

## Three Reflections on New Directions in Comparative Fascism Studies

Roger Griffin ► ORCID: 0000-0002-6626-2818  
*Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK*  
rdgriffin@brookes.ac.uk

Aristotle Kallis ► ORCID: 0000-0001-6711-1969  
*Keele University, Keele, UK*  
a.kallis@keele.ac.uk

Constantin Iordachi  
*Central European University, Vienna, Austria*  
iordachinc@ceu.edu

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### Abstract

In this article, three leading scholars of comparative fascism studies offer their thoughts and reflections on the state of the field. It seeks to stimulate debate and reflection on how to study fascism in the years to come and addresses a number of challenges facing this area of study. Aristotle Kallis focuses on the need to recognise the value of ‘associational’ perspectives, to highlight how fascism historically drew together a constellation of ideas on powerful ways that allowed a new form of politics to emerge. Roger Griffin builds on this discussion by warning that the term ‘fascism’ is in danger of becoming overused, especially to comment on contemporary developments, and such over-inflation threatens the term’s analytical value in identifying political forms that aspire to revolutionary change. Finally, Constantin Iordachi concludes the article by addressing East Central European contexts and explores the relationship between fascist radicalisations and de-democratisation processes, both in the interwar period and following the collapse of communist states from 1989 to highlight the

continued importance of fascism as a tool for the study of ongoing contexts as well as the past.

**Keywords:** fascism, associational, transnational, extreme right, far right, radicalisation, de-democratisation

Developing the interdisciplinary field of comparative fascism studies is central to *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*. In this article, we invited short reflections on the state of research from three leading figures who have been long-standing supporters of the journal: Aristotle Kallis, Roger Griffin and Constantin Iordachi. We asked them to consider how the field of fascism studies is evolving, and to discuss areas they were either particularly concerned about or felt required deeper consideration. Kallis's contribution begins the discussion and focuses on the ideological constellations that framed the development of Fascism in Italy, and more widely in Europe. He proposes the need for 'associational' perspectives to contribute to new studies of fascism that recognise its transnational and even global nature, and unique affective qualities. Griffin comments on the recent expansion in usage of the word 'fascism' by politicians and journalists and essentially urges restraint and more careful deployment to avoid inflation of the term in ways that lead it to encompass an ever-expanding range of phenomena, diminishing its heuristic value. Finally, Iordachi considers the nature of fascism and its relationship to wider aspects of the political right, reflecting on processes of fascist radicalisation as well as de-democratisation, and concluding with commentary on broad synergies found in the interwar era and the period following the collapse of communist states from 1989. We hope these contributions allow for deeper reflections on how to study fascism and will inspire new contributions to the field of comparative fascism studies.

### **Aristotle Kallis: Fascist Mobilities: The Untapped Potential of an 'Associational' Perspective**

Research on fascism has thrived thanks to the pioneering conceptual groundwork that, following years of confusion and conceptual misuse, finally established its ideological specificity and political distinctiveness. Since then, theoretical and comparative/transnational perspectives have also highlighted how connections and exchanges within and across bor-

ders shaped fascism's history as a genuinely international force. I argue that probing these connections as movements and contacts to be traced, mapped, and then classified according to a priori types is not enough. Instead, I suggest that we reappraise them as generative of fascism's global histories. My intention is to sketch the analytical benefits of an 'associational' perspective that seeks to shift some of the analytical focus from fascism's historical outcomes to the distributed agencies that made them possible and shaped their dynamic in each context.

Allow me to start with two key observations. First, the most striking success of interwar fascism cannot be accurately measured by Robert Paxton's 'stages' model that sees mass support, executive power, and radicalisation as its key benchmarks.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, very few fascist movements succeeded in getting to power in one way or another. In the majority of cases, fascists were either co-opted by more mainstream political forces or they were propelled to power as a result of war or military occupation. Few of them, too, achieved significant public support, whether gauged by electoral results or by significant social traction measured by party membership. By contrast, fascism's formidable power in the interwar years stemmed from its apparent ability to strike a chord with diverse political constituencies (many of which did not fully share, indeed even rejected aspects of the fascists' revolutionary outlook or their extreme political behaviour) across an astonishing number of societies across the world.<sup>2</sup> Kurt Weyland's comparative work on fascism's 'diffusion' has highlighted how the crisis of liberal/democratic political cultures was fuelled by, on the one hand, fear of a communist revolution and, on the other hand, distrust of the parliamentary system's capacity for safeguarding elite interests vis-a-vis the spectre of revolutionary upheaval. In this constellation, fascism's emergence as a radical alternative political formula produced not so much a 'fascist' diffusion but instead a significant proliferation of a broader range of authoritarian solutions on a global scale.<sup>3</sup> Weyland's distinction is important because it extends the diffusionist paradigm beyond the conventional notion of off-the-shelf circulation and supposed adoption on the destination end. He also drew attention to the primary agency of local actors in their interactions with the emerg-

1 Robert O. Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (1998): 1–23.

2 Stein Ugelvik Larsen, ed., *Fascism outside Europe: The European Impulse against Domestic Conditions in the Diffusion of Global Fascism* (Social Science Monographs, 2001).

3 Kurt Weyland, *Assault on Democracy: Communism, Fascism, and Authoritarianism During the Interwar Years* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 194; Kurt Weyland, "Fascism's Missionary Ideology and the Autocratic Wave of the Interwar Years," *Democratization* 24, no. 7 (2017): 1253–70.

ing landscapes of radical fascist politics. Thus, alongside the ideologically driven diffusion of fascism among a transnational network of radical outliers, there was a more pragmatic and reflexive process of engagement with the unfolding fascist experience that prompted broader authoritarian constituencies to translate observed fascist political innovations selectively and creatively. It was this process that powered the most surprising diffusion of fascist ideas (e.g. corporatism),<sup>4</sup> and political-institutional experiments (e.g. youth, sport, and after-work organisations), as alternatives to liberal-capitalist mainstream and as the most effective bulwark to a worldwide communist revolution.

Weyland's findings are an important reminder that fascism's impact extended much further than the clusters of radical political outliers, only a small fraction of whom gained significant social traction and achieved success in the polls, let alone came to exercise power independently. Diffusion was the result of both active, enthusiastic choice and collateral strategies, many of which involved fascism alongside, without or in spite of the trademark fascist mavericks. The biggest benefit of the diffusionist perspective is its relative agnosticism as to what exactly was happening as part of the diffusion process—what was being diffused and when, how and why it was (or was not) being diffused, and how the encounter between the external and local played out in diverse national contexts. The opening up of the vista to a more pluralistic story of authoritarian-fascist proliferation is a welcome sign of maturity and confidence in the field of fascism studies. In fact, by gradually becoming less fascism-centric and more attentive to the broader authoritarian entanglements that challenged the liberal-democratic paradigm in the interwar period, research on fascism has become even more relevant in contemporary debates about democratic resilience in the face of populist resurgence and the growing popularity of illiberal/authoritarian alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

My second observation concerns the very essence of what we now call 'fascism' in the generic sense of the term. When news of Mussolini's spectacular political success following the Fascist March on Rome in October 1922 caught the world's attention, very little was actually known about the ideology or political programme of this radical political prodigy, whose leader

4 António Costa Pinto and Federico Finchelstein, *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Europe and Latin America: Crossing Borders* (Routledge, 2018).

5 E.g. Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (University of California Press, 2017); Geoff Eley, "What Is Fascism and Where Does It Come From?" *History Workshop Journal* 91, no. 1 (2021): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbab003>.

had been appointed prime minister in Italy. We often use the metaphor of ‘travelling’ to describe the geographic diffusion and circulation of ideas.<sup>6</sup> This is, after all, how innovations of any kind have spread throughout history—through the movement of people or artefacts or, increasingly in the modern world, pieces of information distributed through channels of technological infrastructure without any material or embodied intermediation.<sup>7</sup> While historical analysis has often tended to abstract and flatten the complexities of ideational diffusion, in both cases, new ideas did not simply travel from origin to destination, and they certainly did not travel intact. But the history of fascism’s diffusion is even more challenging for two main reasons. To put it in rather blunt terms, Italian Fascists did not profess anything particularly new in ideological terms. Their extreme faith in the nation, their demonology of existential national and political foes, their fervid rejection of Enlightenment values, and their populist rhetoric were rather banal contributions to the fray of political ideas.<sup>8</sup> Unlike socialism, fascism’s intoxicating appeal was not grounded on a clearly articulated revolutionary doctrine or worldview; nor did it flow from a coherent vision of rupture from the societal ‘common sense’.<sup>9</sup> In the 1920s, fascism appeared free from an intellectual origin story, ideological foundation or political baggage—something that its leaders often touted as one of its major moral advantages. George Mosse described it as a ‘scavenger that attempted to co-opt all that had appealed to people in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century past’. Again, what may appear at first as vituperation, Mosse conjured up as the unlikely tour de force of fascist populism: mundane eclecticism turned out to be an asset rather than a liability.<sup>10</sup> Many contemporaries

6 James Allen-Robertson and David Beer, “Mobile Ideas: Tracking a Concept through Time and Space,” *Mobilities* 5, no. 4 (2010): 529–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2010.510336>; Tim Cresswell, “Towards a Politics of Mobility,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (2010): 17–31, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d11407>; Aristotle Kallis, “Working across Bounded Entities: Fascism, ‘Para-Fascism’, and Ideational Mobilities in Interwar Europe,” in *Beyond the Fascist Century: Essays in Honour of Roger Griffin*, ed. Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis (Palgrave, 2020), 73–99.

7 On the ‘mobilities paradigm’ see Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Routledge, 2006).

8 Cf. Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality Fascism: Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 43–50.

9 Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives* (Duke University Press, 2016).

10 George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2021), 20, 36; Emilio Gentile, *Fascination with the Persecutor: George L. Mosse and the Catastrophe of Modern Man* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2021), 111–13.

who were confronted with fascism's extraordinary story in Italy saw it as something new and unique in spite of its intellectual illegibility, but rather because of its political, action-oriented panache and open-endedness of its insurgent promise. Before the Italian Fascist dictatorship produced more concrete ideological signals, like the doctrine of the total state or corporatism, what was far clearer about its ideological identity consisted of its fragments of angry discourse and easily observable singular political practice. Moreover, even those early international recruits to fascism's radical promise took heed of what was unfolding in Italy in the 1920s because they were already on their own journey of angry ultranationalist insurrection. The way that the young Corneliu Zelea Codreanu described his reaction to the news of the March on Rome exuded an enthusiasm that only a kindred spirit already steeped in ultranationalist insurgency could muster.<sup>11</sup> Within days from Mussolini's appointment in Italy, Hitler seemed to revel in the international attention that the media label 'Bavarian Mussolini' conferred on him and his then tiny radical movement.<sup>12</sup> Fascism's striking international diffusion in the years that followed profited from usurping the lingua franca of 'common-sense' extreme nationalism and from a similarly pedestrian imagination of the cherished nation under existential threat from the same coalition of devious enemies within and outside.

In other words, fascism spoke in different ways to such a wide range of international audiences and political-social constituencies because it could appear to promise at once a history-making revolutionary insurgency and a tried-and-tested political platform for the radical restoration of order or reassuring 'common sense'. Both its positive appeal to the myth of the nation and its sworn hostility to common wicked global enemies rendered it easily translatable across different contexts without losing the sense of a joint history-making struggle. There were few genuine converts to fascism in the sense of a spectacular political U-turn or proselytism to a different creed. Instead, there were many conscripts to an ultra-nationalist cause that required little persuasion to begin with. One does not need to accept the reductionist view of fascist ideology as a nihilistic 'negative ideology'—driven solely by angry rejections without affirmative content or distinct sense of direction<sup>13</sup>—to acknowledge that to many eventual recruits to fas-

11 Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *For My Legionaries: The Iron Guard* (Libertatea, 1976), 52.

12 Detlev Clemens, "The 'Bavarian Mussolini' and His 'Beerhall Putsch': British Images of Adolf Hitler, 1920–24," *The English Historical Review* 114 (1999): 64–84.

13 Norberto Bobbio, *Dal fascismo alla democrazia: I regimi, le ideologie, le figure e le culture politiche* (Baldini & Castoldi, 1997), 61.

cism what mattered more was the exhilarating promise of total victory over enemies rather than the specifics of the new revolutionary order that would follow it. More than a scavenger, fascism acted as a conductor of previously delegitimised extreme political beliefs and aspirations. Its irresistible power lay in effective synthesis and cohesive affective force that turned into a mobilising political programme for action. Granted, the result of this fusion was nothing short of unique and electrifying in its combination of revolutionary vision, action-oriented resolve, and transgressive behaviour. Yet the specifics or the coherence of the complete article often mattered less than what those attracted to fascism were willing to read into the fascist insurgency.<sup>14</sup>

This is then how ideas ‘travelled’ in the modern mediated world—not through physical movement and revelatory knowledge but through meaningful, affective connections. The French philosopher Michel Serres claimed that ‘relations spawn objects . . . , not vice versa’.<sup>15</sup> So much of the most innovative recent research on generic, comparative, and global fascism has come out of a similar belief in fascism’s viscosity. Transnational perspectives have pierced through the previously compartmentalised accounts of fascism as a collection of nation- and state-bound histories to reveal dynamic connections and exchanges across space and time.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, a shift of focus away from the ‘centre’ to the peripheries of fascist circulations has redrawn fascism’s global geography by challenging stereotypes about ‘paradigmatic’ fascism and supposedly flawed or failed variants.<sup>17</sup> A more processual approach to the histories of fascism uncovered

14 Walter L. Adamson, “Modernism and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903–1922,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (1990): 363.

15 Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 107; Stephen Crocker, “‘As Soon as We Are Two There Is a Medium’: Michel Serres’ Philosophy of Relations,” *Media Theory* 5, no. 1 (2021): 185–200, <https://doi.org/10.70064/mt.v5i1.906>.

16 Ángel Alcalde, “The Transnational Consensus: Fascism and Nazism in Current Research,” *Contemporary European History* 29, no. 2 (2020): 243–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000089>; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (Berghahn, 2017); Constantin Iordachi ed., *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives* (Routledge, 2010); Daniel Hedinger, “Universal Fascism and Its Global Legacy: Italy’s and Japan’s Entangled History in the Early 1930s,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 141–60, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00202003>.

17 Among others, Nicola Karcher and Markus Lundström, eds., *Nordic Fascism: Fragments of an Entangled History* (Routledge, 2022); Constantin Iordachi, “Fascism in Southeastern Europe: A Comparison Between Romania’s Legion of the Archangel Michael and Croatia’s Ustaša,” in

crucial links and productive frictions between the generic/international and the local that transformed what were previously regarded as eccentric outcomes into key facets of the core story of fascist global connections. In this decentred and differentiated geography, what mattered more was interrogating relationships and attachments in difference rather than hunting for supposedly faithful translations of an original canon and in the process losing sight of the bigger radical ‘authoritarian moment’ in the interwar period.<sup>18</sup>

Such an ‘associational’ perspective on fascism enhances dramatically the analytical power of conceptual, comparative, and diffusionist paradigms. By placing emphasis on why the connections traced by transnational accounts were made in the first place and how they shaped singular local translations as organic, deliberate products of these relationships, it extends productively the range of enquiries that we can make into the dynamics of the interwar fascist-authoritarian ‘moment’. It shifts the focus from fascism as a thing that travels to a political catalyst for multiple radical (if not always revolutionary *stricto sensu*) possibilities. Rather than seeing variations as awkward deviations from a canon, it helps validate a view of fascism as a dynamic assemblage of heterogeneous legacies, beliefs, and aspirations that morphed into more coherent programmes of political action in different local contexts.<sup>19</sup> In many ways, this is hardly a disruptive insight. The ideological heterogeneity of fascist movements always reflected the motley crowd of actors and networks that they mobilised and recruited, each with their own ideas, priorities, and aspirations. For example, the standard account of the political formation of the Fascist movement in Italy has long acknowledged its very political diversity, bringing together as it did the notoriously heterogeneous coalition of the 1914–15 *intervento* bloc,<sup>20</sup> with many war veterans,<sup>21</sup> members of a new generation of ultra-

*Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Two: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, ed. Roumen Daskalov and Diana Mishkova (Brill, 2014), 355–467.

18 David Motadel, ‘The Global Authoritarian Moment and the Revolt against Empire,’ *American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 843–77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhy571>.

19 Aristotle Kallis, ‘The Transnational Co-Production of Interwar ‘Fascism’: On the Dynamics of Ideational Mobility and Localization,’ *European History Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2021): 189–213, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02656914211006307>.

20 Paul O’Brien, ‘Inventing Fascism in the Period of Italian Neutrality: The Case of Benito Mussolini, August 1914–May 1915,’ in *Italy in the Era of the Great War*, ed. Vanda Wilcox (Brill, 2018), 164–85.

21 Angel Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Matteo Millan, ‘The Contradictions of Veterans’ Associations? The Fascist Appropriation

nationalist radicals,<sup>22</sup> anti-socialist rural groups steeped in years of vigilantism,<sup>23</sup> and anti-liberal/parliamentary critics of state neutrality. In Italy and elsewhere, fascism's success in 'absorbing' previous radical networks highlighted its extraordinary power not only to attract but also to assemble diverse constituencies into an insurgent political bloc. A significant part of this dynamic involved cultivating links with new constituencies, which were not only different in their political orientation but also occupied different places along the radical-mainstream spectrum. How sustainable and enterprising this assemblage turned out to be in each case depended on a number of contextual factors that affected its power to expand while maintaining a workable stability and identity. In many countries, fascist movements failed to gain or maintain political or social traction; they never managed to coalesce around a dominant political formation or splintered in the process; or they were violently suppressed by mainstream elites or subsumed under top-down authoritarian arrangements. My point is that we have known for a very long time so much about the critical role of ideological and political 'constellations' in the historical formation of the fascist worldview and its political histories within the context of particular parties or countries.<sup>24</sup> It is, therefore, a good moment to put it to work as a methodological instrument for interrogating even more productively the extraordinary transnational field in which fascism took shape as a history-making force.

## **Roger Griffin: How Not to Duck the Question: 'Historic' Fascism and the Contemporary Far Right**

### *Grinding a Prism for Comparative Fascist Studies*

A year before the end of the Second World War, a conflict seen by the Allies and Soviet Union alike as a joint capitalist-socialist crusade against 'fas-

of the Legacy of World War I and the Failure of Demobilisation," in *New Political Ideas in the Aftermath of the Great War*, ed. Alessandro Salvador and Anders G. Kjølsetvedt (Palgrave, 2017), 87–108.

22 Giulia Albanese, "Brutalizzazione e violenza alle origini del Fascismo," *Studi Storici* 55, no. 1 (2014): 3–14; Giulia Albanese, *The March on Rome: Violence and the Rise of Italian Fascism* (Routledge, 2014).

23 Matteo Millan and Alessandro Saluppo, eds., *Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strike-breaking, 1890–1930* (Routledge, 2020).

24 Juan J. Linz, "Some Notes toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective," in *Fascism: A Reader's Guide: Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography*, ed. W. Laqueur (University of California Press, 1976), 5, 23.

cism', George Orwell was already writing scathingly about the term's chronic lack of precision, which rendered it 'almost entirely meaningless'. After an absurdist list of its application to entities as far apart as 'women', 'dogs' and 'Chiang Kai-Sheck' he asks despairingly, 'Why, then, cannot we have a clear and generally accepted definition of it? Alas! we shall not get one—not yet, anyway'.<sup>25</sup> Eight decades later, this exemplary example of 'semantic inflation' has reached bewildering new heights. The use of the term as an expletive or a slur word of delegitimisation has become more entrenched than ever, with traffic wardens, bureaucrats and parents routinely rebuked for being 'blxxdy fascists', and zealots of wellbeing or stylish clothes cancelled as 'health fascists' and 'fashion fascists'.

Meanwhile, politicians,<sup>26</sup> journalists,<sup>27</sup> and academic pundits,<sup>28</sup> who lack the expertise to make authoritative pronouncements about the fascist credentials of politicians or movements, continue to tar with the term 'fascist' right-wing (and sometimes left-wing) forms of extremist politics. As a result, the word loses its precision as a political category and acts instead as a damning verdict which in most cases has resulted from a highly politicised exercise in the delegitimation of an opponents or movement in contemporary history, one which lacks historical or empirical substance and forensic precision. Muddying the taxonomic waters still further is the persistence of the powerful tradition in the way fascism is approached which was pioneered by communist ideologues and activists within months of the formation of Mussolini's first *Fascio* in March 1919, namely that of seeing it as the product in one way of another (and there are several versions of this premise) of the crisis of 'late' capitalism. As the era of 'bourgeois' capitalist hegemony draws to a close and the new age of socialism, eventually leading to communism, dawns, the system it has created to legitimise its exploitation of the labouring masses (the proletariat) and colonial possessions, namely (un)representative democracy, abandons its liberal, humanistic façade. It proceeds to combine two new strategies of repression:

25 George Orwell, 'What is Fascism?' *The Tribune*, March 1944.

26 E.g. Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (HarperCollins, 2018); "Harris Says She Thinks Trump is a Fascist," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2024, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/harris-says-she-thinks-trump-is-a-fascist/2024/10/23/3bfoacdo-503d-4500-8ade-a33cfbe095a2\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/harris-says-she-thinks-trump-is-a-fascist/2024/10/23/3bfoacdo-503d-4500-8ade-a33cfbe095a2_video.html).

27 E.g. T.D. Kamusella, "Putin's Fascism," *New Eastern Europe*, no. 3 (2022), <https://nueasterneurope.eu/2022/04/25/putins-fascism/>.

28 See, for example Jason Stanley, "One Hundred Years of Fascism," *Project Syndicate*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/fascism-100-years-and-the-threat-today-by-jason-stanley-2022-10>.

to propagate extreme forms of chauvinistic patriotism and imperialistic nationalism with which to seduce the masses and distract them from their socioeconomic subjugation and deprivation; and to adopt ever more openly undemocratic, autocratic and (following Dimitrov's Comintern definition of 1935) 'terroristic' forms of repression.<sup>29</sup> In this way, both anti-socialist and anti-liberal military dictatorships and single-party states run by charismatic nationalist leaders backed by conservative elites are routinely seen by the Marxist left as 'fascist'.<sup>30</sup>

Through the dense fog of semantic ambiguity and confusion that swirls around the myriad forms of political 'right', whether movements or state regimes, jockeying for power in the modern world, we can make out two recurrent candidates for the designation of the term 'fascist' in the modern world by self-appointed political commentators. First, anti-liberal forms of democratic politics which reject the principle of universal human rights—and hence global humanistic institutions (such as the UN and the WHO), which demonise and 'other' certain social, ethnic or religious groups (e.g. Muslims, immigrants, transsexuals, feminists, 'woke' liberals and socialists), and which generally embrace climate scepticism, but without rejecting the state apparatus of constitutional democracy itself (e.g. parties such as the German AfD, the French National Rally, the Trumpist faction of the Republican Party, the UK Reform party and India's BJP, or their leaders Alice Weidel, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Princip Erdogan and Donald Trump). And second, modern autocracies or dictatorial regimes, whether religious or secular: such as North Korea, China, Al-Assad's Syria, Iran, and Putin's Russia. All these have been condemned by some observers as fascist at some time or other.<sup>31</sup> In such case 'fascism' is mostly reduced to little more than an

29 For the classic Dimitrov definition, see: Georgi Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism* (1935), available at [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08\\_02.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm).

30 Alan Woods, "The Meaning of Donald Trump: A Marxist Analysis," *The Communist*, March 21, 2025, <https://communist.red/the-meaning-of-donald-trump-a-marxist-analysis/>

31 E.g. North Korea: "North Korea is More Fascist than Communist," *Reddit*, 2024, [https://www.reddit.com/r/northkorea/comments/1dt03eg/north\\_korea\\_is\\_more\\_fascist\\_than\\_communist/](https://www.reddit.com/r/northkorea/comments/1dt03eg/north_korea_is_more_fascist_than_communist/); Xi Jinping's China: Michael Beckley, "China's Turn to Fascist Rule," *The Globalist*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.theglobalist.com/china-fascism-security-xi-jinping-autocracy/>; Assad's Syria: Fahad Nazer, "Syria: Why Fascism Is 'Never Lesser of Two Evils,'" *CNN*, February 19, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/19/opinion/syria-assad-fascism-fahad-nazer/index.html>; Iran since the Islamic Revolution: "Iran (Fascist Reich)," *Alternate History Wiki*, accessed May 16, 2025, [https://althistory.fandom.com/wiki/Iran\\_\(Fascist\\_Reich\)](https://althistory.fandom.com/wiki/Iran_(Fascist_Reich)); Putin's Russia: Taras Kuzio, "How Putin's Russia Embraced Fascism While Preaching Anti-Fascism," *Atlantic Council*, April 17, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-putins-russia-embraced-fascism-while-preaching-anti-fascism/>.

unthinking description of a right-wing movement which the commentator opposes, or to a lazy synonym for 'autocracy', 'despotism' or 'totalitarianism', though one which still retains a demonising charge of invective which these blander terms lack.

The Babel effect that arises from the *embarras de choix* of so many usages instantly renders it impossible for any serious academic to offer an uncontentious, objective account of how 'historical' fascism relates to an entity which is no less intrinsically nebulous than the 'contemporary far right'. Both concepts are so inherently obfuscating, politically loaded, and polysemic that trying to make sense of their relationship creates for political scientists drawn to the niceties of conceptualisation a taxonomic feast, one which offers a generous menu of conceptual dishes made up from different combinations of political and ideological ingredients to savour. However, this is the bad news for the uninitiated seeking a definitive, authoritative account of the relationship between the two terms.

### *Resolving Orwell's Question*

But for those seeking an undogmatic, empirically based, scientifically informed way of conceptualising how 'the contemporary right' relates to interwar fascism, a warming sunlight is finally dissipating the fog. While a definitive account of the topic based on objective definitions of both terms is utopian, it is now eminently feasible to offer a definite, definitionally supple one of 'fascism' which have proved invaluable to many researchers engaged in comparative studies in fascism and related forms of extremism, and is crucial to mapping its relationship to other forms of right, whether we call it extreme, radical, far, hard, 'ultra' or 'alt'. In the half century that passed after Orwell expressed his heartfelt plea for a definition of fascism, chaos continued to reign unabated among historians and political scientists within the 'liberal' (non-Marxist) branches of the disciplines about a usable definition of fascism. But eventually, by the end of the millennium, a growing pocket of international consensus emerged on the most fruitful way of conceptualising the term, which is now available for this brief survey article on how it relates to 'the far right'.

One way of 'climbing into the problematic', as they say in German, is to consider the observation of Gary Johnson, who in 2016 was a US presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party. Asked if Donald Trump was a fascist, he replied without hesitation: 'It walks like a duck, quacks like a duck'. For Johnson, then, Trump was self-evidently a fascist. It takes only a few moments to realise the fallacy at work—or in philosophical terms, 'the category error'—underlying his pronouncement: a concept in the human sci-

ences is not comparable to, is of a different phenomenal order than, ducks. In the case of the duck, an established taxonomic definition of the species has been arrived at by natural scientists (in this case, zoologists) which locates it within the *Anatidae* genus of waterfowl. By contrast, in the human sciences, it is now accepted (by a variety of rival epistemologies) that a generic concept is an artificially simple and synthetically tidy heuristic construct abstracted from irreducibly complex and ‘messy’ groups of human realities, past or present, internal or external. The definition of a political concept such as ‘the far right’ or ‘fascism’ is thus necessarily what Max Weber described as an ‘ideal type’ derived through a (conscious or unconscious) process of ‘utopian abstraction’, and hence can never correspond perfectly to any singular phenomenon examined as a concrete example of it, given the uniqueness of all human realities, past and present. Methodological naivety about the process of concept formation among historians may help explain the unchecked proliferation of uses of the central term that blighted comparative fascist studies well into the 1990s, half a century after the death of Mussolini and Hitler. But by the end of that decade pioneering work by a small group of historians, notably George Mosse, Stanley Payne, Zeev Sternhell, Emilio Gentile, and—some would add—myself, had brought about a workable, internationally growing (but inevitably still contested and refined) scholarly consensus about the generic traits of ‘fascism’.

The tormented story of the term’s emergence as a consensual political concept has been told elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> but in a nutshell it boils down to the growing recognition among scholars that fascism is best approached as a revolutionary ideology (and attempted enactment of that ideology) aspiring to bring about rebirth from what is perceived as the prevailing decadence in all spheres of society—political, economic, social, cultural and, anthropological—through their regeneration in a post-liberal or post-communist new era made possible by the establishment of a new order incompatible with either capitalist or communist democracy. Since the mid-1990s an impressive number of articles, books, conferences, workshops published and held throughout the Europeanised world have been based or held on this broad consensus, and a major journal (*Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*) linked to the online forum and scholarly community (COMFAS) and its related annual convention established to deepen the understanding of fascism as an international, modern phenomenon.

32 See especially Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (Polity Press, 2018), chs. 1–3.

*Fascism and the Contemporary Far Right Seen through This Prism*

Armed with the ideal type of fascism outlined above as a revolutionary form of ultranationalism (one whose model of the nation's 'golden age', precise 'racist' content, perceived enemies, vision of the new state and how it is to be brought about varies considerably), it is possible to offer at least a schematic outline of this complex relationship within the limits of this article. But first, some clarifications of the term 'far right'.<sup>33</sup> It does not take a political scientist to realise that the qualifying adjective 'far' is so vague that it admits several generically different forms of 'right'. The first distinction to be made is between the 'anti-democratic right' and 'democratic right'. The 'anti-democratic right' embraces many forms of autocratic (totalitarian) state, whether religious or secular, only some of which driven by a powerful ideology or sense of mission, since the military dictatorships which litter modern history obsessed with ridding society of communism and what they see as anarchic chaos generally lack any sort of vision a new type of socio-political order. It also includes a wide range of anti-systemic movements (opposed to capitalist or communist democracy), religious or secular, which want to overthrow colonial, democratic or authoritarian governments with the intention of imposing an antidemocratic new order: the Taliban, for example, has functioned as both far right Islamist movement and regime. Within this schema, fascism has historically operated both as a secular anti-democratic 'far right' movement and regime, which is why the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, or BfV) regards neo-Nazism as *extrem* and hence as illegal.

The other 'far right', which is alluded to in the theme of this article, operates within (capitalist) democracy but against the liberal values that inform policies adopted in a liberal or social democracy. It should thus be thought of not as anti-democratic but anti-liberal in its negative attitude to or explicit rejection of the core principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the many bodies and institutions which have been set up to realise its utopian vision. The liberal principles of free speech and freedom of association as well as the commitment of Western 'liberal democracy' to capitalism and individuals ensures that every democratic society hosts many organisations that pursue fanatical, intolerant, hate-filled, and 'othering' agendas without being technically illegal as long as they do not overtly break the law by organising or explicitly encouraging the commit-

33 The most authoritative book on this topic in the democratic context is Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity Press, 2019).

ment of acts of violence, intimidation or discrimination against designated minorities (e.g. particular ethnicities or religious groups), or even majorities (women, the poor, entire nations). All such movements would be considered by Germany's AfD as broadly *radikal* and hence technically legal and democratic (except, as we have pointed out, where there is an activist fringe or a dominant ethos that directly challenges constitutional principles, at which point they are classed as *extrem*).<sup>34</sup> In short, the topic asks us to consider extremely briefly the relationship of 'classic' fascism to i) contemporary fascism as the conspicuous form of extreme right in Western democracies; and ii) right-wing populism, as their most powerful form of radical right.

### *Historical and Contemporary Fascism*

According to this analysis, a right-wing, nationalist dictatorship would only come under the heading of 'fascist' if its core policy and mission was to bring about not just state reform and the destruction of democracy, but a socio-cultural, anthropological revolution to create a new type of human being in a new post-democratic historical era. Only at that point would it have any real generic affinity with or links to the two interwar fascist European states. (Even Hirohito's wartime imperial Shōwa state in Japan fails this stringent test). In the contemporary world, fascism still exists, and thus, by definition, still contains the central commitment (as what Michael Freeden calls its ideological 'ineliminable core') to a revolutionary new national order. However, its lack of a critical mass as a futural populist movement of reaction to actual existing democracy means that it expresses itself in radically transformed ways in its outward manifestations, namely its organisation and strategies for realising its goals.

<sup>34</sup> However, as the following discussion hopefully makes clear, the decision by the BfV on 2 May 2025, to classify the AfD as 'extreme' should be interpreted not as the official judgment that it is a fascist party, let alone a neo-Nazi one (despite its neo-Nazi wing). Instead, it indicates that the level of anti-liberalism of its policies and propaganda has been judged overwhelmingly hostile to the humanistic ethos of the original West German federal constitution which was designed to ensure that the new German republic was not just a democracy but a liberal democracy, and therefore to make the return of any form of totalitarian nationalist regime through democratic processes impossible by outlawing parties whose radicalism moved into the political waveband of extremism. Similarly, the subsequent attack on the decision by Elon Musk says much about his rejection of liberal humanist and social democratic values, but not his 'fascism'. See "Germany Designates Rising Far-Right AfD Party As 'Extremist' Group," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/05/02/afd-germany-weidel-far-right/>.

As a result, though contemporary fascist movements have gained new enemies of the 'national community' to be constructed such as globalisation, multiculturalism, mass immigration, the UN, the EU, gender fluidity, female emancipation, Islam, Israel, the climate crisis 'hoax', they have changed significantly in power and outward appearance. They utterly lack populist charismatic leaders in the mould of Mussolini, Hitler, Codreanu and their many emulators who only emerge on a wave of mass populist longing for a saviour figure. For the same reason, they can no longer boast the support of uniformed paramilitary movements on a par with the Blackshirts, the SA, and the Legionaries of Archangel Michael. It is reduced to existing now mainly as a form of fantasy politics in a virtual subculture of fanaticism which the internet fuels and spreads, enabling hundreds of thousands of desperate individuals to share the illusion of active participation in an imminent racial revolution. However, it is only in a minute number of instances that these 'digital fascists' cross the Rubicon separating virtual space from the actual world of external reality to act out their psychotic delusions of a coming racist revolution or a reborn nation.

Hence the occasional acts of hate crimes and terrorist violence which are deeply disturbing but fade into insignificance in comparison with the extreme level of everyday violence against civil society which took place in the Nazis' New European Order (except, of course for the immediate victims). The only recourse for most revolutionary and fanatical contemporary fascists is to create minute underground cells, or become lone actor terrorists, some of whom go on to carry out a 'successful' campaign of underground violence against ideological enemies or commit spectacular acts of violence against civil society. These, however shocking, do not threaten the fabric of postwar capitalist democracy. It should be added that there is a 'New Right' fascist intelligentsia in many countries which persists in producing thinly veiled fascist critiques of liberal democracy, but which, outside Russia, has had a minimal political effect in a world where literary culture is fast disappearing and genuine fascists are few on the ground. The other outlet for a fascist mindset is to vote for a non-fascist right-wing populist party.

### *Historical Fascism and Radical Right Populism*

As we have established, a vote for a radical right-wing populist party (RWPP) is not to be construed necessarily as a vote for fascism. Nor is the electoral success of an RWPP to be interpreted as a sign of the strength of fascism. In fact, the opposite is true. Given that these parties attempt to purge a national democracy of the perceived societal weakness inflicted by the

'woke', 'permissive', 'decadent', 'communist', 'un-Christian', 'alien' idealism of 'wishy-washy' liberals from within the constitutional democratic state, they could be seen as replacing historic fascism as the main outlet for radical racists sentiment. However, each party has to be examined 'ideographically' as a unique expression of anti-liberal democratic sentiment, since some RWPPs contain an extremist component which effectively forms the fascist wing of a democratic party: Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, and the US all offer examples of this. The AfD's 'Höcke' wing and Trump's relationship to the 'alt right' provide illuminating case studies in this complex and highly heterogeneous relationship.<sup>35</sup>

As for the radical right populist governments found in Modi's India, Erdogan's Turkey, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Trump's US, these lack the mission to create a new kind of national, totalitarian state which they need to qualify taxonomically as fascist, no matter how much they bend, disregard, defy, or corrode a democracy's constitutional, institutional or legal principles. As for maverick political leaders of rogue autocratic states, such as Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Al-Assad's Syria, Vladimir Putin's Russia, Kim Jong Ung's North Korea (and some would add Xi Jinping's China), each hosts a unique blend of personal dictatorship, totalitarianism, nationalist vision of an ideal society and terror state which makes them at most grim parodies of the only two historic fascist states. In short, making sense of the relationship and relevance of fascism to the 'contemporary far right' requires collaborative and comparative analysis on a case-by-case basis and demands high degree of expertise in relevant historical and conceptual knowledge as well as a close study of contemporary realities before the pixels of a meaningful overall picture can begin to emerge.

In the meantime, it should simply be born in mind that the revolutionary fascist era effectively died in 1945, and that contemporary history is unfolding in an era dominated by the de-liberalisation of democracy in the 'pro-Western' world and the autocratisation of societies, or rather their political establishments, in the 'anti-Western' world. Both these processes produce phenomena reminiscent of and apparently akin to generic fascism. However, they are from a non-journalistic and non-Marxist stand-

35 See the Westdeutscher Rundfunk 2024 interview with Andreas Kemper who first exposed in depth how Björn Höcke propagated his core fascist ideology under the populist cover provided by the AfD. "Wäre verwerflich, Höcke nicht als Faschisten zu bezeichnen," *WDR*, May 15, 2024, <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/afd-hoecke-faschist-100.html>. The condemnation of the AfD as a whole as 'extreme' and hence illegal has been commented on above, and suggests that the Höcke wing had not 'infiltrated' a genuinely democratic party but embodied a hidden but identificatory component of its political mission for its leadership.

point generically distinct from it, just as there are birds that share aquatic behaviours with ducks of the Anatidae family with its 174 species—such as coots, grebes, and loons—but which, in fact, belong to a different branch or twig of the evolutionary tree and hence to a different *genus*.<sup>36</sup>

*A Piece of 'Expert' Advice to Would-Be Political Pundits and Journalists*

Certainly, Trump is doing something radical to transform global economic system in the form in which it existed before his inauguration on 20 January 2025. However, this article suggests that it only muddies the waters of understanding further when *The New Republic*, a 'liberal humanitarian' journal published a piece by Michael Tomasky two months later, as tariff-panic was already sweeping through the world's stock exchanges, claiming that:

Across human history, fascism has been imposed upon democracy mostly in one of two ways. First, by brute force—a military coup, that sort of thing. Second, a bit more stealthily, and legally—through legislation, executive decrees, and court decisions that hand more power to the leader. Donald Trump is inventing a new way. Call it chaos fascism. Destroy the institutions of democracy until they're so disfigured or dysfunctional that a majority no longer cares about them.<sup>37</sup>

This is fairly typical of the yawning gap between amateur and expert commentaries on the Trump phenomenon. First of all, fascism has only ever been imposed as a regime between the two world wars, so the phrase 'across human history' is itself a sign of a Trumpian degree of ignorance and exaggeration. Second, neither Fascism nor Nazism conquered state power through a coup, because both the putschist March on Rome and the Munich Putsch failed to deliver total power. Third—and more importantly—Trump's ideological mission (or rather impulsive orgy of ill-conceived fantasy politics) is not to create a totalitarian state which replaces the US constitutional state, but to ride roughshod like a twenty-first century maverick over the legal and ethical constraints imposed by the US constitution's care-

36 For two only partly congruent in-depth conceptual frameworks on radical right populism's relationship to fascism see Finchelstein, *Fascism to Populism in History*; and Leonard Weinberg, *Fascism, Populism and American Democracy* (Routledge, 2018).

37 Michael Tomasky, "Donald Trump Has Invented Something New and Chilling," *The New Republic*, March 28, 2025, <https://newrepublic.com/maz/post/193309/trump-destruction-government-chaos-fascism>. The article first appeared in *Fighting Words*, a weekly TNR newsletter authored by its editor Michael Tomasky.

fully constructed system of countervailing ‘checks and balances’ in order to push through reforms which are intended to return to America its hegemony as the world’s dominant economic, technocratic and industrial capitalist and individualist power. In other words, Trump’s hyper-nationalism is shaped in the mould of the capitalist megalomania of the financial Masters of the Universe, and not of the palingenetic mindset of Nietzschean ‘active nihilism’ typical of fascist fantasists. For example, contrast the mission statements of a Trump, a Musk or a Vance with the declaration of a real fascist, Joseph Goebbels, who declared that ‘We are socialists, we are enemies, mortal enemies of the present capitalist economic system with its exploitation of whoever is economically weak, with its injustice in wealth distribution . . . We are determined to destroy this system at all costs.’<sup>38</sup>

*Finally, a Warning to Upholders of ‘Liberal’ (or Social) Democracy*

The last, but also the first, point to make in addressing this topic is that in the present moment of human history, it is radical right-wing populism that poses a deeper threat to humanity than the ‘contemporary far right’, precisely because it has gathered enormous popular backing in a number of countries for the abandoning of liberal principles of universal humanism and the rejection of global social justice, a point illustrated by the suggestion of the deputy leader of the UK’s Reform Party in April 2025 that migrants in a boat sinking in the English Channel should be allowed to drown. The fact that Trump can throw the entire system of global trade into disarray with impunity and Netanyahu can commit crimes against humanity in Gaza and Lebanon daily with a Putinesque disregard for civilian life, not as fascist leaders but democratically elected heads of state, points to an insidious international process of de-liberalisation at work—sometimes termed Orbanisation<sup>39</sup>—which may well render humanity incapable of stopping the destruction of the human biome and placing both saints and sinners from democracies as well as autocracies in the same rapidly sinking Ship of Fools far more effectively and permanently than the

38 Cited in H.U. Thamer, *Il Terzo Reich* (Il Mulino, 1993), 175. Gregor Strasser’s anti-capitalist verdict is no less virulent: ‘Placing German industry and economy in the hands of international finance capitalism puts an end to any possibility of growth . . . We young Germans of the war, we National Socialist revolutionaries, declare war on capitalism’, cited by M. Lattanzio, Introduction to René Dubail, *L’ordine economico nazional-socialista* (Il Veltro, 1991), 12.

39 Skylar G. Knight, “Dismantling Democracy: The Orbánization of Hungary,” *Illiberalism Studies Program Working Papers: Student Papers Subseries*, no. 1 (October 2021), <https://www.illiberalism.org/dismantling-democracy-the-orbanization-of-hungary/>.

six years of fascism's world war against humanity that came to an end eight decades ago.

In short, the 'new direction' I am highlighting or advocating for fascist studies is for at least some experts in the field to devote more specialist time to demarcating fascism's unique, time- and culture-specific revolutionary vision of national rebirth from contemporary phenomena which have so many features directly reminiscent of interwar fascist yet belong to different (ideal-typically) constructed genera of political phenomena. By doing this, they will be proactively combating the contemporary phase of hyperinflation and chronic devaluation of the term 'fascism' that has so often radically compromised its taxonomic and heuristic value in the past. The indiscriminate and undiscriminating use of 'fascism' now more than ever obfuscates understanding of the ongoing global de-liberalisation of democracy, an insidious and protracted process which may prove to have even more dire long-term consequences for the planet and humanity than interwar fascism ever could.

### **Constantin Iordachi: The Nexus of Radicalisation versus De-democratisation: Reflections on New Trends in Studies of Fascism**

Fascism was, without doubt, one of the most radical political phenomena of the twentieth century, being commonly dubbed the 'greatest evil in history', given its extremism, fanaticism, and violent nature, which culminated in racism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust. No wonder, therefore, that its 'nature' has sparked relentless scholarly and political debate in the century that passed since its emergence following the Great War. The academic literature on this topic is truly enormous—entire libraries being written on just on Hitler's life, worldview, and actions, or on the Nazi Germany's totalitarian regime and murderous extermination campaigns, to give but one example. The dynamic but also contested and highly politicised nature of the field requires recurrent historiographical reappraisals to take stock of the most important new methodologies, archival findings, and research perspectives in the field.

What is the state of the art in current studies of fascism? Obviously, after a hundred years of intensive and passionate research, we now have a much better understanding of this radical political phenomenon. In the last decades, in particular, there has been a flurry of research on fascism as a socio-political as well as a cultural phenomenon. A new generation of scholars promoted a new approach to fascism, one that is rigorous enough

to identify genuine fascism and to point out its mass appeal, while at the same time differentiating it from non-revolutionary yet still highly xenophobic, antisemitic, and nationalist-authoritarian regimes.<sup>40</sup> The new wave of scholarship is rather heterogeneous in its approach and research agenda, focusing mainly on nationalist mass mobilisation and the dominant myths, rites, and rituals associated with mass politics and its aestheticisation, charismatic leadership, paramilitarism, antisemitism, racism, bio-politics, political religions and totalitarianism, to name but a few.<sup>41</sup> This has provided us with a deeper grasp of the nature of fascism as a form of cleansing ultranationalism, its mass appeal, its racism and antisemitism, and its responsibility for the Holocaust.

Despite these obvious advancements, there are still blank spots or grey areas in research that need renewed attention. Since cataloguing and evaluating the newest contributions would be an unrealistic task for a short essay, in the following, I provide a personal assessment of the most important and fruitful research directions in the field, from the vantage point of my research on historical fascism, with a focus on East Central Europe.

### *Fascism: A Brief Historical Overview*

Fascism emerged after the Great War across all European countries (as well as beyond the continent). By and large, we can delineate several waves of

40 For the need to employ a rigorous definition of fascism, see Roger Griffin's work, mostly his *The Nature of Fascism* (St. Martin's Press, 1991); and *Modernism and Fascism: The sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), as well as his contribution to this forum.

41 Let me illustrate this trend with works on fascism in Central and Southeastern Europe: Tomáš Pasač, *Český fašismus 1922–1945 a kolaborace 1939–1945* [Czech fascism 1922–1945 and collaboration 1939–1945] (Prah, 1999); Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Andres Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia* (St. Martin's Press, 2000); Stephen D. Shenfield, *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001); Andreas Umland, "Concepts of Fascism in Contemporary Russia and the West," *Political Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (2004): 34–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2005.00018.x>; Ivo Goldstein, "Ante Pavelić, Charisma and National Mission in Wartime Croatia," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 2 (2006): 225–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1469076060642289>; Valentin Săndulescu, "Sacralised Politics in Action: The February 1937 Burial of the Romanian Legionary Leaders Ion Moța and Vasile Marin," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 2 (2007): 259–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760701321163>; Anton Shekhovtsov, "By Cross and Sword: 'Clerical Fascism' in Interwar Western Ukraine," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 2 (2007): 271–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760701321171>; Nikolai Poppetrov, *Fashizmüt v Bŭlgaria: Razvitie i proiavi* [Fascism in Bulgaria: Development and events] (Kama, 2008); Andres Kasekamp, "Radical Right-Wing Movements in the North-East Baltic," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 4 (1999): 587–600.

radicalisation to fascism in interwar and wartime Europe, generated by a complex set of intertwined economic and socio-political crises: the immediate postwar period (1919–23), marked by the emergence of the National Fascist Party in Italy and its advent to power in 1922 but also the failure of the Nazi Munich Putsch in November 1923; the late 1920s, which saw the founding of several strong movements, such as the Legion ‘Archangel Michael’ in Romania (1927), the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (1929), and the Ustaša—Croatian Revolutionary Movement (1929); the mid-1930s, which witnessed a significant proliferation of fascist movements, driven by the economic crisis (1929–33), the Nazis’ ascent to power (1933) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–39); and 1939–45, when Nazi Germany’s military hegemony led to the establishment of a number of satellite regimes throughout Europe, such as the Slovak Republic (July 1939–April 1945), the National-Legionary State in Romania (September 1940–January 1941), the Independent State of Croatia (April 1941–May 1945), and the Arrow Cross rule in Hungary (October 1944–April 1945), to name but a few. These cumulative waves built upon one another: each new fascist movement or regime introduced another fracture in the Versailles system of collective security, further eroding the alliance of democratic regimes and driving the continent toward an increasingly interconnected system of dictatorships, under the Axis Powers’ hegemony.

Due to a complex combination of historical and conjunctural factors, fascism was most successful in unconsolidated democracies in Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe.<sup>42</sup> This led sociologist Michael Mann to argue that there existed ‘two Europes’ in the interwar period (and a few swing states in between): the northwestern part of the continent remained democratic and liberal, while its southern part turned conservative and authoritarian.<sup>43</sup> First, these regions were traditionally ruled by multinational empires, mostly the Tsarist, the Habsburg, and the Ottoman. Imperial rule, characterised by high mobility and the lack of internal borders but also recurrent wars and intense campaigns of colonisation and deportations, turned these vast and heterogeneous regions into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious mosaic. Second, in the modern period, these regions witnessed the

42 For an overview, see Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Interwar East Central Europe, 1918–1941: The Failure of Democracy-Building, the Fate of Minorities* (Routledge, 2020); Constantin Iordachi, “Fascism in Interwar East Central and Southeastern Europe: Toward a New Transnational Research Agenda,” *East Central Europe* 37, no. 2–3 (2010): 161–213.

43 Michael Mann, “Explaining the Rise of Interwar Authoritarianism and Fascism,” in *Fascists* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39.

rise of strong nationalist liberation movements aiming at unmixing these imperial jigsaws and at establishing homogeneous nation-states.<sup>44</sup> In the Enlightenment and early Romantic periods, nationalism took the form of liberal-democratic movements of socio-political emancipation, best illustrated by the 1848 revolutions in Vienna, Budapest, and Bucharest.<sup>45</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, nationalism turned conservative, violent, and, under the influence of social Darwinism, incorporated elements of racism and antisemitism. Last but not least, the Great War further stimulated the radicalisation of nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe in both defeated and victorious countries. The newly formed states that emerged from the dissolution of multinational empires established fragile and unstable parliamentary political systems while also undergoing intense and formative phases of nation- and state-building, characterised by arduous efforts at either national integration of newly unified provinces in Romania, Poland and Yugoslavia or coping with imperial disintegration, as in Austria and Hungary.<sup>46</sup> Although, for a long time, fascism was seen as an outcome of the rise of political resentments in defeated countries, recent research shows that the emergence of fascism was not directly linked to military defeat in the Great War, per se, but to a larger, more variegated set of factors that led to the rise of paramilitary mobilisation against ‘internal’ enemies in defeated countries (Germany, Austria, Hungary) as well as in victorious countries (Italy, France, Romania, etc.). The defeated Germany, Austria, and Hungary resented the loss of territories and plunged into paramilitary unrest and civil wars that ushered in chaos and anarchy, leading to radical experiments in politics, such as the Béla Kun Socialist Republic in Hungary and the White Terror.<sup>47</sup> This belt of post-imperial unrest led to the birth of national socialism as the most

44 Constantin Iordachi, “The Ottoman Empire: Syncretic Nationalism and Citizenship in the Balkans,” in *What is a Nation? Europe, 1789–1914*, ed. Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford University Press, 2006), 120–51; John Lampe and Constantin Iordachi, eds., *Battling over the Balkans: Historiographical Questions and Controversies* (CEU Press, 2020).

45 Christopher M. Clark, *Revolutionary Spring: Fighting for a New World, 1848–1849* (Penguin Books, 2023).

46 On postwar violence, see Tomas Balkelis and Andrea Griffante, eds., *The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914–1923* (Academic Studies Press, 2023). On the arduous process of post-imperial state-building in Romania, see Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities: The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c. 1750–1918* (Brill, 2019); and Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

47 Béla Bodó, *The White Terror: Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921* (Routledge, 2019).

radical ‘variety’ of fascism.<sup>48</sup> In Italy, the sense of frustrated victory and the inability to forge a postwar political consensus and integrate veterans in politics led to the emergence of Fascism and its rapid advent to power, from the 1919 *Fasci di Combattimento* to Mussolini’s 1922 coalition government. But fascism developed in victorious Romania as well, where the vicissitudes of building a cohesive nation-state led to the radicalisation of the ‘nationalising nationalism’ of the ‘titular nation’ into antisemitic radical right but also revolutionary fascism.<sup>49</sup> The same trajectory can be found in former Yugoslavia too, where sharp ideological and ethno-religious conflicts generated rival Serbian, Croatian or Yugoslav nationalist projects, giving birth to a plethora of right-wing movements which can be discussed in the larger context of fascist studies, such as *Orjuna* (1921–29), *Ustaša* (1929–45), the Yugoslav Radical Union (1935–41) led by Milan Stojadinović, and *Zbor* (1935–45) led by Dimitrije Ljotić.<sup>50</sup> It should also be noted that fascism did not only develop in existing nation-states but also in historical provinces where elites of ‘stateless’ ethnic majorities struggled to create a state of their own: fascist movements in Moravia, Slovakia, the above mentioned Croatia, and the Ukrainian provinces of Poland and the Soviet Union capitalised, with various degrees of success, on local statal aspirations to mobilise the population to a fascist nation-building project, under the aegis of the Axis powers’ vision for a New Europe.<sup>51</sup>

48 Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, “Vectors of Violence: Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War, 1917–1923,” *Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 3 (2011): 489–512, <https://doi.org/10.1086/660364>; Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, “The Great War and Paramilitarism in Europe,” *Contemporary European History* 19 (2010): 267–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777310000160>; Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford University Press, 2012). On Italian Fascism and National Socialism, see Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism: Doctrines of Revolution in the Twentieth Century* (Van Nostrand, 1964).

49 See Armin Heinen, *Die Legion ‘Erzengel Michael’ in Rumänien: Soziale Bewegung und politische Organisation: Ein Beitrag zum Problem des internationalen Faschismus* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 1986); Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*; Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015); Constantin Iordachi, *The Fascist Faith of the Legion ‘Archangel Michael’ in Romania, 1927–1941: Martyrdom and National Purification* (Routledge, 2023). On the concept of nationalizing nationalism in interwar Europe, see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

50 Ivan Avakumovic, “Yugoslavia’s Fascist Movements,” in *Native Fascism in the Successor States, 1918–1945*, ed. Peter F. Sugar (ABC-CLIO, 1971), 135–45; Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford University Press, 2001).

51 Miroslav Mareš, “Separatist Currents in Moravian Fascism and National Socialism,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 41–67, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00201010>; Karel C. Berkhof and Marco Carynnyk, “The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and its

Due to this combination of complicating factors, while in some Western European parliamentary democracies fascism was successfully marginalised by well-consolidated political systems, in Central and Eastern Europe, unconsolidated democracies encountered great challenges in countering fascism and eventually succumbed to (para)fascism. Nevertheless, for a long time, the uncompromising, revolutionary nature of fascism and its anti-establishment orientation isolated fascist movements in the political field. It prompted traditional elites to forge heterogeneous coalitions to block fascism from gaining power. The result was a string of royal dictatorships that departed from democracy while gradually radicalising into para-fascist regimes, by incorporating or simply mimicking selective elements of fascism: see Boris III's dictatorship in Bulgaria (1935–43), King Carol II in Romania (1938–40), the 6 January Dictatorship of King Alexander I in Yugoslavia (1929–34) and also Ioannis Metaxas's 4th of August Regime in Greece (1936–41). This development speaks of the 'abortive' nature of fascism as a generic phenomenon: although several fascist organisations in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe grew into robust mass movements, they could conquer political power only with external help, in various crucial phases of the Second World War (and were thus not fully synchronic). Moreover, once in power, fascist regimes in these regions had difficulties in consolidating their rule and were short-lived, lasting a mere few months or years in other cases, as compared to twenty-one years in Italy, and twelve years in Germany: see the short rule of the Legion in Romania in 1940–41 and the Arrow Cross in Hungary in 1944–45, among other examples. The longest-lasting fascist regimes in the region were the Slovak Republic (July 1939–April 1945), and, counterintuitively, the Independent State of Croatia: although the paramilitary Ustaše operated abroad, mainly in Fascist Italy, its totalitarian and genocidal regime lasted for over four years, from April 1941 to May 1945, until it collapsed in military defeat. The Nazi New Europe thus looked like a disjointed assemble, an incomplete patchwork of occupational regimes and short-lived satellite states. The Axis alliance in these regions was marred by internal weaknesses, a

Attitude toward Germans and Jews: Iaroslav Stets'ko's 1941 Zhyttiepyś," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 23, no. 3–4 (1999): 149–84; Alexander J. Motyl, *The Turn to the Right: The Ideological Origins and Development of Ukrainian Nationalism, 1919–1929* (East European Quarterly, 1980); Oleksandr Zaitsev, "Ukrainian Integral Nationalism in Quest of a 'Special Path' (1920s–1930s)," *Russian Politics & Law* 51, no. 5 (2013): 11–32, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940510501>; Oleksandr Zaitsev, "Fascism or Ustasism? Ukrainian Integral Nationalism of the 1920s–1930s in Comparative Perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, no. 2–3 (July 2015): 183–93.

state of permanent war requiring a difficult-to-sustain societal mobilisation, intra-territorial conflicts, and a lack of effective transnational political coordination.

Overall, although interwar historical fascism was arguably a passing phenomenon in European and world politics that ended in ruin and defeat, its impact was much more powerful and lasting than its meteoric political trajectory might suggest. Fascism's major symbolic power lies in the fact that, as a radical form of nationalism, it articulates a discourse about the nation, founded on the enduring legacy of dark Romanticism. Fascists managed to forge strong nationalist subcultures and then project them at the national level, manipulating key nationalist themes, such as rebirth and regeneration through cleansing, and promoting a violent path toward 'restoring' the lost glory of the Middle Ages. In terms of membership, fascism was a catch-all party, incorporating various strata of society, from students and intellectuals to peasants, workers, war veterans, but also members of the former aristocracy. Its mass appeal was amplified by its innovative forms of propaganda, based on the aestheticisation of politics, its intimate relation to both established religions and dominant discourses on national messianism, and its ability to capture socio-political resentments and to channel them against internal and external 'enemies', most notably the Jews.

### *Studying Fascism: Toward a Processual and Relational Approach*

Given the multifarious nature of fascism, analysing the complex set of ideologies, movements, and regimes has posed great challenges to scholars.<sup>52</sup> First, despite intensive recent work on the topic,<sup>53</sup> the comparative and entangled nature of fascism, as a transnational phenomenon, is not thoroughly investigated. True, in the last decades, the field of fascist studies has been enriched by a plethora of case studies that have added to our knowledge of previously neglected or marginalised fascist movements. Most of the time, however, these case studies are approached in isolation, or at best, confronted with an ideal type of generic fascism, but are not yet fully inte-

52 For the trid ad ideology-movement-regime in fascist studies, see Constantin Iordachi, "Comparative Fascist Studies: An Introduction," in *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi (Routledge, 2010), 1–50.

53 For the new wave of transnational studies of fascism, see selectively: David D. Roberts, *Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach to Fascism and Its Era, 1919–1945* (Berghahn, 2018); Sandrine Kott and Kiran Klaus Patel, *Nazism across Borders: The Social Policies of the Third Reich and Their Global Appeal* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe, *Fascism without Borders*; and Iordachi, "Fascism in Interwar East Central and Southeastern Europe." See also Kallis's intervention in this forum.

grated into the larger European or global picture. Many edited volumes provide multiple national perspectives within the same covers, thus exemplifying the diversity of fascist movements and regimes in interwar and wartime Europe. Yet, placing national case studies side by side does not provide an elaborate historical comparison. Despite much talk about the heuristic usefulness of the comparative method, truly comparative works on fascism remain a desideratum. This has to do, of course, with the challenges of building a comparative framework: such works can best result from a collective undertaking and require elaborate planning and large resources.

Second, in their attempt to neatly differentiate fascism from conservative-nationalism or the non-fascist radical right, most scholars tend to focus almost exclusively on the actions and worldview of the fascists, thus running the risk of isolating them from the larger political context. Too often, monographs on fascist ideology, movements or regimes do not tell us much about the larger historical context in which these forces operated.

I argue that, in order to fully grasp the emergence and consolidation of fascism, we need to explore comparatively the interplay between democratisation and its opposite, de-democratisation and radicalisation leading to political violence. In my research, I plead for a new socio-cultural approach to studying fascism both synchronically and diachronically. I always strive to employ a dual comparative perspective: trans-spatial, between the conservative right, the radical right, and fascism within each family of authoritarians; and trans-historical, between the interwar and post-1989 periods. My emphasis is on the nexus of fascism and authoritarianism in the interwar period, and on hybrid political forms blending populism, the radical right, and the conservative right in the contemporary period. My approach is based on the assumption that politics is, in essence, a relational field among multiple actors and that political identities are constantly in flux and motion due to the complex interaction among multiple actors. For these reasons, while indispensable for research, it should be noted that pre-made political taxonomies, such as the ideal-type definition of generic fascism, cannot fully capture the complex and 'messy' reality that exists on the ground. While acknowledging the importance played by ideal-type scholarly definitions of political ideologies for conceptual clarification, I also point out that, in practice, we need to approach politics as a dynamic process and to account for a web of political entanglements that often result in hybrid political identities and multifaceted political regimes. Consequently, instead of operating with a stable, internally unified and ultimately rigid set of political labels that assume a clear-cut demarcation among democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian political forces, my approach explores

processes of radicalisation to political violence and extremism but also of de-radicalisation leading to acceptance of democratic and pluralistic political values. In other words, I do not regard the political spectrum as made up of isolated 'islands' of democrats, authoritarians or totalitarians, separated by deep waters; instead, I see the political spectrum as a continuum, a space of constant movements and permutations in which political actors interact and oftentimes change or even exchange their original positions by responding to new circumstances. At the two ends of the political spectrum, there are two extreme positions, namely consolidated democracies, on the one hand, and totalitarian regimes, on the other. Few political regimes in history managed to fully embody these ideal types, however, most historical examples are dynamic moving targets situated between these extremes, in the 'grey zone' between democracy and totalitarianism. It is therefore important to study politics as a process rather than as static inner-cores of actors or regimes.

To emphasise the processual nature of politics, I use the verbs 'to radicalise' and 'democratise' along with their derivatives 'radicalisation' and 'democratisation'. Radicalism is an essentially contested concept: as a site of continuous contention, its meaning is never fixed but is constantly shifting as a function of the socio-political context. The politicised nature of the concept of radicalisation and its contested content has generated arduous scholarly debates to date.<sup>54</sup> Traditional historiography has often tended to treat radicalism as an intrinsic characteristic of a person or group. Consequently, in trying to explain the behavioural outcomes and actions of the individuals and groups under study, scholars have focused more on what is generally termed as the dispositional, internal factors, rather than situational causes triggering radicalisation. In a departure from this perspective, new studies emphasise the importance of the relational group dynamics in the process of radicalisation, based on collective grievances and mode of violent action.<sup>55</sup> In line with the latter trends, to understand

54 For the recent scholarly debate on the concept of radicalisation, see Peter R. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049>; and Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 479–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009>.

55 See, selectively: Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eteri Tsintsadze-Maass and Richard W. Maass, "Groupthink and Terrorist Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 735–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.805094>; Eitan Y. Alimi et al., *The Dynamics of Radicalization: A Relational and Comparative Perspective* (Oxford University

the dynamics of radicalisation across time and space and the multiple facets of this long-term process, my work considers the paramount role played by prejudice, economic deprivation, and the breakdown of social institutions in fuelling grievances against an existing socio-political system, potentially leading to violence. But I also explore the importance of intergroup dynamics and ritual socialisation in the adoption and internalisation of extreme political beliefs, and the role played by the international transfers of extremist ideas and violent modes of combat in accelerating and channelling domestic processes of radicalisation.<sup>56</sup> This processual approach requires an interdisciplinary methodology ranging from the history of ideas to social and cultural history, as well as the history of transnational networks and international transfers of extremist ideas and practices, such as fascism, and expertise on new modes of political combat, such as terrorism.

Another important research topic, closely connected to radicalisation, is the opposite phenomenon of deradicalisation. Is deradicalisation from fascism possible? Under what conditions? My research into the history of the Legion 'Archangel Michael' in Romania highlights the repeated failure (to various degrees) of various dictatorial regimes to de-radicalise and 're-educate' fascist militants, from Carol II's royal regime to Antonescu's dictatorship and the communist regimes. A legionary militant in interwar Romania suggestively compared his own radicalisation to a one-way high-speed train journey: 'It's like I got on a train which left with a fantastic speed and I could not get off, because, if I jumped off the train, I would have broken my neck'.<sup>57</sup> Is there a tipping point of no return on the slippery slope to radicalisation and political violence? What are the most effective mechanisms of individual deradicalisation and societal interaction? How can societies deradicalise? These questions require novel interdisciplinary answers involving perspectives from history, political science, and social psychology, as well as from lawyers and policymakers.

Press, 2015); Willem Koomen and Joop Pligt, *The Psychology of Radicalization and Terrorism* (Routledge, 2016); Michael A. Jensen et al., "Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (2020): 1067–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1442330>.

56 For this approach, see Constantin Iordachi and Goran Miljan, "'Why We Have Become Revolutionaries and Murderers': Radicalization, Terrorism, and Fascism in the Ustaša–Croatian Revolutionary Organization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023): 1704–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2077730>.

57 Iordachi, *The Fascist Faith*, 180.

*Radicalisation vs De-Democratisation: The Waves Theory*

To capture these intricate but intertwined dynamics of the political field, I propose the metaphor of ‘waves’ of democratisation versus de-democratisation and radicalisation to political violence. The expression ‘waves of democratisation’ denotes significant democratic breakthroughs in different historical periods. While it circulated in political science for a long time, the concept of waves was greatly popularised by Samuel Huntington’s much-discussed 1991 book, *The Third Wave*.<sup>58</sup> Huntington defined a wave of democratisation as ‘a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period of time’.<sup>59</sup> The number of democratic waves that have occurred to date is subject to scholarly debate. Huntington argued that there had been three waves of democratisation: the first wave began in 1820s in the United States and lasted until 1926, resulting in circa twenty-nine democracies; the second wave started after the Second World War and peaked in 1962 with thirty-six democratic regimes in the world; while the third wave, began in the mid-1970s in southern Europe, later spreading to Latin America, Asia and then to Central and Eastern Europe in 1989–91. Seva Gunitsky put forward an alternative historical framework of democratic waves. In contrast to Huntington, Gunitsky identified thirteen waves of democratisation in the last two hundred years, from the end of the eighteenth century to the Arab Spring (2011–12).<sup>60</sup>

Parallel to the literature on democratisation, wave theory has also been applied to studies of political violence. In a pioneering article, David C. Rapoport applied the concept of waves to the history of modern terrorism from 1880 to the present day, linking it to the concept of generations.<sup>61</sup> I extend wave theory beyond the narrow field of terrorism studies to encompass cumulative departures from democracy at individual, collective, and

58 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

59 Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 15.

60 Seva Gunitsky, “Democratic Waves in Historical Perspective,” *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 3 (2018): 634–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718001044>.

61 David C. Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11,” *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (2002), available at <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/apo801/terror/>; David C. Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Modern Terror: International Dimensions and Consequences,” in *An International History of Terrorism: Western and Non-Western Experiences* ed. Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Bernhard Blumenau (Routledge, 2013), 282–310. See also, more recently, James H. Hess et al., “The Fifth Wave of Modern Terrorism: Perpetual Grievances,” *American Intelligence Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 128–38.

regime levels. Furthermore, while waves of democratisation and radicalisation have often been discussed separately,<sup>62</sup> I argue for their interlinked analysis, connecting them with the phenomenon of polarisation between the ‘family of authoritarians’ and the ‘family of democrats’. This integrated approach highlights the interplay between democratisation and radicalisation, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics that shape political changes, and the resulting wars over cultural hegemony, in a Gramscian sense. By considering these various perspectives, scholars would be able to uncover the interconnected nature of democratisation and radicalisation, offering a nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary political transformations.

### *Fascism and the ‘Family of Authoritarians’*

To account for political dynamics in the process of right-wing radicalisation, I employ the political metaphor of ‘family of authoritarians’.<sup>63</sup> This metaphor has the merits of highlighting the complex relationship between right-wing movements and parties, marked by ideological affinities and collaboration but also by hostility and ‘brotherly’ rivalry that can lead to violent conflicts. As Stanley Payne points out, historically, the main members of this family of authoritarians have been the conservative right, the radical right, and fascism.<sup>64</sup> These family members are differentiated by the degree of radicalism: the conservative right is generally interested in maintaining the social and political status quo; after periods of political upheaval, the conservative right might adopt a ‘reactionary’ attitude by arguing for undoing revolutionary political changes and restoring the status quo ante. The radical right does not shy away from employing grassroots political violence but is generally posited on capturing the political power by ways of elections to implement anti-immigration and anti-minorities policies by top-down legal means. Fascism is the most radical member of this political family due to its revolutionary and anti-systemic political orientation that aims

62 For a significant exception, see Huntington, who points out that each wave of democratisation was accompanied by a counter-wave of de-democratisation: the first one occurred in 1922 to 1945; under its impact, only twelve democracies survived in the world by 1942. The second wave of de-democratisation occurred from 1960 to 1972 and reduced the number of democracies back to thirty. See Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

63 For the use of metaphors in politics, see Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, “Family Metaphors: The Language of an Independence Revolution,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 1 (1983): 154–80.

64 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 14–19.

at enacting a nationalist revolution through cleansing the body politic and the replacement of the country's political elites.

*The 'Family of Authoritarians' Redivivus: Populism, Radical Right and Fascism*

The recent powerful revival, in a new guise, of the family of authoritarians around the world, made up of conservative-nationalists, the populist radical right, and fascism, poses important questions about fascism's nature: is it a unique, European-epochal phenomenon or a generic and thus universal phenomenon? It should be noted that students of fascism have employed two main research strategies to define fascism and its generic vs epochal nature: the inductive-observational versus the deductive-abstract methods, which correspond, by and large, to a cleavage between historians' and political scientists' approaches to fascism. The proponents of the inductive method start from the history of interwar fascism and, on the basis of empirical research of case studies, derive a set of general common features of fascism. The proponents of the deductive method start from a theoretical model of fascism, which is then used as a measuring stick against existing case studies. These different methodological choices resulted in distinct analytical models of fascism. Through retroductive reasoning, scholars who employ the inductive method arrive at a 'descriptive definition' or an 'average model' of fascism, most often expressed through a list of common characteristics. Scholars who employ the deductive method build an ideal type of fascism made up of a few essential axioms, identifying the 'core' of fascism. The two analytical models take into consideration different elements of fascism. The descriptive definition refers to all manifestations of fascism: ideological values, the organisational aspect of fascist movements, and the main features of fascist regimes. The ideal-type model limits the discussion to the fascist 'ideological minimum', on the count that peculiar features related to the history of fascist movements cannot be part of a definition of fascism. Finally, the proponents of the first, inductive method treat fascism as a synchronic-epochal phenomenon, anchoring the discussion on the interwar period. The proponents of the second, deductive method treat fascism as a generic-diachronic phenomenon, detaching its definition from historical examples and extending its relevance in time and space to cover a global phenomenon of the modern age.

In my work, I employ the second, deductive method for defining fascism as a generic-diachronic phenomenon that was not the product of a unique and thus unrepeatable constellation of factors solely manifest in interwar Europe, but a universal phenomenon that can return, in simi-

lar historical circumstances but in a updated form, as part of a novel in a new wave of radicalisation.<sup>65</sup> As a historian of Central Europe, I have been repeatedly asked to address the ‘obsessive comparison’ between the interwar and post-communist periods. The two eras share remarkable similarities, begging for comparison. Both emerged from turbulent wartime periods and began with the political triumph of liberalism and idealism in international relations based on collective security, ushering in new periods of democratisation and globalisation, only to succumb to economic crises, authoritarianism, and war. The aftermath of the First World War brought an unprecedented wave of democratisation to Europe, toppling autocratic, multi-ethnic empires. Yet, the 1930s saw the rise of radical ideologies such as fascism, Nazism, and communism, driven by economic turmoil, social unrest, and disillusionment with traditional political structures. Consequently, many young democracies in Europe collapsed into various forms of dictatorships, leading to the Second World War and prompting analysts to dub the interwar period the era of authoritarianism and fascism. Similarly, the post-1989 period, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, led to an unprecedented wave of democratisation and integration into European political and security organisations. More recently, however, many of these young democracies experienced significant political shifts, marked by the resurgence of nationalism, populism, and various forms of extremism.

Similar economic trajectories in the two eras present another key area of comparison. The Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession of 2008 created fertile ground for the emergence and further consolidation of radical ideologies. In the interwar period, mass unemployment, hyperinflation, and poverty led to widespread dissatisfaction with democratic governments, paving the way for extremist movements that promised stability and renewal. Similarly, the economic disruptions following the end of the Cold War, including the transition from planned to market economies in

65 Further for my approach to fascism both at the level of theory and historical case studies, see, selectively, Iordachi, *The Fascist Faith*; Iordachi and Miljan, “Why We Have Become Revolutionaries and Murderers.”; Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis, “Introduction: Fascism at 100 (and a Bit),” in *Beyond the Fascist Century: Essays in Honour of Roger Griffin*, ed. Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–26; Constantin Iordachi, “From ‘Generic’ to ‘Real-Existing’ Fascism: Towards a New Transnational and Historical-Comparative Agenda in Fascism Studies,” in Iordachi and Kallis, *Beyond the Fascist Century*, 283–307; Roger Griffin and Constantin Iordachi, “Fascism,” in *The Sage Handbook of Political Sociology*, ed. William Outhwaite and Stephen P. Turner (Sage, 2018), 548–71.

Eastern Europe and the economic disparities exacerbated by globalisation, fuelled discontent and the appeal of radical political solutions. Understanding how economic hardship drives people toward radical ideologies could help develop strategies to mitigate the risks of future structural economic crises.

Social and cultural factors also play a significant role in the radicalisation processes of both periods. The interwar years were marked by profound social upheaval, including shifts in gender roles, the questioning of traditional values, and the rise of new cultural movements. The period also witnessed significant political polarisation, with radical ideologies exploiting societal fears and uncertainties. The post-1989 period has similarly witnessed rapid social changes, including globalisation, technological advancements, and migration, which have led to cultural clashes and the questioning of national identities.

Given that the period since the end of the Cold War has now exceeded in length the historical interval between the two World Wars, it is timely to undertake an overall comparison of processes of political radicalisation in these periods. Comparing processes of political radicalisation in the interwar and wartime period (1918–45) and the post-1989 era is crucial for understanding recurring patterns and dynamics that shape political landscapes during times of profound societal change. By cross-examining these periods, scholars can identify common factors contributing to political radicalisation, such as economic instability, identity crises, and the erosion of trust in established institutions. Additionally, examining the types of threats to stability that arose in each period and the differing strategies adopted by democratic regimes to meet these challenges could offer valuable insights into key historical questions: Why did some consolidated democracies survive the interwar crisis while others succumbed to authoritarianism? Why did some unconsolidated democracies transition to authoritarian regimes while others radicalised to fascism and totalitarianism? How and why do authoritarian regimes arise? In answering these questions, scholars must highlight the interplay of political ideologies, economic forces, social transformations, and international contexts that shaped these two turbulent eras, providing a more nuanced understanding of the interwar period and its long-lasting impact on twentieth-century history.

Overall, by studying the processes of political radicalisation in the interwar and post-1989 periods, scholars can identify patterns and factors that transcend specific historical contexts, offering valuable lessons for contemporary society. They can better understand how social transformations con-

tribute to political radicalisation and the conditions under which societies become more susceptible to extremist rhetoric. The aim is not to identify superficial similarities or to straitjacket both periods into a single theoretical framework, but to arrive at complex diachronic comparisons of processes of radicalisation leading to the decay of democracy during the ‘long twentieth century’ from 1918 to today. It is hoped that this comparative analysis will not only deepen our understanding of past and present political dynamics but also help develop strategies to prevent the recurrence of radicalisation and to promote resilient, democratic societies.

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