

What Is Fascism in History?

The word *fascism* derives from the Italian word *fascio* and refers to a political group (such as the political group led by Giuseppe Garibaldi during the times of Italian unification). Fascism also refers visually and historically to a Roman imperial symbol of authority. Its birthplace as a modern political movement was northern Italy, the year of its birth was 1919, and its founder was Benito Mussolini. Thus, *fascism* as a term as well as a political movement originated in the Italian peninsula. Its ideological origins, however, predated its name. Because its antidemocratic realities were global and existed under different national names, its effects were both national and transnational. Knowing that fascism was born as a global ideological contestation of the pre-World War I liberal order before its explicit emergence as a movement is central to any understanding of fascism. The ideology of radical nationalism that made it possible was part of a larger intellectual reaction to the Enlightenment,¹ a tradition that was both European and “non-European.” Ideologically, fascism was conceived as a reaction to the progressive revolutions

of the long nineteenth century (from the French revolution of 1789 to the American and Latin American revolutions of 1776 and the 1810s, respectively, to the Paris commune of 1871 and the Cuban War of independence that started in 1895). Fascism represented a counter-revolutionary attack against political and economic equality, tolerance, and freedom.

Rooted in the ideology of the anti-Enlightenment, fascism was not only a reaction against liberal politics and a rejection of democracy. Fascism did not oppose the market economy, for example, and often put forward a corporatist organization intended to promote the accumulation of capital. Equally important, fascism was a philosophy of political action that ascribed absolute value to violence in the political realm. This ascription was boosted by one radical outcome of the Enlightenment: Soviet communism. The rise of Bolshevism in 1917 was both opposed and emulated on a global scale. By presenting themselves as the opposite of communists, fascists took advantage of this widespread rejection and fear of social revolution while also incorporating some of its dimensions.

A new age of total war, rather than the Soviet experiment, is what ultimately provided the context of fascism. In fact, fascist ideology first emerged in the trenches of World War I. As the Italian historian Angelo Ventrone argues, the war provided a “reservoir” for fascist ideology.² This war ideal, and its related notion of the militarization of politics, transcended European borders and circulated in places such as India, Iraq, and Peru. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini openly stated that war constituted their most meaningful personal experiences, and after World War I, these two former soldiers found violence and warfare to be political elements of the first order. When this ideology of violence fused with extreme right-wing nationalism,

imperialism, and non-Marxist antiparliamentarian leftist tendencies of revolutionary syndicalism, fascism as we know it today crystallized.

The moment of fascist crystallization was not exclusively Italian or European. In Argentina, former socialist intellectuals like the poet Leopoldo Lugones soon understood the political implications of this fusion. Fascism permutated in different national contexts. As General Eoin O'Duffy, the leader of the Irish Blueshirts argued, the recent history of Italian fascism had a "striking similarity" to the Irish situation but "This is not to say that Ireland can be rescued only by Fascism, but we would be fools were we to shut our eyes to the fact that behind fascism in Italy, and responsible for its phenomenal success, is the same spirit which is now making the Blueshirt movement the biggest political movement that Ireland has ever known."³ The Argentine fascists admired the Irish Blueshirts, but they saw them as part of their kin, not as models to copy. Sharing the same spirit did not mean imitation; as the Portuguese fascist João Ameal maintained, Italian fascism as it existed in Italy could not be reproduced outside the country. Portuguese fascism could not be a "sterile copy." Fascism was rooted in each nation but was related in transnational revolutionary ways: "It is not the case that it is a reproduction. It is about equivalence. The Italians did their revolution of order. We are starting ours."⁴

Like Lugones and Ameal, the Brazilian fascist Miguel Reale saw fascism as the expression of a universal transnational ideology of the extreme right: "After the Great War, in Brazil as in China, in India as in France, there is no place for a nationalism without socialism. In other words, there is no place for nationalism lacking the elements of profound social revolution." Like their transnational partners, Brazilian fascists believed they represented "a

powerful renewal” of the practices of “individual and collective life.” Reale claimed that “the revolution” was no longer done in the name of a class: “The revolution is the sacred right of the nation, of the totality of its productive forces.” Similarly, Spanish fascists assumed fascist movements existed in countries as far from each other as China, Chile, Japan, Argentina, or Germany because fascism was an agglomeration of right-wing “nationalist” movements. This cluster of fascism was going to “save” each country by constituting “a true new international of civilization against barbarism.” Fascism represented a new foundation for the world, “a civilization of unity, universality and authority.”⁵

At the end of the war, young Adolf Hitler, a disenfranchised war hero, began to give political expression to his basic violent tendencies. And he did it in the new trenches of modern mass politics.⁶ Hitler first adopted, and then shaped, the ideology of a small German party of the extreme right, soon to be called National Socialism. Hitler early on recognized his debt to the thought and practice of Mussolini, but both leaders shared a more extended belief that the world as they knew it was in crisis. Above all Hitler felt illuminated by Mussolini’s road to power. The epochal dimension of the fact that fascism had become a regime cannot be more stressed. As the prominent historian of Nazism Richard Evans argues, “Hitler looked admiringly to Mussolini as an example to follow.”⁷ Hitler and Mussolini, shared fierce anticommunist and antiliberal stances that were widely disseminated among global counter-revolutionaries at the time. This antidemocratic modernism combined modern politics with technological innovation, aesthetic ideas, and a discourse of war.

The modernity of fascism has preoccupied major thinkers over the course of the last century. Whereas Sigmund Freud saw fascism as the return of the repressed—namely, the mythical

reformulation of death and violence as a source of political power—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* presented fascism as modernity's worst outcome.⁸ Although I agree overall with their arguments, they are nonetheless limited to European developments. Grasping the global and transnational dimensions of fascism requires an understanding of its history, first as it is formulated on the national level, and second, as that manifestation of fascism relates to intellectual exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean and beyond.

Like Marxism and liberalism, fascism was a global phenomenon that assumed many national variations and political interpretations. Also like them, fascism never had a closed ideological apparatus. Its ideas changed over time and only now, with the benefit of hindsight, is it possible to conceive of its major ideological patterns. Most fascists perceived fascism as a new political ideology in the making. It was radically opposed to traditional democratic politics, what they disdained as western "electoralism."⁹ Its creator, Benito Mussolini, argued that only decadent and old-fashioned ideologies had a closed body of knowledge. For Mussolini, ideas were useful when they had a practical value, that is, when they confirmed his own confused intuitions about social regeneration and the rebirth of nations, the leading role of men like himself in guiding the people, politics as an art, and more generally his noted antihumanitarianism. In short, for the creator of fascism, ideas were useful when they legitimized short-term political goals.¹⁰

Mussolini was a strategist who believed political needs should determine theoretical formations. Many historians have concluded that this belief made Mussolini a kind of antitheorist and that fascist theory was not important to the movement. For these historians, fascist theory is simply not significant.¹¹ To be

sure, Mussolini at some moments of his career had antitheoretical biases, but all the political needs that shaped Mussolini's strategic view of fascism were informed by a set of unarticulated thoughts and aims. His ideas about power, violence, the internal enemy, and empire, and his own expectation of being the virile, messianic leader of his people, drove Mussolini's political practice over the years. These ideas were abstract enough to inform his political priorities, and practical enough to be considered by transnational fascist politicians, who often wanted to avoid conceptual complications. Antonio Gramsci, an astute antifascist Italian observer and theorist, preferred to stress the "concretism" of Mussolini as a defining characteristic of the fascist leader and, perhaps, of fascist ideology at large.¹² Mussolini's concretism was related to the idea of the primacy of politics over "rigid dogmatic formulas." With some wishful thinking, Mussolini himself argued that "theological" or "metaphysical" discussions were foreign to his movement. Fascism was not dogma but a "special mentality." In typical anti-intellectual terms, Mussolini usually merged his concretism—namely the fascist preference for violent "immediate action"—with a simplistic understanding of reality. Early on, Mussolini posed his "heretic" realism against the "prophecies" of liberalism, socialism, and communism. In other words, Mussolini defended the "reactionary," "aristocratic," and yet "antitraditional" character of fascism by juxtaposing it with the "orgy of the revolution of words."¹³

Fascism was essentially modern. Nevertheless, it was a "reactionary" form of modernism.¹⁴ Acting against emancipation in order to create a new totalitarian modernity, fascism saw itself as a child of the present and even as a "primitive" dimension of the future. Past causes, past theoretical formations, and even past experiences were not as important to Mussolini as present political

“action.” However, present strategies could for him only be manifest acts of a significant whole, a set of meaningful formations that constituted the basis from which political strategies could emerge.

The search for a symbiosis between this common ground from which fascist practices emanated, and various theoretical justifications for these strategies, constituted the most dynamic element of fascist ideology, and also revealed its most obvious limits to full canonization. At the end of the day, the creation of a fascist canonical corpus was an endless task for fascists. They tried to combine various short-term strategies with a long-standing basic preconception of the world. The fascist synthesis was based on this impossible transition from the politics of daily life to dogma. Fascist interpreters across the world had to articulate the often-tense relationship between fascist practice (strategy) and ideal (theory). These ideas about the divine, race, the people, empire, and a mythical past were constantly adapted to the particularities of the very different realities of East and Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. In India and the Middle East, fascist ideas served the purpose of rethinking an authoritarian variant of postcolonialism, whereas in Japan they were used to rethink the modernity of the empire. In Republican, postcolonial Latin America, fascism often presented itself as having continuities with the prerepublican Spanish empire, but also as the primary way of putting forward an authoritarian form of anti-imperialism. In all these places, as elsewhere with fascism, aesthetics were a key dimension of its politics.

Yet fascist theory was not only about aesthetics. In this regard, although it is important to pay attention to antifascist conceptions of fascism, my emphasis does not rely much on Walter Benjamin’s aesthetic notion of fascism. For Benjamin, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political

life.”¹⁵ As historian Robert Paxton argues, Benjamin clearly saw that war was the most extreme aesthetic experience of fascism. The fascist leader wanted to elevate the people into “a higher realm of politics that they would experience sensually.” This substitution of “reasoned debate” with the intimacy of shared sensorial experiences substantially altered contemporary politics.¹⁶ To be sure, fascist aesthetics played a central role in how fascism showed itself to the world, but fascism as a political ideology could not be exclusively encompassed by aesthetics. Fascism needed to balance its static ideal of the perfect world with a deeper articulation of its political ideas that could account for and justify a constantly changing strategy. Ultimately, fascist practice was not related to mundane day-to-day politics, or to aesthetics, but rather was focused on a set of political rituals and spectacles aimed at objectifying fascist theory and grounding it in lived experiences. These practices presented fascism as something that could be seen and involved active participation and contact with others, turning ideas into reality.¹⁷

Fascist theory never became an articulated system of belief. It was always a changing set of tropes and ideas. In this sense, Mussolini considered fascism to be unique “within the forest of ‘isms.’” He personally disliked systems of belief because he considered them to be by definition dysfunctional. If economics or art were elements that the Duce deemed irrelevant to a person of his stature, he considered fascist ideology or fascist theory to be subordinated to practice and thereby capable of worldly adaptation. But behind or above adaptation there was something more grandiose: the definition of fascism as an epochal turning point, a mythical and sacred revolution of the nation, the leader, and the people. Indeed, despite his contempt for theory, Mussolini believed in the existence of “high theory”—the master

narrative that represented immediate intuitions about the world—namely, a belief in the primacy of fascist basic meaning over the external word. Intentional, self-affirmative violent meaning was thereby the hardcore attribute of fascist ideology.

Above all fascism put forward a radical form of political subjectivity. Fascism's inner meaning represented the fascist matrix, its sacred founding dimension. This conception of an unconscious, prerational intuition expressed the supposed purity of the fascist ideal, the "fascist feeling" that kept the fascist universes of people and specific ideas tied together.¹⁸ Tellingly, even as early as 1919, Mussolini had represented the different groups that formed fascism as sharing the same "unique soul." Fascism, he claimed, may have been "distinctive in form but it is fused and confused in substance."¹⁹ To borrow a Saussurean metaphor, fascism was to be understood as a specific code, a language of political interpretation and action that had a changing set of signifiers attached to a less malleable signified. Mussolini called this more rigid aspect of fascism the "fondo commune," or the "common denominator." It was the meaningful nucleus, the core contained within the less coherent changing dicta or set of fascist signifiers. The common denominator was a master cursor, a point of orientation. It was, in short, the fascist core that contained the most basic premises of fascism, what was relatively constant in fascist ideology as opposed to variable forms of fascist expression. The "fondo commune," the fascist primal notion of the world, was more important than its contextual practices or strategic presentations. The latter were the externalized manifestations of fascism in particular contexts, the strategic instantiations of a more stable "substance of fascism." As Mussolini put it in an uncanny moment of full disclosure, "Each of us has his own temperament, each has his own susceptibility, each has his own individual

psychology, but there is a common denominator through which the whole is equalized.”²⁰

For the Duce, this equalized whole, the fascist matrix, was the most basic level, or core, of fascist notions about politics and the world. It was a set of master tropes, distorted values, and feelings about violence; war; the trinity of leader, people, and nation; myth; the sacred; and the abject. For some present-day interpreters, it may be difficult to make sense of the sheer charge of irrationality and instinctual force that fascism embodied, what Antonio Gramsci had earlier presented as a fascist embrace of the “mysterious” coupled with a “psychology of war.”²¹ Although fascists in the past often understood this psychology in mystical or even esoteric terms as being imbued with unsignifiable, or unrepresentable, hidden meaning, its main components can perhaps be defined by historians in the present.

The fascist matrix was constituted by traditional binaries such as “us versus them” or “civilization versus barbarism,” and the people versus its enemies, among others. But the fascist importation of this notion of the other as a total, existential, enemy provided a central dimension to its ideology. Thus, fascism also had central victimizing dimensions, that is, negative drives that represented what it stood against as opposed to what it stood for. My historical working definition of fascism as a global mythical ideology with distinctive national movements stresses the connections between these binaries and fascism’s modern, counter-revolutionary, ultranationalist, antiliberal, and antisocialist features, which took shape in the perfect storm of the interwar years: the dual crises of capitalism and liberalism. In this scenario, the primary aim of fascism was to destroy democracy from within and create a totalitarian dictatorship. Destroying democracy would in turn destroy civil society, political tolerance, and pluralism. The new

legitimacy of the fascist order was rooted in the power of the leader, the people, and the nation. Fascism was formulated on the basis of a modern idea of popular sovereignty, but one in which political representation was eliminated and power was fully delegated to the dictator, who acted in the name of the people.

This dictatorship of the people, with its will to create a new man and a new world order, relied on its dialectical other, the existential enemies, the antipeople. These links among the enemy, the dictatorship, and the people were central to fascists around the globe. Fascism's methods against the enemy were persecution and elimination. As the Argentine fascists put it, "The day of final reckoning is close in the future, we will make disappear all the unworthy for the sake of the Patria."²² In his famous "prophecy" speech of January 1939, Hitler had, just a few months before he himself started World War II, similarly, and equally explicitly, addressed the world as follows:

In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet, and have usually been ridiculed for it. During the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish race which only received my prophecies with laughter when I said that I would one day take over the leadership of the State, and with it that of the whole nation, and that I would then among many other things settle the Jewish problem. Their laughter was uproarious, but I think that for some time now they have been laughing on the other side of their face. Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!²³

For Hitler, sacrifice and violence worked in tandem with believed lies and the imagined actions of the enemy of the

people. The notion of sacrificial violence in the name of the prophetic leader and the people concerned not only the enemy but also the fascist self, as Mussolini often repeated and Hitler personally embodied with his suicide in 1945. Fascist racism and anti-Semitism were the consequences of the continuous search for the ideal public enemy, who was becoming increasingly dehumanized from 1919 onward.²⁴ However, fascism was not made up only of “anti,” or negative, dimensions. The more “positive” elements of a definition of fascism included a messianic “religious conception,”²⁵ which stressed the centrality of a dictatorship embodied in the persona of Mussolini, for whom violence, war, and the accumulation of power were the categorical premises for a desired turning point in national and world history: the fascist empire. In fascist ideology, violence and aggression were considered the best expressions of power, as embodied in the people’s “race” and “normal” masculinity. The clear outcome of this extremely *masculinist* and antifeminist dimension of fascism, was, as historian Richard Evans suggests, “a state in which men would rule and women would be reduced mainly to the functions of childbearing and childrearing.”²⁶

Fascism represented a particular understanding of the state and its monopoly on violence—namely, totalitarianism.²⁷ Whereas the Italian antifascists who coined the term *totalitarianism* in the 1920s meant it to denote a modern form of tyranny, with fascism as a contemporary version of absolutism, Mussolini had a different take on totalitarianism. He appropriated the term, changing it from a negative political adjective to a self-assertive concept, and reformulated it to encompass all of fascist ideological imperatives (violence, war, imperialism, and a particular notion of the abject) with respect to the state, the nation, and the people:

The Fascist State is not a night-watchman, solicitous only of the personal safety of the citizens; nor is it organized exclusively for the purpose of guarantying a certain degree of material prosperity and relatively peaceful conditions of life, a board of directors would do as much . . . The State, as conceived and realised by Fascism, is a spiritual and ethical entity for securing the political, juridical, and economic organization of the nation, an organization which in its origin and growth is a manifestation of the spirit. The State guarantees the internal and external safety of the country, but it also safeguards and transmits the spirit of the people, elaborated down the ages in its language, its customs, its faith. The State is not only the present; it is also the past and above all the future. Transcending the individual's brief spell of life, the State stands for the immanent conscience of the nation. The forms in which it finds expression change, but the need for it remains.²⁸

The state that fascism posited as being above and beyond anything else was not every state but a fascist state personified in the leader of the national people and his ideological imperatives. It was the state that fascism had previously conquered and dominated. This state eliminated the distinction between the public and the private. Moreover, the fascist state swallowed civil society and eventually destroyed it.²⁹ As many antifascists noted at the time, fascism used democracy, and even democratic alliances, in order to destroy democracy.³⁰

The fascist revolution that the state impersonated was supposed to exterminate the bourgeois order once and for all. Fascism advertised itself as the antithesis of gradualism, the “anti-party,” the “anti-Europe,” that would move Europe and the world to the future.

Fascism was essentially revolutionary in that it created a new political order, but it was less revolutionary in its relationship to capitalism. In fact, it never threatened it. Fascists wanted to reform

capitalism in nationalist terms that took social reform away from the left. They put forward a way of ruling society with massive popular support but without seriously questioning “conservative social and economic privileges and political dominance.”³¹

Yet while capitalism remained intact, the way most fascists approached capitalism should not be conflated with liberal or neoliberal methods. In the interwar years, transnational fascism put forward corporatism as an economic and social solution, and in this economic sense, it was not that far from other experiments in capitalistic reform like the New Deal in the United States.³² On the contrary, fascism essentially differed from liberalism politically. In the political sense, fascism was clearly totalitarian.

Like Soviet Russia, fascism eliminated political discussion, tolerance, and plurality. Like “real socialism” it obscured the distinction between the state’s legitimate use of power and the use of unlawful violence. In short, in totalitarianism, the state became a criminal that abhorred enlightened normativity. However, if Stalin was totalitarian in practice, he never rejected the legacy of the Enlightenment from a theoretical point of view. This was, of course, the ethical failure of communist ideology.³³ That Nazis could enjoy listening to Beethoven in the midst of Auschwitz stands in contrast to Lenin’s incapacity to listen to the German composer in the midst of communist terror. Lenin believed that listening to Beethoven would make him softer while he was engaged in the gruesome repression of political opponents. As we are told in the German movie *The Lives of Others* (2006), for Lenin, Beethoven’s music represented reason—namely, the legacy of the Enlightenment. This was a symptom of Lenin’s recognition that one could not listen to reason while acting against it.³⁴

In contrast, for the Nazis, the German composer represented bare beauty and violence. One may recall in this regard, film

director Stanley Kubrick's re-creation of postfascist urban squads leader Alex DeLarge in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).³⁵ De Large shared his musical taste with Nazis such as Hitler, Goebbels, and Mengele. Fascist totalitarianism, unlike Soviet Russia, does not spread fear, violence, and death with the sole objective of silencing real and imagined dissent. In fascism, violence ceases to be exclusively a means to achieve political goals and becomes a political end in itself. It is precisely the primacy of violence in fascism and its absence in populism that, as we will see, presents the starkest contrast between fascists and populists. But first we will examine how historians have interpreted fascism, followed by an analysis of the Holocaust and, more generally, the primacy of violence in the name of the people as key examples of the logic that shaped fascism in history.

FASCISM AND HISTORIANS

As a globalized form of political ideology, like Marxism and liberalism, that found followers throughout the world, fascism has always been an object of global study. But more recently, the resurgence of a binary that traditionally put history in opposition to theory as a field of study appears to be working in tandem with a classic division of labor among historians. According to this situation, many "working" historians test the hypotheses developed by groups of historical theorists, the "generic" interpreters of fascism. As a result, highly theoretical notions arrived at aprioristically now shape national considerations of fascism in history. At the same time, a transnational phenomenon like historical fascism has been displaced, obscured, or simply ignored. What occupies its place is a generic definition that homogenizes what fascism is and does not consider important national

distinctions. Such an understanding of fascism as a generic phenomenon is not new. Since its inception, “Nazi-fascism” was theorized in political and global ways that were easy to understand and useful to combat it. This simplicity helped in its defeat but had the unintended result of obscuring its complex historical nature. These first readings, which were antiliberal, anti-communist, or both, stressed fascism’s surrogate role as a global puppet of capitalism or, alternatively, as a borderless replica of communism. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, new comparative historical studies acknowledged that different fascisms shared common structural features even as they also stressed the particularities of a given national incarnation.³⁶ With these new trends, the centrality of contexts and processes was affirmed, but their transnational effects were lost. Until the 1990s, this was the prevailing tendency among historians, who were mainly working on national cases. Fascism was part of different national histories. Italian historian Renzo De Felice is the most representative example of this approach.

De Felice was a founding historian of fascism studies in Italy. He outlined the idea that fascism was a unitary phenomenon resulting from a dialectical movement among many forces from right and left. A main component of this complex interaction, Mussolini at many times conditioned these forces but at many others he was conditioned by them. Already in 1965, in the introduction to the first volume of his extensive biography of Mussolini, De Felice identified himself with the famous phrase by Angelo Tasca, “per noi definire il fascismo è anzitutto scriverne la storia [for us to define fascism is above all to write its history].” De Felice interpreted it in terms of the need for a new historicization of fascism. He advanced a new historiographical line, in clear opposition to Benedetto Croce and predominant Italian

historiography, that claimed fascists were a parenthesis, a historical aberration, and were not a truly causal outcome of Italian history.³⁷

Telling the history of fascism involved recognizing the difficulties presented by characterizing (or defining) it from theoretical typologies, since, for De Felice, fascism was not a phenomenon made up of immutable, well-defined characteristics but a reality that was in constant transformation. To be sure, De Felice never suggested that the task of generic characterization was impossible. In fact at the same time that he downplayed the need for a cross-national understanding of fascism, he embraced the comparative concept of totalitarianism. In this context, De Felice's narrative adopted a fierce anticommunist stance, which was reinforced by the early Cold War approach to totalitarianism that equated fascism with communism.³⁸ This approach converged with that of such historians as Ernst Nolte, François Furet, Stéphane Courtois, and, more recently, Timothy Snyder in propagating a new historical paradigm that tends to conflate fascist and communist forms of violence and repression. Doing so involves reformulating the theory of totalitarianism in terms that remain close to the slogans of the early Cold War.³⁹ As the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell argues, "The theory that fascism and communism are twins, accomplices and enemies at the same time, and that Nazism was an imitation of Stalinism, an understandable and even natural response to the Bolshevik danger and a simple product of the First World War, is not only a banalization of fascism and Nazism but above all a distortion of the true nature of the European disaster of our century."⁴⁰

Expanding on the works of George Mosse, Stanley Payne, and the German historian Ernst Nolte in the 1970s and 1980s, a new generic trend emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, the

historical study of fascism has consolidated into a distinctly global field of knowledge, one that must be founded by consensus.⁴¹ And yet the consensus approach was not totally accepted by all researchers. According to Payne, criticism of the consensus usually took a nominalist perspective. The historian Gilbert Allardyce stood as the emblematic advocate of this position.⁴² Allardyce saw no use in the term *fascism* and proposed discarding it as a category of historical analysis.⁴³ In contrast, most historians promote the need to understand fascism beyond national borders.

Among the most cogent definitions of fascism is Emilio Gentile's. He argues that fascism was typically organized as a militaristic party that held to a totalitarian conception of state politics, an activist and antitheoretical ideology, and a focus on virility and antihedonistic mythical foundations. A defining feature of fascism was its character as a secular religion, which affirms the primacy of the nation understood as an organic and ethnically homogeneous community. Moreover, this nation was to be hierarchically organized into a corporatist state with a vocation for potency, warmongering, and national expansion.⁴⁴

Similarly, Paxton expanded our knowledge of fascism by providing a theory of its developmental stages, from the creation of fascist movements and their presence in political systems to the fascist seizure and exercise of power. The last stage is the moment when fascism is in power and either goes in the direction of self-destruction through war and radicalization or follows the path of entropy and de-fascistization. Paxton made clear that "Most fascisms stopped short, some slipped back, and sometimes features of several stages remained operative at once. Whereas most modern societies spawned fascist movements in the twentieth century, only a few had fascist regimes. Only in Nazi Germany did a fascist regime approach the outer horizons

of radicalization.” Paxton de-emphasized the centrality of fascist ideology and focused on its practice. Consequently he stressed behavior and function over fascist ideas and rationales. Paxton defined fascism “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.”⁴⁵

Another influential author of current theories of fascism is the German historian Ernst Nolte, who is also famous, or rather infamous, among historians for having generated the *Historiskerstreit*, that is, the debate among West German historians and critical theorists regarding the German character of the Holocaust. Nolte stressed the common genetic nature of fascism and Marxism. This is a position that led him first to minimize fascism as an event that was born not out of right-wing traditions but from Marxism, and second to minimize Nazi extermination policies against the European Jewish population.⁴⁶

Nolte started his treatment of fascism with a definition that became highly influential for later generic historians.⁴⁷ Fascism was primarily a dialectical reaction to liberalism, and, more importantly, to Marxism. The latter is for Nolte the consequential culmination of the former. If fascism as anti-Marxism aims to “exterminate its opponent, it cannot be satisfied with the mere political defeat of a recognizable party: it must expose the ‘spiritual roots’ and include them in its condemnation.” In Nolte’s view, the Nazis, even in their exterminatory drive, took after the Soviets. Stalin thus inspired Hitler. In short, fascism was a

revolutionary reaction against Marxism that aimed to change the world that surrounds it.⁴⁸ Nazism was the synthetic form of fascism, something close to its ultimate realization. Nolte defined Nazism as, “the death throes of the sovereign, martial, inwardly antagonistic group; it was the practical and violent resistance to transcendence.” *Transcendence* is a term that for Nolte relates to the historical, the transhistorical, and even the metaphysical in probing the “hidden structures of fascism.”⁴⁹

Whereas for Nolte, fascism was basically anti-Marxism (in his view a combination of Marx and Nietzsche), Sternhell, an intellectual historian who rejects most generic definitions, is far more suggestive in his approach to fascism. He stresses the anti-liberal nature of fascism, with its proposal for the future, and argues fascism cannot be defined only by what it stood against: liberalism, Marxism, and democracy. Also, he points out, Marxism and liberalism began by challenging the existing ideas and political forces: “Before offering its own vision of the world, Marxism began by opposing liberalism, which a century earlier had risen up against absolutism. The same was true of fascism, which conflicted with liberalism and Marxism and then was able to provide all the elements of an alternative political, moral, and intellectual system.”⁵⁰

In contrast to Nolte and other scholars who take a generic approach, Sternhell studies a cultural and ideological phenomenon, the revolt against the Enlightenment that was synchronically developed with it, and was later reinforced in the aftermath of the French Revolution.⁵¹ Thus, for him, the prehistory of fascism is to be found in the anti-Enlightenment. However, Sternhell suggests that it was much later, at the end of the nineteenth century, that this revolt radicalized itself into a massive political phenomenon, as it was during the Dreyfus affair. But

Sternhell sees these two events as catalysts and not prime movers.⁵² Sternhell argues that an aristocratic rejection of the Enlightenment was translated into truly popular, revolutionary terms by thinkers like Maurice Barrès and other members of the generation of 1890. Barrès and company radicalized the legacies of thinkers like Edmund Burke, J.G. Herder, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernest Renan, and Hippolyte Taine, launching a revolt against “ideological modernity, against the ‘materialism’ of liberalism and Marxism. Thus fascism was a third revolutionary option between liberalism and Marxism that could offer its own vision of the world and create a new political culture.”⁵³

Sternhell sees the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the period before the First World War, as a laboratory of fascist thought.⁵⁴ During this period, the crisis of liberal democracy was a symptom of a broader intellectual crisis critically centered on democratic values. Fascism has two essential components: 1) a brand of antiliberal and antibourgeois tribal nationalism based on social Darwinism and, often, biological determinism; and 2) a radical leftist, antimaterialist revision of Marxism.⁵⁵ Sternhell’s work addresses the origins of fascism in the pre–World War I context. The Great War was important insofar as it created favorable conditions for fascism to become a political movement with a broad mass of constituencies. But Sternhell provocatively proposes that the war was not that important in the genealogy of fascism. For Sternhell, “Anyone who regards fascism as no more than a byproduct of the Great War, a mere bourgeois defensive reaction to the postwar crisis, is unable to understand this major phenomenon of the past century. As such fascism represents a rejection of the political culture prevailing at the beginning of the century. It is difficult to find in the fascism of the interwar period, in Mussolini’s regime as in all the other European

movements, an important idea that had not gradually come to fruition in the quarter century preceding August 1914.⁷⁵⁶

Likewise, Mosse, and later Gentile, has stressed fascism's pre-war origins in radical nationalist ideas of the nation, its history, and the people, as well as in political cultures, rituals, and modern aesthetics. According to Mosse, a political and cultural phenomenon such as fascism cannot easily be categorized within the traditional canons of political theory. For Mosse, this type of phenomena was not constructed as a coherent system that can be understood by means of a rational analysis of philosophical writers. Fascism is for him a preeminent object of cultural history.⁵⁷ Mosse thinks of fascism as a complex phenomenon that in its different national variants introduced itself as a spiritual revolution made up of hierarchical mass movements. In this way, it could appeal to the past for ways of relating it to a national mystic. Linked to *Romanesque* in Italy and to "race" in Germany, and lacking a concrete political or economic program, a specific fascist aesthetics constituted the essence of fascism, which was objectified through its particular mythologies, rites, and symbols and which expressed the general willingness of the movement and the nation.⁵⁸

For Mosse, fascism needed to be analyzed through its own self-understanding. Social and economic factors were important, but they were not as important as its cultural dimensions. Fascism was a civic religion and belief system. It combined extreme nationalism, ideas of regeneration and sacrifice, a mythical mindset, a supreme leader, an expansionist drive, racism and extreme violence, aesthetic ideals of war and masculinity, and revolutionary rites and symbols.⁵⁹

As historian Enzo Traverso argues, "In spite of their differences, Mosse, Sternhell and Gentile converge in their underestimation of a major mark of fascism: anti-communism."⁶⁰ Traverso

is right in emphasizing the anticommunist dimensions of fascism. But why have so many historians occluded this dimension? An important aspect of this oversight is the extent to which this idea has been exaggerated by conservative historians like Ernst Nolte, the most famous champion of the idea of fascism as anticommunism. But if the Sternhell or the Mosse-Gentile approaches have been truly influential for transnational historians of fascism, Nolte's methodology has been the most important for generic historians, who have thus far dominated recent discussions of what fascism is in history. For them, fascism works as an illustration of the theory that it has previously explained. Thus, in most generic approaches, taxonomic explanations tend to replace more empirically based historical inquiries.

FROM THE "GENERIC CONSENSUS"
TO THE TRANSNATIONAL TURN

Generic historians present a European explanation of fascism. When confronted with the non-European fascism of modernizing reactionary traditions, they often resort to tautology. Fascists outside Europe cannot be true fascists because they are not European. This European objection is not apparent in fascist sources, and like other simplistic definitions does not preclude fascism's becoming a diverse reality on European and non-European soils.⁶¹

For these historians, fascism as a generic object of study becomes a subject only when it is "ideal typed."⁶² Examples of this swift and paradigmatic displacement of agency (from how fascist theorists saw themselves to how historical theorists generically defined them) are to be sure quite diverse, and sometimes are even opposed. For Payne, fascism is a radically antagonistic

form of revolutionary ultranationalism having a vitalist philosophy and authoritarian conceptions of leadership, war, violence, and mass mobilization. In contrast, Roger Griffin sees generic fascism as essentially focused on national rebirth, what he suggestively calls the palingenetic myth, as a form of historical, modernist resistance to liberalism.⁶³

Generally, generic historians tend to displace the peculiar intertwining of fascist theory and practice onto the past. Yet this radical connection between action and theory shaped how fascists themselves conceived of the experience of political violence as ideology. Although this connection was not specific to fascism, it was with fascism that it became radicalized in an extremely novel political formation, according to which the primacy of violence was globally explained and practiced through the prism of political myth. I consider this mythical experiential ideology to be one of the most significant aspects of transnational fascism, as it accounts for how and why fascists acted out ideological constructs through extreme forms of violence. Violence became the ultimate form of theory, and the centrality of violence is precisely what these historians tend to situate outside of national and transnational contexts.

Most generic historians of fascism consider their task to be finding the “fascist minimum,” a sort of Holy Grail of fascist historiography.⁶⁴ Ironically, this view coincides with Mussolini’s belief in an essential kernel of fascism that transcends its more national and political connotations. However, generic scholars are not very interested in fascist self-understanding that posits a transnational enemy of the people in politics. They tend to reify important aspects of fascism, such as notions of national rebirth, modernism, and biopolitics, while also omitting the analysis of fascist processes of global circulation, adaptation, and reformulation.

In his important critique of generic historiography, Benjamin Zachariah juxtaposes the “fascist minimum” of generic historians to his proposal for a “fascist repertoire,” which he draws from his own research on Indian fascism: “Perhaps it is easier to acknowledge this important presence if fascism is not seen as a specific European import that comes readymade and relatively clearly formed.” For Zachariah, “The repertoire tends to include an organic and primordial nationalism involving a controlling statism that disciplines the members of the organic nation to act as, for, and in the organic (or *völkisch*) nation that must be purified and preserved. It is in the service of preserving this organic nation that a paramilitarist tendency towards national discipline is invoked. The coherence of the repertoire is maintained by inciting a sense of continuous crisis and alarm about the potential decay of the organic nation if discipline and purity is not preserved.”⁶⁵ Zachariah cogently argues for the need to rethink fascist transnational connections as processes of convergent evolution and mutual recognition, rather than as top-down “diffusionist” Eurocentric frameworks. This argument represents a new trend in transnational studies that rethinks fascism as a diverse group of national formations with a distinctive and yet converging set of political ideas and practices.

All in all, major generic historians of fascism like Paxton, Griffin, Mosse, and Payne propose a Eurocentric model of fascism that emphasizes the mimicry and the lack of agency of non-European actors. The same can be said for the few who take the nominalist position that dominated earlier discussions in the field. Going back to De Felice’s emphasis on national singularity, Nolte’s historicism about an epoch of fascism that had no clear links with its past and its future, and Allardyce’s anti-theoretical nominalism, these neo-positivist historians deny the

possibility of fascism outside of Europe and project great hostility, even irritation, toward both the relationship between history and theory and the idea that analyzing fascism globally is opposed to, that is, not the same as, merely telling its history. These historians dispute that Argentine, Japanese, or Indian fascists were fascists because they stress epochal, national, and specialized disciplinary paths. In this profoundly conservative and anti-intellectual view, fascism deserves no analysis, and its ephemeral nature does not warrant any substantive interpretation. The history of fascism problematically becomes a form of antiquarianism.⁶⁶

Unlike neopositivists, most generic historians turn fascism into a theory that is at the ready when it is needed to catalog fascism according to its different national expressions. To be sure, generic theorists deal with fascism as a universal entity and expect all national historiographies to follow their models. However, most historians of, for example, Italian fascism in Italy, or Latin American, Japanese, or German fascisms have not joined the generic consensus, or they even ignore its success among English readers interested in fascism.

Many studies of fascism go only so far in addressing the interwoven dimensions of fascism on a global scale. As Constantin Iordachi remarks, too often historians of fascism “fell into the trap of reifying geographical labels into historical types.” And as Zachariah observes, “Much of the (still meagre) material on ‘global’ fascism ‘outside Europe’ still sees Europe as the natural homeland of fascism; it is not clear why this is the case.”⁶⁷ An outcome of employing this European-centered lens is that fascism outside Europe is regarded as a subject without agency or as having been replaced with stereotypes, such as “Islamofascism” in the Arab world or the “caudillo” rule in Latin America. It is

rather curious that scholars of European history are open to studying the global circulation of liberalism and Marxism, but when they are confronted with the European participation in fascist global exchanges, they prefer to stress a more Eurocentric view. As bluntly put by Zachariah, "Scholarship on fascism tends to ignore the extra-European writing for reasons of embarrassment, disciplinary specialisation or (in)competence or because it is seen as a secondary part of the history of fascist ideas."⁶⁸ When confronted with these positions on fascism, many historians of India, Japan, Syria, Brazil, and other places simply accept them and then treat fascism as a category that is essentially external to their national histories. In some cases, there is even an undercurrent of nationalism in these historical positions. This often unacknowledged nationalist approach stresses the singularity of national history and denies that, for example a country like Argentina could have been polluted by such a problematic "European" ideology. The result of this approach is an essentialist idea of two nations, one being authentically national and the other being a European ideology that was first exported and then adopted by nationals with false consciousness or worse. These readings of fascism that converge in denying it any sort of national dimension are devoid of contextual implications, but paradoxically they first appeared in many contemporary antifascist sources that confronted fascism from the position of a progressive nationalism. For them, fascism simply had no relation to more inclusive national traditions. These antifascist critics offered up an idealized idea of the nation that had no place for fascism. Yet historical explanations still need to address why fascism belonged to the experience of extreme right actors within so many of these national traditions, at the same time that it circulated and was constantly reformulated around the globe.⁶⁹

TRANSNATIONAL FASCISM

When considered globally, in terms of its national specificities but also in terms of ideological transfers and social, cultural, and economic exchanges, fascism becomes less European centered. In contrast with what the leading historian of global history Sebastian Conrad aptly criticizes as a “national container” mentality and a “methodological nationalism,” global mobilities, circulation, and transfers are in fact key elements of national history.⁷⁰ As a historical approach that focuses on external links that also shaped nations, the transnational perspective leads to better a understanding of the national and supranational workings of geopolitical spaces.

The history of the transnational is not only about transfers but also about those things that were never transferred, or could not be successfully exported because of specific national histories. As Rebekka Habermas suggests, transfer and nontransfer “are two sides of the same coin and therefore must always be viewed together.” She argues it is important to look not only on “what was transferred or not transferred but also at the often unintended effects the transfer interaction produced.” Processes of transfer are “always accompanied by the shadow of a non-transfer, whether owing to actual ignorance or a conscious decision not to address an issue.”⁷¹ In analyzing the clear and shadowy aspects of fascist exchanges, transfers, and nontransfers, the transnational approach to fascism moves it far away from ideal forms and “minimal” definitions. Fascism was a lived experience and, like liberalism and Marxism, it eventually became a global political ideology with significant differences from one national context to another.

Fascism crossed the Atlantic and adopted extreme clerico-fascist dimensions that were not as prevalent in Europe. If this

were the case in countries like Argentina, Japanese fascism put forward a distinctive imperial notion of “restoration” of the past. But as in Argentina and elsewhere, Japanese fascism was concerned with modernizing previous forms of national sovereignty. The historian of Japanese fascism Reto Hofmann observes, “The ambiguities of Japan’s fascism are a characteristic of fascism itself, reflecting its role as a mediator between revolution and restoration as well as its hybrid nature as a product of global and national history.”⁷² As a global contestation of liberal democracy and socialism, fascism affirmed nationalism while posing a seemingly paradoxical global challenge to liberal and socialist forms of universalism.

The relationship between fascism and the nation was always ambivalent, since fascism was both a global ideology and an extreme form of nationalism. Most fascists defended a fascist form of internationalism. For the Colombian fascists, the Leopards, there were no “enemies to the right,” which for them meant that both nationally and internationally, fascism represented a dictatorial solution to national states of emergency. The fascists of Colombia argued that they “represented a coherent, organized and logical doctrine that has a solution of its own to all the problems in the universe.” The Leopards especially stressed how Latin American forms of the extreme right had to be dually rooted in anti-imperialism and Bolivarian ideals. Latin Americans had to be united in order to defend themselves from the “ambitions” of the Anglo-Saxon races that were taking away from their national sovereignty. But if racism were a legitimate solution for a cosmopolitan place like Argentina, the Leopards wanted to defend the internal homogeneity of Colombia as it had grown from the “simple mestizaje of the Spaniard and the Indian.”⁷³ Similarly, José Vasconcelos, a major Mexican intellectual who embraced fascism, presented his

country, and Latin America as a whole, as living in colonial conditions. For him, Mexico needed to defend its *mestizaje* and its imperial Hispanic legacies against the northern powers and the “world program” of the “Jews.”⁷⁴

While in Brazil some fascists proposed an idea of a multiracial and multireligious totalitarian society, in Mexico fascists often associated fascism with an idealization of both Catholicism and Mexico’s Indian past.⁷⁵ If in Germany fascists were obsessed with Judaism as the primary enemy of the community of the people, in the Andes, the Peruvian Blackshirts aimed their totalitarian animosity toward Asians, and especially Japanese, immigrants. In what eventually would become India and Pakistan, fascism adopted Hindu or Muslim undertones, while in Argentina, fascists put forward “Christian fascism.” Considered from a transnational perspective, fascist entanglements defy standard national histories. Even in Europe, fascism did not always come to power out of an internal crisis such as in the “classical” cases of Germany or Italy. It is true that Mussolini and Hitler were “elected” to power, but it is also true that they reached power as members of party coalitions that they eventually came to dominate and later obliterate. If in Germany and Italy fascism destroyed democracy from within and they became dictatorships, in countries like Spain, fascism came to power with a coup d’état. Desires for civil war in the name of the people’s national community predominated on both sides of the Atlantic. Peruvian fascists, for example, called themselves the “children of the people,” but in a more adult manner they also stated that they were waging a “holy crusade” as “guerrillas” of fascism. These claims notwithstanding, an actual civil war took place in a few historical cases, notably Spain in 1936–39 and in Italy in 1943–45.⁷⁶ Across the world, fascism thrived not only when conservative and

authoritarian powers were in decay (Italy, Germany, Spain, and Argentina) but also when other fascist powers helped them. The reasons for fascism were both internal and external. In countries like Romania, Norway, France, and Hungary fascism was “successful” after the German fascist war of occupation. Power and transnational politics were equally important during the Spanish Civil War, which the Spanish fascists won owing to substantial Nazi and Italian fascist support. The same can be said about the Ustasha Movement in Croatia. When this was not the case, the fascists were contested or diminished by authoritarian governments or imperial powers: in Hungary before the Nazi occupation; in Brazil, Colombia, Portugal, Uruguay, and Mexico during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s; in British India and British South Africa; and in imperial Japan.

Across the world, fascism contested liberalism and socialism, but it also confronted more moderate forms of the conservative right on a global scale. Most fascists supported forms of corporativism, but they differed in terms of their ultimate and practical applications. Fascism brutalized politics and militarized society. It magnified the political use of violence.⁷⁷ The two world wars affected all territories of the world, but in very different ways and with very different outcomes. Countries like Argentina, Mexico, Portugal, and Spain never faced external war during this period, but their politics, fascism included, were substantially affected by international conflicts. England and the United States, on the other hand, experienced the war as combatants but did not face important internal fascist threats. The opposite happened in what is now Ukraine and the Baltic countries, the Middle East, China, Japan, and India, where fascism found an important place in the sun. Later on, the emergence of populism in the Global South was also related, and it became a response

to the military events and the genocidal violence that had first originated with fascism in the north.

Political violence through internal and external repression and war remained at the center of transnational fascism. Fascism was a political model that first took power in Italy, but then acquired regional and cross-regional connotations. There were important Mediterranean points of convergence among southern fascisms, and the same can be said about transatlantic fascism, Central European fascisms, and fascism's Asian or Middle Eastern variants.⁷⁸

In contexts of political deterioration, and during periods of economic regression or imperial occupation, fascism proposed an alternative to the perceived crisis of liberal democracy in the interwar and war years. It put forward political violence, racism, and dictatorship as transcendental solutions to epochal problems. Fascism wanted to redefine the relationship between society and the state, but its efforts to do so resulted in very different national permutations. At times, different fascisms (especially but not only Nazism and Italian fascism) competed against each other, and conflict was often at the center of fascist transnational exchanges. Even the study of Nazi Germany is in need of more transnational approaches.⁷⁹

All in all, it would be misleading for historians to study specific cases of fascism without considering others. As Zachariah argues, fascism was

a family of ideas, with common—though often disavowed—roots, intellectual underpinnings, styles and organisations of movements, and sometimes even a strong overlap of personnel. The phenomenon of fascism in India has not been adequately explored, in part because of a prejudice that fascisms in general are strictly European phenomena and that non-Europeans only produced inade-

quately understood imitations. When and if it is addressed at all, fascism in India is usually attributed (correctly) to the Hindu right, collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar*, but often (incorrectly) only to the Hindu right; however, its history in India is a much longer and broader one.⁸⁰

As in most places, many Hindus in India recognized fascism as both a global and local phenomenon, while Muslims like the fascist intellectual Inayatullah Khan al-Mashriqi not only claimed to have inspired Hitler's own program but also considered his own "Muslim fascism" to be the best version of fascism. If al-Mashriqi claimed that fascism should follow "the shining guidance of the Holy Qur'an," Argentine fascists claimed that their clerico-fascist version was superior to the more secular European versions. In Argentina it was "a Christianized fascism."⁸¹ These views of Latin American fascism were also influential in Europe. A prominent Spanish fascist even stated that European fascists should learn from the Latin Americans:

It is the case that the Latin American processes of reaction followed an inverse path to that of Europeans. Here [in Europe] it is the nationalist and imperialistic consciousness that initiates the processes, and [European fascists] look for a way to accommodate Catholic principles and the Church. There [in Latin America] the Catholic groups initiate the process and they start looking for collaboration with fascist instruments and styles. Here it is force and violence that, with a decorative intention, later call upon Catholic principles. There, these Catholic principles call upon force in order to defend themselves.⁸²

In contrast with this Latin American, and at times European and Southeast Asian, view of the sacred in fascism, Japanese fascists admired fascism's down-to-earthness rather than its god-like features.⁸³

Fascism was different and even incompatible in different places. Its causes and effects changed with respect to broader national histories, as well as to changing international contexts, from the Great War to the Cold War and beyond. In my own work, I have studied how in Argentina the clerico-fascism of the 1930s and 1940s was central in the postwar period through Peronism, its populist reformulation, and later in the ideological origins of the Dirty War in the 1970s.⁸⁴

These aftereffects of fascism are often missing from the Eurocentric literature, which downplays fascism's transnational and later its transcontextual connections. For example, in Japan, as in Argentina and in the Arab World, the complex relation between European powers and fascism was a key element in the local attempts to leave fascism behind after 1945. In Argentina and Japan, past fascist connections became inconvenient truths in the new Cold War against communism.⁸⁵ After 1945, fascism encountered a certain denationalization of its ideology with the increasing development of pan-European forms in Europe and, often, anti-European forms in Latin America or Asia. As Andrea Mammone, a foremost historian of transnational neofascism argues, "Even what is generally perceived as a narrow nationalism can take a non-national dimension and redeploys at a supranational or international level (even if the main feeling of black shirted comradeship was almost always with their right-wing fellows and with their political and ideological projects)."⁸⁶ Neofascists in France and Italy influenced each other and even read their own national contexts in terms of the other. Transatlantic neofascist engagements were continued and often reformulated among Chile, Argentina, and Spain and between Brazil and Portugal. As the Mexican historian of Latin American neofascism Luis Herrán Ávila shows, transnational fascist ideas criss-

crossed the Americas from Mexico City and Miami to Buenos Aires and Taipei.⁸⁷ Many of these neofascists, earlier in Latin America and the Middle East and later in Europe, would turn to populism as the way to reach a wider antiliberal consensus.

Immediately after World War II, the memories of fascist violence, especially those of the Holocaust, motivated the populist rejection of the past. New forms of postfascist populism created an authoritarian version of democracy, influenced but also firmly rooted in the explicit rejection of genocidal fascist violence.

Modern populism also enforced a notion of popular sovereignty, but this was, and is supposed to be, anchored in an anti-liberal electoral democracy and not in the fascist form of dictatorship. Fascism and populism presented clear distinctions in their uses and conceptions of political violence. If fascism understood power as firmly rooted in violence, populism later shared with liberalism a more Weberian, and restricted, notion of violence. In fact, when actual dictatorship in countries like Argentina in the 1970s replaced populist forms of democracy, fascist forms of violence returned. In this case, fascism came back from the past in the form of often-silenced, but at times quite active, memories of and by perpetrators. This was a process in which fascist notions of violent subjectivity returned after they had been repressed. This new take on the perpetrators' memories of violence renewed fascist ideology, in the postfascist and neofascist contexts of the Latin American Dirty Wars but also in other "hot" war contexts of the global Cold War, from the Middle East to Africa and Southeast Asia. Many of these radical dictatorships represented a form of antipopulist ideology, in which violence reigned supreme. In contrast, populism put forward an authoritarian version of democracy that straddled democracy and dictatorship. Turning the page on the Holocaust and other

memories of fascist violence, populists tried to close the book of liberal recipes for the nation. Populist postfascism denied the centrality of extreme violence for the authoritarian democracies it constructed in the early postwar period. If many populist regimes were initially founded in order to detach from the fascist past, populists implicitly ignored how much their politics were an effect of this past's radical violence, which the German case epitomized. Because it is at the center of the populist reformulation of fascism, the Holocaust remains a challenge to historians of fascism and populism.

FASCISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust is a paradigmatic fascist transnational experience of genocide, and for this reason still poses, and is symptomatic of, the problems and perspectives opened by a critical global history of fascism. By the end of the Holocaust, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges thought of Nazi ideology as a theory of violence. And in 1945, Borges considered violence literally to be fascist ideology. Borges also realized that the victims of this radical form of political violence—the Jewish other in the Holocaust case—were turned into sacrificial objects. For the Borgean Nazi character of the story “*Deutsches Requiem*,” camp commander zur Linde, for example, the fascist body and the national organism are sacrificial objects as well. Moreover, for zur Linde the sacrifice of the fascist self is, in a sense, an even more significant source of ideological self-determination through violence. Moments before his imminent execution by the Allies, zur Linde argues that the memories of fascist violence will remain after the defeat of fascism: “An inexorable epoch is spreading over the world. We forged it, we who are already its victim.

What matters if England is the hammer and we the anvil, so long as violence reigns and not servile Christian timidity? If victory and injustice and happiness are not for Germany, let them be for other nations. Let heaven exist, even though our dwelling place is Hell. I look at myself in the mirror to discover who I am, to discern how I will act in a few hours, when I am face to face with death. My flesh may be afraid; I am not."⁸⁸

In Borges's view, the Nazi idea of the sacrifice of the Jews implied for Hitler's followers an end in itself—namely, bare physical violence.⁸⁹ For a fascism that transcended national borders and cultures, the Jew represented absolute darkness. This violence is presented as a naked innate form of authenticity, but according to Borges's interpretation it leads to an ideological maelstrom of destruction and self-destruction beyond fascist regimes.

Fascism ends when it achieves its ideologically sacred imperative of violence. It ends with the sacrifice, the destruction of the fascist self. This was clearly exemplified in Hitler's decisions as his armies began to undergo defeat at the eastern front. He sacrificed his troops regardless of military logic. Fascism is fully entropic. More so than any other ideology, fascism is bound to inevitable decline and harm its own political viability. Entropy leads to the destruction of reason as epitomized in the split between the flesh and the ego in the body and memory of Zur Linde. The killing of the ego is the result of the overdetermination of the forces of desire in politics, the equation of authenticity with victimization, sacrifice, and violence. For Borges, the fascist internationalism that aims to establish violence through victimization as the only politics is a wrong kind of universalism.

Some years before, Sigmund Freud considered Nazi victimization as a central element of global fascist ideology, especially in terms of its stress on myth and the unconscious and of its

rejection of reason.⁹⁰ Both the Argentine Borges and the Austrian Freud considered the Nazi victimization of Jews an essential element of fascist ideology. To be sure, their view was more sophisticated than the simplistic view shared by the majority of their fellow antifascists. For the latter, fascism was simply an evil, a brute yet silly aberration from normative politics. Fascism had no ideology and was even a surrogate for other ideologies and economic forces.⁹¹ Borges and Freud postulated the opposite view. Fascism was above all a radical ideological event that threatened enlightened civilization. The reasons for this distinctive perspective in the context of antifascism was especially related to the Borgean and Freudian emphasis on anti-Semitism as a central source of ideological fulfillment in Nazi ideology, as well as their inclusion of the latter within a broader fascist mythical notion of the primordial role the unconscious played in politics. The most violent dimensions of this mythical worldview would later be repressed with the defeat of fascism but as Borges indicated, its most damning legacies would remain for future perpetrators as a memory of the overpowering violence of fascist victimization.

It was in the camps that this most violent mythical implication of fascist ideology was first experienced and later interpreted. Jean Améry, an antifascist and a member of the resistance against Nazism, would talk of “real fascism and singular Nazism.”⁹²

Many other victims felt the same. The tendency to identify fascism with Nazism was widespread during the time of the Holocaust, especially among the victims. In the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, Chaim Kaplan used it to aptly explain the Nazi fascist attempt to create a new world order.⁹³ For Kaplan, this world order clearly proposed victimization as an ideology of conquest and persecution. In contrast, for historians of the Holocaust, the

limits of historiographical notions of fascism and Nazism explained the need to exclude fascism altogether as an analytical tool for understanding the Holocaust. As a result, many historians often overlooked the actual ideological connections between the transnational history of fascism and the historical conditions for the Holocaust.

Primo Levi, who became a member of a fascist youth group in 1924, when he was only five, came to realize the victimizing implications of the Italian variant of fascism. He saw and experienced the grip of fascism from the perspectives of substantially different “gray-zoned” subject positions—namely, semimandatory fascist youth, onlooker, antifascist, and Jewish victim. For Levi, the “exaltation of violence” opened the way to the fascist ideological attack against reason. Levi who conceived Nazism as the “German version of fascism,” saw the former as a radical version of fascist ideology. The camps were the model for the fascist “New Order.”⁹⁴

Levi reflected on the sacrificial aspects of fascist violence. Fascist violence had the ultimate aim of destroying the humanity of the self. Levi traced the continuum of fascist violence from the Italian fascist squads of 1922 to the world of Auschwitz: “The Blackshirts had not just killed Turin’s trade unionists, Communists and Socialists. First they made them drink half a kilo of castor oil. In this way a man is reduced to tatters, is no longer human ... There’s a direct connection between the Turin massacres [of 1922] and the entry ceremony in the Nazi camps, where they stripped, destroyed your personal photographs, shaved your head, tattooed you on the arm.” He concluded, “This was the demolition of man; this is Fascism.”⁹⁵

Fascists around the globe shared this view of their actions as a total attack against their enemies, albeit not its critical ethico-political implications. For the fascists the victimization of the

enemy was another example of the centrality and desirability of violence in fascist ideology. Mussolini and the Argentine, Japanese, Brazilian, Colombian, Peruvian, and Romanian fascists considered the enemy to be a defining character of their own notion of the self.⁶ In short, Jews and other enemies defined what the fascists were not and, by opposition, what they actually were.

Not all fascist ideologies were as radical as Nazism in terms of their victimization of the invented enemy of the people. Similarly, other forms of fascism were not as extreme in terms of their desire, their “will,” to put their fantasies about violence and demonization in practice. For most “sources” living during the time of fascism (1919–45), Nazism was a peculiarly radical version of it. In other words, Nazism was German fascism. This appreciation was shared by most fascists and antifascists. After the war and the Holocaust, this experiential conceptualization of fascist ideology was displaced by newer forms of historical meaning-making and selective postwar memory processes. Whereas before 1945, global fascism served the purpose of illuminating the global ideological implications of Nazi processes of victimization, after 1945, fascism as an explanatory device often obscured central dimensions of the Shoah experience, especially the experiences of its Jewish victims. In this context, the different experiences of all victims of the Nazis were homogenized, obscuring the ideological hierarchies and victimizing imperatives present in German fascist ideology.

After the war, and until recently, fascism and Nazism were generally conflated in public memories. This conflation buttressed a form of collective silence about the identities of the victims of the Holocaust, and hence the ideological peculiarities of Nazi persecution. This was the case when these notions of fascism were embraced either in Western or in Eastern Europe.

In the East and the West, the inclusion of Nazism within global fascism, or global totalitarianism, served the purpose of downplaying the main features of Nazi victimization.

This situation obliterated the history and memory of victims. It also downplayed the particularities of transnational fascism, as it was understood at the time of the Shoah. In turn, many historians of fascism and the Holocaust presented an uncritical take on this transnational peculiarity of fascism. In fact, they often ended up mutually excluding their respective fields of knowledge. Especially generic historians of fascism replaced a mutually inclusive living field of ideological experiences and genocidal practices in the past with definitions, glossaries, and “high theory” from the present.⁹⁷

Concurrently with this exclusion, historians of the Holocaust have concluded that fascism has no connection whatsoever with Nazism. For example, Saul Friedländer, a major historian of the Holocaust, stresses the singularity of what he aptly calls Nazi redemptive anti-Semitism. Friedländer emphasizes the pseudoreligious dimension of the Holocaust, that is, the extermination was a “sacred end and not a means to other ends.”⁹⁸ He concludes that no similar trait can be found in other countries.⁹⁹ In Friedländer’s master works *Nazi Germany and the Jews* and *The Years of Extermination*, the global history of Nazi endeavors is explained through the enactment and reception of Nazi policies, both nationally and internationally. To be sure, Friedländer states that the Holocaust “is an integral part of ‘the age of ideology,’” but he also clearly differentiates between global fascism “in Italy and elsewhere” and Nazism in Germany. In other words, for him fascism can be a transnational ideology but not in Germany. Friedländer’s work is especially innovative in its emphasis on the experience of the victims. In this regard, the lack of references to

fascism as experienced and interpreted by the victims is surprising. The transnational history of global interpretations of fascism could provide another angle for thinking about the Nazi transnational project of conquest and destruction, especially in terms of how it was interpreted by its victims.

Developing transnational and comparative approaches outside the framework of the Nazi empire is often anathema in Holocaust historiography. However, the adoption of a global historical approach to Nazism may not necessarily mean a general downplaying of the Holocaust as an extreme event within an extreme history.¹⁰⁰ Eurocentrism, which is also a trademark of many studies of fascism, plays an important role in current pleas for uniqueness in Holocaust historiography. Whereas Africans, and also Arabs, experienced an equally unique brand of Italian racism in the forms of mustard gases and other chemical weapons, summary executions, and killings of civilians, the Nazis effected one of the most severe events in history. In short, it was a radical departure, a turning point in history. But empire, fascism, and racism link the Holocaust with the world outside Europe. More recently many historians of Nazism have focused on German and European imperialisms as central precursors of the Nazi genocide in the East.¹⁰¹ All in all, as Hannah Arendt suggested many years ago in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, global ideologies and imperialism were central elements of the history and prehistory of fascism and the Holocaust.¹⁰² They also continued to play a role in its aftermath.

In their radical display of raw, unmediated physical violence, Nazis pushed the fascist experience to the extreme. In a sense, Nazism became fully different from other forms of fascism. However, fascism exercised its genocidal potential by engaging in genocidal practices in Italian fascist Africa and Civil War

Spain. Transnational fascists (from France to the Ukraine) also collaborated in the Nazi Final Solution by providing logistical and ideological support and, last but not least, killers. However, Nazism presents a radical departure from other fascist formations. Nazism is not a generic “ideal type” of fascism but the culmination of its most radical possibility.

Fascism as a movement and as a regime rose and fell promoting civil war. This was at last the Italian legacy of Mussolini’s fascism: a country divided and a near apocalyptic fight that required radically violent means, including fascist collaboration, in sending Italian Jews to Auschwitz.¹⁰³ But perhaps more importantly, the legacy of fascism goes beyond Italy and Mussolini. Not only did Italian fascism send Jews to Auschwitz after 1943 but links existed from the far-distant Argentine fascists, who justified the extermination of the Jews; to the French and Dutch collaborators who corralled them; and to the Baltic and Ukrainian fascists who killed them. Transnational fascism was the global ideology that made that crime possible.

Nazism in its radical spiral of integral “sacred” terror against the Jews left the fascist pack behind. It was in the Nazi empire in the East that the Nazis decided to literalize in the concentration camps the most circular notion of Nazi fascism, the notion of the abject. In Auschwitz, a closed and controlled laboratory of fascism, the Nazi idea of the abject as the existential enemy of the people, the most detached and psychotic aspect of Hitler’s ideology, became a reality.¹⁰⁴

THE FASCIST HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Fascism was an ideology of violence. It took violence so seriously that it not only devoted thousands of pages of books and

speeches to it but also made violence a political imperative. Violence defined fascist practice. In other words, there is no fascism without political violence. There is no real fascism without a total, existential enemy of the people and its consequent political persecution.

The logic of violence in fascism is central for thinking through its ideological and aesthetic dimensions. Violence defined fascism's conceptual representations, especially with respect to fascist genocidal notions of the abject and sacrifice. Violence constituted fascism and the fascists. Violence was ascribed a sacred status and made fascism an extreme political theology. It was a primary idea of the world as rooted and ruled by violence in apocalyptic times of emergency. As the Chinese Blueshirts stated, this was why fascism "is the only tool of self-salvation of nations on the brink of destruction. It saved Italy and Germany. . . . Therefore, there is no other road than imitating the fascist spirit of violent struggle as in Italy and Germany."¹⁰⁵ Like the Blueshirts in China, the Portuguese Blueshirts also identified the apology for violence with international fascism. Violence was the aim of fascism but also the starting point of politics: "Violence is the essential and intelligent start of all good politics because without violence and in adversity, conquest is impossible."¹⁰⁶

There was no place for other ideas, insofar as in fascist minds alternative politics represented a rejection of the idea of fascism as the only possibility for politics. Those with other ideas were necessarily positioned against the national community of leader and people. They had no legitimate place in fascist politics or society. For fascists, it was theoretically logical that the enemy fully deserved to be met with violence. The logic of violence was equated with power. To put it simply, the logic of violence constituted a core element of fascist ideology. A practical out-

come of this ideology was the victimization of those deemed to be different. This form of political victimization was entirely modern in the fascist sense precisely because, although it claimed to be rooted in old myths from the past, it was actually a violence legitimized by and through a modern political myth of the leader, the nation, and the people.

In fascism, belief was connected to an act of faith in the conductor. Fascism presented its leaders as living myths. While in Germany the *Führerprinzip* presented Hitler as the ultimate sacred source of truth and authority, in Brazil, Argentina, Spain, and beyond, fascists identified the politics of the leaders with a transcendental mythical truth. In Argentina, Leopoldo Lugones, the country's most famous fascist, related truth to power and the divine. For fascists truth was a matter of almost divine intuition and detached from practical corroboration. Like Lugones, Spanish fascist writer Ramiro de Maeztu posited the existence of an "eternal truth." It was in the search for right and truth "as transcendental essences" that reality emerged. Similarly, Gustavo Barroso argued that Brazilian fascism was the best political formation on earth because it represented "eternal truths." These truths of Brazilian fascism promised an extraordinary change, the "new times," when the "unity" of the spirit, the cross, and the nation would rule. Like Lugones and de Maeztu, Barroso identified the rise of a new era with the aesthetic and political primacy of an absolute truth.¹⁰⁷

Fascism connected the reality of the movement and its leaders with a mythical past of heroism, violence, and subordination. In fascist ideology, the leaders personified an epochal continuum establishing a direct link, a unitary front with the people and the nation. In turn, the leader was the ultimate source of popular sovereignty, responsible only to himself. Fascists were

obsessed with the infallibility of their leaders because, for them, their assumed lack of error reflected the core divine truths of the ideology. Unlike liberalism or socialism, which they believed had nontranscendental roots, fascists longed for a return of the mythical warring heroes, and that is what they expected from their leaders.¹⁰⁸ Fascism was a political religion. Its modernity especially lay in the fact that it repositioned the place of the sacred in politics.

It is important to stress the particular modernity of fascism with respect to the sacred and the unconscious. As historian Angelo Ventrone argues, the fascist critique of modernity was apocalyptic, but it also proposed an alternative modernity at the service of conquest and domination. Fascists wanted to replace what they saw as mechanistic, repetitive, and involuntary modernity with a “qualified” modernity in which the fascist could tame matter and the economy. Fascists saw their modernity as the “domination of the spirit and the political.” They placed an “ethics of war” and a violent sense of masculinity and community at the center of these concerns.¹⁰⁹ For this reason, for fascists violence was the ultimate form of politicization.

Violence, and the lawless use of violence, is a defining aspect of both fascist practice and fascist theory. Violence, as Primo Levi cogently put it, became an end in itself.¹¹⁰ Fascism brandished power and violence as ideological aims rather than means. In fascist ideology, violence is not only instrumental, it is mainly a form of intuition, of creation. It is not only a mobilizing myth but also a dark negative sublime. Namely, violence is elevated to the greatest form of politics.¹¹¹ For Mussolini, violence was power without restraints. It was a nonrational state that provided the nation and the individual with the security of being protected from the menacing outer world. For thinkers like Max

Weber and Karl Marx, or even in part for Georges Sorel (who nonetheless exalted violence in regenerative and redemptive terms), violence has a primary role in politics but needs to be restrained once it has achieved a useful end. These authors clearly differ from the fascist theorists of violence.

In the fascist ideal, violence loses its instrumentality and becomes a direct source of knowledge.¹¹² Violence defines fascist identity. It is a key dimension of the inner self. Violence becomes a transcendent experience that renders politics an almost sacred field of action. In Mussolini's case, violence was an ethical force that helped fascism achieve a radical break from ordinary concerns. Here the notion of sacrifice is once again central. Over time, Mussolini best expressed this idea in the famous fascist catchphrase, "I don't care" (or I don't give a damn), which was inscribed in the showrooms of the permanent fascist revolution in 1942. For Mussolini this action of not caring was related to the acceptance of death and "purifying blood" as redemptive forces.¹¹³ Even as late as 1942, when considering the future of the Italian nation, he could not (or did not want to) conceal the fascist embrace of violence that the Nazi war of destruction promised him.¹¹⁴ As was the case for Hitler, or for the Argentine fascist *nacionalistas*, violence and war were for Mussolini sources of political orientation and personal and collective redemption.¹¹⁵ Spanish fascists talked of the "sacred violence of action," which for them was equally rooted in justice and right. Similarly fusing politics and holy violence, Eugenia Silveyra de Oyuela, one of the most extreme Argentine fascist intellectuals, asserted that violence was legitimate as a result of God's war against the internal enemies. For her, this was the situation in Argentina: where "red hordes" had invaded the country, "we have the invaders in our midst, and we are, in fact, in a state of defensive war. This is

a licit war for the Argentine who needs ‘to defend the rights of the threatened homeland.’” The motto of the Egyptian Blueshirts was “Obedience and Struggle” (*al-tcah wa al-jihad*), and this idea of struggle was also reflected in their oath, “I swear by almighty God, by my honour and by the fatherland that I will be a faithful and obedient soldier, fighting for the sake of Egypt, and that I will abstain from whatever would pervert my principles or be harmful to my organization.” A world away from the Middle East, the Chinese Blueshirts asserted that violence had to be directed toward all political rivals: “There must be a determination to shed blood—that is, there must be a kind of unprecedented violence to eliminate all enemies of the people.”¹¹⁶ If Chinese fascists considered violence the way to achieve the true politics of the people, the Colombian fascists, the Leopards, asserted, “Violence, as illuminated by the myth of a beautiful and heroic fatherland, is the only thing that can create for us a favorably alternative in the great fights of the future.” The myth of fascism as rooted in the notion that the inner self and collective unconscious forces could lead only to violence and death was the preeminent form of conceiving politics as essentially divine.

Fascists connected violence and death, in and though politics, to a radical renewal of the self. For example, the Romanian fascists linked the sacred nature of violence to the idea of regeneration and salvation of their warriors through death as sacrifice. For them, as “God wanted” it, “the germ of a renewal can grow only out of death, of suffering.” Romanian fascists did “love death.” Death was for them, “our dearest wedding among weddings.”¹¹⁷ A feeling of imminent danger embedded in violence was part of the fascist way of life, and death was an outcome of the fascist response to the political enemy, and eventually the self. As Mussolini declared, “Living dangerously, should mean

always being ready for everything—whatever the sacrifice, whatever the danger, whatever the action, when the defense of the fatherland and fascism are concerned.”¹¹⁸

Violence was, for fascism, essentially expressed in the totalitarian fascist state and its “spiritual” and “ethical” imperialism. As Mussolini stated,

The Fascist State expresses the will to exercise power and to command. Here the Roman tradition is embodied in a conception of strength. Imperial power, as understood by the Fascist doctrine, is not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. An imperial nation, that is to say a nation which directly or indirectly is a leader of others, can exist without the need to conquer a single square mile of territory.¹¹⁹

Imperialism is for fascism a state of becoming rather than a state of being. To be sure, fascism does not differ in this sense from other imperialist formations.¹²⁰ However, it diverges in that it is presumably a “proletarian imperialism” when it is viewed as the ultimate expression of Mussolini’s nationalist displacement of class struggles onto national struggle. Paradoxically, for Mussolini, fascist imperialism was the ultimate form of anticolonialism. Imperialism was the political antithesis of decadence. In other words, an active, new fascist form of imperialism eliminated the possibility of “becoming a colony.”¹²¹ Fascist imperialism proffered itself as heir to Roman imperial traditions. But the importance of Romaness notwithstanding, Italian fascism, in contrast to the ancient Romans, promoted the idea of a war without end.¹²² In other words, Mussolini conceived of war as preemptive action to strengthen Italian leadership in the Latin world—indeed, as an imperialist move against “plutocratic empires—“a war of civilization and liberation. It is the war of the people. The Italian people feel it is its own war. It is the war

of the poor, the disinherited, and the war of the proletarians.”¹²³ When projected onto a global stage, fascist imperialism was the ultimate form of people’s violence and power: “Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit—i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand—a manifestation of their vitality. In the opposite tendency, which would limit their interests to the home country, it sees a symptom of decadence. Peoples who rise or rise again are imperialistic; renunciation is characteristic of dying peoples.”¹²⁴ For fascists, imperialism was at the center of the fascist matrix. It provided them with a sense of moving from theory to practice, through war and violence, in the name of the people. In short, it represented a tangible expression of fascist action situated beyond ritual and theory. The different failed attempts to create a formal fascist international have to be understood within the larger framework of fascist spiritual imperialism.¹²⁵

Spiritual imperialism also included the conception of the Nazi genocidal empire. Whereas the Nazi radical version of fascism stressed the perceived enemy as the defining aspect of its ideology, most fascisms ascribed to it a less fixed place in fascist ideology. These key differences notwithstanding, fascism was a global phenomenon that included Nazism. There is no such thing as a fascist platonic type. Italian fascism was the first fascist movement in Europe, and it was the original point of reference for other fascist movements. It was not, however, a form of fascism from which all other fascisms were derived. Understanding the Italian case is central to the global understanding of fascism, but *fascism* as a term and a reality refers to a transnational network of shared opinions and feelings. Fascists in Europe and across the world were identified with the “idea.” Above all, fascism was, and is, an idea about the world, the people’s national community, and the leader that occluded other

readings of reality. Fascism confuses reality with truth. Hannah Arendt defines ideology as providing a circular vision of the world that occludes perception and empirical experience. Fascism represented the ultimate ideological gaze in this Arendtian sense.¹²⁶ Among political ideologies, fascism represented an ideological lens through which to see and read the world. But it was more than that. It paradoxically implied a denial of reality, an ideological detachment from it that changed it, and even created a new reality and a new definition of the possible in ideological politics. Yet this fascist contribution to the dark side of modernity was not only a singular and tragic historical experience but also part of the broader history of challenges to democracy. In fact, this history includes fascism's most distinctive descendant, modern populism.

FASCIST POPULISM?

Fascism is not populism, but it is clear to historians that both share important affinities regarding the people, the nation, the leaders, and their enemies. They are different chapters of the same history. The *longue durée* intellectual trajectory of fascism and populism is essentially global. It has a long history as part of the itinerary of ideas of democracy (and dictatorship) across the globe and a shorter one as part of the transcontextual history that turned fascism to populist postfascism in power after the end of World War II.

To put it playfully, if democracy starts in Athens, modern democratic populism begins in Buenos Aires. The other stops in this long, schematic genealogy of ideas and regimes of power are manifold, but we could tentatively mention the following: 1) pre-imperial Rome and its grappling with the concept of the people, as well as the role of tribunes and plebeians in this earlier political

context; 2) the Paris of the French Revolution and its creation of a modern notion of popular sovereignty; and 3) Rome again, along with many places like Berlin, Lima, Aleppo, or Tokyo, with their respective fascist counter-revolutions against the democratic legacies of the enlightened revolutions.¹²⁷

While classical Athenian democracy emerged from the collapse of tyrants and monarchs, and modern democracy emerged in the French Revolution as the product of a rejection of absolute monarchy, fascism came out of democracy.¹²⁸ It was an unexpected, negatively dialectical offspring of popular sovereignty. As a movement, fascism was at times involved in political persecution, street fighting, and the assassination of the preconceived enemy, and it combined this extreme violence with a militarization of politics and the adoption of varied electoral strategies. Fascists often participated in the democratic game, but they were not democratic in any way. In fact they explicitly wanted to destroy democracy. As a regime, fascism became at all times a dictatorial formation, emerging from the democratic crisis of representation that came out of the ruins of World War I. However, it was also rooted in the modern principles of the people and the idea that the leader represents and conveys the desires of the national popular community.

Similarly rooted in this triad of people, leader, and nation, the modern populism that emerged as a regime after 1945 was not a static or an obvious outcome of fascism. Populism was not fascism. Populism had existed in incomplete forms as a set of ideas and movements before the rise of fascism. In turn fascism incorporated some elements of early forms of populism and at times converged with it. At the time of fascism, and in countries as different as Austria, the United States, France, Argentina, or Mexico, many early populists (whom in this book, in part to

differentiate between substantially different contexts, I call either prepopulists or protopopulists) became fascists or fellow travelers of fascism, while others clearly rejected fascism. But after the demise of fascism, all populists clearly rejected the violence that had defined fascism as an ideology and a practice of power. Fascism, to be sure, featured traits that we might call populist, but fascism should not be conflated with the postfascist, modern populism that emerged out of its defeat.

From the perspective of the theory of populism, one might argue that fascism was an incomplete populism, a populism without democracy. But historically, fascism was substantially new and thereby different from early populism, as well as from the postwar modern populist regimes, in that fascism fully rejected democracy. Fascists were also keen to present a multiclass authoritarian front that would later be typical of populist regimes, but they did so by establishing a single-party dictatorship with no legal role for the political opposition. Nonetheless fascists and populists both translated this idea of the unrepresented whole into a homogenizing idea of the nation as the social community of the people. As Peter Fritzsche explains, in the case of Germany, “The aim of Nazism was the realization of a racially purified ‘people’s community’ or ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*,’ which relied on violence and exclusion even as it promised to overcome the deep divisions among Germans. The idea of the ‘people’ was both the rhetorical ground on which the National Socialists operated and the horizon for which they reached.” Geoff Eley also argues that “Combining together widely disparate and heterogeneous interests and demands, the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* promised to make a damaged and corrupted Germany once again whole.” For other European cases such as Spain or Italy historians have similarly presented fascism as being endowed

with an extreme form of antidemocratic populism. As António Costa Pinto argues, fascism stood against reactionary principles precisely because it had the aim of destroying liberalism without restoring the old order. They wanted to create a new man and a new civilization. This was the context of fascist mass plebiscitarian politics and its calls for social reform. For the Portuguese Blueshirts, as was the case for many other fascist movements, corporatism first appeared as a combination of these concerns about the masses and a nondemocratic way that established a new form of populist consensus.¹²⁹

This antiliberal and anticommunist version of corporatism was a key element of the global circulation of fascism and its politics of the people. Stressing this contextual situation provides a more complex view of the social nationalism of global fascism and its close interactions with other interwar dictatorships similarly opposed to “demoliberalism.” As Costa Pinto observes, “Powerful processes of institutional transfers were a hallmark of interwar dictatorships . . . corporatism was at the forefront of this process, both as a new form of organised interest representation and as an authoritarian alternative to parliamentary democracy. The diffusion of political and social corporatism, which with the single-party is a hallmark of the institutional transfers among European dictatorships, challenges some rigid dichotomous interpretations of interwar fascism.”¹³⁰

All in all, fascism emerged as a reaction against the legacy of the Enlightenment. It rejected liberal democracy and replaced it with dictatorship. This replacement was theoretical as well as practical. While historians have important doubts regarding the real application of corporative practices, few disagree with respect to the centrality of corporative ideas within fascist ideological circles and fascist regimes.¹³¹

Starting in the 1920s, corporatism increasingly became a synonym for antiliberal and anticommunist dictatorial forms of government. During this period, Mussolini included corporatism as a central element of fascism. It was part of a “new synthesis” that “overcomes socialism and liberalism.”¹³² Mussolini was not alone. His corporatist “third way” between liberalism and socialism became a global vehicle for the diffusion and reformulation of fascist ideas. Corporatism became one of the arguments put forward by transatlantic fascists as well by the representatives of the “hybrid dictatorships,” the authoritarian fellow travelers of the fascists, who thrived during this period.¹³³ For these regimes, corporatism represented a form of sovereign legitimacy that established a system of representation without downplaying in any significant way the authority of the dictator. If more generally, dictatorship was rooted in a trinitarian notion of popular sovereignty, according to which the leader personally embodied the nation and the people—or as the fascists put it, one man, one people, one nation—corporatism provided a theory for regulating conflict in capitalism and under the supreme arbitration of the leader.

While in nondictatorial forms of representation, corporatism presented the state as the arbiter of interest groups (as would be the case later on for early postwar populist regimes in Latin America), under totalitarian corporatism, there was in general no difference between leader and state with regard to corporatist organization. In theory, corporatism worked as an ideological means for the legitimation of the dictator. Nevertheless, was corporatism only a theoretical bluff or had the fascists meant what they said? To paraphrase the Italian historian Matteo Passetti, it was neither a bluff nor a true revolutionary change in the fascist organization of the state. Similarly, Alessio Gagliardi,

called our attention to the need to understand this failed project as a successful form of popular legitimation.¹³⁴ This legitimating power of the corporatist dictatorship was created to last. In fact, as Costa Pinto cogently argues, it was a deep-seated element of the dictatorial European response to liberalism: “Corporatism put an indelible mark on the first decades of the 20th century, both as a set of institutions created by the forced integration of organized interests (mainly independent unions) in the state, and as an organic-statist alternative to liberal democracy.”¹³⁵

In this context, the fascist critique of capitalism was not against capitalism *per se*, but rather against forms of capitalism that according to fascists had ignored the needs of the people. For example, the program of the Spanish fascist Falange stated that they repudiated the capitalist system that disengaged itself from popular needs and dehumanized private property. For them, fascism was on the side of the working people. As José Antonio Primo de Rivera expressed it, “We have in common with socialism the aim of advancing the fate of the proletariat.” But as Italian fascists also argued, fascism was opposed to socialism—they wanted all of the people to be united with the fatherland. Fascists worldwide wanted “social justice” for the people and the nation. Mixing nation and people, fascism was thus conceived of as “authentically popular” because, as Italian fascist Carlo Costamagna argued, under fascism the people ceased to be an “amorphous mass.” Fascism differed from liberalism in maintaining a nationalist notion of the people as needing to be led by the leader and the state. Fascism took from liberalism the concept of the general will of the people, but as Costamagna maintained, “For fascism the general will it is not a will expressed by each citizen.” A common understanding among fascists was that only the leader of the state incarnated this tra-

dition and made decisions in its name. The fascist notion of the people collapsed the distinction between the past and the present and created a fascist myth of the people: "For fascism, the people is the infinite number of generations that follow each other as the flow of a river and for this reason these past generations are revived in the most remote of descendants." This idea of the people made fascism stand against liberalism and socialism: "Fascism is as anti-liberal as it is anti-socialist, and in this place between liberalism and socialism fascism finds its originality. In this way it shows its revolutionary character."¹³⁶

The fascist politics of the people were supposed to create a harmonic relationship among capital, people, and nation. As the Argentine fascists affirmed in murals displayed in the streets of Buenos Aires, fascism was going to defend the "superior interest of production." "The time has come to harmonize capital and labor in order to save the nation from the voracity of professional politicians. You are with us or against us." As would later be the case for populism, for fascism, corporatist solutions could only be headed up by the leader, who in turn would be advised by technocrats and experts rather than professional politicians. Fascism was not opposed to technocracy, but technocracy had a secondary role with respect to the leaders of the people. In this regard, it was no different from populism.

Across the globe, fascists opposed the dictatorship of the proletariat with their own idea of a people's fully organized national community. They defended the people and the nation against international forms of capitalism. As the Brazilian fascist Gustavo Barroso explained, fascism, which combined the defense of God, family, and property with social justice, was against international capitalism and communism. If for the Brazilian Green Shirts, *capitalism* was not a pejorative term in itself, but became a

problem only when it was not national and social, for the Argentine fascists it was clear that incorporating the people, and especially the working classes, into mass politics was a key dimension for the success of their movement.¹³⁷

For the Argentine fascist Leopoldo Lugones this relationship between the nation and the people was the starting point of any modern theory of the state. For him, corporatism belonged almost exclusively to the politics of global fascism, but he also proposed an Argentine national version of it. Lugones saw the fascist politics of the people as being essentially antipolitical. He argued that, as a needed historical process of political reform, modern dictatorship was not the expression of conservatism, or more generally a return to the past, but a “revolutionary” attempt to radically modify the organization of the state in “authoritarian reactionary” and prepopulist fashion. By reactionary authoritarianism, Lugones meant the national and popular reaction against the “universal crisis of liberalism.”¹³⁸

The national and social reorganization of the administration that Lugones advocated included the reestablishment of domestic loans; the extirpation of “foreign agitators”; the imposition of national defense in economic and military terms; and, more important, the reform of the electoral system in terms of corporative structures of government, or what Lugones, with self-proclaimed “impersonal objectivity,” called “functional representation.” Lugones argued that functional representation, with a universal but qualified vote and organized in corporations and vocational groups, was the form of nationalism that was more adapted to the needs of Argentina. The Argentine people, and not the “amorphous masses,” would be the electors of this political system. Lugones identified ordinary politics with liberal democracy. In contrast, he saw the corporatist system as part of

the global fascist reaction against electoral representation, but he also diverged from Italian fascism in the sense that he wanted one corporation (the military), even beyond the dictator, to reign supreme. Lugones advocated for the “imposition of the military technique at the governmental plane.” He insisted on the need for an “Authoritarian reorganization” (*reorganización autoritaria*) of the state that would be solidly rooted in a new popular form of legitimacy.¹³⁹

From Sweden to Egypt, and from Portugal to Syria, fascists believed in the socially popular nature of their politics. All fascists wanted to represent the working people, whose authentic national habitus they opposed to the antinational laziness of the elites. Fascist ideologues claimed to adopt an alternative position that genuinely transformed traditional politics into people’s politics. As Mussolini saw it, from the start fascism wanted to bring politics back to the people. He had “faith” in the “inalterable” fascist program of “going to the people.” But this search for the people was far away from notions of democratic electoral representation or what he dismissed as “electoralism.” As the Colombian fascist Silvio Villegas reminded his followers, the people’s role was to obey the Duce. Hitler had said that he “never felt as the dictator of my people but rather as its conductor.” The German dictator claimed to be “indissolubly united with my people as a man and as a conductor.” Mussolini in turn, affirmed that the people “delegated” its sovereignty and power in the persona of the leader. Villegas concluded that “Hitler and Mussolini rule with the people and for the people.”¹⁴⁰ The Egyptian Green Shirt Ahmad Husayn put forward a strikingly similar interpretation of the fascists politics of the people: “By working night and day for the interest of the people as a whole,” Mussolini and Hitler had overcome social divisions. They exemplified, “the genuine rule

of the people for the sake of the people.”¹⁴¹ Similar José Vasconcelos, the most famous Mexican fascist, talked about “the liberating totalitarianisms of Hitler and Mussolini.” These leaders fought for the people and against the “international banking democracy.” Vasconcelos presented Hitler as the incarnation of the idea of his nation. For him, Hitler and Mussolini were giving a “productive lesson to all the Hispanic peoples of America.” If they learned this lesson, Latin Americans could “incarnate the collective will and convert it to a creative element and suddenly decide to change the paths of history.”¹⁴²

For fascist followers around the world, there was no fascism without the people. Mussolini had named his newspaper *The People of Italy*, and distinguished between the “true people” and those who did not belong in that group. As Matteo Pasetti observes, this theory of the people and the antipeople first legitimized political violence and then acted against parliamentary democracy. With the affirmation of the fascist dictatorship, and the defeat of its internal enemies, the homogenization of the people was combined with racism, imperialism, and the creation of new external enemies. In global terms, these fascist notions of the people were not conceived as democratic concepts, but their existence established significant continuities between fascism and populism in history. As Roger Griffin also argues in his famous generic definition of fascism as a palingenetic form of *populist* ultranationalism, fascism was a “peculiarly undemocratic mode of populism.” Thus Griffin stresses, perhaps more than other scholars, that fascism was a fascist populism.¹⁴³

Calling fascism a fascist populism often leads to the confusion of ideas and contexts. Fascism was not merely a subset of populism. If these ideas of fascism as populism help us to identify important links between fascism and populist strategies and

conceptions, their historical distinctions are also important. This is especially clear once we leave behind Eurocentric views, and the focus shifts to a more global perspective. For example, most historians of Latin American fascisms stress the distinctions between fascism and populism. In countries like Chile, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil, fascist groups presented totalitarian ideas of the people that proved influential in the subsequent history of modern populism but this does not mean fascists and populists were the same. This was especially the case after the fall of fascist regimes, once postwar Latin American populist regimes inaugurated a new modern form of populism as the preeminent authoritarian road to power. Similarly, in India, ideas of the people's community held important continuities with the later developments of Indian nationalism in a very different postwar, democratic context. In the Middle East, a right-wing political radicalism that often resembled, but was also significantly different from, European fascisms "prepared the ground for long-term authoritarian trends in the postwar Arab states." In Japan, fascism offered a combination of populist-sounding themes and appeal, mixed with the idea of *kokutai* (national polity), thus establishing continuities with the politics of the past and the present.¹⁴⁴

Across the globe, fascist ideas of the nation, the mythical leader, and the people unleashed mutually connected processes of consensus building and dictatorial repression, inclusion, and exclusion. As Michael Wildt explains, in Nazism, the idea of the community of the people meant some people were included and many others were excluded. Similarly, Dan Stone argues that the Nazi people's community implied "an endless process of 'becoming the Volk.' The more the process was realized, the more alternative conceptions of ways of living became marginalized."

This processes was a key element of the ideology of fascism, as Aristotle Kallis cogently put it, and “fascist ideologies offered the opportunity to enact a future without ‘others’, dominated by the regenerated and cleansed national community in a powerful, complete and homogenous state.”¹⁴⁵ Yet for tactical and ideological reasons, fascism needed a constant supply of enemies. In Nazism, this led to a dynamics of radicalization that increasingly moved from the invention of the enemy as antipeople to its persecution and extermination. In other forms of fascism, this move from the rhetorical enemy of the people to its actual personification in the bodies of its victims was never as radical, but it was nonetheless central.

Modern populism also embraces this intolerant creation of the people as dependent on the exclusion of others. In fascism and populism, the presence of the people-antipeople binary defines political relations, and historically both political ideologies have held to a homogenizing idea of the people. This process led to increasing political marginalization of dissenters while it also generated, for some periods, wide consensus and participation. As Dylan Riley argues, fascism pooled together claims of democratic legitimacy with authoritarian means: “Fascists combined the claim to represent the people with a rejection of politics as the institutionalized struggle of groups over control of the state. Fascists held that elections, parliaments, and discussion about public affairs—in short, the stuff of politics—were incapable of constituting and representing a ‘general will.’” The fascists wanted to replace institutional representation and political struggles with “a form of nonpolitical interest representation.”¹⁴⁶ In fascism, the total homogenization of the people happens only once electoral democracy is destroyed along with the imagined enemies of the people.

Like fascists, modern postwar populists like Juan Domingo Perón wanted to take away political representation from professional politicians. As we will see in the next chapters, populist leaders claimed that only they could speak for the people and protect them against their enemies—namely, the antipeople. However, Perón did not want to replace electoral representation altogether, nor did he want to eliminate the multiparty system. In contrast with fascism's, the populist processes of homogenizing the people are generally restricted to the rhetorical creation of its people, and they refrain from the extreme practices of violence that define the progression of fascism from the theory of the people and its enemies to the persecution and even elimination of the latter. In other words, unlike fascism, populism does not fully marginalize the "enemies of the people" from the political process. Rather, its leaders and followers want to defeat their candidates with formal democratic procedures. Elections and not elimination are key sources of legitimacy in populism. Even if one were to argue fascism has populist tendencies, and even though it defines itself politically against the enemy of the people, it does not require its victims to play an active role in politics after the destruction of democracy has been accomplished.

The fascist notion of the people produces consensus through political violence. It turns enemies of the people into enemies of the state. In doing so, it consolidates totalitarian dictatorships. The populist homogenizing idea of the people promotes intolerance within democracy. It embattles democracy without destroying it. Populism creates, and depends on, minorities to vote and lose in open elections. These minorities are not eliminated or even substantially persecuted. Their role is to vote for those who have been designated the antipeople. Only after winning democratic elections can populist leaders claim their

legitimacy as the only true expression of the true community of the people.

Fascism was against electoral representation, while populism channeled elections in authoritarian terms. The historical continuities and distinctions between fascism and populism—namely, how forms of the inclusion and participation of the many in fascism and populism were coupled with marginalization and exclusion—are generally lost in theory. While, some theorists reduce fascism to being just another type of populism, others simply ignore their historical connections. The most productive example of the failure to acknowledge the historical context is the key work of the preeminent Argentine theorist of populism Ernesto Laclau.

Laclau is the author of arguably the most significant current theory of populism. He is also attentive to the global dimensions of populism, and this attention is generally lost on his many anti-populist critics. If fascism is generally absent in his famous work *Populist Reason*, it is overwhelmingly present in his earlier work from the 1970s. He argued then that, rather than being reactionary, fascism became one of the “possible ways of articulating the popular democratic interpellations into political discourse.” Fascism used mass politics and the idea of a unified people to guarantee that socialism would not be a popular alternative. “Fascism has been the extreme form in which popular interpellations, in their most radicalized form—jacobinism—could be transformed into the political discourse of the dominant fraction of the bourgeoisie.” Debating those who attempted to ground populism in a specific period and context, Laclau argued that populism appeared at different times and places. In this context, he suggested that fascism was just one populist experience among many others. In short, for Laclau, Fascism is populism.

In his treatment of fascism and populism as forms of democratic interpellation, Laclau collapses important boundaries between the two. While fascism did first appear within a democratic context, it also used democratic interpellations to destroy democracy. In this sense, fascism presented populist forms when it was part of the opposition but not when it was the regime. This important dimension in the work of Laclau was relegated to insignificance in his most recent and influential work on populism. Without sufficiently noting this change, Slavoj Žižek, another prominent theorist of fascism and populism whose work lacks historical perspective, blamed Laclau for ignoring the perils behind the link between fascism and populism. Populism, even when it was on the left, preserved the capitalist edifice, leaving it untouched, and could not be emancipatory insofar as it presented a notion of the enemy that was deeply rooted in protofascist tendencies. Radical popular politics were replaced with the desire to destroy the enemies of the unified people. He stated, “fascism definitely is a kind of populism.” In making fascism a subspecies of populism, Žižek showed how fascism had populist undercurrents and why populism displayed fascist tendencies. However, important historical distinctions between fascist and populist enemy-making theories and practices were lost in his analysis.¹⁴⁷

Fascists and populists shared a notion of the people as threatened by the ultimate enemies, which led to alarmist ideas of the onset of apocalyptic times and crisis that only their leaders could resolve. In fascism, this notion of the people was radically exclusionary, and eventually racist, in most if not all cases, while most populist notions of the people, even when they were xenophobic and racist, tended to be more indeterminate and rhetorical. The fascist notion of the people moved theory toward practice in radically violent ways that were absent from modern

postfascist populism. Dictatorship was the form of governance under which this radical violence took place. Populism, on the other hand, represented an unstable mix where electoral democracy could be squared in practice with authoritarianism.¹⁴⁸

Fascism often used democratic means to eliminate democracy while constantly and paradoxically claiming that its dictatorial totalitarianism was the best means of popular democratic representation. Leaders like Mussolini in Italy or Uriburu in Argentina claimed that fascism and dictatorship represented higher stages of democracy.¹⁴⁹ As is well known, these fascist understandings of democracy led to the destruction of democratic forms of representation and the rule of law. Extreme fascist violence led to war, genocidal imperialism, and the Holocaust. After 1945, the result of this extreme interpretation of the supposed desires of the “majority” led to a sort of crisis of fascist thinking on representation that paralleled its lack of power and legitimacy in the emergent Cold War era. This was the context in which the Peronist third way emerged as a reformulated fascism, one more rooted in democratic forms of representation. Other Latin American populist regimes soon followed in countries like Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela. These classical populist regimes were not imitations of Peronism but rather converging symptoms of a new political epoch in which populism would take center stage and achieve and keep power. This is what I call a new complete form of populism that differed from fascism. Emerging from the ruins of fascism, this new modern populism was very different from its ancestors. After fascism, it implied a transnational rethinking of the need to leave totalitarian dictatorship and extreme violence behind while keeping authoritarianism. The result was a political ideology radically different from the original. This new modern postwar populism in power

was a new genus not a political subspecies.¹⁵⁰ As had happened before with fascism, only after the epochal turning point of ideas and movements had reached power for the first time did populism become more complete as a formidable challenger of liberalism and socialism.

Modern populism arose from the defeat of fascism as a novel postfascist attempt to return the fascist experience to the democratic path, thus creating an authoritarian regime form of democracy that would stress social participation combined with intolerance and rejection of plurality. In populism, political rights were highly strained but never eradicated, as they had been under fascism. Modern populism pushed democracy to its limits but generally did not break it. Early Cold War Latin America was the first context in which such a postfascist attempt to redefine democratic theory and practice took place. It was there and then that modern populism first emerged as a regime.¹⁵¹ Thus, after 1945 fascism became populism, which is the subject of the next chapter.