Does the "Fascism Debate" Matter for Understanding 2024 American Politics?

By
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In 2020, historians and public intellectuals began to ask whether fascism had come to America, with many analysts arguing in the affirmative. I argue here that fascism as a category has an "epistemic plasticity" that attenuates its analytic utility when it is used outside of historical context. Fascism as an analytic device in the American context, therefore, obscures dangerous tendencies in American politics and culture. Where European political culture is characterized by secular and religious solidarity rooted in national state institutions, American political culture lacks collectivism and solidarity and is susceptible to nativism, a distinctly American impulse that is unmoored from institutional arrangements. In the 2024 American election cycle, analysts should focus on factors that threaten democratic institutions and strategies that strengthen democracy. Comparisons that apply imperfectly to the American situation will not save democracy.

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Fascinating Fascism

In late 2016, in response to the widespread media narrative that linked Trump to Brexit

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and an array of European populists, I wrote a short essay entitled, "Trump Isn't a European-style Populist: That's Our Problem," in which I argued that the comparison between Trump and his supposed European counterparts was flawed (Berezin 2016). European populists are career politicians who deploy a standard nationalist script to address any number of political issues. Their predictability as well as commitment to their national political institutions was their strength—and their weakness. In contrast, Trump questioned the very legitimacy of political institutions, from the courts to the electoral system, and denied the reality of facts. My essay concluded that Trump's unpredictability made him "profoundly dangerous" and pointed to a rocky road ahead for American democracy.

I did not imagine back then that the dangers posed by Trump would take the form of a refusal to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election. I did not imagine an attack on the U.S. Capitol building that would be engineered from inside the White House and include the threat of assassinating the vice president. I envisioned milder transgressions than the ones that culminated in the failed coup of January 6th. As Trump's behavior became increasingly contemptuous of democratic practice and norms and his rhetoric became more inflamed, the populist comparison lost salience. In its place, a growth industry in public commentary on fascism developed. Academics (for example, Ben-Ghiat 2020; Churchwell 2020; Finchelstein 2020; Snyder 2017; Stanley 2018) and public intellectuals became laser-focused on Trump's resemblance to a host of past and present authoritarian political leaders with a weak attachment to democracy. Adding to this analytic commentary, politicians and pundits deployed "fascism" as a political expletive (de Grazia 2020; Kuklick 2022).

Fascism is "fascinating," as Sontag (1975) observed and recent history confirms. The academic debate bled into popular culture and political communication. Lewis's (1935) *It Can't Happen Here* and Roth's (1997) *American Pastoral* became popular again. At the Democratic National Convention in 2020, New York Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez argued that "stopping fascism in the United States. That is what Donald Trump represents" was the major point on the national political agenda. Ahead of the 2022 midterm elections, President Biden described MAGA philosophy as "semi-fascism." He then went on national television to give a speech entitled "Standing Up for Democracy" (Biden 2022).

As we look ahead to the 2024 presidential campaign and election, the events of January 2021 force us to consider whether the past is prologue (Berezin 2022). Did Trump's challenge to the 2020 election results and his loyal followers' willingness to commit seditious actions in support of that challenge signal a fascist turn in American politics? Or was it merely an outlier event tied to Trump?

Trump's unwillingness to leave the public stage, coupled with his decision to run for office again, suggests that now is a propitious moment to ask if fascism is the correct focus to understand the political meaning and consequences of the past seven years. Trump's permanent campaign mode; his MAGA rallies; and his complete disregard for governmental norms, laws, and practices evoke multiple dimensions of interwar fascist politics and practice. Yet the academic experts who have explored the similarities between Trumpian politics and the 1930s

acknowledge that whatever Trump's autocratic proclivities, we do not yet have a fascist regime—the events of January 6th notwithstanding.

With the spring 2024 primary upon us, social scientists can draw lessons from Europe's past. Our task is to figure out which of those lessons are meaningful in the current American moment. *Making the Fascist Self* (Berezin 1997) argues that Italian fascism was more than the sum of its constitutive features. Fascism in its national variations is notoriously difficult to define, making it susceptible to epistemic plasticity. As a concept, fascism tends to act as a "bridging metaphor" (Alexander 2003)—that is, as a code word for evil, violence, and authoritarian behavior, whether it be political, cultural, or social. Definitions of fascism tend toward reductionism even when sophisticated scholars offer them.

The purpose of this article is to not to enter the definitional game but rather to ask whether focusing on fascism is politically useful for thinking about America's political future. Thinking about fascism in our present moment requires, in my view, a focus on four issues: first, a hard look at salient features and outcomes of the Trump presidency; second, a view of fascism that focuses on historical methodology and the question of comparison across time and space; third, a revisitation of empirical evidence that asks what was happening in Europe in the 1930s—particularly Italy, where fascism began; and last, the question of political strategy—what is to be done? Fascism as an analytic concept is an academic discussion that is tangential to this article. What happened between 2016 and 2020 is background. The larger part of this article focuses on the comparative political culture of Europe and the U.S., with a view toward thinking about a political strategy that will reinforce American democracy.

What Did Trump Do?

Trump is a showman—not a talented politician. An astute politician—especially an aspiring autocrat—would have recognized the opportunity for power consolidation and electoral success that the COVID-19 pandemic afforded. The virus was democratic. Everyone was at risk. Even a half-hearted attempt to control the virus in March 2020 would have whittled away, if not erased, Biden's margin of victory. Trump's own pollster told him that citizens' primary interest was the virus and urged Trump to focus his campaign energies there (Dawsey 2021). But Trump did not listen and instead turned a vehicle of political unification into one that intensified already existing polarization (Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck 2022). Trump's initial denial of the virus, rants against science and the "China" virus, and his pitting of states against states eventually ensured his electoral defeat (Luce 2020).

Dead loved ones coupled with lost wages were more politically persuasive than angry Tweets and MAGA rallies. In contrast to Trump, Joe Biden understood the pragmatic need to deal with the virus as well as the symbolic value. His inaugural team recognized the opportunity that COVID-19 offered to stage a public display of national cohesion to counter the polarization that had plagued

American politics during the Trump presidency. On the eve of Biden's inauguration, buildings in Washington, DC, were lit to commemorate the lives lost to COVID-19. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris and their spouses stood at the Washington Monument to participate in a moment of silence. At 5:30 p.m., all Americans had the opportunity to participate in a moment of silence across the U.S., and church bells rang in "a national moment of unity and remembrance" to commemorate the dead. Political ritual unifies as well as repels. The January 19th commemoration unified, in contrast to the January 6th insurrection, which repelled. Biden and his team staged a political spectacle of national cohesion. They understood that grief and tears are more powerful than the spectacle of disruption, anger, and blood. In short, the period between November 6th and January 20th revealed that Trump had lost on multiple levels while nonetheless leaving the legacy of the damage done during his four years in office.

The debate over whether Trump is a fascist may ring alarm bells, but that framing hides more than it reveals about the illiberal tendencies in contemporary American politics. Trump's presidency laid bare the fissures that are embedded in American democracy and begged a reconsideration of whether American institutions and democratic norms are up to the task of resisting authoritarian rule.

First, our institutions held—but often, barely. The four years of the Trump presidency showed how flexible they are. Who knew that the head of the General Services Administration had the power to hold up a presidential transition or that the operations of the post office could interfere with ballots? If Trump had been a slightly more rational person, how far might William Barr have pushed his vision of the unitary executive?

Second, Trump encouraged and gave new legitimacy to networks of paramilitary "patriots" who use armed intervention and violence in local and national politics when they dislike the outcome of standard political practices. Paramilitary groups are not new to the U.S. They have existed on the margins of society in rural and sometimes urban areas (Belew 2018). But Trump invited them onto a larger stage on January 6th, and, in my view, they will not leave the political scene any time soon. Today, a group of Proud Boys is as likely to show up on the steps of a state capitol building (as they did in Oregon in 2021) as they are to stage some minor protest in a rural backwater. Charlottesville was the beginning, not the end, of a new genre of organized racism (Miller-Idriss 2020).

Third, the idea that we dodged a bullet in 2020 ignores the fact that there are smarter, more efficient Trumps on the horizon. Senator Josh Hawley, the conservative Republican senator from Missouri, was the name that frequently came up on Trump 2.0 lists until he tried to stop the certification of the election results on January 6th. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis had his moment; former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley may be having hers at the time of this article. The question of a Trump replacement is hardly settled, even as we approach primary season. Still, the Trump wannabes out there are sometimes smarter and sometimes more extreme and unpredictable than the man himself. Many are trying to reverse established law. None of this bodes well for the normal practices of American democracy.

Lastly, Trump and Trumpism have revealed a willingness on the part of leaders and citizens to chip away at the institutions, norms, and values of our long-established, if sometimes flawed, democracy. Trump told Americans that democracy did not matter, and 74 million persons, not all of whom were fledgling fascists, were not sufficiently alarmed by that sentiment to vote against him. The failure to value democracy, rather than the desire to embrace fascism, is the great danger that Trump poses. The ongoing willingness of his supporters to believe Trump's "big lie" about the stolen election and their nonchalance in the face of Trump's taking and refusing to return classified documents suggest an ongoing and pervasive undervaluation of democracy and indifference to democratic norms. Although events in the contemporary U.S. may not exactly replicate the 1930s in Europe, we do not need to abandon the fascist comparison entirely. European fascism ended badly, and we would do well to at least keep its example in mind.

Comparison and Epistemic Plasticity

If fascism is to be more than simply a label for political behavior that is either unacceptable or antidemocratic, it should be embedded in a conceptual narrative. For example, if one asked an undergraduate who had taken only an introductory course in classical sociological or political theory to describe Marxism, the most likely reply would be something like, "Capitalists who own the means of production do not pay workers a fair price for their labor. Capitalists exploit the worker, and eventually, the worker can no longer stand it and a Communist revolution ensues." This is a narrative with a causal mechanism—simplistic though it may be. As Hedström and Swedberg (1998) argued, a theory without a mechanism has weak analytic power. In contrast, even the most elegant attempts to produce a definition of fascism, such as Eco's (1995) concept of "Ur-Fascism," rely on lists of characteristics rather than identifying social mechanisms that explain what separates fascism from other mobilizing ideologies. Where Stanley's (2018) *How Fascism Works* lists a series of descriptors that characterize fascism, his more recent work argues that philosophy needs to take fascism seriously as a concept (Stanley 2019). This shift suggests that he might be moving in the direction of a mechanism-based, narrative understanding of fascism.

Historian and legal scholar Moyn's (2020) *New York Review of Books* article, "The Trouble with Comparisons," argues that locating Trump's election in the politics of the 1930s obscures more than it reveals and deflects public attention from real problems. Berezin (2019) questions the analytic utility of the term *fascism* to address our current moment. Without conceptual boundaries within narrative frameworks, it is difficult to see how political events fit together in any politically consequential manner (Berezin 2012). The epistemic plasticity of the term presents a challenge, not an invitation, to theoretical complacency.

In contrast to the U.S. today, liberal democracy was not deeply rooted in the countries that succumbed to fascist rule in the past (Conway 2020). And if we conclude that Europe in the 1930s is not the best comparison point for the U.S.

today, then we must take on the challenging question of what an appropriate comparison would be. To find them, it is useful to put aside the features of fascism that analysts typically focus upon. Analysts who set out to define fascism typically focus on aggregations of characteristics—such as political violence, public spectacle, suspension of democratic practices, hypermasculinity, corruption, and the list goes on. They often come up short with a conceptual frame, since all these characteristics tend to mix and match depending upon the geographical location or historical moment.

To think comparatively, and perhaps more systematically, about events that began in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, we should first examine the aspirational structure of fascism rather than its constituent characteristics—what it wanted to be, rather than what it was. With a few exceptions (Paxton 2005; Sternhell 1995), scholars have not tended to focus upon critical exegesis of fascist texts and ideas. And since they never considered fascism seriously as a system of thought, why would they? It lacked coherence, and its contributions to social and political life were, as noted above, seen as metaphors for evil and destruction. Wimmer (2023) offers a way out of the dilemma by thinking about fascism's influence within any given formerly fascist state and also about its ability to travel across geopolitical boundaries. In a discussion of historical legacies' impact on contemporary European politics, he argues that legacies are not static, but rather "layered." Multiple features of national histories—for example, war and/or religion—influence the ways in which citizens relate to contemporary events and the paths of action that they might pursue. But no feature of the past will produce the same legacy across a given national space. What is more, the idea that these aftereffects travel across geopolitical boundaries is even more complicated. The effect of the past is multiple and never static, and even the same aspect of the past (such as war) can produce different memories and actions in the present. A finely grained historical analysis of central texts and events can bolster this argument. Wimmer's approach is useful not only in thinking through recent public comments on fascism but also in developing a more robust and historically grounded approach to fascism itself.

Fascism as Political Aspiration

Fascism was a social as well as political program. Although present in the historiography of fascism in Italy and elsewhere, the social dimension is absent from current discussion of the current American context. When thinking about America's supposed fascist turn, it is worthwhile to examine aspects of fascism's social program. What scholars and pundits label as fascism began in Italy in 1922, when the Italian king invited Benito Mussolini, a former socialist journalist, to form a government. With his paramilitary Black Shirts in attendance, Mussolini staged a *faux* March on Rome. (Historical accounts show that he took a train from Milan to the outskirts of the city and walked in with his entourage.) The march was theater, not a *coup d'état.* Much current literature focuses upon fascist

violence: there was indeed violence (although not against ordinary citizens) and strong persecution of the left—Antonio Gramsci languished in prison; the Roselli brothers were murdered in France. In addition, the Italian regime developed, and delivered on, social programs based on an ideology of work and family.[1]

I have often made the argument, here and elsewhere, that fascism was a historical moment tied to a historical moment, but I would not argue that it did not have an underlying ideological form, albeit one more focused on political style than on political content (Berezin 1994). After all, the calling card of the National Fascist Party, "Believe, Fight and Obey," left the ends of action undefined.

Although Mussolini (1932) coined the term *fascism* to denote a collectivist system of government in his Italian *Encyclopedia* article, he did not do the theoretical thinking around the concept. In fact, most of the *Encyclopedia* entry was written by Giovanni Gentile, an Italian philosopher and Mussolini's minister of education. He had laid out the details for this new political philosophy in an academic article in *Foreign Affairs* (Gentile 1928), one of many legal and philosophy journals that thrived in Italy during the 1920s and 1930s wherein professors of various disciplines aimed to convey the meaning of fascism to a general and academic public.[2]

As Gentile (1928) described it, fascism aspired to community and coherence—to eliminating the boundary between the state and the individual. Liberalism, with its soulless individualism, was as much fascism's enemy as Marxism was. No matter what form it takes, Trumpism, with its affinity for isolationism, opposition to free trade (Mutz 2021), and antipathy to government regulation, makes no common cause with collectivism.

Berezin (1997), rather than trying to define fascism, draws on Holmes (1993) to talk about the dimensions on which it differed from liberalism as a political idea. After a meticulous exegesis of party and regime documents, holidays, practices, and texts, Berezin (1997) argues that fascism differed from liberalism in that it aspired to erase the distinction between the "public and private self." In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor (1989) argues that modern, post-1789 European society is characterized by an embrace of the notion of multiple selves and multiple identities. Taylor uses the term "hierarchies of identity," meaning that different identities have salience for individuals at different moments—some identities are private (religion, family) and some are public (citizenship, position in a labor market). Institutions buttress and laws define modern identities. Fascism aims to destroy this distinction or to fuse the distinction between public and private. You are a fascist at home and at work; your identity exists in the State. This fusion was aspirational (this type of fusing rarely succeeds), but this ideal stands in sharp contrast to liberalism's sharp delineation between public and private. This ideational style bears a kinship relation to the Roman Catholic assumption that a Catholic is Catholic in public and in private.[3]

In "Che cosa e il fascismo?" ("What Is Fascism?"), Gentile (1926 [1991]) underscores this similarity when he compares fascist practice to Roman Catholic practice: "One cannot be a fascist in politics and not fascist in school, not fascist in one's family, not fascist in one's work. Like a Catholic, if one is Catholic, one

invests his whole life with religious sentiment. . . . [If] one is truly Catholic, and has a religious sense, one remembers always in the highest part of one's mind, to work and think and pray and meditate" (Berezin 1997, 51). In short, fascism as Gentile describes it is a style of behavior rather than a system of ideas, and, as a style of behavior, it is adaptable to any context. Polanyi's ([1944] 2001) *Great Transformation* is the standard economistic account of the relation between capitalism and fascism. Yet even Polanyi (1936) authored an earlier essay on the "essence of fascism" that spoke to its religious dimension.[4]

Fascism when it emerged in 1920s Italy could easily establish a kinship relationship with Catholicism that had payoffs for both church and state. The institutional arrangement between the Roman Catholic Church and the fascist state in Italy, while fascinating, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, that this kinship relationship was neither exclusively institutional nor doctrinal in the standard sense, although it may have favored certain ideas, policies, and practices, some of which were decidedly nondemocratic.[5] And the social and cultural dimension of fascism embodied in the Italian relation to Catholicism is again being invoked in Italy. While Giorgia Meloni sticks to a rigid affirmation of the Italian constitution, the calling card of Italy's new, nationalist prime minister is "I am Giorgia. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a Christian." Her theme signals a conservative social agenda that is firmly anti-trans and anti–gay marriage (Berezin 2023).

Work Rather than Labor: Grounding Illiberalism in Production

In short, fascism was a form of illiberalism with religious and secular origins, which placed no specific requirements for how events and institutional actions would play out. One feature of fascist practice is its reification of the idea of work as opposed to labor. Work took place in the secular space in which individuals linked their creativity and source of well-being to the state. One can see traces of this romantic vision of work, albeit with far different meanings and implications, in Marx's (1959) discussion of alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Many fascists, including Mussolini, started out as socialists, and this shift is not unique among right-wing politicians and others.

But the notion of work, as opposed to labor (which is more commodified in meaning and practice), was a dominant theme in much fascist writing—as well as other, nonfascist writings. For example, Pope Leo XIII's (1891) encyclical *Rerum Novarum* or *Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*, issued on May 15, 1891, is widely viewed as articulating an alternative to socialism and anticipating how later writers envisioned the role of labor in the fascist state. *Rerum Novarum* also introduced the idea of subsidiarity, which is a major organizing principle of European Union politics. Another earlier influence on fascist writing was Durkheim's (1902) preface to the second edition of *The Division of Labor in*

Society. This early, non-Italian work formulated an understanding of corporations as a social body, an idea that would become the fascist theory of corporations.

The major fascist articulation of the relation between work and social integration appeared in the 1927 *Labor Charter*, which described a way of working based upon principles of hierarchy and order. Instead of joining labor unions, workers were expected to join occupational corporations or groups that defined their place in a productive universe. (Today, the archive of the fascist corporations—not to be confused with financial bodies—resides in the library of the Confederazione Italiana dei Sindacati Lavoratori [CISL] in Rome.) *Work and Passion* were the themes of the fascist regime's 1927 fifth-anniversary celebration of the March on Rome (Berezin 1997, 102–8). This emphasis on the social value of work was not unique to Italy: *travail, famille, patrie* (work, family, fatherland) was the motto of Vichy France, and *Arbeit macht frei* (Work sets you free) was emblazoned on the entrance to Auschwitz.

The references cited above are only samples of a larger analysis of work from the late 19th century through the interwar period. Their importance for my discussion of fascism lies in how they describe the fusion of public and private self in the economic and political arena. Or to put it more colloquially, you are your work, and your work advances the state—fascist or otherwise. Article 1 of the 1948 postwar Italian constitution states, "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour." Work is a duty as well as a right.

Which Isms Matter in the American Context?

Scholars of fascism often overlook a type of collectivism that was prevalent in Europe from the revolutions of 1848 to the end of World War II. Fascism, corporativism, and even socialism were distinctive ways of being in the world based on shared cultures of solidarity. With its roots in Catholic social teaching, the idea of solidarity was religious in nature, and fascism appropriated that religious dimension. But solidarity was also secular and the core of socialist organizing. The other form of collectivism that began in the early 19th century—nationalism—also blended secular and religious forms of solidarity.[6] Unlike fascism, however, nationalism required only a partial fusing of public and private. Even the most committed national citizen would not likely define every aspect of private life in national terms. Nationalism can be benign or toxic depending upon the historical moment (Berezin 2021a). But fascism in its ideal form demands obliteration of the self—a demand that leads to failed aspirations, extremism, and a tendency to violence.

Fascism, along with socialism and nationalism, are distinctively European ideas. They never had much traction in the U.S., as they all assume solidarity and a collective approach to social and political life that is absent from American political culture and practice. Trump wanted to smash institutions, but he had no plan to create any new ones. By contrast, interwar European fascists wanted to create totalitarian states. And across contemporary Europe, the right and left

view neoliberalism as a threat because its core commitment to market fundamentalism weakens social solidarity. Contemporary European populists want to restore their respective states to their nationalist roots.

Trump is at the extreme end of an American disposition to go it alone and resist any forms of state regulation. In these qualities, he is essentially American. Solidarity, secular or religious, is not on his radar screen; nor is it constitutive of American political culture. For this reason, contemporary America will never be fascist in the full-blown European sense of the term. And so, fascism in that European sense does not add analytic power to our understanding of democratic weakening in American politics.

Trump, as I argued in the beginning of this article, has been dangerous and destructive of American politics and institutions. He seized the moment in 2016 but lost it in 2020 when COVID-19 appeared. He failed at seizing the state on January 6th. The fact that "freelance" rioters could turn up seemingly out of the blue that day suggests that the U.S. is in a dangerous political moment that needs to be understood. In this effort, the term *fascism* distracts. But if fascism is the wrong comparative frame, what ideological frame does describe the current breakdown in American politics and weakening of democracy?

In analyses of right-wing political parties and movements in contemporary European and American politics, scholars and pundits have begun to use the terms *nativism* and *nationalism* interchangeably (Duyvendak, Kesic, and Stacey 2022). As my discussion of fascism in this article implies, nativism and nationalism represent different political phenomena. Nativism may be a part of nationalism but, in the European context, does not supersede the institutional demands of nationalism. To elide the difference between the two terms obscures dangerous tendencies in American politics and culture. At its core, nativism is an individualistic phenomenon that exists outside the state, whereas modern nationalism is a collective sentiment embedded in state institutions. Even though scholars use the term nativism to describe xenophobic movements and feelings in Europe, nativism is a distinctly American political impulse that is unmoored from institutional arrangements.[7] Nativism is singularly focused on the individual. In contrast to nationalism, it is about acceptable versus unacceptable individuals and not about anyone's relationship to national institutions. This a-institutional quality of nativism makes it particularly dangerous and particularly threatening to democratic publics and practices. In the American context, its roots lie in colonialism, slavery, and the politics of the late 1890s. It is the red thread of American political development up to 2016, and today, it is interchangeable with racism.

Nativism's European cousin—Nazism—is different from fascism. Nazism, not fascism, had an elective affinity with American nativism. The Nazis turned to American racial laws to develop their racial policies (Whitman 2017), and, in turn, various American nativist groups in the 1930s and 1940s modeled themselves on what they perceived as Nazism (see accounts in Churchwell 2018; Gallagher 2021; Steigmann-Gall 2017). Because exclusion is constitutive of nativism, struggles for inclusion lie continually beneath the surface of American politics—no matter what form they take. Focusing on the distinction between

nativism and nationalism, rather than on the fascist movement of the 1930s, is a better way to understand the different political legacies that pose challenges to democracy today, not only in the U.S. and Europe but globally.

Thinking about the 2024 Election Cycle

Fascism, as scholars acknowledge, is notoriously difficult to define (Berezin 2019). The imprecision embedded in the term yields a kind of epistemic plasticity that makes it a distraction when it comes to practical political strategizing, where precision is required. Scholars have better terms to employ as we try to understand the challenges to American democracy that the 2024 presidential election might pose. Why use an imprecise term when precise analytic frames are at our disposal? In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have demonstrated the fragility of democratic governance by focusing on concrete institutional issues. Scholars concerned about democracy and the 2024 election likewise have concrete issues to address: first, the attack on institutions, including the courts and system of election rules; second, issues of freedom of expression, with violations at the state level; and third, the challenge of revitalization, principally an economic issue because people who are economically stable tend not to be interested in destroying the security that democratic governance provides.

But these are merely the tip of the analytic iceberg, and we should do more than focus on interpretation. Fascism can be fascinating and seductive, and it certainly leads to destruction. But for the present moment in the U.S., it is a distraction. There is work to be done, and comparisons and warnings that apply imperfectly to the American situation will not save democracy.

Notes

1. A review of the vast historiography of the complicated intertwining of socialist and fascist projects is beyond the scope of this article, but de Grazia's (1981, 1992) monographs on the *Dopolavoro* (the fascist after-work organization) and women in fascist Italy give an idea of the political and social complexity.

2. Mattei's (2022) study of comparative austerity politics in England and Italy in the interwar years demonstrates how involved the Italian intellectuals were in fascist policy design. After the war, many of these economic thinkers returned to public life, including Luigi Einaudi, who became the first president of the "new" democratic Italian Republic.

3. John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech to the Protestant bishops in Houston refers to this public/private distinction to assure the bishops and Americans that he could be a Catholic and a president in Protestant America (Kennedy 1960); if he were elected president, the Vatican would not rule the U.S.

4. Fascism also bears a kinship relation to other ideologies of solidarity, such as socialism or communism (Comrades!) or mafia groups (*Cosa Nostra*), even though socialism and communism come out of a radically secular dialogue around wage labor and capitalist exploitation.

5. The relation between the Catholic Church and nation-state formation in Europe is just starting to be explored (e.g., Grzymała-Busse 2023).

6. See Bonikowski (2016) for an introduction to the voluminous literature on nationalism.

7. See Friedman (1967) for an early summary of the history of this concept with respect to the U.S.

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