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Haunted by Hitler

LIBERALS, THE LEFT, AND THE
FIGHT AGAINST FASCISM
IN THE UNITED STATES

CHRISTOPHER VIALS

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For my parents, Judy and Peter Vials

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALAWF	American League Against War and Fascism
ALPD	American League for Peace and Democracy
ASQ	<i>American Socialist Quarterly</i>
BP	<i>The Black Panther</i> (newspaper)
BPP	Black Panther Party
CP	Communist Party
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States
CRC	Civil Rights Congress
HAW	Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin
HUAC	House Committee on Un-American Activities
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
NM	<i>New Masses</i>
NR	<i>New Republic</i>
NSDAP	National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party)
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
OFF	Office of Facts and Figures
OWI	Office of War Information
SPD	Social Democratic Party (Germany)
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
WHK	Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee

HAUNTED BY HITLER

Far from trying to present an exhaustive or complete account of historical fascism, I wanted to give a sense of the political characteristics that are critical to understanding both its presence in the United States and its survival after the Second World War. For the purposes of this book, it is also necessary to briefly consider how major historians have dealt with the possibilities of its reincarnation after 1945 inside and outside Europe. In short, the idea that fascism survived the Second World War is no longer a controversial idea among

historians; however, as might be expected, there is no consensus as to which national arena, if any, presents the ripest conditions for its full rebirth. In the early 1960s the German historian Ernst Nolte asserted that fascism was effectively buried in 1945, and other eminent scholars followed suit. But by the 1990s this assessment of the European scene changed in light of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, the decline of social democracy, and the mainstreaming of radical right parties.²⁰

In considering the continuity of fascism after the Second World War, one must distinguish between two things: the existence of fascist or fascist-like movements within ostensibly nonfascist states and the nightmarish reconstitution of a fully fascist government. As to the first, no one any longer denies that neofascist groups as well as mainstream radical right parties that draw inspiration, ideas, and personnel from such groups are a reality of modern and postmodern societies across the world and will be for some time. In 1991 Griffin wrote, "As a *political ideology* capable of spawning new movements [fascism] should be treated as a permanent feature of modern political culture."²¹ Since then, the heirs to historical fascism have entered mainstream politics in a number of European countries. The first neofascist party to participate in a European majority government was the Italian Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), founded in 1946 as the direct heir of Mussolini's PNF. In 1994 the conservative Silvio Berlusconi emerged as the leader of a coalition government when the MSI joined other conservative and rightist parties to form a parliamentary majority.²² Relying primarily on anti-immigrant sentiments, the Front National in France, Jörg Haider's Freiheitspartei in Austria, the National Front in Britain, the Jobbik party in Hungary (clad in the symbols of the fascist Arrow Cross party from the Second World War), and, more recently, the Golden Dawn in Greece have also moved from margin to mainstream in recent decades.

The larger question here is the continued existence of such groups outside of Europe and whether any of them could ever rebuild an actual fascist state. Major historians are univocal in their doubts about the formation of a future Fourth Reich in Western Europe, as a deepening belief in parliamentary democracy since 1945 has ensured that neofascist parties will remain single-issue movements driven by a narrowly anti-immigrant agenda.²³ It is outside of Western Europe where some scholars urge vigilance. The politically conservative Stanley Payne, for instance, sees the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa as the most likely grounds for a resurgent fascism, and he largely agrees with the assertion of George H. W. Bush in 1990 that Saddam Hussein represented the "Hitler of Our Time."²⁴ From a liberal perspective, Robert Paxton agrees that the Middle East and Eastern Europe could be future sites, but Paxton sees the United States as a possible danger as well. Though he argues that fascism

will never again appear in its exact, pre-1945 form, he urges us to beware of its “functional equivalent.” The functional equivalent would not be an “exact repetition” of the NSDAP or PNF but would create fresh symbols to organize the population around national regeneration, encouraging citizens to “give up free institutions” in the process.²⁵ Paxton describes a potential incarnation in the United States as follows:

No swastikas in an American fascism, but Stars and Stripes (or Stars and Bars) and Christian crosses. No fascist salute, but mass recitations of the pledge of allegiance. These symbols contain no whiff of fascism in themselves, of course, but an American fascism would transform them into obligatory litmus tests for detecting the internal enemy. . . . Around such reassuring language and symbols and in the event of some redoubtable setback to national prestige, Americans might support an enterprise of forcible national regeneration, unification, and purification.

To Paxton, Americans are well on their way to fascism when jittery conservatives begin looking for “tougher allies” and when establishment politicians appeal to the same mobilizing passions as these brutish allies, giving up “the due process of law” to organize the public around racist and nationalist demagoguery.²⁶

But given the legal codification of the Japanese American internment, slavery, Jim Crow, the extermination of Native Americans, and the Naturalization Law of 1790, which made whiteness the basis of U.S. citizenship until its effective repeal in 1952, one could rightly ask whether Paxton’s analysis valorizes the due process of law in the United States. If intense racialization has occurred under the normal auspices of the country’s liberal democratic system, why single out fascism as a singular threat? Can paying too much attention to fascism help to normalize and render invisible the workings of a more established mode of injustice? For centuries the West has perpetrated racialized mass death without the help of fascist demagogues: examples include the millions dead as a result of the African slave trade, the extermination of indigenous peoples through settler colonialism, and the preventable famines of European imperialism, which, as Mike Davis has recently estimated, claimed at least thirty million lives in three late nineteenth-century catastrophes alone.²⁷ This dark history made many African Americans and colonial subjects apathetic toward Allied wartime rhetoric, at least initially (see chapter 6).

Since the eighteenth century these crimes have been perpetrated not under fascism but under the auspices of what can be termed liberalism. When I refer to liberals in this book, I rely on the American sense of the word, that is, people whose politics are left of center yet who, unlike leftists, do not wish to radically reshape the given bases of society. But when I use the terms *liberalism* and *the liberal state*, I evoke their European meanings, which do not indicate a distinct

left/right orientation. This liberalism commonly refers to a representative system of government grounded in the Enlightenment, one which guarantees its citizens the freedoms of speech, press, and association. Yet because it was championed by the bourgeois founders of modern states in western Europe and the Americas, many of its iterations have linked human freedom with the capitalist marketplace. But capitalist exploitation, which requires hierarchy and political exclusion for its smooth reproduction, undercuts liberalism's leveling impulses. In the attempt to resolve this contradiction, the Western imperial powers created a dual system consisting of both a body of free citizens with constitutionally protected rights of life, liberty, and property and a set of spaces for those outside the social contract who are excluded as political subjects but included as objects of political power and sources of exploited labor.²⁸ The German conservative Carl Schmitt called attention to this dynamic, arguing that Western democracy offers an internally homogenous "equality of equals" that always depends on the exclusion of the foreign, both internally and externally.²⁹

Yet the histories of violence shared by fascism and liberalism do not make the two systems moral equivalents, and the fact that both have tended to preserve capitalist social relations does not make them, in essence, the same. Viewed in the context of liberalism's dual system, fascism is a specific mode of denying formal political rights such as multiparty elections, free speech, and free press to almost all of its subjects and of forcibly closing any space for nonhierarchical, democratic mobilization, actual or potential. After all, a strand within socialism, namely, social democracy, has argued that liberalism is not the exclusive property of its bourgeois originators and can be repurposed for working-class ends; indeed, working-class and subaltern organizing is largely responsible for the extension of political rights to the lower ranks. Further, fascism accelerates and intensifies the violence of the societies from which it sprung. Given the more than sixty million dead in nine years of war, fascist regimes led to the deaths of more people than the dominant liberalism over any equivalent time span. In fascism, the space of social death, reserved only for some in the liberal capitalist state, grows in size to the point that it encompasses the social whole, while at the same time those marginalized in the old regime face intensified repression, even extermination (intellectuals of color drew most closely on this spatial model of fascism).

Scholars and cultural commentators often exalt liberalism as a bulwark against fascism. Weak or failed liberal states are fertile ground for fascist organizing, the argument goes, and thus any people with a broad-based faith in liberal freedoms can be counted on to keep the Blackshirts in check. But given the way it has been historically institutionalized under the auspices of capitalism, as a means to secure a range of social hierarchies, neither I nor most

of the figures discussed in this book see liberalism as a ward against fascist mobilization. The dual system created by Enlightenment political thought, combined with the hierarchies required by capitalism, create a set of possessive investments among the privileged polity, investments which, when threatened under particular conditions, can become a truly demonic force. In 1951 Aimé Césaire wrote that Hitler was the demon inside every white, Christian bourgeois and that the defeated dictator “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”³⁰ As Césaire shrewdly observes, the possessive investments of the French, English, and Americans can take the form of those of the Germans precisely because Germans share a cultural field with other Western nations from which they cannot be neatly extricated. Indeed, Nazism was fueled by a biological racism begotten of colonialism that hardened across the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is often forgotten that the Nazis learned eugenic theory from England and the United States: the Nazis’ Law on Preventing Hereditarily Ill Progeny, for instance, was modeled on legislation from the State of California.³¹ For this reason American antifascist cultural production did not simply miss its mark when ascribing fascism to a society whose main crimes arise from liberalism. Rather, it worked to check liberalism from further degenerating into the nightmare of its own contradictions. Laboring under the banner of antifascism, cultural producers went on the offensive, attacking the very ground of fascism by showing how it can emerge from the hierarchies and dual political spheres of the dominant liberalism.

This book is not guided by a fear that retrograde militarists will establish the functional equivalent of a fascist government in the United States: an irony-driven consumer culture, the post-civil rights institutionalization, however flawed, of multiculturalism, and the absence of an anxiety-producing, organized left make an American Reich hard to imagine at present. But conditions change, and the rise of such a state is not impossible. More pressing, however, is that key historical and institutional dynamics in the United States have persistently facilitated the emergence of fascist and fascistoid groups. The country has its own cult of the warrior fueled by a history of frontier violence, empire building, and, since the Cold War, vast outlays of military spending that have helped to create a permanently militarized culture. Add the venerable racialized dual system of liberalism and a surprisingly tenacious streak of anticommunism to which the American warrior cult is linked, and you have very real foundations for would-be fascists to build on as their relative social privileges become threatened. Consequently, in the United States, as in Europe, there are actors on the political stage who represent neofascist functional equivalents,

and they have shifted the political center at a number of critical junctures, as the following chapters will attest.

To begin to recognize these actors and to discern which movements are likely to be animated by a possessive investment in relative social privilege, one must acknowledge something once widely regarded as self-evident: fascism's status as a right-wing movement. Curiously, there is little debate among scholars, including scholars on the left, that even the worst communist regimes are left wing in nature. Such consensus is no longer the case with regard to fascism and the right. Although the recent historiography of fascism is in full agreement that it is not a left-wing movement, there is a debate about whether it constitutes a properly right-wing phenomenon, and consequently contemporary historiography has often been out of synch with a popular majority on this issue, particularly in Europe. While many historians, including Griffin, still feel comfortable describing fascism as a right-wing movement, others, like Payne, Zeev Sternhell, and D. S. Lewis, prefer to place it outside the categories of left and right, mainly because of its eclectic economic policy.³² Yet in Europe and in the United States for much of its history fascism has often been synonymous with the far right among the public at large.³³ To cite a personal example, when I lived in Germany and was learning the language, I once asked a friend there if a certain politician from the Christian Democratic Party was right wing (*rechts*). Taken aback, he politely informed me that conservative politicians prefer to be called *conservativ* because in Germany *rechts* is generally associated with Nazis.

No major scholar in this field has attempted to actually define the terms *left* and *right* when assigning fascism to a place on the political spectrum. Left and right first appeared as terms of political cartography during the French Revolution of 1789, when supporters of the revolution seated themselves to the left of the National Assembly while those backing the king gathered to the right. After the Bourbon Restoration in the 1820s, the usage of the terms as political markers gradually spread beyond the French context.³⁴ As political designations, left and right are positional: they do not encompass a consistent set of policies and ideologies across space and time; the belief in free markets and a rejection of statism, for example, have not been dependable markers of the political right over the past two centuries. Rather, left and right are relational terms whose specific contents change over time within diverse national contexts. As the Italian political scientist Norberto Bobbio has argued, however, this does not mean they are simply "empty vessels" that can be filled with any random content; rather, there are broad epistemological assumptions that consistently distinguish left- and right-wing thought.³⁵ Drawing on Bobbio, the French historian Marcel Gauchet, and the American studies scholar Nikhil Pal Singh, one could synthesize the following definitions of left and right in the West, at least insofar

as each position conceives the nation. In short, what places one to the left or to the right is not one's stance toward big government versus small government (this view projects contemporary debates in the United States backward in time and across oceans). More fundamentally, it is our views on social hierarchy and human equality, and how we map these views onto the nation, that position us to the left or to the right.

For a starting point, consider Bobbio's claim that as one moves to the left, people are seen as more equal than unequal, and that as one moves to the right, people are seen as more unequal than equal. In regard to the national arena, the political left tends to see division arising from hierarchies and inequalities which are unnecessary and unjust; it calls attention to structural divides within the nation in the hope of bringing about eventual reconciliation. Those who are slightly to the left, American liberals, for instance, might see some social hierarchies as being unchangeable, but on the whole and like others to the left, they see human beings as more equal than unequal. The right, on the other hand, tends to see social hierarchies within the nation as unavoidable, even natural or desirable, and works toward a nation that is organically unified with many of its inequalities intact, a nation wherein each person acknowledges his or her proper position. The right certainly acknowledges the existence of internal division but sees it as harmful and artificial, something created by those who do not recognize the nation's fundamental unity. Unlike the left, the right therefore tends to locate the ultimate threat abroad.

For the hard right, all this is sharpened: domestic elements that do not fit its narrative of the nation are rendered as foreign, and fatal disunities plaguing the national body are attributed to these alleged outside elements.³⁶ In other words, the epistemology of the hard right, past and present, is characterized by an often racialized fear of foreignness and by a tendency to render domestic groups as foreign in its drive for a national unity fully compatible with social hierarchy. If one listens carefully, antifascism reveals how the far right brazenly uses nationalism as a means of organizing social hierarchies, and how it does so by making rigid distinctions between the domestic and the foreign, ultimately de-naturalizing those who do not fit their sense of the nation. One early twenty-first-century example is the American who renders Barack Obama foreign by claiming he is a Muslim and has no birth certificate—in actuality, because he does not fit a particular narrative either of the United States or of what an allegedly true American looks like. Rightist American sympathizers of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco in the 1930s likewise insisted that Franklin D. Roosevelt was actually a Jew and referred to him as “Frankly Deceitful Rosenvelt”³⁷ (fig. 1). In itself, the claim that Obama is Muslim does not prove the contemporary Islamophobe to be a fascist: rather, it illustrates why she or he (as well as the

anti-Semite of the thirties) are both situated on the hard right. They are placed there because they share a deep structure of thought spanning a century and an ocean, one which, to be sure, has intersected with actual fascism.

This example illustrates a potential danger as well. When a conservative labels a liberal a communist or when a leftist calls an ordinary conservative a fascist, they often engage in a behavior one could call tilting the scale. That is to say, if someone's politics are slightly to the left or the right, they are erroneously moved to the extreme of the pole. This can also apply to the mislabeling of specific events or policies, for example, when universal health care is characterized as communistic or the bombing of Hanoi as fascist. To minimize this problem, historians of fascism developed the concept of the fascist minimum, often a bulleted list of benchmarks which someone or something must meet in order to be considered fascist. Such an approach makes it more difficult to apply the label to a contemporary phenomenon on the basis of a single trait it may share with the evils of the past (for example, Hillary Clinton supported after-school programs, Hitler supported after-school programs, therefore . . .). Thus in the example above, to observe that the nationalism of Tea Party Islamophobes and the NSDAP "overlap"—in that both are marked by the epistemology of the political far right—is not to say they are both fascist. The range of ideological beliefs in which an utterance is embedded is what moves its speaker into fascist territory. In the case of Gerald Winrod, a Hitler supporter who adamantly proclaimed FDR's Jewishness in the 1930s, these conditions certainly were present, as his wider belief system met a consistent fascist pattern. Be that as it may, one is justified in raising the alarm when a number of fascist traits converge, even if they are not in their most fully developed form.

Prudence dictates that one should also make clear when modern political actors with xenophobic tendencies are *not* fascist. Many constituents of the Tea Party coalition, for example, are strongly guided by a belief in parliamentary democracy and are preoccupied with economics. So long as these elements predominate, it is not a fascist movement per se, but one that sharpens the exclusionary dual system of rights within liberalism. Yet while liberals and the left use the term *fascism* imprecisely when they apply it to any manifestation of conservatism, there is a strand of the American right that indeed constitutes a functional equivalent of fascist mobilization, one in which too many hallmark traits converge to be ignored. Antifascisms directed at this particular strand of reaction are the focus of this book.

Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966); Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004); Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 1993; Ian Kershaw, *Nazi Germany: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993); and Richard Bessel, ed., *Life in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). In addition, I have drawn from a few seminal primary sources of fascist political rhetoric, including the speeches of Joseph Goebbels, assembled in Helmut Heiber, ed., *Goebbels-Reden, Band I: 1932–1939* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971); Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971); and Benito Mussolini, *My Rise and Fall* (New York: De Capo Press, 1998).

5. Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 130.

6. Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 242; Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 95–96.

7. *Ibid.*, 5, 10, 102–3.

8. In Germany, Hitler dramatically purged the socialism from National Socialism during the so-called Night of the Long Knives from June 30 to July 2, when he ordered the murder of key *Sturmabteilungen* (SA) or Brownshirt, leaders. The SA was the central Nazi organization before the party's seizure of power, and many of its members still clung to the antibourgeois rhetoric of early Nazism even after Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933. By 1934 their continued street violence became a political liability for the regime, particularly among conservatives and bourgeois, who craved order. By purging them, Hitler earned further respectability from these quarters and removed any substantive opposition to an alliance with established wealth from within his own party. See Bessel, "Political Violence and the Nazi Seizure of Power," in *Life in the Third Reich*, 10–14.

9. Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 242.

10. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 403.

11. Payne, *History of Fascism*, 242.

12. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 65.

13. Mark Christian Thompson, *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture between the Wars* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 30.

14. Payne, *History of Fascism*, 71–79; Mussolini, *My Rise*, 32–50; Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 161–69, 187–206.

15. Payne, *History of Fascism*, 90–92; Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 5.

16. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 280. Most historians are quick to point out that fascists cannot be defined by what they say, but by what they do (i.e., the institutions they create and the policies they pursue). But fascism is also an ideology not reducible to its institutional outcome: fascist "words" can be particularly instructive when trying to ascertain the nature of the national identity intended by its bearers.

17. *Ibid.*, 132–35. Thompson synthesizes Theweleit and fascist misogyny in *Black Fascisms*, 30–31.

18. Payne synthesizes this debate in *History of Fascism*, 328–30.

19. Maria Hsia Chang, "'Fascism' and Modern China," *China Quarterly* 79 (1979), 553; Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh Selected Writings, 1920–1969* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), 54, 56, 303; Luis Taruc, *Born of the People: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), 49; for an official example of "Japanese militarism," see Henry Wallace, *Our Job in the Pacific* (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations, 1944), 39.

20. Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 172–73.

21. Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, xii.

22. Payne, *History of Fascism*, 508, Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 176–77.

23. Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, xii; Payne 511; Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 188.
24. Payne, *History of Fascism*, 516–17, 520.
25. Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 174–75, 241.
26. *Ibid.*, 202, 205.
27. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2002), 5–7.
28. My notion of liberalism is deeply indebted to Nikhil Pal Singh's definition in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 140–45.
29. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 9–16.
30. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 14.
31. Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38–39.
32. Griffin, *Nature of Fascism*, 50; Payne, *History of Fascism*, 16. The positions of Sternhell and Lewis are synthesized in Roger Eatwell, “The Rise of Left-Right Terminology,” in *The Nature of the Right: American and European Politics since 1789*, ed. Roger Eatwell and Noel O’Sullivan (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 30.
33. Eatwell, “Rise of Left-Right Terminology,” 42.
34. Marcel Gauchet, “Right and Left,” in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Volume 1: *Divisions and Conflicts*, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press), 241, 244.
35. Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 58–59.
36. This definition of left and right is a reworking and elaboration of the definitions put forth by the cultural historian Marcel Gauchet regarding the French national context; from Bobbio’s universal definition of left and right; and from Nikhil Pal Singh’s notion of the American left and right. Gauchet, “Right and Left,” 266, 277; Bobbio, *Left and Right*, 60–69; and Singh, “Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy,” *American Quarterly* 50.3 (1998): 476–77.
37. Avedis Derounian Papers, Drawer D2, folder “Gerald Winrod,” and Drawer G2, folder “Christocrats.” National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, Belmont, Mass.
38. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 6.
39. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 122.
40. *Ibid.*, 124.
41. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Sprache und Geschichte: Philosophische Essays* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1995), 153.
42. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254. Benjamin writes that the historical materialist must “blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework,” *ibid.*, 263.

2. From Margin to Mainstream

1. “The War Mongers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1938.
2. In October 1936 Franco’s general Emilio Mola boasted that he had four columns of