

# Post-Fascism: Facism as Trans- Historical Concept

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Abstract: What does “fascism” mean at the beginning of the twenty-first century? The word conjures a dark interwar landscape of violence, dictatorship, and genocide. Such images spontaneously return to our thoughts as we again see the rise of the radical right on a global scale, from Europe to the US and Brazil. Yet, fascism has changed its skin. It ostentatiously exhibits typical fascist features – authoritarian and charismatic leadership, hatred of democracy, contempt for law, derision of human rights, open racism (notably against Blacks, Latinos, and Muslims), misogyny, homophobia – but the old fascist rhetoric has been abandoned: the post-fascist movements depict themselves as defenders of national identities threatened by globalization, mass immigration, and Islamic fundamentalism. A hybrid phenomenon, this “post-fascism” is neither the reproduction of the old fascism nor something wholly new; it remains in suspension between an unknown future and a haunting past.

Keywords: fascism, post-fascism, violence, populism, xenophobia, anticommunism

In recent times, fascism has exceeded the boundaries of historiographical debate, where many observers thought it had been definitely relegated, and spectacularly came back to the political agenda. The tendency is global. Since the 1930s, the world has not experienced a similar growth of the radical right-wing movements, which inevitably awakes the memory of fascism. At the beginning, the phenomenon appeared in continental Europe, with the rise of the Front National in France and other far-right movements in the countries of the former soviet bloc. Today, far-right parties are strongly represented in almost all European Union countries, sometimes as governmental forces. The success of Alternative für Deutschland and Vox show that Germany and Spain are no longer exceptions. In the most recent years, the wave became a tsunami and overflowed other continents, with the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Nabendra Modi in India, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Nationalism, racism, xenophobia and authoritarianism have become highly contagious. Everywhere, the ghosts of fascism reappear and reopen old debates: are we coming back to the 1930s? Does the concept of fascism capture the novelty of our situation?

As Reinhart Koselleck reminded us, there is a tension between historical facts and their linguistic transcription. This does not only mean that concepts are indispensable in order to think a historical experience. This also means that they can transcend it and be used in order to apprehend new realities, which are connected to the past through a web of memorial continuity. Historical comparisons—fascism is one of their privileged realms—come out from this tension between history and language; they are often extremely fruitful, but they establish analogies

and differences rather than homologies and repetitions. Sometimes, they reveal that old concepts no longer work and have to be renewed.

Today, this entanglement between past and present displays an ambiguous semantics: on the one hand, almost nobody openly endorses fascism—Bolsonaro is the exception that confirms the rule—and most observers recognize the differences existing between the movements of the radical right and their ancestors of the 1930s; on the other hand, any attempt to define this new phenomenon implies a comparison with the interwar years. In short, the concept of fascism seems both inappropriate and indispensable for grasping this new reality. This is why I prefer to speak of *post-fascism*, a definition that emphasizes a chronological distance and locates what is happening today in a historical sequence shaped by both continuity and transformation. Chronologically, this right-wing constellation comes after classical fascism and belongs to a different historical context; politically, it cannot be defined without being compared to classical fascism, which remains a foundational experience. On the one hand, it is no longer fascism; on the other, it is not completely different; it is something in-between. The concept of post-fascism certainly does not answer all open questions but corresponds to this transitional step.

We should not forget that the category of fascism has been frequently used after the Second World War. In 1959, Theodor Adorno wrote that “the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy” was potentially more dangerous than “the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy.” In 1974, Pier Paolo Pasolini depicted the anthropological models of neoliberal capitalism—at that time still embryonic—as a “new fascism” in front of which the regime of Mussolini appeared irremediably archaic, as a kind of “paleo-fascism” (with similar arguments, Umberto Eco spoke of “Ur-Fascism”). And ten years ago, many historians who tried to interpret Berlusconi’s Italy recognized its intimacy—if not its filiation—with classical fascism. Of course, there were enormous differences between the founder of a totalitarian state and a successful businessman who owned several TV channels, but Berlusconi’s plebiscitary conception of democracy and charismatic leadership strongly evoked the fascist archetype. And Berlusconi was a modest forerunner of Donald Trump.

Therefore, fascism is not only transnational—or transatlantic, according to Federico Finchelstein, the historian of Argentinian fascism—but that it is also trans-historical. It is collective memory that establishes a link between a concept and its public use, which inevitably exceeds a purely historiographical dimension. In fact, this is true for many of the concepts in our political lexicon. Saying that the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany and France are democracies does not mean to posit the identity of their political systems, neither to pretend that they would correspond to the Athenian democracy of Pericles’ age. In the twenty-first century, fascism will neither take the face of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco, nor hopefully the form of totalitarian terror, but there are many ways to

destroy democracy. The ritual reference to the threats to democracy—barbarians at the gate: a trope hammered by all the media since the emergence of Islamic terrorism—forgets a fundamental lesson of the history of fascism: democracy can be destroyed from within.

The rise of the radical right is not the only analogy that we can make with the situation between the two world wars. Other similarities are evident and have frequently been emphasized, from the lack of an international order to the concentric waves of the economic crisis of 2008. The global chaos of the 1920s and 1930s depended on the collapse of the nineteenth-century “European concert,” whereas nowadays it results from the end of the Cold War and its bipolar world. As we know, international instability always raises the demand for strongmen. Sometimes, the entanglement of crisis and instability produces events that turn into tragic repetitions. Think of the refugee crisis of 2015, which recalls of the Evian conference of 1938, when Western democracies concluded that they would not receive the Jews who fled from Nazi Germany.

These parallelisms are significant, but they intertwine with some crucial differences that complexify and problematize the comparison. In this talk, I would like to stress the most relevant of them: violence, anticommunism, utopianism, racism, and the attitude of the economic and political elites.

### **Violence**

The first difference is obvious, but this is a not good reason either to ignore or to overemphasize it. Violence was central in both the ideology and practice of classical fascism. It was a product of the “brutalization” of continental Europe during the Great War, speaking with George L. Mosse. War shaped the realm of politics by transforming its language and its means of action. In many countries, especially those that had been defeated, the state monopoly of legitimate violence had been radically put into question and politics had taken arms. Many parties created their own militia. Today, on the opposite, most radical right leaders are accustomed to appearing on our television screens; they no longer inflame hysteric crowds or attend mass rallies in which their followers march dressed in uniform. Amongst their activists, violence is the exception—like the Utoya massacre of 2011 or the Charlottesville car attack six years later—not the rule. Post-fascism has emerged after seventy years of peace in most Western countries. Thereafter, its relationship with democracy is different and it does not exhibit a “subversive” character. The West was able to “export” violence outside of its borders, mostly in the Middle East, and is accustomed to depict one of its creatures—terrorism—as an external threat. But this is a form of exorcism.

## Anticommunism

A fundamental pillar of classical fascism was anticommunism. After the Great War, anticommunism was the crucible for the transformation of nationalism from a conservative to a “revolutionary” right: Mussolini defined his movement as “revolution against revolution.” Today, after the collapse of real socialism and the end of the USSR, anticommunism has lost both its appeal and its meaning. Sometimes it survives—think of Bolsonaro’s campaign against “cultural Marxism”—but has become marginal. This has some considerable consequences. A powerful boundary that in the past separated fascism from the laboring classes no longer exists. Thus, Le Pen, Salvini, Orban and Trump have reintegrated the working class into a nationalist imagination. Of course, they refer to a “national” working class (without immigrants), mostly composed of white men, but they pretend to defend them against globalization. They claim a kind of ethnically circumscribed welfare state opposed to a neoliberal policy of privatization. A significant obstacle has fallen down. In a historical perspective, post-fascism could also be seen as the result of the defeat of the revolutions of the twentieth century: after the collapse of communism and the embrace of neoliberal reason by most social democratic parties, radical right movements have become, in many countries, the most influential forces opposed to the “establishment” without showing a subversive face and avoiding any competition with a demobilized left.

This change is far from being anecdotal. In the 1930s, fascism was unable to conquer the laboring classes, which remained pervaded by a socialist culture and organized by left-wing parties and unions. A solid wall separated their values, identities and languages; they expressed different rituals and symbols. When it came to power, fascism could not integrate the labor movement into its own social and political system; it was compelled to destroy it. Today, this cleavage has disappeared. In many European countries, the former bastions of the left have become, with a spectacular reversal of the traditional electoral landscape, the strongholds of far-right parties.

The radical right claims the classic populist paradigm of the “good” people opposed to the corrupted elites, but has significantly reformulated it. In the past, the “good” people meant an ethnically homogeneous rural community opposed to the “dangerous classes” of the big cities. After the end of communism, a defeated working class struck by deindustrialization has been reintegrated in this virtuous national community. The “bad” people of post-fascist imagination—immigrants, Muslims and Blacks of the suburbs, veiled women, junkies and marginal men—are merged with the leisure classes that adopt liberated customs: feminists, LGBTQ, antiracists, ecologists and defenders of immigrant rights. On the opposite spectrum, the “good” people are nationalist, antifeminist, homophobic, xenophobic, and nourish a clear hostility towards ecology, modern arts and intellectualism.

## Anti-Utopianism

Post-fascism belongs to a “post-ideological” age shaped by the collapse of the hopes of the twentieth century and it does not break a new regime of temporality which, speaking once again with Koselleck, is deprived of any “horizon of expectation.” In the 1930s, fascism claimed a “national revolution” and depicted itself as an alternative civilization opposed to both liberalism and communism. It announced the birth of a “New Man” who would have regenerated the continent by replacing the old and decadent democracies. On the contrary, post-fascism does not have utopian ambitions. Its modernity lies in the means of its propaganda—all its leaders are familiar with television advertising and communication—rather than in its project, which is deeply conservative. Against the enemies of civilization—globalization, immigration, Islam, terrorism—the radical right only claims a return to the past: national currency, national sovereignty, “national preference,” stopping immigration, the preservation of the Christian roots of Western countries, gender hierarchies, defense of family, etc.

From this point of view, the new radical right is more neoconservative than fascist; it belongs to the tradition of “cultural despair” (the *Kulturpessimismus* described by Fritz Stern) rather than to “conservative revolution,” which projected aristocratic and antidemocratic values into a future political order (a peculiar mix of obscurantism and idealized technology). Think of the ideologue of Alternative für Deutschland, Rolf-Peter Sieferle. He wrote a pessimist pamphlet in which he complained about the decadence of Germany, dominated by cosmopolitan and post-national values, and completely reshaped by Habermas’s idea of “constitutional patriotism.” After publishing his intellectual testament, *Finis Germania* (2017), he committed suicide. In short, this is not the trajectory of a “redeemer.” He reminds once more of the resigned discourse on “decadence” elaborated by Arthur Gobineau and Oswald Spengler in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rather than the modern call for revenge and regeneration embodied by Maurice Barrès and Ernst Jünger, the thinkers of “integral nationalism,” “total mobilization” and the advent of the era of new “militiamen.” Their anti-modernism is antipodal to the proclivity to aestheticizing of politics so typical of classical fascism.

In fact, there is a striking symmetry between the lack of futurity in both post-fascist and radical left culture. The eclipse of the myth of a “Thousand-Year Reich” or the rebirth of the Roman Empire corresponds with the end of the socialist utopia. There is no equivalent today to the competition between Bolshevism and fascism to conquer the future that so deeply shaped the 1930s. This competition which, according to Ernst Bloch, took place in the unconscious and the dreams of the masses, belongs to the first half of the past century. Whereas many left-wing movements like Occupy Wall Street in the US, 15-M in Spain or la Nuit debout in France tried to build a new project for the future, post-fascism

fills the vacuum left by a disappeared “horizon of expectation” with a reactionary retreat into the past.

### **Xenophobia**

A common feature of the radical right is xenophobia. A hatred of immigrants shapes their ideology and inspires their action. They transform “immigrants” into “infiltrated enemies,” foreign bodies that threaten the health of a national community. Globalization has engendered a series of powerful reactions, very diverse and often antipodal. Out of all of them, post-fascism is certainly the most regressive: a revival of ethnic nationalism. It rejects cultural pluralism in the name of monolithic identities and disclaims cultural, racial or religious pluralism. It transforms Georg Simmel’s paradigm of the stranger into Carl Schmitt’s figure of the enemy. The search for a scapegoat is a constitutive element of fascist discourse, and post-fascism does not divert from this path, but it is an innovator more than a follower: the main target of its hate are no longer the Jews, rather the Muslims. This shift from anti-Semitism to Islamophobia is a significant change that deserves to be analyzed.

Fascism was strongly anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism shaped the entire world-vision of German National Socialism and deeply affected the varieties of French radical nationalisms; it was introduced in the laws of the Italian fascist regime in 1938 and even in Spain, where the Jews had been expelled at the end of the fifteenth century, Franco’s propaganda identified them with the Reds as both enemies of national Catholicism. Of course, in the first half of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism was wide-spread almost everywhere, from the aristocratic and bourgeois layers—where it established symbolical boundaries—to the intelligentsia: many of the most-read writers of the 1930s did not hide their hatred of the Jews. Today, however, Muslim immigrants have replaced the Jews in racist discourse. Racism—a scientific doctrine based on biological theories—has been replaced by a cultural prejudice that emphasizes a irreducible discrepancy between “Jewish-Christian” Europe and the Islam world. Traditional anti-Semitism, which shaped all European nationalisms for over a century, has not disappeared—periodic neo-Nazi attacks against synagogues and Jewish schools in both Europe and the United States prove its persistence—but has become a residual phenomenon or has transmigrated from the right to Islamic fundamentalism. As in a system of communicating vessels, prewar Anti-Semitism declined and Islamophobia increased. In fact, there is a certain continuity in this historical transfer. The post-fascist representation of the enemy reproduces the old racial paradigm and, like the former Jewish Bolshevik, the Islamic terrorist is often depicted with physical traits stressing his otherness.

In one century, the intellectual ambition of the radical right has significantly diminished. Nowadays, there is no equivalent of *Jewish France* by Edouard Drumont (1882) or *The Foundations of the Nineteenth*

*Century* (1899) by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, nor the essays on racial anthropology by Hans Günther of the 1930s. The new nationalism has not produced writers like Louis Ferdinand Céline and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, not to speak of philosophers like Giovanni Gentile, Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. The cultural humus of post-fascism is not nourished with literary creation—except perhaps Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2016), which depicts France in 2022 transformed into an Islamic Republic—, rather with a massive campaign to win media attention. Many political and intellectual personalities, television channels and popular magazines that cannot be qualified as fascist, have contributed to building this cultural humus. We could remember the enflamed prose of Oriana Fallaci on the Muslims who “reproduce themselves like rats” and urinate against the walls of our cathedrals.

George L. Mosse had pointed out that, in classical fascism, spoken words were more important than written texts. In an age in which the culture of words and images channeled by television and the social media has replaced textuality, it is not astonishing that the post-fascist discourse spreads first of all through the media, assigning a secondary place to literary productions (which become useful—like *Soumission*—insofar as they are transformed into media events).

We may observe many significant similarities between today’s Islamophobia and fin-de-siècle anti-Semitism, in a pre-fascist era. But we should distinguish between France and Germany. After the Dreyfus Affair, French anti-Semitism stigmatized Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia but its main target were the senior officials (*juifs d’Etat*) who, under the Third Republic, occupied very important positions in the bureaucracy, the army, the academic institutions and the government. Captain Dreyfus himself was a symbol of such a social ascension. At the time of the Popular Front, the target of anti-Semitism was Léon Blum, a Jewish dandy who embodied the image of a Republic conquered by the “Anti-France.” The Jews were designated as “a state within the state,” a position that certainly does not correspond to the present situation of the Muslim minorities that still remain hugely underrepresented inside the institutions of European countries.

Thus, the comparison would be more pertinent with Wilhelmine Germany, where the Jews were carefully excluded from the state machine just as the newspapers warned against a “Jewish invasion” (*Verjudung*) that was putting into question the ethnic and religious matrix of the Reich. Anti-Semitism played the role of a “cultural code” that allowed Germans to *negatively* define a national consciousness, in a country torn by rapid modernization and urbanization, where the Jews appeared as its most dynamic group. In other words, a German was first of all non-Jewish. In a similar way, today Islam is becoming a cultural code that allows Europeans to find, by a *negative* demarcation, their “lost” national identity, threatened or engulfed in the process of globalization.



Sometimes, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia coexist in the post-fascist discourse as two complementary rhetorical figures. The most striking case of this combination is found with Viktor Orban, the chief of the Hungarian government, who denounces a double threat: a financial conspiracy organized by a Jewish elite from Wall Street (the usual target of his speeches is the banker George Soros), and a demographic threat embodied by mass immigration: “Islamic invasion.” While less explicit than Orban, similar arguments are often suggested by other far-right leaders of Central and Western Europe. But we should not neglect the multiple contradictions of such xenophobic rhetoric: Orban, as well as Trump, Bolsonaro and other far-right leaders, has a very good relationship with Israel, which he considers as a powerful anti-Islamic bastion (and as a useful intermediary between the Visegrad group and the US). Think of Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italian radical right, who became internationally famous when, as Ministry of the Interior, he impeded ONG ships of refugees from reaching the shores of Sicily. One month ago, over the course of just one week, he both participated in mass meetings against immigrants and organized a conference against anti-Semitism in Rome with the Israeli ambassador as a distinguished guest.

In France, the myth of “Islamic invasion” was first formulated as a literary trope that quickly turned into a slogan: the “great replacement” (*le grand remplacement*). The inventor of this figure of speech—the “Islamization” of France—is Renaud Camus, a writer who does not hide his closeness with the National Front. Fifteen years ago, he complained in his journal about the overwhelming Jewish presence in the French cultural media; in the following years, he shifted his focus to the Muslims, the actors of the “great replacement.” Camus belongs to the old school of French conservatism. His complain about the disappearance of eternal France has the anguished taste of Léon Bloy’s pamphlets. The most popular advocates of the theory of the “great replacement,” however, are two public intellectuals: Eric Zemmour and Alain Finkielkraut. Zemmour has devoted to this topic a very successful book—500,000 copies sold in six months—titled *The French Suicide* (2015). Finkielkraut is the author of another best-seller, *L’identité malheureuse* (“the unhappy identity”), in which he depicts the despair of a great nation faced by two calamities: multiculturalism and a mistakenly idealized hybridity (the French “melting pot,” the *métissage* of a France “Black-Blanc-Beur,” i.e. Black, White, and Maghrebian: a national image that became very popular after the French victory of the football World Cup in 1998).

Put in a historical perspective, the myth of the “great replacement” reveals some astonishing affinities with a classic anti-Semitic stereotype. This discourse does not differ very much from that of German nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1880, Heinrich von Treitschke, the most respected German historian, deplored the “intrusion” (*Einbruch*) of the Jews into German society where they shook the customs of *Kultur*

and acted as a correlative element. Treitschke's conclusion was a note of despair that became a kind of slogan: "the Jews are our unhappiness" (*die Juden sind unser Unglück*). This catchphrase was appropriated by National Socialism in the 1930s. In fact, Finkelkraut's and Treitschke's "unhappiness" have the same roots: a similar discontent in the face of modernization and globalization combined with the search for a scapegoat.

In the US, the equivalent of the "great replacement" is Donald Trump's slogan "America first" which, like its French homologue, has an interesting genealogy recently analyzed by Sarah Churchwell. Words have their own history of which even their speakers may not be conscious. Robert O. Paxton, a distinguished historian of fascism, pointed out that, despite his frequent almost fascist behaviors and assessments, Donald Trump has probably never read any book on fascism. Nonetheless, his slogan is burdened with a large and heavy past. Until the First World War, "America first" was the mantra of isolationism; it evoked a spirit of selfishness and the conviction that national interests should be defended regardless of any external circumstances. But the Great War was a turning point. Since the early 1920s, this catchword took a different meaning, until it condensed the claims of a new nativism that, according to many contemporaries, expressed the features of a possible American fascism. Pushed forward by the anti-Bolshevik "red scare" and the rise of the KKK, which reached at that time its highest influence, "America First" was reinterpreted in terms of biological racism. The United States had to protect itself from mass immigration, an external threat coming from Southern and Eastern Europe that was modifying the biological bases of its civilization. Italian, Polish, and Balkan peasants, as well as Eastern Jews were destroying Nordicism, the pillar of traditional, i.e. wasp America. The US equivalents of Chamberlain, Drumont, Barrès and Maurras, were the eugenicist Madison Grant, the author of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), and Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920). Both of them announced a future of decadence for a nation that, because of immigration, could not remain a "homogeneous population of Nordic blood." This huge campaign resulted in the National Origins Act of 1924, enthusiastically supported by the KKK, that reduced immigration by more than 80% by fixing national quotas corresponding to the average of each nation in 1890, when the immigration wave from Southern and Eastern Europe was just starting.

In the age of the New Deal, this wave of racist nativism disappeared, until its spectacular come back with Donald Trump. Thus, it is not very difficult to sketch the historical background of his speeches against Latino and Muslim immigrants. In January 2018, he shocked the public opinion when he declared that the United States should stop receiving "all these people from shithole countries" like Africa and Haiti instead of admitting "more people from places like Norway." In 2018 like in 1924, stopping

immigration was “a matter of life and death for America,” the condition “to make America great again.”

### The Return of the Colonial Repressed

Islamophobia, however, is not a simple ersatz for the old anti-Semitism, insofar as its roots are old and it possesses its own tradition, which is colonialism. In Europe, colonialism had invented a political anthropology based on the dichotomy between citizens and colonial subjects—in French the legal categories of *citoyens* and *indigènes*—that fixed social, spatial, racial and political boundaries.

The colonial matrix of Islamophobia gives us a key for understanding the ideological metamorphoses of post-fascism, which has abandoned the imperial and conquering ambitions of classical fascism in order to adopt a much more conservative and “defensive” posture. It does not wish to conquer, rather to expel (even to the point of criticizing the neo-imperial wars carried on since the beginning of the 1990s by the US and its Western allies). Whereas nineteenth century colonialism wished to accomplish its “civilizing mission” by seizing and appropriating territories outside of Europe, postcolonial Islamophobia fights against an interior enemy in the name of the same values. Rejection replaced occupation, but their motivations did not change: in the past, conquest aimed to subjugate and “civilize”; today, expulsion aims to “protect” civilization. This explains the recurring debates on secularism and the Islamic veil, especially in France, that led to Islamophobic laws prohibiting it in public places. This consensual agreement on a neocolonial and discriminatory conception of secularism has significantly contributed to the legitimization of post-fascism in the public sphere.

I pointed out the neoconservative character of post-fascism, but this tendency is shaped by many contradictions and should not be interpreted as a return to Joseph de Maistre.

Emerging from within a consolidated political tradition of liberal democracy and an anthropological model of possessive individualism built by market societies, post-fascism has broken with the fascist ideal-type and, in many cases, claims the legacy of the Enlightenment. In the post-totalitarian age of human rights, this gives it respectability. Classical colonialism had taken place in the name of progress and universalism; this is the tradition with which post-fascism tries to merge. It does not justify its war against Islam with the old and today no longer receivable arguments of doctrinal racialism, rather with the philosophy of Human Rights. Marine Le Pen—who has clearly distanced herself from her father on this issue—does not wish to defend exclusively the native French against immigrants; she wishes to defend also women against Islamic obscurantism. Homophobia and gay-friendly Islamophobia coexist in this changing radical right. In the Netherlands, feminism and the gay rights have been the flags of a violent xenophobic campaign against

immigration and the Muslims, carried out first by Pim Fortuyn and then by his successor Gert Wilders.

### Elites

The last significant difference between classical fascism and post-fascism lies in the position of the global elites. In the 1930s, the fear of communism pushed them to accept Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. As several historians have pointed out, such dictators certainly benefited from the many “miscalculations” made by statesmen and the traditional conservative parties, but there is no doubt that without the Russian Revolution and the world depression, in the middle of a collapsing Weimar Republic, Germany’s economic, military and political elites would not have allowed Hitler to take the power. They despised Hitler because of his plebeian origins, his fanaticism and his hysterical style—more than for his racism or anti-Semitism—but they preferred him to Bolshevism and were ready to welcome him as a providential man in front of the threat of a new Spartacist revolution. Today, *toute proportion gardée*, something similar could happen in the American elections. The global elites are neither protectionist nor interested in stopping immigration, and don’t share Trump’s culture or style, but unlike in 2016, when they supported Hillary Clinton, this time they would probably endorse Donald Trump against Bernie Sanders.

In Europe, the situation is different. There, the interests of the economic elites are much better represented by the European Union than by the radical right. The latter could become a credible interlocutor and a potential leader only in the case of a collapse of the euro that would push the continent into a situation of chaos and instability. Unfortunately, we cannot exclude such a possibility. The European Union elites remind the “sleepwalkers” at the edge of 1914, the holders of the “European concert” who went to the catastrophe completely unaware of what was happening.

During the inter-war years, the liberal democracies looked at the rise of fascism with an ambiguous attitude made of a mix of incomprehension and complacency, whose major expressions were the non-intervention of France and the UK during the Spanish Civil War and their concessions to Hitler at the Munich Conference in 1938. A similar ambiguity seems to be repeating itself today, with many episodes of collusion between the radical right and the traditional right in several countries from Southern and Central Europe. In the European Parliament, the followers of Victor Orban are allied with those of Angela Merkel<sup>1</sup>, and in Thuringia, just a few days ago, the CDU and AfD allied against the left before being disavowed by Merkel herself. These episodes confirm that post-fascism is an unstable constellation and may change in the future, but until now the radical right has grounded its legitimacy in its rejection of neoliberalism. The global elites are cosmopolitan; they embody a form of economically and culturally post-national universalism that, as Wolfgang Streck pertinently

points out, has engendered, by reaction, “a form of anti-elitist nationalism from below.” Post-fascism was able to give a political expression to this fearful resentment.

The roots of today’s radical right-wing movements are old, but their rise was fueled by the economic crisis that has dramatically revealed the symbiotic relationship between political elites and financial elites. Since the 1990s, i.e. since the end of the Cold War, both left and right government forces have embraced neoliberalism as a kind of *pensée unique*. This is the main premise of the spectacular increase of the far right, which has finally appeared as an alternative. Thus, I fear that the defense of the establishment is not the answer to post-fascism, just as the elites of the 1930s were unable to stop the rise of fascism. The radical right, one could say, is the undemocratic answer to the process of “undoing democracy” carried out by neoliberal reason. In a famous aphorism of 1939, Max Horkheimer wrote that “If you don’t want to talk about capitalism, then you should be silent about fascism.” Today, one could say: “If you don’t wish to talk about neoliberalism, you should be silent about post-fascism.”

### Populism

Considering the significant differences between historical fascism and its epigones which I mentioned above, some scholars suggest to depict the latter as populists. Populism, they argue, is a new correlation of charismatic leadership, political authoritarianism, rejection of pluralism, ethnic nationalism, mythical views of sovereignty, xenophobia and racism often translated into discriminatory laws. We can agree with this definition. In the public discourse, however, populism is too often a source of confusion and misunderstandings. Today, it is weaponized by the elites themselves as a kind of “immunizing tool.” Since there is no alternative to neoliberal reason, all its critics are automatically stigmatized as populists. In a similar way, during the Cold War the term totalitarianism was used in order to “immunize” the so-called “free world:” communism was interchangeable with fascism and all critics of market society and liberal democracy were totalitarian enemies.

If populism is a rhetorical dispositive that consists in opposing the virtues embodied by a mythical “people” to the corrupted elites, there is no doubt that most contemporary far right movements are populist. Such a definition, however, simply describes their political style, without grasping their content. And this content can be very different. In Latin America, for instance, there is a long history of left-wing populism that used demagoguery and often—particularly in recent times—took authoritarian features, but its goal was primarily to include the lower classes into the social and political system by assuring them some fundamental rights. In Western Europe, right-wing populism is xenophobic, racist, and claims policies of exclusion. Since the nineteenth century, we have experienced a Russian and an

American populism, a great variety of Latin-American populisms, a right-wing and a left-wing populism. Now, if populism means that Donald Trump is interchangeable with Bernie Sanders, Podemos with Vox, Marine Le Pen with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Evo Morales with Jair Bolsonaro, I think it becomes a useless concept. Populism is a chameleonic word: when the adjective is transformed into a substantive, its heuristic value dramatically drops. Very often, populism is a word that reveals the contempt for the people by those using it in order to disqualify their adversaries. This is why I think that post-fascism is a more pertinent definition.

In conclusion, considering fascism as a trans-historical concept does not mean to posit its eternal character or envisage its repetition. In the twenty-first century, it cannot appear but under a new guise and, as I indicated at the beginning of my talk, we probably will need new words to depict it. If fascism is trans-historical, it is first of all because it is much more than a simple historiographical object. It is also a realm of memory and it is as such that it affects our present and our political imagination. Commemorating the Holocaust is useless if it does not help us to struggle against the racism of the present. Studying fascism would be similarly pointless if it does not instill into us the consciousness that democracies are fragile conquests, that sometimes they implode, and that the history of the twentieth century is also the history of their disintegration.

<sup>1</sup> This text was written before the European elections and within a different setup of governmental power, that is a different political conjuncture than that of today.