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State of the Field

Fascism Has an American History, Too

Olivier Burtin

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The specter of fascism is once again haunting the United States. After the victory in the 2016 presidential election of a candidate who showed clear affinities with authoritarian leaders abroad and white supremacists at home, many Americans realized that their country was not as immune to such forces as they had thought. On the night of the election, “fascism” was the most searched word on the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.¹ While the term had always been popular as a throwaway epithet to condemn one’s political opponents, the publication of a few monographs on the topic in the aftermath of the election marked its return as an important scholarly category in its own right. In *Fascism: A Warning* (2018), former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright cautioned her readers that the new president had anti-democratic “instincts” and was leading a “herd” of other like-minded authoritarian rulers “in a Fascist direction.”² The same year, philosopher Jason Stanley dissected the various elements of fascist politics, from the use of a mythical past to the vocabulary of victimhood, in a call for Americans to reject this type of right-wing nationalism.³ It was not a coincidence that both authors were children of Central European émigrés who had fled to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Almost three-quarters of a century later, they feared that history might repeat itself.

Not everyone agreed that fascism was the right term to express these anxieties, however. On the right, most voices dismissed such language as yet another attempt by the left to prevent a healthy exchange of ideas by marking its opponents as beyond the pale. Perhaps more surprisingly, fascism also received mixed reviews in liberal and progressive circles. Historian Samuel Moyn argued, for instance, that the concept hid more than it revealed: not only did it obscure the profoundly American roots of the 45th Presidency, but it also “[spared] ourselves the trouble of analyzing what is really new about it” by focusing only on what it had in common with a distant past.⁴ Historian David Bell joined him in discarding the label, pointing to differences between the present situation and the 1930s as well as to the fact that fascism was for most Americans “an alien, foreign ideology” whereas Donald Trump was a very American phenomenon.⁵ Other scholars have also raised the concern that using this term could serve to delegitimize participatory politics as a whole and to give new surveillance powers to the “security state.”⁶ In rejecting the term “fascism,” these critics seemed to share the common assumption that this phenomenon had never taken roots in America.

Here I demonstrate the opposite. This essay reaches beyond contemporary politics in order to assess whether this form of political behavior is really as alien to U.S. history as we often assume it to be. Bringing together recent works in a variety of subfields, I argue that the relative absence of fascism from historiographical debates after the mid-twentieth century tells us less about the historical record than it does about the blinders that hinder historians’ vision. Though fascism as a term was invented in interwar Europe, the kind of politics that it describes could be found as early as the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. After paving the way for the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, fascist groups continued to play an active role in American politics throughout much of the twentieth century.

Scholars have failed to take this phenomenon seriously for a number of reasons. The first has to do with the long debate about the U.S. populist tradition, which was defined to a large extent in

opposition to fascism from the 1960s onwards. The second is related to the strength of American exceptionalism, which has made many historians of the United States reluctant not only to compare their country's past with that of others, but more importantly to import analytical tools initially developed abroad (especially when those were associated with darker episodes of the past). Finally, the U.S. victory in the Second World War helped convince many observers that fascism was no longer a relevant threat, and therefore not a phenomenon worthy of serious study.

Before going any further, let us pause here in order to tackle the problem of definition. This article will rely on the classic work of historian Robert Paxton, who has defined fascism

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

In addition to this brief definition, Paxton made two important points that will guide our analysis as well. The first is that though fascism as a term was first used in interwar Italy to describe the movement and later the regime created by Benito Mussolini, its application should not be limited strictly to this single case. Rather, we can use it to describe situations not only beyond Europe but also before and after the interwar years. The second point is that fascism has gone through five stages of evolution, which include its creation as a movement (first), its transformation into a major force in mainstream politics (second), its seizure of power (third), and finally its rule in the short- and in the long-run (fourth and fifth). Not every country has witnessed all five stages, nor was its evolution necessarily unilinear—the growth of fascism could be stopped or even reversed.⁷

Applying this definition to the United States has broad implications. For one thing, it helps us make sense of this country's history in a global context, from the outside in rather than the inside out. Despite the efforts of many historians to advance a less exceptionalist view of the U.S. past, this goal has remained elusive. As Ian Tyrrell remarked over three decades ago, the few scholars who have tried to propose a comparative framework for U.S. history have tended to look for differences instead of similarities. Rather than apply to the United States concepts that were initially created abroad, they have largely done the opposite.⁸ Admittedly, Tyrrell's statement holds less true today, as more recent works have made the case for seeing U.S. history through the prism of notions such as the "fiscal-military state," the "developmental state," "genocide," the "caste system," and "empire," which were previously thought to apply only to other countries.⁹ These concepts have not yet reached mainstream status among scholars and the general public, however.

Such an approach also reminds us of the contingencies at the heart of American history. As mentioned earlier, one of the major reasons why U.S. scholars have failed to pay serious attention to fascism was the outcome of World War II. The unconditional victory achieved by the Allies over the Axis powers not only led many observers to believe that fascism had been defeated once and for all, but it also obscured the commonalities between these two adversaries (due in large part to the still-pervasive myth of the "Good War," which portrays this conflict as a Manichean battle of good versus

evil).¹⁰ By contrast, seeing U.S. history through the lens of fascism reminds us not just that this political movement remained alive after 1945, but also that there were more similarities between the United States and its enemies before 1941 than we now remember. Without the external contingency of the Second World War, such commonalities may not have faded away as quickly as they did. This example illustrates what Jay Sexton has written about some of the most important moments in U.S. history, namely that they “were less the inevitable outcomes of an exceptional American political tradition than...the contingent products of moments of acute crisis.”¹¹

Finally, the example of the United States can teach us a lot about the nature of fascism itself. While historians no longer define this phenomenon as strictly the product of a fin-de-siècle crisis in Europe, there is still a tendency to treat it as having come into its own only in the twentieth century. This interpretation holds only if one excludes the United States, for fascism burst onto the political stage there as early as the nineteenth century, in the form of the white supremacist militias that helped overthrow Reconstruction, at a time when it was still limited to the cultural or intellectual sphere in Europe. In this sense, the U.S. example suggests a new chronology. It is also remarkable that the regime ushered in by these terrorist groups—the Jim Crow South—would go on to survive for nearly a century within the same framework as the more pluralistic and liberal system that existed in the rest of the country. This disjuncture suggests that the line between democracy and fascism is considerably thinner than we often think, and therefore that we should see fascism not as a kind of distant evil relegated to the past but rather as the always-present underside of liberal democracy.

The Eclipse of American Fascism

The reluctance of many scholars to apply the concept of fascism to the United States is a relatively recent development. It was a major topic of debate in the interwar period, as observers often drew comparisons between fascist activity abroad and at home. There was a widespread expectation at the time that the United States would follow the path of Mussolini’s Italy or Hitler’s Germany if the federal government failed to get the country out of the Great Depression. For instance, a visitor reportedly told Franklin Delano Roosevelt not long after his inauguration in 1933 that he would be the “worst” president in American history if his New Deal program failed, to which FDR replied, “If it fails, I’ll be the last one.”¹² Though this story is probably apocryphal, the fact that it was so often repeated at the time suggests that it captured a common fear. Many observers agreed that fascism could happen in the United States, and they often pointed to the same culprits. Authors like Lewis Corey who identified with the Marxist tradition tended to argue that the “upper bourgeoisie” would attempt to “use the petty-bourgeois masses (including the agrarian)...to act as a counter-revolutionary mass force.”¹³ Liberal authors were also inclined to emphasize the roots of fascism in lower-middle-class discontent, as did for instance Sinclair Lewis in his semi-satirical best-seller novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), where the character of Shad Ledue is a former hired hand who supports Buzz

Windrip's authoritarian government out of resentment toward his former employer.¹⁴ Nor was this discussion only about the future, for intellectuals saw plenty of examples of fascism already at play in U.S. society. Education specialist William Gellermann argued that the American Legion, a group of conservative World War I veterans known for its efforts to censor left-wing speakers, was a "potential force in the direction of fascism in the United States."¹⁵ This threat was clearly on the public mind during the interwar years.

The discussion lost some of its urgency after World War II, but it did not disappear entirely. The concept of fascism remained in frequent use during the Second Red Scare in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with liberals using it to condemn efforts to suppress public discourse. The magazine *The New Republic*, for instance, assailed the Legion for its "fascist potentialities," while President Truman privately used the same adjective to describe the group's leaders.¹⁶ Similar fears surfaced again in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this time centering on the John Birch Society, a hardline anticommunist organization that sought to root out all potential internal subversion. After it was revealed in 1961 that Army Major General Edwin A. Walker had used Society materials to indoctrinate the troops under his command in Europe, concerns over the close relationship between military leaders and the "extreme right" grew. Fears of a potential fascist coup led to a congressional investigation and forced President Kennedy to react publicly.¹⁷ Fascism remained a potent symbol in postwar politics.

These debates left a mark on the scholarly conversation as well. In the 1940s and 1950s, academia was scarred by repeated red-baiting attacks on the elite "East Coast establishment," which forced many professors who were critical of the anticommunist fever to either accept censorship or resign.¹⁸ It was therefore in an attempt to understand what had been a direct threat to their own status that many of the leading public intellectuals of the day, from Daniel Bell to Richard Hofstadter to Seymour Martin Lipset, participated in the landmark volume *The New American Right* (1955). Each contributor had a distinct perspective, but the larger thesis of the book was that the "radical right" of the postwar years was an irrational response to the threat of communism with roots going back to the anti-elitism of the Populist movement in the 1890s and of Father Coughlin in the 1930s. This argument reflected the fear of mass movements and participatory politics that was pervasive among elite liberal circles, who saw in this type of political activity the source of the intolerant and authoritarian behavior that had paved the way for the rise of fascism in Europe a generation earlier. Other authors made this connection explicitly. In an article published a few years later, the political scientist Victor Ferkiss claimed that the "creed" of the "American fascist movement...arose logically from the Populist creed, and...attracted substantially the same social groups and sectional interests as had Populism."¹⁹ In short, mid-century liberals drew a straight line between the far-right of their own day and 1890s Populism, and they rejected both as leading to fascism.

This perspective changed with the arrival of a new generation. In the early 1960s, younger scholars, for whom the potential of mass movements was captured not by fascist leaders such as Mussolini but by civil rights activists like Martin Luther King, sought to rehabilitate the Populist movement. They rejected the association with fascism and stressed instead its democratic, egalitarian,

and progressive credentials.²⁰ Their rehabilitation effort was largely successful, and later historians broadened this intellectual project to include not just the Populist movement of the 1890s but also the American populist tradition as a whole. In a 1990 article, Leonard Moore argued for instance that the Ku Klux Klan of the interwar period was a “popular social movement, not an extremist organization.” Far from “an aberrant fringe group motivated primarily by its overwhelming hatred of ethnic minorities,” Moore argued that the group was “composed primarily of average citizens representing nearly all parts of America’s white Protestant society.”²¹ Echoes of the controversy launched by *The New American Right* can still be heard today in the way in which some progressive historians have dismissed all comparisons between the Trump presidency and fascist Germany on the ground that they would only serve to “[fuel] elites’ antidemocratic fantasies” and pave the way for technocracy.²² In other words, the longstanding debate about the American populist tradition has to a large extent been built on a rejection of the fascist analogy. The careless use of this parallel by liberal intellectuals in the 1950s predisposed several generations of U.S. historians against using the term itself.

Another reason why historians and the general public alike turned their attention away from the study of U.S. fascism had to do with historical contingency. In the eyes of many, the unconditional victory of the Allies in World War II seemed to mark the definitive defeat of fascism. While the term itself remained common in political discourse, few serious observers continued to believe after 1945 that the United States was still at risk of turning into a fascist regime, nor did it seem likely anymore that such a regime could emerge in other industrialized countries. As one scholar noted in the late 1970s, “fascism is ‘dead,’ seemingly swallowed up and consumed by the Second World War...”²³ As a result, interest for fascism’s past became primarily an academic matter. European historians could hardly ignore the outsized influence of this phenomenon on their own continent, of course, but the situation was different in the United States, where fascists had not taken power in the interwar period and seemed to have disappeared almost entirely from postwar politics. In these conditions, scholarly interest in the topic was almost non-existent.²⁴

This conviction was reinforced by the resurgence of American exceptionalism after 1945. This tradition had deep roots in U.S. history, for the idea that this country was destined to transcend the divisions of the “Old World” dated back at least to Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Such views returned to the fore after World War II, when they seemed to be validated by the decline of European influence and the rise of the United States to a position of global leadership. This geopolitical reality was given a veneer of inevitability in the postwar years by scholars like Louis Hartz, Richard Hofstadter, and Daniel Boorstin, whose works stressed the absence of serious conflict throughout their country’s past. The “liberal consensus school,” as they were collectively known, attributed this phenomenon to the natural pragmatism of Americans as well as to the strength of the liberal tradition. These scholars sought to explain what made the United States stand apart from the rest of the world rather than what it had in common with it. Needless to say, this triumphalist mood left little room for a concept as negative as fascism, especially one so strongly associated with Europe.²⁵ The liberal consensus came under criticism very quickly, but its basic assumption of American exceptionalism would remain remarkably pervasive.

Indeed, this approach remained conventional wisdom in the field of modern U.S. history in the following decades. In the 1980s, Peter Amann claimed that the United States had been “exceptional” in its resistance to fascism, thanks to the resilience of its “liberal tradition” which did not falter under the impact of total war.²⁶ In a similar vein, the dean of U.S. political historians, Alan Brinkley, argued in his influential *Voices of Protest* (1982) that Huey Long and Charles Coughlin, two of the most dominant figures in American politics in the 1930s, were not themselves fascist—even though he recognized clear similarities between their program and the fascist agenda, and he also noted the existence of a “motley group” of American fascists, including such individuals as William Dudley Pelley’s “Silver Shirts.”²⁷ Leo Ribuffo reached a similar conclusion in *The Old Christian Right* (1983), where he argued that the many accusations of “fascism” hurled by the left in that decade were deliberately overblown and part of a “Brown Scare” whose goal was to restrict the freedom of speech of right-wing activists.²⁸ The views of these two leading historians were typical of those of the profession at large, which paid little attention to American fascism in the following decades. Published in 2010, the authoritative *Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* included no entry on the subject.²⁹

It is worth pausing for a moment to note that American scholars were far from the only ones to claim that their country had been exceptional in its rejection of fascism. Other historiographical traditions have also dismissed the impact of this phenomenon within their own national borders, preferring to see it as an imported product that never had more than a small domestic audience. The example of France is particularly illustrative, as historians of this country have taken part since the 1980s in an acrimonious debate about the extent of the fascist phenomenon there. On one side of this argument were a group of primarily French-born historians who agreed with René Rémond that interwar France had largely been immune to fascism because of the strength of its centrist and republican tradition. On the other side were a number of mostly foreign-born historians who argued, along with Zeev Sternhell and Robert Soucy, that France’s intellectual and political life had produced significant examples of fascism. This controversy is no longer as lively as it once was, but it is not entirely settled.³⁰ There are two ways in which it is relevant for our own analysis: first, it illustrates how national historiographies are often reluctant to accept concepts seen as foreign, and second, it suggests that we should think twice before assuming that the United States was truly exceptional.

A Fascist Turn?

While the study of fascism has fallen out of fashion among U.S. historians, a new picture of the past has begun to emerge from the convergence of recent scholarship in separate subfields. Taken as a whole, these works paint a less triumphalist and exceptionalist view of U.S. history and make a compelling case in favor of re-examining the place of fascism in it.

Paxton's definition of fascism as a form of nationalist politics "marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline" and pursuing "goals of internal cleansing" finds echoes in the United States as early as the mid-nineteenth century, when xenophobic organizations like the Know-Nothing Party or the Native American Party flourished in reaction to the immigration of large numbers of Irish Catholics, who were seen as part of a "Romanist" plot to subvert civil and religious liberty in the country. Supporters of the Know Nothing movement coalesced into the American Party after 1855, but a lack of experienced leaders on the national level as well as the deep split between North and South over the issue of slavery led to the quick collapse of their campaign. Many members of the American Party ended up joining the emerging Republican Party.³¹

More successful examples of fascism can be found in the aftermath of the Civil War, during Reconstruction. In this period, white Southerners created various terrorist groups—such as the Knights of the White Camelia, the Red Shirts, and the White League—to oppose Northern rule and Black empowerment. The most notorious of these vigilante organizations was the first Ku Klux Klan, which existed from 1866 until its suppression by the federal government five years later. Studies of this organization written by Americanists have typically avoided the comparison with fascism, not in the sense that they found it to be irrelevant after a careful comparison but simply by bypassing the analogy altogether.³² By contrast, non-specialists of U.S. history have long argued that the group displayed many features that were typical of fascism. In 2004, Paxton suggested that the Klan may have been the "earliest phenomenon that can be functionally related to fascism." As a group whose members rejected civil authority, organized in parallel to the state, acted as the paramilitary arm of a political party (Southern Democrats), readily employed violence, wore a distinctive uniform, and sought to restore a racially exclusive past, Paxton made a compelling argument that the Klan offered "a remarkable preview of the way fascist movements were to function in interwar Europe."³³ The German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch likewise saw parallels between the "cultures of defeat" that arose in post-World War I Germany and in the post-Civil War South: both societies clung to mythical versions of their past (the "stab in the back" and the "Lost Cause") and both witnessed the rise of terrorist paramilitary groups such as the Freikorps and the Klan that "portrayed themselves as avengers of national honor."³⁴ In this sense, the Reconstruction era in the United States witnessed the rise of fascist organizations that sought to forcefully reverse the consequences of prior defeats in ways that clearly resembled what happened in the interwar period in Europe.

The goal of these fascist groups was largely achieved in the post-Civil War South. Though the Klan was forced to end its activities in 1871, the continued resistance of Southern whites forced the U.S. military to withdraw from the region a few years later, paving the way for the maintenance of a racial order in which African Americans were kept at the bottom of society and firmly separated from whites. The "constitutional revolution" represented by the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, which together had attempted to create a biracial male democracy for the first time in U.S. history, was gradually walked back by a series of Supreme Court decisions.³⁵ This was not merely a legal process, however. Not unlike fascists in interwar Italy, Germany, or Spain, Southern whites in the late-nineteenth century did not hesitate to resort to violence to overthrow their duly elected opponents, as for instance in 1898 in Wilmington, North Carolina, when a white mob carried out a

coup to topple a biracial Fusionist government.³⁶ Violence was crucial both to the installation of Jim Crow and to its survival over the decades that followed. In the aftermath of World War I, whites instigated many race riots, of which the most notorious was the Tulsa massacre of 1921, when an entire Black neighborhood was razed and hundreds of its inhabitants murdered.³⁷ Aside from these periodic outbursts, violence was part of everyday life in the South: between 1877 and 1950, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has documented over 4,000 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in the South—an average of more than one per week for nearly three-quarters of a century.³⁸

The frequency with which violence was used to maintain the white-dominated racial order in everyday life marked a key difference between the Jim Crow South and the rest of the country. Yet it makes more sense to think of this section not as an exception but rather as a culmination of the trends that could be found in other parts of the United States. While lynchings of Black people occurred overwhelmingly in the South, the EJI has also documented over 300 such acts that took place in various Midwestern states from Ohio to Oklahoma.³⁹ Moreover, the federal government was implicated in this phenomenon, which it did little to stop: throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth century, civil rights activists pushed for Congress to pass anti-lynching legislation, but their efforts were repeatedly thwarted by the influence of Southern Democrats.⁴⁰ Nor was this form of terrorist violence used only against African Americans: recent works have uncovered evidence of similar acts targeting other racial minorities throughout the West, from Chinese migrants to Native Americans to Mexicans.⁴¹

This violence did not stand apart from the nation's legal system. Rather, both reflected the same embrace of white supremacy. Perhaps the clearest example of this can be found in the widespread nature of laws banning interracial marriage, which existed in the vast majority of U.S. states (only 9 of them and the District of Columbia never enacted such legislation). Most of these laws aimed not at prohibiting all interracial marriages, but rather focused on preventing whites from marrying persons of color so as to protect the “purity” of the dominant racial group. Many Western states also adopted racially discriminatory laws similar in their essence to those in the Jim Crow South, though they were targeted less at African Americans and more at Native Americans, Mexicans, or Chinese, who were often forbidden from testifying against whites in court or from acquiring land (no less than fifteen Western states passed such “alien land laws,” which were ruled unconstitutional only in 1952).⁴² More broadly, the federal government in 1921 and 1924 adopted immigration quotas premised on explicitly racist criteria establishing a hierarchy between people of different countries. These laws came on top of a series of court decisions that racialized U.S. citizenship in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century—from *In re Ah Yup* (1878) to *U.S. v Bhagat Singh Thind* (1922)—by closing access to naturalization for people of South Asian, Japanese, and Chinese descent. All these examples help explain why many other white settler regimes across the Americas and the world looked to the United States as a leader in racist immigration policy.⁴³

Law and violence contrived to create a rigid racial order that showed striking similarities with the caste systems established in other countries. In his magnum opus *An American Dilemma* (1944), social scientist Gunnar Myrdal argued that the term “caste” was appropriate to describe not only Southern society but the entire United States as well, citing among other examples the presence of interracial marriage bans across the country. Myrdal acknowledged the existence of variations in race relations across time and place in U.S. history, but he stressed that most African Americans had remained in a lower position than whites.⁴⁴ More recently, Isabel Wilkerson has built on the work of Myrdal and other sociologists to draw comparisons with the caste system in India as well as with the situation of Jews under the Third Reich, which she argued shared significant similarities with that of African Americans (such as the ban on exogamy, the fear of pollution by lower castes, and the heritability of caste status).⁴⁵ Her comparative perspective suggests that American society in the Jim Crow era had more in common with fascist regimes abroad than we often realize.

Scholars are not the only ones to have noticed these similarities; so did contemporaries. In the interwar period, many Nazi observers approved of the domination of white supremacy in Southern society. A German periodical once described the Ku Klux Klan as “American fascism,” while the official Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* printed articles praising the lynching of Black men accused of raping white women. Other Nazi-friendly publications lauded Jim Crow laws for their similarity to those of the Third Reich. While the white southern press in the United States took great pains to deny such comparisons because of the negative image of the Nazi regime, Black southerners had fewer qualms. The Howard University sociologist Kelly Miller wrote several articles discussing the “striking analogy between the legal manifestations of race prejudice against the Negro in America and the Jew in Germany.” Though the specific situation of these two minority communities was different—white Southerners mostly sought to exploit the labor of African Americans whereas Nazis aimed at the ultimate elimination or removal of Germany’s Jewish population—they still faced many of the same problems in their daily life, such as legal segregation, second-class citizenship, and frequent episodes of public violence.⁴⁶ These similarities were obvious to Black journalists and scholars, who began using the word “ghetto” during World War II as a way to compare the situation of urban Black neighborhoods, such as Chicago’s South Side, with the Jewish districts created by the Nazis in Eastern Europe. Their goal was to stress the legal barriers that forced African Americans to remain in these areas, as well as the ideal of Caucasian purity that undergirded both the Black and the Jewish ghetto.⁴⁷

These comparisons between African Americans and German Jews were also made from the other side of the Atlantic. Soon after the Nazis came to power, their jurists turned to the United States in an effort to find new ways of tackling their own “Jewish problem.” They found some aspects of U.S. race law particularly appealing, such as the category of second-class citizenship that applied to certain groups of the population like Native Americans (who until 1924 were considered to be “nationals,” a status in-between citizen and alien). Other policies also drew their attention, such as the overt use of racial quotas in immigration policy and the criminalization of interracial marriage (a practice that the Nazi Justice minister found in no other country). They even found that some aspects of U.S. race law went too far for them. This was the case of the “one-drop rule,” according to which a

single Black ancestor was enough for someone to be considered as such. Nazis refused to apply the same stringent standards: the Nuremberg laws initially required at least three Jewish grandparents to be classified as Jewish.⁴⁸ These examples demonstrate not only that European fascists saw clear connections between the kind of racial order they wanted to implement at home and the one that existed in the United States, but also that they found those similarities both in the Jim Crow South and in various public policies implemented throughout the country.

One area in which European fascists not only looked to the United States but created an active network of exchange with representatives of this country was eugenics. We have known since Dan Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings* that Progressive reformers on both sides of the ocean collaborated closely.⁴⁹ More recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of some of their more "illiberal" ideas, among which was the effort to improve "racial health" by encouraging the breeding of a "superior" stock of people. The United States was a global leader in this field, with Indiana passing the first law allowing the sterilization of the mentally ill and criminally insane in 1907. 28 states followed suit by the late 1920s and the Supreme Court declared the practice constitutional in *Buck v. Bell* (1927).⁵⁰ Throughout the first half of the century, German eugenicists actively followed the progress of their American colleagues. A 1913 book by the Austrian vice-consulate in California about racial hygiene in the United States became a reference work, while Adolf Hitler once wrote to the leading U.S. proponent of eugenics, Madison Grant, that he regarded *The Passing of the Great American Race* (1916) as "his Bible." German eugenic research also received financial support from the Rockefeller foundation, and American eugenicists counted among the Nazis' strongest supporters abroad.⁵¹ This collaboration was part of a larger pattern: in the mid-1920s, the United States invented the gas chamber as a more "humane" way of carrying out executions and U.S. and German companies later developed it jointly.⁵² To be sure, neither eugenics as a science nor the gas chamber as a technology were inherently fascist, but the existence of such extensive ties suggests once again important similarities between the United States and the European societies that witnessed the rise of fascism in the interwar period.

This is not to say that foreign fascists admired everything about the United States, for they also disliked the more pluralistic and democratic character of its political system. Perhaps the most striking example of this was the mock trial organized by the American Jewish Committee in March 1934 at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Billed as the "Case of Civilization against Hitler," it was a follow-up to a similar meeting that had taken place a year earlier to call for a boycott of German goods after Hitler's rise to power, and it gave the Committee the opportunity to condemn his regime as having "not only destroyed the foundations of the German Republic, but...reduced and subjugated to abject slavery all sections of its population." With 20,000 people in attendance, including major public figures like Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and former Governor and Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, the event was so high-profile that Nazi officials considered it a direct affront. They called repeatedly on U.S. officials to cancel it, but their counterparts in the State Department refused to do so on the grounds that they had no power to censure an event organized by a private entity.⁵³ This

example shows how the U.S. public sphere was never as tightly controlled by the state as it was under some fascist regimes.

Nonetheless, recent works in American Jewish history also suggest under-appreciated similarities between Jim Crow America and the European societies that witnessed the rise of the first self-proclaimed fascist movements. The scholarly consensus in this field had long been that the United States had been uniquely welcoming to Jews, who supposedly encountered less discrimination and could move up the social and economic ladder more easily than in Europe. Not coincidentally, this exceptionalist paradigm emerged at the same time as the consensus school in the 1950s.⁵⁴ Its limits have become evident in recent years, however. In a critique published in 2010, Tony Michels pointed to the growing amount of evidence showing the depth, resilience, and traumatizing impact of antisemitism in the United States. American Jewish exceptionalism, he argued, was premised on a distorted understanding of European history: by using the extreme example of Nazi Germany and more specifically of the Holocaust as their sole point of reference, scholars often overestimated the severity of antisemitism in Europe and underestimated its importance in the United States. In Michels's view, the United States had much more in common with Europe in its attitude to Jews than had commonly been recognized.⁵⁵

In making this argument, Michels was building upon the work of other historians such as Leonard Dinnerstein, Laura Weber, and Joseph Bendersky, who have shown the pervasive character of antisemitism in U.S. society. Dinnerstein found for instance that the phenomenon reached a climax between the late nineteenth- and the mid-twentieth century, a period in which the country "witnessed the emergence of a full-fledged antisemitic society." In the wake of the Civil War, a confluence of factors resulted not only in the institutionalization of new barriers against Jews in many fields (such as housing, social clubs, and employment), but also in the multiplication of episodes of public violence (including several accusations of blood libel as well as the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915). In Minneapolis, known as the "capital of antisemitism in the United States," Weber has shown how Jews were excluded from almost all civic and social organizations. Nor should we forget that the world's pre-eminent antisemite in the 1920s was the American business tycoon Henry Ford, whose role in the global diffusion of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* earned him the enduring admiration of Adolf Hitler. Antisemitism grew only more acute throughout the Great Depression, the New Deal, and then the Second World War. In 1945, almost three-fifths of all Americans still thought that Jews had too much power in their country. Only in the aftermath of this conflict did surveys begin to register a decline in such attitudes.⁵⁶ Even then, antisemitism remained pervasive within certain elite circles, as Bendersky demonstrated. For instance, Army leaders were prone to seeing Jews as the masterminds of a global conspiracy to subjugate the Anglo-Saxon "master-race."⁵⁷

Recent scholarship has also shed new light on the strength of fascist sympathizers in interwar U.S. society. Historian Bradley Hart has shown that their ranks included not just the 20,000 members of the German-American Bund led by Fritz Kuhn or the 15,000 followers of William Pelley's Silver Legion, but also the "religious right" led by figures such as Father Coughlin, Gerald Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith, as well as members of the U.S. Congress like Representative Hamilton Fish of New York and Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana, who used their franking privileges to disseminate

Nazi propaganda. Many pro-fascist and antisemitic speakers also found a home in the isolationist America First Committee, which was created in the late 1930s to oppose U.S. entry into the Second World War and counted no less than 800,000 members.⁵⁸ Veterans' groups like the American Legion, which in the interwar period counted over 1 million adherents, also displayed key fascist traits, such as the central place of the memory of World War I, the active repression of labor activism, the adoption of military uniforms, and the promotion of an aggressive form of anti-communism and nationalism.⁵⁹ Nazis found additional support among the elite circles of academia, while many smaller organizations backed Mussolini's regime.⁶⁰ Fascism even found an audience in the African American community: Marcus Garvey once claimed that the members of his United Negro Improvement Association, who wore military uniforms, believed in a myth of nationalistic rebirth, and stressed the need for Blacks to separate from whites, were "the first Fascists."⁶¹ More broadly, the American public remained ambivalent toward Germany well into World War II, with many preferring to see its inhabitants not as enemies but rather as victims of a government of Nazi "gangsters."⁶² In sum, fascist ideas did not lack defenders in interwar American society.

The question of whether the second Ku Klux Klan, which existed from 1915 to the early 1940s, should be counted among these supporters has long been controversial. Many scholars continue to see the interwar Klan as a populist rather than a fascist group, for reasons we have seen earlier. This is probably one of the reasons why Hart did not devote as much attention to this group as he did to the Bund or the Silver Legion, even though he acknowledged that they often joined forces at the local level, as other historians have also shown.⁶³ Historian Linda Gordon acknowledged these resemblances but nevertheless concluded against using the fascist label as well, on the ground that the organization "sought ideological hegemony but planned to achieve it without fundamental changes to the political rules of American democracy," by contrast with European fascists who sought to topple their own political system. As she put it, Klan members supported the democratic system "because, in the 1920s, they could hardly imagine a United States in which 'right' Americans would not be a majority": they were defending a kind of *herrenvolk*, or "master-race" democracy in which only the majority ethnic group participated in government.⁶⁴ Though most historians agree that the second Klan did not advocate the overthrow of the government, few have taken the next, logical step of asking what it meant for our understanding of American society that a group showing such clear affinities with the values advocated by European fascists was defending the status quo in the United States. Perhaps the reason why the Klan supported the existing political system was not because it did not espouse fascist ideas, but simply because these ideas were already well represented in the political mainstream. To put it more bluntly, perhaps the second Klan did not feel the need to advocate for the overthrow of the system because that overthrow had already occurred in 1877 with the collapse of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow.

Though the second Klan quickly dwindled in size and influence, many smaller groups continued to advocate similar ideas at the local level. Philip Jenkins's remark in the 1990s on the need to write the local history of fascism remains largely valid today, as only a small number of such case

studies exist. His own work on Pennsylvania under the New Deal demonstrates the wide variety of groups with fascist sympathies that existed in this state, some of them large (like the Bund and the Christian Front) but most rather small (a multitude of fascist organizations were associated with immigrants from Ukraine or Russia, for instance).⁶⁵ In his work on the anti-Nazi intelligence ring run by a small group of Jews and Gentiles in Los Angeles from 1933 to 1941, historian Steven Ross also found local authorities to be rather sympathetic toward Hitler's followers.⁶⁶ The list of local pro-fascist activities would be considerably longer if one added the other cases of white supremacist or anti-union action that U.S. historians have not labeled "fascist" despite their clear similarities. For instance, in his study of Minnesota during World War I, William Millikan found that the state was largely controlled by an "unconstitutional dictatorship" in which business interests took control of the government and used a secret intelligence service and volunteer militia groups to repress labor strikes—a situation which in any other country would be described as straightforwardly fascist.⁶⁷ It seems clear that fascist activity was even more pervasive at the grassroots than at the top of American society.

An interest in history from the bottom up is precisely what led Joseph Fronczak to make a larger case for the importance of fascism in interwar U.S. politics in a recent article. Borrowing from European historiography, Fronczak pointed out that many ordinary Americans understood fascism more as a set of practices than as a firm ideology and that they were conscious of their membership in a transnational network. This was illustrated by the use of color-coded shirts (as with the anti-labor Black Legion in Michigan), the spread of the fascist salute, the creation of so-called "concentration camps" by Georgia's governor Eugene Talmadge to imprison labor strikers, and the development of the "Mohawk Valley Formula," a strikebreaking strategy focused on winning public support and using vigilantism. Fronczak argued not only that historians have overlooked these clear instances of fascist activity, but also that we should pay more attention to oft-neglected episodes of American history such as the 1933 "Business Plot," in which wealthy businessmen drew inspiration from Mussolini's march on Rome eleven years earlier to organize a coup against the newly installed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the help of World War I veterans—a plan that unraveled when the man they chose to lead the organization, retired Marine general Smedley Butler, disclosed it to the public.⁶⁸ Such examples show once again that the United States was far from immune to the currents of anti-radical and fascist activity that were raging across the globe in these years.

We have focused until now on the period before World War II. As noted earlier, the scholarly consensus has long been that fascism disappeared after 1945 as a result of the decisive defeat of the Axis. Such a view has been called into question by more recent research, however. On the one hand, the policies that fascists drew inspiration from in the United States did not simply fade away after V-J Day; many of them endured well into the 1960s. This was true not only of the Southern Jim Crow regime that Nazis found so appealing, but also of white supremacist policies nationwide, such as racial immigration quotas or bans on interracial marriage. Racial segregation in real estate was another enduring legacy of this period.⁶⁹ According to the sociologist James W. Loewen, thousands of so-called "sundown towns," in which only whites were allowed after sunset, continued to exist at the dawn of the twenty-first century.⁷⁰ The practice of forced sterilization likewise survived in the United

States well into the 1970s, long after eugenics had been discredited.⁷¹ All these examples suggest that World War II was far less of a turning point than we often assume it to have been, and that the decline of the *herrenvolk* democracy championed by the second Klan was a much slower process.

On the other hand, pro-fascist groups and individuals never really went away either. Far-right activists continued to play a role in the conservative movement during the 1950s and 1960s, when their antisemitic and racist views were tolerated by more mainstream figures like William Buckley, Jr., as long as they were not exposed publicly.⁷² The Klan also experienced a resurgence in the midst of the “massive resistance” of whites to the gains of the civil rights movement.⁷³ Though the American Nazi Party, founded by George Lincoln Rockwell in 1959, never had a large constituency, it is likely that this reflected a rejection less of its ideas than of the ostensibly foreign symbol it represented, especially given its association with a regime that the United States had gone to war against.⁷⁴ A few decades later, one of the Party’s young members realized that he could be more successful politically if he adopted a more distinctively American attire. David Duke was correct: running as a Republican in 1990 for a U.S. Senate seat in Louisiana, he received no fewer than 600,000 votes, over 40 percent of the total.⁷⁵ The surprisingly strong showing of this former Klan and Populist Party leader echoed the simultaneous rise of the “white power movement” (a term coined by Rockwell in reaction to the Black Power movement), which had experienced rapid growth in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Many of these militia groups saw themselves as acting not in support of the U.S. government, as the second Klan had in the 1920s, but rather against it.⁷⁶ The fact that the state was no longer seen as an ally of white supremacists suggests that a dramatic change had taken place in the intervening years.

The Fascist Perspective on U.S. History, and Vice Versa

To make sense of what happened in this interval, we need to step back and move from exposition to analysis. What do all the different examples of fascist activity presented here amount to and how do they change what we know about U.S. history? In turn, how does the U.S. example change what we know about fascism?

The definition of this concept presented in the introduction provides a good starting point to answer the first of these two questions. In his work, Paxton recognizes that the nature of fascist movements was bound to change as they evolved from one stage to the next. Two options were open to fascists who reached power: over time, they could either radicalize as Hitler’s regime did during the Second World War, or—and this was much more common—they could normalize and become in the long run “more authoritarian than fascist.” The difference between these two types of political systems is subtle but important: according to Paxton, both routinely trampled civil liberties and engaged in acts of violence, but whereas fascists sought to exert total control over the private sphere, authoritarian

leaders were generally content to let “intermediary bodies” such as churches, economic associations, and local notables exist. Authoritarian regimes also rarely intervened in the economy or developed extensive welfare programs, by contrast with fascists, who often did. In sum, authoritarian rulers “cling to the status quo rather than proclaim a new way.”⁷⁷

This “fascist-turned-authoritarian” trajectory dovetails with the evolution of the Jim Crow South after the collapse of Reconstruction. Once Southern Democrats had managed, with the help of fascist groups like the first Klan, to re-establish control over their section of the country, they settled into an authoritarian regime that tolerated some forms of political activism on the part of African Americans (the example of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute in Alabama comes to mind) but only as long as these groups did not constitute a threat to the core ideal of white supremacy that undergirded the entire system (when Ida B. Wells’s anti-lynching campaign became too high-profile, for instance, repeated death threats forced her to move from Memphis to Chicago). The Jim Crow regime retained some of the defining features of fascism, such as a cult of racial purity, a single-party system, frequent recourses to redemptive violence, and the treatment of racial outsiders as second-tier citizens, which is why it appealed to so many fascists abroad. Yet it also abandoned the search for external expansion and the goal of complete internal cleansing, at the same time as it adopted a relatively hands-off approach to economic and welfare policy. In a word, it was routinized. This was hardly a surprising development: as Paxton noted, in the absence of war most fascist regimes have tended to follow that same long-term course and acquire the traits of more traditional authoritarian systems. The example of Hitler’s Germany, which continued to radicalize until it was destroyed, was the exception and not the norm.⁷⁸

Having explained the connection between fascism and Jim Crow, it is helpful to discuss what happened to that regime in the last third of the twentieth century, after the reforms of the civil rights movements and the Great Society. Did Jim Crow collapse, or was it simply replaced by some new white supremacist order? Some scholars have argued for continuity over change, stressing the fact that formal segregation was phased out but many structural inequalities remained, and that a “new Jim Crow” replaced the previous one with the rise of mass incarceration.⁷⁹ We should not lose sight of the momentous character of the changes brought about by these years, however. At the federal level, a series of measures dismantled key parts of the legal edifice of white supremacy, such as the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 that ended the racial immigration quotas; the Supreme Court’s *Loving v. Virginia* decision in 1967 that prohibited bans on interracial marriage; the Fair Housing Act of 1968 that prevented discrimination in this field on the basis of race, religion, or national origin; and of course the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. To be sure, these milestones did not end racial discrimination and segregation altogether. Yet it is impossible to understand why the new wave of fascist groups in the last quarter of the twentieth century saw themselves as enemies rather than supporters of the state if we do not take these reforms seriously, at least on a symbolic level. Contrary to the interwar period, when the second Klan acted as an auxiliary of the government and used the democratic system to reach its ends, the right-wing militias that emerged from the 1970s onward openly endorsed violence to overthrow the established political system.⁸⁰ This suggests that key parts

of the authoritarian regime built in support of white supremacy had collapsed, and that something new had emerged in its place: a “civil rights state.”⁸¹

The breakdown of Jim Crow is a subject that social scientists have debated for decades. Most interpretations have focused on explaining the success of the civil rights movement, however, rather than trying to understand why the state reacted in the way that it did.⁸² The concept of fascism sheds a more comparative light on this question, by inviting us to contrast Jim Crow with other authoritarian regimes with residual fascist trappings such as the dictatorship of Francisco Franco in Spain, which was overthrown only ten years later in 1975. These two systems were admittedly very different, but they had in common the fact that they both collapsed without a civil war. In part, they simply fell victim to the process of entropy that afflicts all entrenched political regimes over time, whereby the leadership becomes less and less attuned to the needs of its population and more and more reluctant to make the necessary changes that would allow it to hold on to power. A comparative outlook also points to a remarkable and perhaps unique feature of the Jim Crow South, namely that it was not an independent country but merely a section of the United States. As a result, the leaders of this authoritarian regime were never in complete control of their own internal affairs. They had to contend with a national political system that was much more democratic and pluralistic than their own, as the example of Hitler’s mock trial at Madison Square Garden illustrates.

How can we make sense of the fact that the same country harbored two very different political traditions, one authoritarian and the other more liberal? An answer to this question is suggested by the work of political scientists Desmond King and Rogers Smith, who argued in a 2005 article that U.S. politics has historically been shaped by the competition between two “racial institutional orders,” one “white supremacist” and the other “egalitarian transformative.” This framework allows us to nuance the view, popular among some critics, of the U.S. state as a monolith always deployed in support of white supremacy. Though King and Smith recognize that the latter has generally been dominant in American history, they also insist that advocates of egalitarian change have been able to come to the fore during brief windows of opportunity, such as the Reconstruction era from 1865 to 1877 or the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸³ King and Smith were concerned with race rather than fascism, but their dialectic model is nonetheless useful for our own analysis, insofar as it accounts for change over time and therefore helps us understand the breakdown of Jim Crow.

Their work also prompts us to define more carefully the difference between “fascism” and “white supremacy,” a task that is all the more important since scholars have used the latter term more frequently in recent years. Two distinctions seem noteworthy here. First, white supremacy describes a goal whereas fascism designates a method. White supremacists believe in a strict racial hierarchy but not necessarily in the need to overthrow the political system in which they currently live, especially if that system already reflects these values, as was the case of the Democratic politicians who upheld Jim Crow in the South throughout much of the twentieth century. By contrast, fascist activists mobilize to create a new society through the use of violence, as did for instance the first Klan in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, or the white power movement from the 1970s on. Second, fascism is a potentially universal form of political behavior that can be taken up by any group seeking to overthrow the system in which it lives—as demonstrated by the existence of embryos of fascism in the African

American political tradition, such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA or the Nation of Islam—whereas white supremacy is only the goal pursued by the dominant American and European strands of fascism. In other words, fascism is generic while white supremacy is peculiar.

King and Smith's interpretation of American history as shaped by the longstanding competition between two racial institutional orders is useful in yet another respect, for it helps us make sense of the continuing fascist activity after 1945 in the United States. Just as the white supremacist order did not go away after the collapse of Jim Crow, neither did the Allied victory in World War II lead to the complete disappearance of fascist groups. This should not come as a surprise, for Paxton noted that Europe has also seen plenty of fascist groups emerge after 1945, from Italy's *Movimento Sociale Italiano* to Greece's *Golden Dawn* to Germany's *Socialist Reich Party*. Though scholars in the 1970s and 1980s tended to define fascism as the product of a specific period and place—the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of modernity that affected the European subcontinent—Paxton defined it more broadly as a mass-based reaction to any sentiment of “community decline,” which explains how it could have endured for so long. The United States was only one of many countries that experienced fascist spasms after World War II, even though (as was also the case elsewhere) the memory of this war was for a long time enough to hold its supporters at bay and to ensure that they did not transition from Paxton's first stage—incipient movements—to the second—major actors in mainstream politics.⁸⁴

After discussing how fascism can alter our interpretation of American history, we should also tackle the question of how the American example changes what we know about fascism. To begin, it suggests a different origin story. Though Paxton cited several examples of fascist precursors in the late-nineteenth century, he nonetheless maintained that this phenomenon was “the major political innovation of the twentieth century,” something that clearly distinguished this epoch from the previous one. The lack of research on the United States as well as the reluctance of most of its historians to embrace this term meant that Paxton saw the first Klan as merely an isolated example of proto-fascism and that he did not discuss Jim Crow at all. We now know not only that the Klan was only one of many white fascist groups that were active during Reconstruction but also that they largely succeeded in establishing an authoritarian regime that would rule the South for decades to come. In other words, taking Jim Crow seriously entails revising the view that fascism first came to power in interwar Europe. Italian fascists may have been the first to use the term, but the type of political behavior that it describes had been pioneered by white Southerners over a half-century earlier. Though no single country can claim to have invented fascism—it appeared in many different places at the same time—in late-nineteenth century Europe this phenomenon remained largely limited to the cultural sphere, whereas in the United States it had already entered the realm of politics. Again, this should not surprise us. If, as Paxton argued, fascism was the product of the emergence of mass politics in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century, then it makes sense that it found a home in one of the world's most precocious democracies, the United States.⁸⁵

In addition to a new timeline, the American example also suggests a new understanding of the nature of fascism itself. One of the reasons why it has been so difficult to conceive that fascism could exist in the United States had indeed to do with the fact that this form of political behavior is largely associated in the public mind with Nazi Germany, a regime whose atrocities are often seen as so far beyond the pale that they do not tolerate any comparison. As a result, fascism has also come to be

understood as an exceptionally evil form of politics. The example of the United States, by contrast, shows that a fascist-inspired regime could coexist for roughly eight decades within the same framework as a pluralistic democracy. This suggests that the distinction between these two kinds of regimes is more a matter of degree than of kind, and therefore that the transition from one to the other might be less difficult or dramatic than we like to imagine. Since both systems are premised on mass participation of the people in politics, it makes sense to view fascism not as something that we have decisively left behind in 1945 but rather as a “latent temptation” inherent to all democratic regimes, which could always come to the fore in times of crisis.⁸⁶ Just as Paxton noted that the five-stage progression of fascist movements could be reversed or stopped, so can democracy experience episodes of backsliding where it turns into an authoritarian or *herrenvolk* democracy in which only the “right” people are granted full citizenship. Instead of a whiggish view of fascism as the product of a specific time and space in our past, we should therefore understand it as the always-present underside of democracy.

Conclusion

From the Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s to the Silver Shirts of the 1930s to the present-day “white power” movement, fascism has cast a long shadow in U.S. history. Not only do its roots date back more than a century and a half ago, but it has also left a deep mark on the structure of the U.S. state by paving the way for the return of white supremacy in the Jim Crow South after the Civil War. The absence of this concept from the historiography over the past several decades therefore tells us more about our own blinders than it does about the past. A number of factors have contributed to this collective amnesia, such as the longstanding effort to rehabilitate the populist tradition, the strength of exceptionalist thinking, and the inclination to believe that the defeat of fascism in World War II made its study irrelevant. Given the growing number of recent works that point in a different direction, the time is ripe to reconsider the validity of this concept.

Doing so has broad implications for how we think about U.S. history as a whole, first and foremost by inviting us to adopt a more comparative perspective. As we have seen throughout this article, European fascists themselves saw the United States not as an exception but instead a source of inspiration. German Nazis looked to the Jim Crow South as well as to a wide range of public policies across the country and they actively collaborated with the Klan and other American groups. This article is far from the first to notice such contacts, but historians have yet to take them seriously enough to change their epistemological categories. Despite the significant progress made since the “global turn” of the 1990s, U.S. history continues to be interpreted largely on its own terms and most of its practitioners are often reluctant to make systematic comparisons with other countries or to use analytical tools created abroad. Applying the concept of fascism to the United States thus represents a step towards the acknowledgement that this country was not immune to historical processes that happened everywhere else—in a sense, it is tantamount to “provincializing” U.S. history.⁸⁷

Another way in which this term changes our view of American history is by highlighting the contingencies at its heart. Once we recognize that this country harbored a fascist-inspired regime for over eight decades, its turn in the last third of the twentieth century toward a more egalitarian model can be seen not as the natural result of a steady march toward progress, but rather as a surprising move away from its longstanding embrace of white supremacy. Put differently, scholars should not take the achievements of the Great Society and of the civil rights movement for granted but instead see them as a departure from the authoritarian norm that had defined the country for nearly a century. As Ira Katznelson has put it, “[a]lthough the United States entered the 1930s as the globe’s most established racialized order, the pathways from [the 1933] Nuremberg [race laws] and Jim Crow unfolded very differently, one culminating in mass genocide, the other, after much struggle, in civil-rights achievements.”⁸⁸ The roots of that great divergence lay not in some exceptional American tradition but rather in the unexpected conflagration of World War II: the defeat of Nazi Germany not only discredited scientific racism but it also ushered in an ideological Cold War in which U.S. policy-makers felt forced to reform those aspects of their system—such as Jim Crow—that were damaging to their image as the leader of the “free world.” The idea that war played a crucial role in advancing the cause of civil rights is not new, but seeing U.S. history through the lens of fascism further underscores how the success of what Smith and King have called the “egalitarian transformative” order in the 1950s and 1960s was contingent on unanticipated external events.⁸⁹ In turn, it may also explain why the impact of this success was so limited, as the scholarship on mass incarceration has made clear.

The concept of fascism may also prove useful in the ongoing effort of U.S. political historians to focus less on great men, as the “presidential synthesis” has long tended to do, and more on structural patterns.⁹⁰ When foreign fascists looked to the United States in the interwar period, after all, they were drawn not to specific individuals but rather to the country’s legal and social structure in the form of its many laws enforcing a racial caste system. This emphasis on public policy dovetails with the current turn in political history toward the study of the state.⁹¹ Examining the fascist phenomenon in U.S. history entails paying closer attention to social movements such as the Klan not just on the local level but also in their relationship with policymakers, which brings to the fore the relationship between civil society and the state that this new scholarship emphasizes. Fascism may also help us find a balance between consensus and conflict, in the sense that it produced a regime that was widely embraced by a majority of the population yet that also relied on the frequent use of violence.⁹²

Applying the concept of fascism to U.S. history would, finally, change the way that we understand our present. The term made a comeback in the wake of the election of the 45th President, but critics have often questioned whether it is really an apt description of his administration, his personality, and his supporters. Rather than answering such a question directly, this article has demonstrated that we should not dismiss fascism as an analytical tool simply on the ground that it is foreign to the United States. The term may indeed have been invented abroad, but on closer examination we have seen that the type of political behavior that it describes has in fact cast a long shadow in American life. This does not mean that it will manifest itself today in exactly the same ways as it did over a century ago. Like any other kind of political behavior, fascism in the United States has varied in form and in content both over time and from its foreign counterparts. Rather than dismiss this

concept for present-minded reasons—lest it be used to dismiss Donald Trump and his followers as aberrations with no roots in U.S. history, for instance, or to delegitimize participatory politics and to lay the groundwork for technocracy—we should therefore acknowledge its value for the study of the American past as well as its relevance for our present. After all, the first step toward resisting fascism is to recognize that it has long been with us and that it will continue to be for the foreseeable future.

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