

# What the history of fascism can tell us about Donald Trump's rise

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*The past year has seen many brand the now president-elect Donald Trump as a fascist, citing his narcissism, threats against minorities, and appeals to authoritarianism. Whether Trump is a fascist or not, [Jane Caplan](#) writes that we may be able to understand him and what he represents better by looking to the history of fascism, a political ideology that was able to draw on fears about 'other' groups during similar periods of crisis in the past.*



Is Trump a fascist? Let's start with another question: why do we want to know? Is it simply to stick him with the most damning political label available? Or is it because his ideas, his actions, his support really put him in the same genus as the fascist movements and regimes of interwar Europe?

For months, historians of the twentieth century have been looking nervously at Trump and asking what tools we have to understand the man, his popular appeal and his backers – and to measure the danger he represents. Against my own better judgment, I have been spotting Mussolini in this gesture or turn of phrase, Hitler in that one; I have been watching the manipulated interactions of speaker with audience, the hyperbolic political emotions, the narcissistic masculinity, the unbridled threats, the conversion of facile fantasies and malignant bigotries into eternal verities, the vast, empty promises, the breath-taking lies. A whole repertoire seems to have returned us to the fascisms of interwar Europe, acted out by a man whose vanity is equalled only by his ignorance. But has it?

Fascism has always been a challenge for historians to pin down, empirically or conceptually. It is not alone in testing our precision. You could say the same of 'populism' – another term much in circulation these days – or virtually any other ideological -ism; they all resist conclusive definition. What's particular to 'fascism' is the combination of its slippery meaning – like mud, easy to throw around – and the special political horror that attaches to it. Under this term also slides its most horrifying incarnation, Nazism, waiting in the wings so to speak. But since Nazism has become so closely identified in public memory with the Holocaust alone, it's the more indeterminate 'fascism' that takes the stage.

Thirty years ago, when studying fascism was a scholarly cottage industry, the historian Noel O'Sullivan [suggested](#) that 'the prevailing intellectual mood of our age has inevitably made fascism incomprehensible to us', because fascism – far less Nazism – was 'not supposed to happen at all'. It contradicted the optimism characteristic of modern western thought, but at the same time it exposed the tension between the activist-democratic and limited-liberal styles of politics that have prevailed in Europe since the French Revolution: the fundamental question here is how much power can be entrusted to the people. Fascism, like populism, is a creature of democratic politics, its shadow and its threat – or, depending on your interests, its promise, a weapon with which to beat the masses back into submission.

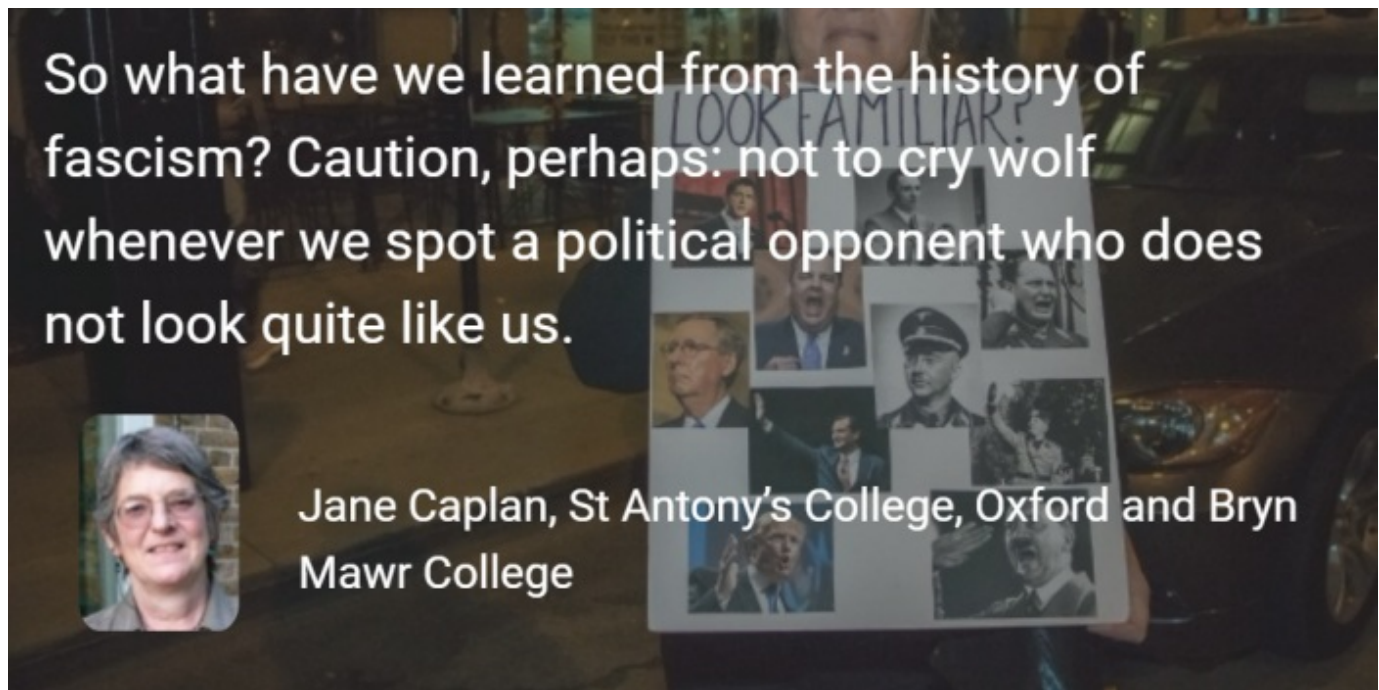
These questions are back on the agenda with a vengeance. 'The intellectual mood of our age' has been ambushed again by something that now seems to have been lying in wait, gathering force, in Europe and now in the US. But now it has to be confronted, not just historicized. Anyone who studies modern history always has at least one corner of one eye trained on the present; and there are moments when the encounter between present and past suddenly forces itself to the center of our field of vision. The moment of Trump is one of these. But this eruption does not mean simply that we should paste bits of the past onto the present and see if they fit. The point is how the history we already know can be used to make sense of the present.

I'll focus on three of the most pressing issues where I think the history of fascism offers us something usable. This

leaves a lot out, and in any case the aim is not to play a taxonomic game, but to try to identify points of risk and resistance. If I use the case of Germany, this is not to substitute Nazism for fascism in all its guises, but to disclose some of the crucial mechanisms through which power can be translated into tyranny.

1. *Crisis and opportunity*: The fascist movements of interwar Europe were the creatures of war and defeat, revolution and political violence, economic inequality and depression: in a word, systemic crises of national identity and security. In Germany and Italy, they were eased into power by the patronage of elites who were unable to control the pressures of popular democracy through the existing mechanisms of political parties and the state. Today's atrophied systems of political organization and representation are also struggling to maintain their authority. The situation is by no means as critical, but Trump's initial success has been built on the exhaustion of the resources of the US party system, Democrat as well as Republican. The US has proved vulnerable to the threat of a type of movement that groups itself on the edge of the body politic and does not guarantee to play by the rules of the political or – potentially – the constitutional game.

The poster-child for political and constitutional manipulations was Germany in 1933. There the 1919 constitution provided emergency powers for rule by decree that had become familiar by use and misuse in the 1920s and early 1930s. When the Nazi seizure of power began in 1933, the weapons of the constitution were too easily turned against itself. It was decommissioned in all but name, taking all political and civil rights with it and turning power over to an unfettered executive.



In America, the constitution may be more robust, but it has already given away some of its protections. The leading edge of tyranny is the 2001 Patriot Act (twice reauthorized under Obama) which, among other things, authorizes the indefinite detention of immigrants suspected of terrorism and provides for the immunity of some FBI actions from judicial review. Reliance on the power of the constitution will not be enough to guide strategies of defense against tyranny. And one other point. The chaos of the transition suggests that this highly personalized movement, having turned its back on political convention, will introduce a dynamic disorganization into government that will put orderly decision-making at risk. Competing centres of power and distorted chains of command were endemic to fascist regimes, exposing unregulated spaces for radical forces to exploit.

2. *Figures of the enemy*: In Italy and Germany alike, fascist regimes were carried to power on the promise to vanquish the threat of communism, physically as well as politically. Hence the systematic violence that paved their way to power, and its unrestrained scale and intensity after they took over. Exploiting widespread stereotypes, Nazi propaganda elided 'opponent' with 'enemy' and 'criminal'; it identified 'the communist' and 'the Jew' as a composite figure of limitless threat and subversion who had to be eliminated from the body politic.

For all the difference between the organized communist party of Germany and the diffuse Muslim and immigrant presence in the US, America's political discourse has proved vulnerable to similarly intensified images of 'the Muslim terrorist' that are in essence no less troubling. In fact, Trump's campaign played with great success on the double equation Muslim/terrorist and immigrant/criminal, proposing excision as the solution to both. An absolute priority is to force apart these tendentious and dangerous elisions, and to refuse militarized frontiers and mass deportations.

3. *Whose interests*: In the 1920s and 1930s, Marxist theorists held fascism to be a mass movement exploited by capitalism to protect itself politically from the threat of communism. But the idea that fascism was not what it seemed was more widespread than this. Numerous commentators from across the political spectrum also warned that these movements that claimed to represent the interests of a wide spectrum of ordinary members and supporters had neither the intention nor the capacity to deliver on their incompatible promises. But once in power, maintaining the facade of that unity was what drove the violent repression of dissent.

The current globally mobile power of financialised neo-liberal capitalism does not, on the face of it, seem to need the defense of a fascist mobilization. It has sucked what it needs from the body of liberal states, and has been allowed to ignore the remnant claims of their weakened fiscal institutions with staggering ease. Whether it can continue to do this is at least in part an international question that cannot be resolved by the actions of a single state. Trump's victory has been widely assigned to popular revulsion against this, especially among those whose status and livelihoods have been shattered by the effects of neoliberalism, and who respond to his promise to restore jobs and respect. Yet it is clear that the sources of Trump's popular support were far wider than this, including many middle-class voters motivated more by anxiety than despair, and by broader ideological motives. It may be a hard task to keep his constituencies together. He will also have to confront the incompatibility of his stance on immigration and trade protectionism with the needs of powerful US business interests. But we cannot rely on the eventual fragmentation of his base; and in any case, will that matter? Or will power have been redistributed by then to more impregnable locations than a disappointed electorate?

So what have we learned from the history of fascism? Caution, perhaps: not to cry wolf whenever we spot a political opponent who does not look quite like us. This misleads and antagonizes in equal measure. In any case, what we face is going to be appalling under any name. To combat it we need not to shout louder but to look more closely. So, above all, vigilance: not to let misplaced moderation or sheer anxiety cloud our judgment as events unfold. Fascism is not just the big bang of mass rallies and extreme violence; it is also the creeping fog that incrementally occupies power while obscuring its motives, its moves and its goals. It is about inserting demagoguery, violence and contempt for the rule of law into the heart of popular politics.

[Detlev Peukert](#), a German historian who died too young, has bequeathed an eloquent summary of the elementary civic and ethical obligations that everyone owes – not just in crisis, but always, and not just to people with whom we already agree:

*The values we should assert [in response to fascism] are easily stated but hard to practise: reverence for life, pleasure in diversity and contrariety, respect for what is alien, tolerance for what is unpalatable, scepticism about the feasibility and desirability of chiliastic schemes for a global new order, openness towards others and a willingness to learn even from those who call into question one's own principles of social virtue. (Peukert, Inside Nazi Germany (1982), pp. 144-5)*

This is our task.

A version of this article first appeared at [History Workshop](#).

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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