



Fascism Comes to America

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Abstract

For almost a century, American politicians and social commentators, trailed by novelists, Hollywood movie makers and television producers have agonized about the menace of fascism, and its ability to corrupt the United States' constitutional republic, supposedly moderate, strong, and firm. Four facets of this huge set of issues are called to the attention of readers: the creation of the understanding of fascism in 1939–1941; the connection between political crises and their renderings in popular culture; the contribution of European scholars to the conventional conceptual framework; and an exploration of the penchant of American scholars for the notion.

Keywords: fascism, America

Americans and observers of the United States have worried about the corruption of the Republic since the early part of the nineteenth century. In the run-up to World War II and in the long period after 1945 when the United States was the world's dominant power, the transformation in American internationalism was on the minds of many. In the homeland and abroad the idea of the existential 'other' of fascism developed as a rival to the form of modernity usually identified as democracy. American politicians and diverse commentators on politics – followed by novelists, Hollywood movie makers, and television producers – have agonized about the terrifying menace of fascism. US and European intellectuals have added conceptual frameworks to explain the jeopardy

of Americans. Some vague doctrine of non-rational violence has left a huge mark in American minds, not so much in pictures of Mussolini or Hitler, but in images of strutting soldiers, of flamboyant military uniforms, of red, white, and black flags bearing a swastika-like symbol, and of any kind of arms-out salute. Despite the antithesis between democratic and fascistic values, many pundits and scholars have believed that this horror imperils the United States, perhaps because the flame attracts the moth, or because Americans will effloresce into what they truly are, or because they become cowardly in the face of evil.

Google 'Fascism comes to America', or search the same topic on Amazon. Thousands of entries appear. Liberals are fascists; conservatives are fascists; corporate business leaders are secret fascists, and there are neo-, good, fastidious, Park Avenue, modern, and friendly fascists. In the 1930s, some communists in the United States were called 'social fascists', and in the late 1960s Black Panthers called liberals 'fascist pigs'. Americans were warned that fascists would often declare themselves as anti-fascist, and a 'functional equivalent of fascism' exists. Fascists often 'reemerge', while other politicians are fascist-oid or fascist-like. The New Deal was fascist, and so was the Reagan Revolution. The Jim Crow South was fascist, but so were its opponents in the Civil Rights Movement. Barack Obama may be a fascist, but so is John McCain. The labeling of someone or other as a fascist occurs in social media, in websites of opinion or commentary, in blogs, in reviews of books and movies, in academic evaluations, in the lunatic and in the sober, in English written by US nationals and by non-US citizens, and in many non-English sites.

Fascism has had the chief role in debates of the last hundred years over how America could be degraded and its earliest liberties lost, and the political philosophy far overshadows the anti-communism that many people have written about. The Soviet Union lasted from the early 1920s to the early 1990s. In this seventy-year period, its wickedness loomed prominently in the American imagination. For a time, 'totalitarian' was adopted to cover both communism and fascism. However, as soon as the USSR collapsed, so too did the communist alarm. Hitler's regime was in control for twelve years, and was entirely defeated in 1945. Yet angst about it is still apparent over seventy years after World War II. National Socialism's impact on all subsequent collective belief in the United States cannot be underestimated.

No one has attempted to map this huge territory in the American mind. A mountainous scholarly literature on very limited aspects of the problem, or on short time periods, often mirrors rather than analyzes the political jousting that can be found on the internet.¹ With an emphasis on Hollywood's contribution, this essay outlines some of the major issues raised by the fixation on fascism. In the background to the essay is the flood of cogitation about the supposed fascist tendencies of the presidency of Donald Trump. A variety of scholarly strategies and approaches defines this introductory overview.

I will be making four points about the dread of fascism through the twentieth century, so easily transmuted into film. The first concerns the politics of the 1930s when the word took on the aura it had for several decades. The second point is about the complex way in which popular culture, as exemplified by Hollywood, responded to political worries about fascism. The third point tries to understand why some European intellectuals reacted as they did to politics in the United States; and the last ruminates over the understanding of native-born intellectuals.

I.

A small group of articulate Americans positively discussed Mussolini's governance of Italy in the 1920s. Nonetheless, the trope of fascism in America only came to fruition in 1939–1941, the product of tangled and complicated national debates, and of the actions of decision-makers over ten years. Before 1933 the centrist position of both Republican and Democratic parties was Progressivism, and our contemporary notions of liberals and conservatives were more than fuzzy. The extraordinary economic crises and events in Europe threw the progressive ideology of Americans into disarray.

When Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency in March of 1933, he brought a jumble of views to his office. As the Great Depression reached bottom and was discrediting much of American economics, he searched unsuccessfully for solutions to the financial crisis. In addition to the conceptual fluctuations of his 'New Deal' itself, an array of leaders, sometimes hostile to Roosevelt, sometimes in league with him, struggled to make sense of what a rational polity would look like. None of his commitments from 1933 to 1936 distinguished the president

from an assortment of more or less wacky, if serious, foes. Many prominent politicians were noteworthy but cannot be categorized in the 1933–1936 period: Father Charles Coughlin, William Lemke, Upton Sinclair, Gerald L. K. Smith, Francis Townsend, and Gerald Winrod. Arguably the most important one – Huey Long, Governor and Senator from Louisiana – was assassinated in 1935. During this time, Roosevelt was called an old progressive, a radical, a nationalist, a socialist, a communist, a corporate capitalist. The confused politics of the time resisted any simple taxonomy.

Roosevelt's policies in the wake of his great 1936 victory did not add much clarity. In 1937 Roosevelt supported industrial labour unions that had reputations for violence; he tried to enlarge the Supreme Court to secure majorities for his ideas – to 'pack' it, said his enemies – and to reorganize the executive branch and diminish the Congress. Then in 1938 he bid to purge from his party Democrats unfriendly to him. Finally, from 1937 on, he had toyed with a third term as president. This last notion was only realized in the summer and fall of 1940, and broke not the constitution but an important constitutional tradition set by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. All of these initiatives perplexed devotees and foes of the New Deal, and made even his enthusiasts worry that he was jettisoning American values and embracing those prevalent in Europe as it plunged into disaster.

To grasp the meaning of Roosevelt's inclinations, they must be put in context of the convulsions of Continental politics: the rise of National Socialism; the collapse of peace from 1936 onwards; and the culminating events – the end of the Nazi-Soviet pact in June of 1941 and its aftermath. Only this culmination, in which Roosevelt pressed the United States to defend the western European democracies and secondarily to assist Russia, defined what he was about. At that point a consensus emerged that his policies pursued a middle path. This pigeon-holing that materialized at the end of the decade, meant that the social order had sorted out the political scare words of the time – dictators, tyrants, authoritarians, demagogues, autocrats, despots, corporatists, strongmen, totalitarians, gangsters, extremists, statist, fifth columnists. By the end of 1941 the United States adhered to a welfare state liberalism embodied by FDR, with moderate Republicans, conservatives, reactionaries, and fascists to his right; and socialists, radicals, and communists to his left.

So, my first point is that while the United States had much controversy about fascism in the 1930s, the scholar can only make much sense of the term after America went to war. Only then did the United States have a vital centre, supposedly antithetical to fascism (and not incidentally to communism).

II.

The next point concerns how Hollywood has treated the fascist menace over some seventy-five years. Examples abound. The first is from *Casablanca* (1943), the memorable World War II movie set in the fall of 1941, before the United States entered the conflict. Although the initial meeting between Rick Blaine, the American proprietor of a successful night club, and the Third Reich's Major Strasser does not usually come up in discussions of the film, the scene received the most attention from contemporary audiences in the United States. After Strasser and his assistant review the Nazis' battlefield conquests, they ask the American if he can imagine Germans in New York. Blaine blandly advises the Major that they should not invade certain parts of New York City. An audible growl from audiences across America greeted this laconic warning.²

In 1946 the famous novelist Robert Penn Warren wrote a fictional account of Huey Long's reign in Louisiana, *All the King's Men* (1946). It was made into a movie in 1949, and depicts Penn Warren's character, Willie Stark, galvanizing the 'hick' voters through a series of demagogic speeches.³ A lesser known film of 1957, *A Face in the Crowd*, shows how a TV personality leveraged his ratings into political stardom. The moderator of a music and talk variety show, Larry 'Lonesome' Rhodes, realizes that his folksy and humorous but also pointed remarks about politics have attracted fans willing to back him in public life. Rhodes begins a frightening attempt to seize national power.⁴ In 1964 Dr. Strangelove, the character in the film of the same name, brought fascism to the councils of the president, as a nuclear arms advisor who is both mad and a former National Socialist.⁵ That same year, 1964, in *Seven Days in May*, the chief of staff of the United States military attempts a coup; it is thwarted at the last minute by a 'weak' president who has made a controversial treaty with the old Soviet Union.⁶

Another well-known and important project that took up the issue of fascism in the United States was Mel Brooks' astonishing comic musical, *The Producers* (1967). The movie told the story of how two lovable white-collar criminals try to make money on a musical that is bound to fail. Their show, 'Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden', becomes a huge box office success, just as did *The Producers* itself. The movie was translated into Broadway theatre in the late 1960s, and the theatrical production had an impressive re-run at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after which the movie was remade in 2005.

In a baseball movie of 1989, *Field of Dreams*, the wife of the protagonist attends a parent-teacher association meeting at a school district in Iowa. A public argument ensues about school reading lists and the banning of novels. After one believer in censorship is called 'a Nazi cow' and an 'Eva Braun', justice triumphs when the audience votes against the outlawing of certain books.⁷

My final instance comes from a 2004 movie, with a 2016 update that is more complex, requiring some exegesis. A much-touted German film, *Der Untergang*, was released in the United States as *Downfall*, with English subtitles. It is a fact-based story of the last days of Hitler in his bunker in Berlin. In a famous scene of three or four minutes, Hitler's entourage (and moviegoers) are subject to a rant from Hitler about his trials and tribulations in leading Germany to destruction. This scene has become the subject of what are called Hitler Parodies, where the original subtitles have been replaced by a different diatribe by Hitler (or someone else) about some other issue: Hitler responds to being denied entrance to graduate school; Hitler complains about the traffic on the Long Island Expressway; Nixon explains to his staff why he is disliked by Democrats. But the parodies need not be with English sub-titles or about matters in the United States. There is one, for example, in Flemish about the Belgian politician Bart De Wever on his political troubles, and another in which a Hitler-David Cameron reacts to Brexit in England. But readers need to turn their attention to the large collection of parodies in which Hitler raves about Donald Trump's nomination as Republican candidate for president of the United States. Many such parodies exhibit the German's rage at the travesty of an American polity that would support a clown like Trump, but others identify Trump himself as the Hitler figure.⁸ The hundreds of parodies have generated web-sites that discuss

the meaning of this use of *Der Untergang* and of humour about the Third Reich, and endless expositions of the semiotics of the movie, of the parodies, and of fascism's danger to the United States.

The structure of film discourse aside, another issue strikes me as of great significance: the connection of these varied movies to the politics of a given era. Take two periods in which statesmen, commentators, and the producers of popular culture have worried about fascism. The first had its high point from 1950 to 1954; the second from 1968 to 1974.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the United States was seized by the frenzy of a red scare often associated with the rise to prominence of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. However, the anti-communist 'McCarthyism', often labelled as some kind of proto-fascism by liberals, can be seen among Democrats from the end of World War II, and it extended beyond McCarthy's fall from power in 1954 to the late-1950s. Hollywood found a receptive audience in communicating these troubles on the big screen, and it is easy enough to think that the emanations of the movie capital were linked to politics. From *All the King's Men* of 1949; through *Face in the Crowd*, to *Strangelove* to *Seven Days in May* of 1964, commentators have found a link between political dilemmas to themes in Hollywood drama.

The second period of concern is that of the high-1960s, the era of the Vietnam War, succeeded by the impeachment of Richard Nixon. The War unsettled Americans, and at the Democratic convention in Chicago in August of 1968, Senator Abraham Ribicoff from Connecticut tormented Democratic Mayor Richard Daley, who presided over the city's security arrangements. Ribicoff denounced Daley for permitting 'Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago'. Nixon, the Republican who won the election in November, loved to watch the movie *Patton* (1970) in the White House and was ridiculed because he briefly dressed his secret-service guard in imperial costumes. He resigned in disgrace in 1974 to avoid impeachment proceedings. What kind of outbreak of popular-culture anxiety took place about the constitutional future of the United States in these years?

The most well-known and important project that took up the issue of fascism in the United States in these years was the aforementioned comic musical, *The Producers*. The movie in some way epitomized bad taste and catered to attitudes shared with National Socialism: sexist treatment of women and disdain for homosexuals and transvestites,

among many other expressions of the politically incorrect. But Hitler and National Socialism are also reduced to a series of amazing and dumbfounding jokes. Rather than displaying a fear of fascism, *The Producers* did more than make fun of its politics; it treated the politics as buffoonery. National Socialism was reduced to a joke.⁹

What should be made of Hollywood's link to McCarthyism and to the long 1960s? If there is a kind of historian's explanation about how politics joins culture, would not a lot of fascism be expected from Hollywood from 1965 to 1980? This is what I just argued happened in the post-war period: McCarthyism gave the United States Dr. Strangelove. But the popular cultures of the two periods – of the red scare and of the 1960s – are at odds. In the second period, instead of fear, we have absurdity. Instead of super-star Burt Lancaster as a megalomaniac general (in *Seven Days in May*), we have the unknown Kenneth Mars playing the author of 'Springtime for Hitler', Franz Liebkind, a deranged former Nazi sergeant who believes Hitler a far better dancer than Winston Churchill. Instead of a fascist attempt at a coup, we have a song and dance, 'Springtime for Hitler and Germany. Winter for Poland and France'. The sensation of *The Producers* intimates that it is no easy task to connect politics and culture. The age of Vietnam and Watergate suggests to me that no simple scheme enables historians to figure out why fear of fascism waxes or wanes on the rim of the consciousness of Americans.

III.

Now turn to the other side of the Atlantic. The third point notes what European theorists made of these developments. There is earlier commentary by German intellectuals, and later commentary by French.

In the 1930s, the rise of National Socialism drove many European literary figures and thinkers to seek refuge in America. Some located in Santa Monica, California, near Hollywood, where they were employed; most others lived in or around New York City, thought they might stray from teaching or research positions in Manhattan to Princeton, Chicago, or Cambridge, Massachusetts, where they also might have employment. These people included individuals as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Bertold Brecht, Rudolph Carnap, Albert Einstein,

Heinrich and Thomas Mann, and Paul Tillich. The New School for Social Research in lower Manhattan became renowned for giving a home to almost two hundred others in 'the University in Exile', figures like Karl Löwith, Wilhelm Reich, and Hans Speier. Uptown, around Columbia University, the celebrated Frankfurt School or Institute for Social Research took root for some fifteen years, and reassured men like Theodore W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse that they could continue their scholarship. These homeless minds were mainly, though not exclusively, German and Jewish.

Almost all of these people had absorbed the high-culture precepts of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century European Continent. These precepts dictated that intellectuals had a special and elevated role that made them the ultimate preservers of the only truly civilized sort of polity, a kind of aristocratic republicanism. As the detached guardians of this sort of governance, the professoriate was entitled to enormous societal respect. Simultaneously, these sages had gloomy forebodings that their dignified life-style as they understood it was under threat everywhere. They were gripped by the kind of prophetic perspective of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, which foresaw inevitable decay. Or they were enamored by the vision of Martin Heidegger, who saw at work mechanistic forces that would rip man up from the racial and regional loci giving meaning to existence.

Steeped in the milieu of Spengler and Heidegger, these men and women arrived in the United States, and were surprised by its mass democracy and consumer-oriented gadgetry. They believed that the American popular arts and vulgar politics personally disrespected them. As they came to comprehend where they were, they became convinced that America might itself be a kind of fascist state, or might become one. Their books, letters, memoirs, and ephemeral writings are filled with lamentations about American fascism.

In 1942 Paul Tillich repeatedly told the congress of the Episcopal Church in Indiana that critics of the New Deal were 'half-fascist'. They were working for 'an American...brand of fascism', and expressed 'the American type of fascism'.¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno was the lead author of the 1950 book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, a study of the social psychology of Americans. This work included a test that could be given to interviewees, or could be applied to fictional characters, or to absent friends or family; it encouraged one to rate someone on 'the F scale'.¹¹

Alfred Döblin, at the time regarded as a premier German literary figure, spent 1940 to 1945 in California, as an exile sometimes employed by Hollywood. He found America's politics, on its way to Hitler, as 'hostile and despicable'. The composer Hanns Eisler escaped to the United States in 1938, but was deported in 1948 because of his own communist background. His parting shot was that in the US, he had seen 'fascism in its most direct form'. Thomas Mann, far more prominent than Döblin and Eisler, spent a much longer time in the United States, and had far more success, but he shared Döblin's views. Living well in southern California, in 1946 he dreaded that he would be sent to a concentration camp. With the rise of Joseph McCarthy, in 1951, Mann had come to loathe the United States. He wrote that it seemed probable that there would be a 'constant further development into a fascist dictatorship'. Mann's famous literary children shared these ideas. The 'real fruit' of the war, one reported, was that 'the Americans will kill us all, all the intellectuals who were against Hitler and for Roosevelt'. Even more prominent than Mann, Albert Einstein had his own problems with American authorities, and wrote that in the United States, 'The German calamity of years ago repeats itself'.¹²

Hannah Arendt had a longer connection to the United States than most of her compatriots, and indeed relished her naturalized citizenship. In 1963 she wrote a celebratory book on the American Founding, *On Revolution*. The book proclaimed the genius of the framers of the Constitution in comparison to the French politicians of the 1790s. But she also believed that since the end of the eighteenth century, the United States had been on a downhill trajectory. This meant that the nation, embodying the characteristics of mass technological civilization, had some of the same traits as National Socialist Germany. During the time she was writing about the Revolutionary and Constitutional era, she engaged in a 'jeremiad of decline' which had brought the country to 'neo fascism'.¹³

Herbert Marcuse came to the United States in the 1930s, and talked about its fascism for more than thirty years. During the New Deal the supporters of FDR were fascists, promoting an authoritarian welfare state. When the Cold War began in the late 1940s, Marcuse argued, it pitted the old Soviet Union against 'neo-fascism'.¹⁴ In the 1960s, *One Dimensional Man* and a paper called 'Repressive Tolerance' deserve special mention even in a brief survey. 'Repressive Tolerance' was

separately printed, and was for many a paper-back gospel of radical critics of the United States. For Marcuse, the broad-minded acceptance of the viewpoints of others, often claimed as a hallmark of American democracy and anti-fascism, became a defining element of fascist state and culture. Tolerance was the way of suffocating non-establishment viewpoints without violence. It was the hallmark of the novel kind of fascism in America that conceded dissent only to smother it with kindness.¹⁵

These ideas showed how malleable fascism had become. It was leaving the moorings established for it at the start of World War II, and becoming much more labile.

The second stage of commentary was French, and was mainly embraced by writers who may have visited the United States, but who did not live in the country for any extended period as had the Germans. French accusations also were made later, not from the 1930s through the 1960s, but from the 1970s through the end of the twentieth century, although the accusations can be linked to Jean-Paul Sartre, who visited the United States in the 1940s, and began a period of antipathy to America that lasted into the late 1960s. Sartre detested America, and suggested that it might become the home for a post-World War II form of fascism. Subsequently, French critics of the United States have denigrated its democratic decadence, which they have linked to the mass production and industrial collectivization brought about by a love affair with technology. An essential American modernity had marginalized elite values and produced a conformist civilization. As the United States became a world force, it imposed its hegemonic capitalist ways wherever it could, by economic coercion if possible, by violence if necessary. In other parts of the world, the imprint of America coarsened the locals, and further diminished the sensitivity of the conqueror. For French intellectuals, the country was *essentially* fascist.

These appraisals derived from semiotic theories in which savants like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, and lesser figures put forward a program of linguistic idealism; notions of inter-textuality and discourse were primary. In examining American art, or in unpacking fictions, or in uncovering the code at work in popular culture and foreign policy, the French scholar could get at the core (and often tormented) principles that shaped America. A focus on textual method replaced conventional and obsessive archival research.

The upshot was an ‘intertext’. Repeated complementary descriptions, cannibalizing one another and exhibiting similar structures in the depiction of the United States resulted in a complex signifier, a set of shared categories, political commitments, and collective musings that bore the name America (often spelled AmeriKa). This representation also intended its object – the American nation. The intertext or formation or representation was a generalization from the writing of thinkers, but also pointed to social reality in the United States. Intertext and object were not separate: in a sense America was its representations.¹⁶

For Americans worried about fascism per se, the issue was always about how it might get to the United States. This worry can be seen in the movies: the focus is the *modality* of disaster – a parent-teacher association; a renegade politician or a celebrity personality; an apostate advisor to the president; or a traitorous military man. The Europeans, French and German, differed. Fault lay in a communal personality; the socialization of Americans was a mess; their ideas exhibited a pathology; the culture was sick. For the Germans, a Hegelized Marxism, leavened with a bit of Freud, demonstrated these overviews. Among the French, AmeriKa exemplified an epistemology of language. Hollywood enjoyed details; Europeans loved the sweeping statement.

For whatever reasons, the German and French critics did not like America. So they picked up the dirtiest brush in their intellectual toolkit – fascism – and slapped it on the United States. It needs to be remembered that fascism was born and came to fruition on the Continent of Europe – in Germany and Italy, primarily, but secondarily in Spain, France, and Belgium. It did not take root in an American (or even Anglo-American) order. It might be argued that the French and Germans had a natural predisposition to interpret events in a framework that was familiar to them and that had implicated their intellectual predecessors. Here is my third point. A portion of the explanation of the fixation on fascism by many Europeans lies in a generic hostility to the New World by the Old World that has been around for many, many years.

IV.

My fourth point is the reverse of the third. For some 300–400 years, reflective Americans have self-consciously noted the purity of their own

country, and had an aversion to Europe. Americans have defined themselves ‘through a deeply felt sense of conflict with Europe’, and have been ‘resentful, servile, or ambivalent’. Despite living the good life in France in the late-eighteenth century, Jefferson wrote of the ‘malignant darkness of life in Europe’, ‘a menacing Old World’. For Mark Twain, ‘democratic scales of judgment’ found Europe ‘perpetually ... wanting’. In World War I, Woodrow Wilson would only ‘associate’ with England and France, and refused to be an ‘ally’.¹⁷ ‘They’ might off-load their evils to America, but ‘we’ blame them for everything bad at home.

US nationals are taught a fantastic version of their own country’s development that emphasizes decent constitutional restraint. Thus, when doubtful leadership arises, Americans have come to see its origins not in normal doings at home, but in something outside of what the conventional historical wisdom promotes. Dubious political leaders cannot really be homegrown, or have roots in American traditions. Voilà: these people get their inspiration from Europe. Americans who claim to discover domestic fascism are distancing themselves from their own past, preserving a romantic interpretation of their own history.

As an historian and US national, I find this the most important point of my study, and one that requires a difficult re-orientation to resolve. ‘We’ all imbibe a fairy-tale version of our past, and it may not be possible to think ourselves out of this powerful enculturation. If Americans had a more grown-up understanding of US history, they might conclude that suspect politics is as American as apple pie. If Americans had a better grasp of their own traditions and their imperfections, the appeal of interpreting some dimensions of American history in categories that may be irrelevant to it might diminish.

The best way to revision American history begins with the Founding Fathers and what they were trying to circumvent. Tyrannical democracy has been an issue for political thinkers since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Democracy, for the framers of the Constitution, was a monstrosity, an evil to be shunned. The direct rule of the mass of men led to the arbitrary jurisdiction of a licentious leader. This kind of despot somehow attracted the ignorant multitudes. The masses had irrational urges that could lead to the disastrous rise of a single oppressor and a threat to civilized order.

In seventeenth century England, the containment of the democratic was easily accomplished by making the rights of citizenship dependent

on the acquisition of property. Such acquisition set a high bar and limited participation in public affairs to a few who would shun democratic vices. In the English colonies in the New World, because land could be taken with such ease from the Native Americans, property ownership became more effortless – and less a guarantee of right thinking in governance. The Euro-American leadership on the east coast of America fretted over democratical uprisings from Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia in the seventeenth century; to the Paxton Boys in Pennsylvania in the mid-eighteenth century; and to Shays’s Rebellion in the late-eighteenth century.

The political class consisted of prosperous lawyers, successful politicians, military figures, land speculators, plantation owners, businessmen, and local gentry. Alexander Hamilton, one of those with the darkest view of human nature, was not far wrong when he spoke of his peers as ‘the rich, the well born, and the able’, on whom organized society must rely. They had many motives for having fought the Revolution. Yet high among these was an anxiety – historians have found it exaggerated if not unfounded – that Britain was moving to displace the provincial governors with a new English caste, or at least to alter dramatically the socio-economic connection of the old management to novel British ideas. As one interpretation of the Revolutionary period has long held, the war was not so much about home rule, but who should rule at home. An important thing to remember about the Founding is that the likes of Jefferson, Madison, and John Adams conducted a curious Revolution – to preserve what they had, not to create a new order of justice. In the run-up to 1776 and during the war itself, the Founders dreaded the stirring-up of the populace, and after the defeat of the Britain, their concerns grew. One consequence of the successful Revolution was the attempt to tame the ardor of the 1770s and early 1780s.

The creators of the Constitution believed that ultimate political competence rested with the people, but this belief was complex and restricted. No one dreamed of the direct democracy that had perplexed the Greeks. When the Founders brooded over the evils of democracy, they had in mind *representative democracy*, in which everyone chose leaders to represent them. Bows had to be made to this sort of governance but it also had to be kept in check, confined.

First, the people with a voice were a limited group, and did not include women, or African- or Native- Americans certainly. The group

did embrace many white men with property, although this was a shaky foundation, since property was so widely distributed among Euro-Americans. And so, representation had to be further diluted, and the result was not called democracy at all.

A *republican* polity depended first on a constricted concept of ‘the people’. Second, on deference. The people would respect their betters. Finally, for republicanism, this constricted collectivity should have only an oblique role in rulership and submit to more esteemed men.

In looking at the construction of the constitution, historians must distinguish the checks and balances that permeate the document from the various attempts to adulterate the rule of the people. The checks and balances show that the Founders feared all agglutination of ‘interest’, as they called it, and hoped to have varying influential communities pitted against each other. On the other side, the watered-down rule of the people speaks not to the Founders’ anxieties about competing groups, but about the multitudes acting without regard to the divisions that produced warring interests. The statesmen wanted to circumvent the concentration of factions, based mainly on the rational possibility of economic gain, but also to avoid the irrational passion of the *hoi polloi* about some momentary gratification.

The House of Representatives was the only branch of the national government that was popularly elected, although even representation in the House was compromised by the role of the states as the home of representatives. All other federal officials – the upper house (the Senate), the executive, and the judiciary – were more distanced than representative democracy allows.¹⁸

The Founders were early aware that their obsequious republic was imperfect. Their dream of rule by like-minded men of virtue immediately vanished. By the 1790s rival clusters of public figures fought for the esteem of the people and slandered their opponents in attempts to win even the temporary loyalty of the electorate. That is, the Founders themselves, in their political behaviour, undermined their republic, and admiration for the more worthy at once came under attack. According to historians, a crucial event was the disputed election of John Quincy Adams over the rough-hewn and uneducated Andrew Jackson in 1824, and the election of Jackson in 1828.

Jackson, the most important political figure in the first half of the nineteenth century, upended the deferential republicanism of

the Founders. He was a militarist, a promoter of slavery, and a hater of the English, Spanish, and Native Americans. And after him came the deluge. Lincoln determined to alter the restricted constitutional notion of the people by returning to the long ignored but potent Declaration of Independence. Running unsuccessfully for the presidency three times in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, William Jennings Bryan frightened leaders in both the Republican and Democratic parties, especially in the first and critical election of 1896. Later in the twentieth century, a variety of improbable figures roiled the nation with a varied politics of demagoguery, populism, nationalism, and class warfare. In addition to those figures in the 1930s who have been mentioned and who include Franklin Roosevelt, there are Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s; George Wallace in the 1960s; Ross Perot in the 1980s; and Donald Trump in the 2010s.

An old story tells us about Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, when the Constitution was drafted. When Franklin is leaving at the end of the meetings, a woman asks him: ‘Dr. Franklin, what kind of government have you given us?’ He replies, ‘A republic, Madam, if you can keep it’. How should this story be interpreted? Franklin warns this non-voter that it may be hard to respect the restraints that republican government imposes on a rationed citizenry, and these individuals must make concessions to their superiors. Simultaneously, the story acknowledges that anyone can accost the superiors, and probably will. In any event, the nation did not keep the republic. But Americans need not think about fascism to find where their troublesome politicians come from, nor should Europeans tell us that we are the carriers of their disease.

Notes

- I A miscellany to start with: John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, 1972); Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945* (New York, 2010); Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983); Bertram Gross, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (New York, 1980); Jonah Goldberg *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York, 2007); Christopher Vials,

- Haunted By Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight against Fascism in the United States* (Amherst, 2014); Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!: How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, 2015); and Bob Hertzberg, *The Third Reich on Screen, 1929–2015* (Jefferson, 2017).
- 2 The scene is no longer available on YouTube, but appears early in the movie.
 - 3 A central scene is at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgJC4Pu_tbo, accessed on 3 October, 2018. Readers need to be warned that this link, and others below, may not be available in their country.
 - 4 The scene available here, where Rhodes tells his girl-friend of his plans, displays how Hollywood portrayed its fear of having the political status quo overturned: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQwTGgpJM28, accessed on 3 October, 2018.
 - 5 Regarded as one of the greatest dark comedies in cinema history, *Dr. Strangelove: or How I stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* starred Peter Sellers as both the president and his Nazi advisor Strangelove. They both appear here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ww7WISPi9gc>, accessed 3 October, 2018.
 - 6 An exchange between the general (played by Burt Lancaster) and the president (played by Frederick March) conveys the differences between constitutionalism and its opposite: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWO-XnAwGrA>, accessed 3 October, 2018.
 - 7 This scene can be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ur7pHRRKhV4, accessed on 3 October, 2018.
 - 8 One of these videos may be found at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajqWJEVKMLc, accessed on 3 October, 2018.
 - 9 A critical scene: www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmYIo7bcUw, accessed 3 October, 2018. *The Producers* was just one of a line of such creations that I place into the genre of the farce of fascism. *Duck Soup* (1933) starring the Marx brothers; Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940); *To Be Or Not to Be* (1942); the eccentric *Dr. Strangelove* (1962); *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (a play written by Bertold Brecht in 1941, but not on Broadway until 1963, failing then and thereafter); *The Producers* (1967); Woody Allen's *Bananas* (1971); and Sacha Baron Cohen's *The Dictator* (2012).
 - 10 Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago, 1948), 241, 250.
 - 11 Theodor Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950).
 - 12 Albrecht Betz, *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician* (New York: 1982), 107; Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann* (Princeton, 2002), p. 519; Jean Michel Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and*

- America* (New York, 2006), 539, 541; and Jamie Sayer, *Einstein in America* (New York, 1985), 256.
- 13 In addition to *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), quoted on p. 49, see the essays included in Peter Graf Kielmansegg, et al., *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War Two* (New York, 1995); and Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago, 2015), 61, 87, 98–99, 107, 271, 290.
- 14 See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, 1994), 247–248, 388.
- 15 *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964); ‘Repressive Tolerance’ first appeared in Robert Paul Wolff, et al. (eds), *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston, 1965).
- 16 Extensive details about the French may be found in two books by Jean-Philippe Mathy: *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago, 1993); and *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis, 2000).
- 17 These quotations and examples come from Cushing Strout, *The American Image of the Old World* (New York, 1963), xiii, 1, 27–33, 113.
- 18 The latest statement on these issues is Michael J. Klarman, *The Framers’ Coup* (New York, 2016).

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