fascism: A Warning,” in 2018; several of the writers in “Did It Happen Here?” invoke Albright or her book, brandishing its very existence as their own kind of *reductio*, although they never say a word about what’s in it.) At its most petty and oversimplified, the fascism question became yet another way for the left to play one of its oldest parlor games: progressives accusing other progressives of being useful idiots for centrism. Or, as Adler-Bell later put it in a semi-ironic tweet, “Just clarifying that I’m worried about fascism in the cool leftist way not the cringey resistance lib way. 😎👊”

It does no one any good to distort the facts in service of a hypothetical strategy. You can oppose COVID lockdowns without ignoring the transmission rates; you can abhor the Patriot Act without denying the existence of terrorism. Similarly, you can oppose Biden, or the forever wars, or the liberal establishment, and still think that Trumpism is a democratic emergency. Instead of calibrating your observations to some tactical calculus, you can describe what you see in plain terms, even if, horror of horrors, you risk finding yourself in agreement with Madeleine Albright. One irony of the fascism meta-debate is that, although it became an article of faith that playing up Sanders’s electability required downplaying the severity of the Trumpian menace, the opposite may have been true all along. If part of Trump’s appeal lay in what Jan-Werner Müller calls “right-wing populism,” then maybe the most pragmatic way to counter that appeal was to nominate a left-wing populist.

Müller's definition of far-right populism is idiosyncratic, but, of all the diagnoses on offer, I think it's the best fit. "Right-wing authoritarian populists ultimately reduce all political questions to questions of belonging," he writes. In his view, far-right populism "is not so much about antielitism, but about *antipluralism*: populists hold that they, *and only they*, represent what they often call 'the real people.'" He sees "family resemblances," therefore, not between Trump and the textbook fascists but between Trump and the current "examples of a new authoritarian quasi-normal": Viktor Orbán, in Hungary; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in Turkey; Narendra Modi, in India. In the end, Müller's diagnosis that Trump is not a fascist doesn't come as much of a relief; he delivers the news like a doctor telling you that you don't have cancer, but that what you do have might be terminal. "None of this should be taken as a reason to be less concerned," he writes. "Far-right populism really does destroy democracy."

Analogies are not equivalences. Trump isn't Hitler. Trump isn't Mussolini, or Silvio Berlusconi, or Giorgia Meloni. Trump isn't even Trump—he was pro-choice before he was pro-life, he was for the Iraq War before he was against it, and he can't even make up his mind about whether to ban TikTok. To know when we ought to panic, it's helpful to know what to look out for, and Müller's framework gives us a clearer idea of the shape contemporary authoritarianism is likely to take. Don't think armband insignias, tanks in the streets, and martial law; think lawfare, sophisticated cronyism, surveillance, and counter-majoritarian restrictions on reproductive rights and voting access and academic freedom. "Today's threats to democracy don't parallel 20th-century experiences," Müller wrote in the *London Review of Books*, in 2019. "One of the reasons we are not witnessing the second coming of a particular anti-democratic past is simply that today's anti-democrats have learned from history too."

If "Did It Happen Here?" gives Moyn the middle seat, then Corey Robin, his fellow-skeptic, gets the last word. In an article titled "Trump and the Trapped Country," originally published in *The New Yorker*, Robin, a political scientist at

Brooklyn College, presents Trump not as a strongman but as a weak, thwarted President whose tenure, like much of the Obama Presidency, was characterized by “a paralysis of political agency . . . an era in which the call of the voters is answered by the palsy of our institutions.” Robin makes a compelling case: it’s indisputable that much of Trump’s agenda was blocked by a dysfunctional Congress and a counter-majoritarian Supreme Court. The same could be said of the Biden Administration. Partisan deadlock is one structural impediment to a sudden authoritarian breakthrough; so are the anti-democratic filibuster, the sclerotic two-party system, and the lamentably high bar to amending the Constitution. There are many reasons it may not happen here. An even simpler reason is that Trump is a vain, distractible dilettante. Still, even if he isn’t capable of bending the system to his will, his party, now largely reshaped in his image, seems increasingly willing to do it for him. The deflationists play a crucial role, but it would be a mistake to slide from deflationism to quietism. Since we don’t have an exemplary democracy, how can we worry about losing it? One need not swallow such absurdities as this.

The sky has not fallen, but, for years, many people have warned that lights are flashing red, or at least yellow. The Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt made a best-selling case for concern in their book “How Democracies Die,” in 2018, and they updated their argument last year, in “Tyranny of the Minority.” Ari Berman, a voting-rights journalist, builds on this literature in “Minority Rule,” which will be published in April. Viktor Orbán, maybe the most adroit of the far-right populists, didn’t kill Hungarian democracy the first time he became Prime Minister, in 1998. He lost the first time he ran for reelection, in 2002, and, although he never fully accepted the legitimacy of that election, he remained in the opposition until 2010. Then he came back, entrenched his power, and worked with his party to chip away at the state—patiently, clinically, not like a twentieth-century fascist but like a twenty-first-century authoritarian. “Orbán doesn’t need to kill us, he doesn’t need to jail us,” Tibor Dessewffy, a Hungarian sociologist, told me, in 2022. “He just keeps narrowing the space of public life. It’s what’s happening in your country, too—the frog isn’t boiling yet, but the water is

getting hotter.” I was there to report on CPAC, the American conservative conference, which was being held in Budapest. This February, CPAC—the main one, in Maryland—denied press credentials to reporters from HuffPost, the *Washington Post*, and other “propagandist” outlets. Earlier this month, Trump invited Orbán to Mar-a-Lago. Orbán posted some highlights on his Instagram: a cover band played a stiff rendition of “Got to Get You Into My Life,” and Trump took the stage to say a few words in his friend’s honor. “There’s nobody that’s better, smarter, or a better leader than Viktor Orbán,” Trump declared. “He said, ‘This is the way it’s going to be,’ and that’s the end of it, right? He’s the boss.” ♦

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