

Populism Is Not Fascism

But It Could Be a Harbinger

By Sheri Berman, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Nov/Dec, 2016

As right-wing movements have mounted increasingly strong challenges to political establishments across Europe and North America, many commentators have drawn parallels to the rise of fascism during the 1920s and 1930s. Last year, a French court ruled that opponents of Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's National Front, had the right to call her a "fascist"—a right they have frequently exercised. This May, after Norbert Hofer, the leader of Austria's Freedom Party, nearly won that country's presidential election, *The Guardian* asked, "How can so many Austrians flirt with this barely disguised fascism?" And in an article that same month about the rise of Donald Trump, the Republican U.S. presidential candidate, the conservative columnist Robert Kagan warned, "This is how fascism comes to America." "Fascist" has served as a generic term of political abuse for many decades, but for the first time in ages, mainstream observers are using it seriously to describe major politicians and parties.

Fascism is associated most closely with Europe between the world wars, when movements bearing this name took power in Italy and Germany and wreaked havoc in many other European countries. Although fascists differed from country to country, they shared a virulent opposition to democracy and liberalism, as well as a deep suspicion of capitalism. They also believed that the nation—often defined in religious or racial terms—represented the most important source of identity for all true citizens. And so they promised a revolution that would replace liberal democracy with a new type of political order devoted to nurturing a unified and purified nation under the guidance of a powerful leader.

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Although today's right-wing populists share some similarities with the interwar fascists, the differences are more significant. And more important, what today's comparisons often fail to explain is how noxious politicians and parties grow into the type of revolutionary movements capable of fundamentally threatening democracy, as interwar fascism did. In order to understand this process, it is not nearly enough to examine the programs and appeal of right-wing extremist parties, the personalities of their politicians, or the inclinations of their supporters. Instead, one must carefully consider the broader political context. What turned fascists from marginal extremists into rulers of much of Europe was the failure of democratic elites and institutions to deal with the crises facing their societies during the interwar years. Despite real problems, the West today is confronting nowhere near the same type of breakdown it did in the 1930s. So calling Le Pen, Trump, and other right-wing populists "fascists" obscures more than it clarifies.

THE BIRTH OF FASCISM

Like many of today's right-wing movements, fascism originated during a period of intense globalization. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, capitalism dramatically

reshaped Western societies, destroying traditional communities, professions, and cultural norms. This was also a time of immense immigration. Peasants from rural areas, which had been decimated by new agricultural technologies and the inflow of cheap agricultural products, flocked to cities, and the citizens of poorer countries flocked to richer ones in search of better lives.

Then, as now, these changes frightened and angered many people, creating fertile ground for new politicians who claimed to have the answers. Prominent among these politicians were right-wing nationalists, who vowed to protect citizens from the pernicious influence of foreigners and markets. Fascist movements arose in almost all Western countries, from Argentina to Austria and from France to Finland. Fascists became disruptive forces in some countries and influenced policymaking in others, but they did not fundamentally challenge existing political orders before 1914. Their policies and appeal alone, in other words, did not make them truly dangerous or revolutionary. It would take World War I to do that.

That conflict killed, maimed, and traumatized millions of Europeans, and it physically and economically devastated much of the continent. “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime,” British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey remarked at the beginning of the war. And indeed, by the time the war was over, an entire way of life had vanished.

The year 1918 brought an end to the war, but not to the suffering. Europe’s continental empires—Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian—collapsed during or after the conflict, creating a variety of new states that lacked any experience with democracy and featured mixed populations that had little interest in living together. Meanwhile, in many of Europe’s older states, such as Germany and Spain, old regimes also collapsed, making way for democratic transitions. But like the new states, most of these countries also lacked experience with popular rule—and thus the habits, norms, and institutions necessary for making it work.

To make matters worse, the end of the war, rather than ushering in a period of peace and reconstruction, brought with it an unending stream of social and economic problems. New democracies struggled to reintegrate millions of soldiers back into society and reconstruct economies that had been distorted and disrupted by the fighting. Austria and Germany had to respond to the humiliation of a lost war and a punitive peace, and both were hit with hyperinflation. Across the continent, lawlessness and violence quickly became endemic as democratic governments lost control of the streets and parts of their territories. Italy suffered through almost two years of factory occupations, peasant land seizures, and armed conflicts between left- and right-wing militias. In Germany, the Weimar Republic faced violent left- and right-wing uprisings, forcing the government to send in troops to recapture cities and regions.

Despite these and other problems, fascists at first remained marginal forces. In Italy, they received almost no votes in the country’s first postwar election. And in Germany, Hitler’s 1923 Beer Hall Putsch flopped, ending with him and many of his coconspirators in jail. But as time passed, problems persisted. European economies had trouble getting back on their feet, and street brawls, assassinations, and other forms of social disorder continued to plague many European

countries. By the late 1920s, in short, many Europeans' faith in democracy had been badly shaken.

DEMOCRACIES IN CRISIS

Then came the Great Depression. What proved so catastrophic about that event was not the economic suffering it caused—although that was bad enough—but the failure of democratic institutions to respond to it. To understand the difference, compare the fates of Germany and the United States. These two countries were hit the hardest by the Depression, experiencing the highest levels of unemployment, rates of business collapse, and drops in production. But in Germany, the Weimar Republic then fell to the Nazi onslaught, whereas in the United States, democracy survived—despite the appearance of some pseudo-fascist leaders such as the Louisiana politician Huey Long and the radio preacher Father Charles Coughlin. Why the different outcomes?

The answer lies in the two governments' divergent responses to the economic crisis. German leaders did little to ease their society's suffering; in fact, they pursued policies of austerity, which exacerbated the economic downturn in general and the horrifically high rates of unemployment in particular. Strikingly, even the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, sat meekly by, offering little in the way of an attractive alternative program. In the United States, meanwhile, democratic institutions and norms were longer lived and therefore more robust. But also critical to staving off fascism was President Franklin Roosevelt's insistence that the government could and would help its citizens, by laying the foundations of the modern welfare state.

Unfortunately for Europe, too many governments there proved unable or unwilling to respond as actively, and most mainstream political parties offered little in the way of viable alternative plans. By the early 1930s, liberal parties had been discredited across much of the continent; their faith in markets, unwillingness to respond forcefully to capitalism's downsides, and hostility to nationalism struck voters as completely out of synch with interwar realities. With the exception of Scandinavia's, meanwhile, most socialist parties were also flummoxed, telling citizens that their lives would improve only once capitalism had fully collapsed—and that they could do little to help them in the interim. (Socialists were also indifferent or hostile to concerns about national identity and the evisceration of traditional norms—another politically unwise stance during a period of immense social upheaval.) Communists did at least put forth a compelling alternative to the status quo, but their appeal was limited by an almost exclusive focus on the working class and their hostility to nationalism.

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And so in all too many European countries, it was the fascists who were able to take advantage of the declining faith in democracy that accompanied the Depression. Fascists offered both a strong critique of the reigning order and a powerful alternative to it. They criticized democracy as inefficient, unresponsive, and weak and promised to replace it altogether. The new system would use the state to protect citizens from capitalism's most destructive effects by creating jobs, expanding the welfare state (for "true" citizens only, of course), eliminating supposedly exploitative capitalists (often Jews), and funneling resources instead to businesses that were

deemed to serve the national interest. Fascists promised to end the divisions and conflicts that had weakened their nations—often, of course, by ridding them of those viewed as not truly part of them. And they pledged to restore a sense of pride and purpose to societies that had for too long felt battered by forces outside their control. These positions enabled fascism in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere to attract an extremely diverse constituency that cut across classes. Although fascist parties received disproportionately high support from men, the lower-middle class, and former soldiers, they enjoyed a broader base of support than any other type of party in interwar Europe.

Despite all these advantages, the fascists still lacked the strength to take power on their own; they also needed the connivance of traditional conservatives. These conservatives—who sought to preserve the power of the traditional elite and destroy that of the people—lacked mass constituencies of their own and believed they could use the fascists' popularity to achieve their long-term goals. So they worked behind the scenes to maneuver Mussolini and Hitler into office, believing that they could later manipulate or get rid of these men. Little did they know that the fascists were playing the same game. Soon after being appointed chancellor, in 1933, Hitler did away with his erstwhile conservative allies, whom he correctly viewed as a hindrance to his long-planned revolutionary project. Mussolini, who had been appointed prime minister in 1922, took a little longer to completely secure his position—but he, too, eventually pushed aside (or simply killed) many of the traditional conservatives who had helped make him Il Duce in the first place.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

So what does all of this say about Le Pen, Trump, and today's other right-wing extremists? They certainly share some similarities with the interwar fascists. Like their predecessors, today's right-wing extremists denounce incumbent democratic leaders as inefficient, unresponsive, and weak. They promise to nurture their nation, protect it from its enemies, and restore a sense of purpose to people who feel battered by forces outside their control. And they pledge to stand up for "the people," who are often defined in religious or racial terms.

But if the similarities are striking, the differences are even more so. Most obvious, today's extremists claim they want not to bury democracy but to improve it. They critique the functioning of contemporary democracy but offer no alternative to it, just vague promises to make government stronger, more efficient, and more responsive.

Current right-wing extremists are thus better characterized as populist rather than fascist, since they claim to speak for everyday men and women against corrupt, debased, and out-of-touch elites and institutions. In other words, they are certainly antiliberal, but they are not antidemocratic. This distinction is not trivial. If today's populists come to power—even the right-wing nationalists among them—the continued existence of democracy will permit their societies to opt for a do-over by later voting them out. Indeed, this may be democracy's greatest strength: it allows countries to recover from their mistakes.

But the more important difference between today's right-wing extremists and yesterday's fascists is the larger context. As great as contemporary problems are, and as angry as many citizens may

be, the West is simply not facing anything approaching the upheaval of the interwar period. “The mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt,” Leon Trotsky once wrote, and the same logic applies to the appearance of fascism. In the United States and western Europe, at least, democracy and democratic norms have deep roots, and contemporary governments have proved nowhere near as inept as their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, democratic procedures and institutions, welfare states, political parties, and robust civil societies continue to provide citizens with myriad ways of voicing their concerns, influencing political outcomes, and getting their needs met.

For these reasons, the right-wing extremists in the United States and western Europe today have much more limited options and opportunities than their interwar counterparts did. (On the other hand, in eastern and southern Europe, where democratic norms and institutions are younger and weaker, movements have emerged that resemble traditional fascism much more closely, including Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary.) As the scholar Theda Skocpol has stressed, revolutionary movements don’t create crises; they exploit them. In other words, true revolutionary threats to democracy emerge when democracies themselves create crises ready to be exploited by failing to deal with the challenges they face.

Things can change, of course, and the lack of true fascist movements in the United States and western Europe today is no excuse for complacency. But what the interwar period illustrates is that the West should worry more about the problems afflicting democracy than about right-wing populists themselves. The best way to ensure that the Le Pens and Trumps of the world go down in history as also-rans rather than as real threats is to make democratic institutions, parties, and politicians more responsive to the needs of all citizens. In the United States, for example, rising inequality, stagnating wages, deteriorating communities, congressional gridlock, and the flow of big money to campaigns have played a bigger role in fueling support for Trump than his purported charisma or the supposed authoritarian leanings of his supporters. Tackling those problems would no doubt help prevent the rise of the next Trump.

History also shows that conservatives should be particularly wary of embracing right-wing populists. Mainstream Republicans who make bogus claims about voter fraud, rigged elections, and the questionable patriotism and nationality of President Barack Obama in order to appeal to the extremist fringes are playing an extremely dangerous game, since such rhetoric fans citizens’ fear and distrust of their politicians and institutions, thus undermining their faith in democracy itself. And just like their interwar counterparts, these conservatives are also likely enhancing the appeal of politicians who have little loyalty to the conservatives’ own policies, constituencies, or institutions.

Right-wing populism—indeed, populism of any kind—is a symptom of democracy in trouble; fascism and other revolutionary movements are the consequence of democracy in crisis. But if governments do not do more to address the many social and economic problems the United States and Europe currently face, if mainstream politicians and parties don’t do a better job reaching out to all citizens, and if conservatives continue to fan fear and turn a blind eye to extremism, then the West could quickly find itself moving from the former to the latter.