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**Saluting tyranny: demonstrators protest in July against plans to exhume Spanish dictator Francisco Franco from the El Valle de los Caidos mausoleum**

# The dark European stain

Faced with Trump and the populist nationalism sweeping the Continent, liberals are quick to proclaim the return of fascism. But other disturbing historical echoes are going unnoticed

*By Thomas Meaney*

When the last zoning war is won, and the Donald J Trump Presidential Library finally opens for business in Manhattan, it is not hard to imagine future historians idling inside the gift shop, regretting that their subject had not done them all a favour and gone full fascist. How much easier the history would be to write if one could date the beginning of the end of the democratic era to the day Trump took office? How much more convenient if the echoes of the 1930s had been of perfect pitch: if Trump had locked up Hillary Clinton, if the trade wars had turned hot; if, instead of withdrawing security clearances from his enemies, Trump simply had them shot.

The intellectual reflex of today's Western liberals is to invoke the spectre of fascism. It is the most solemn way of registering their revulsion at the course politics has taken. Madeleine Albright, the former US secretary of state and herself a child of fascist Europe, writes that fascism "pose[s] a more serious threat now than at any time since the end of the Second World War". Fintan O'Toole, Ireland's leading liberal

intellectual, declares fascism is under way. "What we are living with is pre-fascism," he writes. Michelle Goldberg of the *New York Times* agrees: fascism "is already here".

Liberal historians have certified the mantra. "The attempt to undo the Enlightenment as a way to undo institutions," the Yale historian Timothy Snyder says, citing Trump's first two years as president, "that is fascism." Nor is the fascist wave confined to the United States. Upstanding liberals are supposed to take it as given that France only narrowly escaped a second round of Vichy under Marine Le Pen, that Italy has undergone a new "March on Rome", and that even Scandinavia now has a right-wing "model" in the Sweden Democrats. During the recent bout of political deadlock late last year in Berlin, when Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union could neither form a coalition, nor stomach running a minority government, the Harvard historian Charles Maier published a pie chart comparing the voting patterns of the Weimar Republic with current German ones, coyly noting that they were not *exactly* the same.

The definition of fascism is notoriously hard to pin down. The recent coinages

– twee-fascism, gonzo-fascism, schizo-fascism – no less so. With understandable caution, some historians insist the term only applies to the social conditions in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, when the term was first used by Mussolini and his *squadristi* to describe their vision of society and the state. But most agree that fascism at least applies to the broader phenomenon of right-wing regimes in the interwar years, when parties and groups such as the Nazis, Romania's Iron Guard, the French Popular Party, the Spanish Falange, and others, came to the fore. These parties forged a new political form by blending together different features, which were sometimes at odds with each other: the idolisation of the beauty and efficacy of violence, the need to construct a mythical past for the people that could only be fulfilled by the instincts of a charismatic leader, and the belief that socialism could only be achieved through a corporatist economy that met the needs of a racially defined group and co-ordinated the interests between workers and capitalists.

Many fascist movements took aim at the idea of not only liberal democracy – but "democracy" *tout court* – which they took to ►

► be a political form that, in its vagueness and elasticity, threatened to dilute the special life force of the chosen people. The problem with invoking fascism today is less that it doesn't work as a historical parallel or that it doesn't summon the correct response in populations already numb to every form of invective. Rather, the comparison mistakes the symptoms of decaying liberal democracies – anti-refugee sentiments, the return of anti-Semitism, the attraction to right-populists – for the cause. Worse, it serves as an exculpatory manoeuvre for political elites who, however inadvertently, helped soften the ground for the current upsurge of the right.

fall within America's constitutional provisions. One of the ongoing ironies of the Trump years in America is watching liberals put their faith in the very institutions they despised only a few years before – the CIA, the FBI, the NSA – to protect them from the domestic menace. In the Deep State we trust.

**I**s thinking about the conditions of the 1930s and our own time in any way useful? One aspect of fascism's rise to power seems particularly relevant. It is sometimes forgotten how fragile and uncertain the fascist ascent in Europe was in the interwar period. Musso-

too, had every interest in presenting Italian and German fascists as upstarts without any deep support.) But today, once again, conservatives have serenely presided over Trump's tinkering and savoured the blessings he has brought to the Republican Party. In this scenario – crude, but more accurate than others – Republican Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell is America's Paul von Hindenburg, the Weimar president who thought he could manage the Führer.

Only this time, the conservatives have got their way: Trump delivered the tax cut Republicans have been salivating over for more than a generation; and he is able to voice views they no longer find it profitable to air, but which they profit from nonetheless. Nazism itself was no foe to private enterprise, but early on it was more divided about its relation to capitalists. Trump, too, makes noises in this direction – on certain days he seems to want to imitate China's state capitalism model – but Republicans have no reason to be threatened by the rhetoric, considering Trump's record and his unblinking eye on the US stock market.

In Germany, too, a species of conservatism still has the upper hand, despite the inroads of some genuinely fascist elements in Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), whose advertisements should one day compete for space in museum display cases with Nazi propaganda (a recent campaign poster reads: "German core culture! Islam-free schools!" below a picture of frolicking, pale teenagers). This summer Horst Seehofer, the leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU) and an Orbán admirer, was not only invited into Merkel's cabinet, but was allowed to call the shots on migration policies.

In my interviews with AfD politicians, it was often difficult to tell the difference between their line and that of more standard German conservatives. Alexander Gauland, the co-head of the AfD, whom I met in his rooms in the City Palace at Potsdam, shifted effortlessly between the bombast of a Trumpian provocateur and the pro-market, pro-Nato, pro-US platitudes of a dyed-in-the-Cold-War German liberal.

If one is worried about fascism, the real lesson of the 1930s is to look at the conditions that gave rise to Trumpism and new political forces such as the AfD. America's decades of fruitless, costly wars – in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – have undermined faith in the "liberal international order" much more than Trump's lack of reverence for it. In the US, the Republican Party has long wanted to reward its upper economic stratum, but has only now cottoned on to the fact that it can be more effectively done in a fully hypocritical populist guise than one that sincerely clings to the virtues of

## The comparison with fascism mistakes the symptoms of decaying liberal democracies for the cause

In the broadest sense, fascism is not a useful word. Almost none of the right-wing populist movements of our time pit themselves against the principles or rhetoric of democracy. Instead they view liberalism as an alien spore that has infected real democracy. The bluntest besieger of liberal democracy in Europe today is the Hungarian president, Viktor Orbán. In a Transylvanian spa town this summer, Orbán made the case for the fundamental incompatibility between democracy – specifically, Christian democracy – and "liberalism". Untraditional families, immigration and cultural pluralism – Orbán wants to weed them all out of Hungary. But more notable is that he plans to do it through the EU. "Let us steel ourselves for the European Parliament elections," Orbán told his audience, "we are on the threshold of a great moment." He may not be wrong. Orbán's political party, Fidesz, is a member of the European People's Party, alongside Merkel's Christian Democrats, whose right flank is far from repelled by Orbán's calls for a more exclusionary politics.

The reliance of right-wing populists on traditional institutions and precedent is even clearer in the US. Trump has appointed and nominated reactionary Supreme Court justices in a perfectly legal manner (with members of the American liberal professoriate complimenting him on his choices). His child separation policy on the Mexican border provided some of the most repugnant scenes in recent American history. But such separations were already being conducted under Obama and George W Bush (though Trump turned an ad hoc policy into a formal one), and may likely

lini's "March on Rome", in which he seized power in Italy at the head of thousands of blackshirts, is a bit of very successful fascist mythology. In fact Mussolini arrived from Milan in a comfortable railway sleeping car, and warily called on King Victor Emmanuel III, who – instead of using the forces available to him to crush Mussolini's followers and deny his claim on power – acquiesced and gave him the reins of the state. More dramatically, Hitler was invited into the German government by an old guard of conservatives who thought that they could control him as their political puppet.

The way in which fascists were only able to rise in Europe with the connivance of conservatives was something that fascists themselves wanted to forget by the time they reached their heights in the 1940s. (And they weren't the only ones: the Allies,



**"Apparently scientists can tell how much you drink from your hair"**



**Tall story: Mussolini's "March to Rome" was a fascist myth that disguised the role of conservatives**

the free market. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party has been content to sabotage the organisation of its working-class constituents, who may well still be keeping a vigil for the emergence of a new New Deal.

In Europe the story looks different. The blanket policies of economic austerity, so apparently enlightened that European elites stopped bothering to justify them, are often understood as having provided populists of every stripe with tinder to burn. But the effects of austerity on the surge of nativism on the continent are very difficult to measure. In Germany, the political scientists Philip Manow and Hanna Schwander have challenged the widespread assumption that it was Germany's "losers of globalisation" who voted in droves for the AfD. Germany, after all, was still experiencing its post-2008 boom as the far-right surged across the country, mostly piloted by "winners of globalisation" (early on, the AfD was personally funded by the respectable former president of the Federal Association of German Industry, Hans-Olaf Henkel, though he has since distanced himself from the party).

Manow and Schwander argue that populations that suffer from globalisation via the free flow of goods and capital (ie who live in low-productivity economies, and whose states can't counteract this with the manipulation of currency) will vote for left-wing populists. By contrast, countries that suffer from globalisation via increased influx into their welfare systems will turn to the right. The voters for the AfD are against migrants not because migrants are competition in the labour market, but because migrants may become competition for social benefits. In

particular, AfD voters are horrified about refugees receiving monthly allowances that they themselves may have received – or were eligible to receive – a decade previously, and may one day need again.

The leading historians of European fascism have balked at being asked to validate the supposed "fascist creep". Dylan Riley, a scholar of interwar Romania and Italy, makes the uncomfortable argument in his work that fascism, contrary to what liberals tend to think, is not premised on the destruction of civil society. Instead it is something that can grow out of civil society. For

Riley the most notable aspect of Trump is not his fascistic tendencies but his "neo-Bonapartism", which Riley defines as "a form of state-dependent capitalism, in the sense that profits will owe more to political connections and interventions than to productivity". The result is the opposite of the fascist empowerment of the political party: in the scenario of state-dependent capitalism, Riley argues, parties wither away, leaving only enterprising salesmen to collect the political remains.

For Robert Paxton, the revered historian of Vichy France, Trump appears too ignorant of what a state actually is to be a good fascist – he is more of a plutocrat interested in growing his own wealth and that of his family and fellow "anti-elite" elites. Beyond his passion for military parades, Trump does not see violence or new large-scale military adventures as a way of transcending the failures of the American brand of neoliberalism – at least not yet. Unlike today's right-wing populists, interwar fascists, Paxton reminds us, were generally averse to replicating themselves: Hitler was pleased to see the Romanian fascist party brought to heel, and found Franco intolerable. For Geoff Eley, one of the shrewdest historians of Nazism, what's most notable are the keenly felt global pressures that Trump is proposing a solution for. Where the Nazis worked hard to gin up an internal enemy, Trump can coast on the anti-Muslim propaganda of the American media, and point to enemies at the border, who are desperate to link up with domestic subversives.

These migrants and refugees represent the area where Trump has perhaps been ►

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**Extremist fashion: a couple at a far-right music festival in Ostritz, Saxony marking Hitler's birthday**

► most innovative. He recognised much earlier than the neoconservatives or traditionalist “paleocons” that upgrading Islam to the status of public enemy number one was not going to be sufficient. With the infinitely inflatable threat of communism gone with the end of the Cold War, something equally flexible was required for the fear-monger. China would seem to fit the bill, and Trump occasionally uses it, but it is still too abstract: it is still a word on product labels, rather than a physically embodied presence. Instead, the figure of the migrant has become the best way to recharge the friend-enemy distinction.

Trump's brilliance on the campaign trail was to build up the sense of the enemy as the non-American who is pursuing Americanness among natives: the enemy who wants to dilute or possibly poison the beloved brand. There is fake news but there are also fake Americans – and only Trump and his administration, the message goes, are ruthless enough to weed them out.

This gambit has worked remarkably well. While liberal commentators expected Latino Americans and their supporters to band together in a beautiful, solidarity-igniting protest, something else appears to be happening. In the immediate wake of the implementation of the child separation policy, the approval of Trump among Hispanic voters appears to have increased. They seem to be doing what “passing” populations have traditionally done to survive: to assimilate into the white majority – to compress their identity to “white” as opposed to “Hispanic white” – and present themselves as part of the host population.

**T**he Weimar Complex that certain liberals today exhibit has an unfortunate – and perhaps not entirely coincidental – way of shutting out the possibility of learning from other historical periods, not to mention other regions. Two candidates for comparison for our decade would be the 1960s (a decade of comparable polarisation) or the 1990s (a decade when smaller upsurges of right-wing populism were roundly defeated in several countries). The 1990s saw the rise of Third Way politics and the muscle-flexing of the “liberal international order” and bears more resemblances to our time than many liberals seem prepared to admit. But there is one critical difference: what lost back then is advancing now.

In Germany in the 1990s, small right-wing “flash parties” such as the Republicaners and the Schill Party appeared, but never made the inroads of the AfD. The young Viktor Orbán already had a stint as prime minister of Hungary in the late Nineties, though he recognised quite clearly that the timing for a nationalist resurgence was not yet ripe.

Only Silvio Berlusconi, having taken the reins of a country suddenly no longer of geopolitical consequence, was able in the 1990s to serve up a preview of coming attractions: the special brew of populist, nativist politics combined with a neoliberal agenda that is the signature political form of our time. With a combination of cultural canniness and charisma, Berlusconi first got a nation of Catholics to watch soft pornography in the evenings, and then embarked on an orgy of privatisation and

state sell-offs more spectacular than his Viagra-fuelled soirées.

What kept the forces of right-wing populism back in the 1990s, which is no longer able to hold them back now? There appear to be three elements. The first was that the Cold War had kept polarisation within Western democratic electorates relatively at bay. In the face of Soviet propaganda – and the Soviet example – the liberal regimes of the West were compelled to provide their lower-middle classes with tolerable living conditions, and a common vision of the future. Neither imperative remained in place after 1989, as had been registered earlier in the years of the Cold War Détente. The second, greater condition for liberalism's relative power was that the Third Way – the new “compassionate” form of neoliberalism – had not yet failed, at least in the public's mind. And so it was granted a trial period of sorts that ended in the financial crisis and Middle Eastern paroxysm. Finally, the pressure of China in the global economy had still not yet been adequately felt in the 1990s. The Chinese state was, for instance, still a net exporter of oil until 1993, not having yet adjusted to its own appetite for resources.

What was new in the 1990s – the decline of Cold War solidarity, the Third Way, the rise of China – is now old hat. But the right-wing populism of that decade has still never been properly tested. To the horror of those liberals who came to prominence in the 1990s, Tony Blair above all, it seems that a significant portion of their populations are willing to “give fascism a chance”. But to the horror of the more authentically fascist-minded figures of today's right – from Steve Bannon to the AfD's Björn Höcke, from Olcay Kilavuz, leader of the Turkish Grey Wolves, to Tommy Robinson, formerly of the English Defence League – illiberal nationalism is being thwarted by an adaptable breed of populist neoliberals. The rising political form of our time appears to be a mongrel: the expansion of the market into every domain, combined with shrewdly targeted redistribution and social programmes, all wrapped in an appeal to racial solidarity and the demonisation of outsiders.

To counter this combination, liberals need to do more than just roll back privatisation, tweak social provisions and crush right-populists at the voting booth. The longer-range necessity is to undermine the view that we live in an economic and political order without alternatives. At the minimum, this will mean allowing socialist contraband – under whatever label necessary – back on to the dock of liberalism. ●

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