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How Fascist Is Trump? (Re)Considering Nazi History in an Age of Populism

Editorial note: I gave this speech to students at the University of Birmingham on 18 January 2017 – two days before Trump’s first inauguration.

The topic at hand allows two different perspectives, and I would like to make clear from the outset that I plan to explore both of them. First, it is about an assessment of Donald Trump and his upcoming presidency: is this a return of fascism, or a twenty-first variety of fascism, a fascism 2.0? How far do we get when we read Donald Trump through the lens of fascism as it presents itself through the burgeoning historical literature? But second, it is worth to explore this connection in the opposite direction, too: how do recent trends in Nazi historiography and the literature on Italian fascism look in an effort to make sense of Trump?¹ Does existing scholarship provide proper guidance, or would a different literature offer deeper insights? Of course, historical research has its own set of rules, and for good reasons, and nothing that I will say in the following shall be construed as to mean that political relevance is all that matters. However, the case for Nazi history has always been political as well as academic: it grew out of a conviction that the collapse of democracy during the interwar years must never repeat itself. So when we see democracy under threat again all over the West, it deserves reflection whether our historical literature, and our general style of engaging with the fascist past, provides the kind of help that it purports to offer.

Such an endeavor runs into two fundamental problems, one of a moral nature and one of a cognitive nature. As to the later, it is perhaps obvious that any assessment of Trump’s rule is preliminary on day minus two of his presidency. We have an incoming administration that is fraught with tensions. It embraces isolationism and yet wants to go to war against what it calls “radical Islam”; it flirts with protectionism in an economy built on globalization; it wants to abolish Obamacare and protect entitlements; and it has yet to decide whether anthropogenic climate change is real or imagined. Nobody can possibly know how this will play out, and I will refrain from speculation as much as I can. Maybe Trump will have a great presidency, or an abysmal one, or one that is completely different from what we expect – we do not know, and we should not pretend otherwise.

We should do so for cognitive as well as moral reasons. I am deeply disturbed by many things that Trump said on the campaign trail, and I am even more disturbed by the things that he did *not* say: I have yet to hear a serious commitment to democracy, the rule of law and human rights from Donald Trump. However, moral indignation has not kept Trump out of the White House, and I am not sure whether it will be helpful in the next four years either. The transition

¹ I will focus on Germany and Italy in the following, with more emphasis on the former. I am aware that Spain, Italy, Hungary, and Romania had fascist governments as well, but I doubt that they can contribute much to the question at hand.

has already been a noisy one, and Trump's presidency may be turbulent as well, with many statements and decisions that will provide fodder for cheap outrage. It may be amazingly simple to criticize Trump, and it may not even require a familiarity with current events: it may be sufficient to look at his hair, at his penchant for gold, or at Alec Baldwin on "Saturday Night Live". I think we need to do better: we need a more sophisticated critique of Donald Trump, and such a critique needs a clear understanding of the potential and the limits of historical precedents. And when it comes to historical precedents, fascism is clearly the defining one for Donald Trump, the event in collective memory that resonates more than any other. Of course, historical precedents never work out in every detail, but they leave traces in our collective imagination and our political language. And so there are good reasons to read Trump through the experience of fascism.

The Nazis ruled Germany for twelve years, and Mussolini was in power for 21 or 23 (depending on whether you count the farcical Republic of Salò), but our historical imagination has not given equal attention to all these years. The Second World War and the holocaust dominate collective memory since the 1990s, and that has left its mark on research and teaching, down to special degrees on the holocaust that some universities offer (the University of Birmingham being one of them). Books and exhibits in this vein typically speed through the early years of Nazi rule and devote most of their attention to the years since 1938. But if I look at these years with a view to what we can learn about Trump, I find it very difficult to distill meaningful insights. There are certain things that we take for granted as we search for ways to engage with Trump: the freedom of speech, the right to protest and organize, an economy with plenty of opportunities, many of which are not subservient to Trump, and the assumption that there will be another presidential election four years from now. None of these certainties existed in 1938 and thereafter: Nazi rule was firmly entrenched, a war economy left no part of German society untouched, and personal freedom was constrained in a way that left little if any room for collective action. Does it make any sense to compare these societies, given that the United States of 2017 is so vastly different from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1945? I will later suggest two ways in which we can learn from this time period if we look at it as part of the full history of National Socialism. But looking at the years between 1938 and 1945 in isolation, I doubt that we can learn very much beyond the idea that it should never come to this again, which does not strike me as a controversial point. Whatever drove American voters on 8 November, I am fairly confident that they did not mean to vote for genocide and another world war.

We can learn more when we look at the early years of fascist rule. The first months of Hitler's and Mussolini's reign resonate with our contemporary situation, as it was anything but clear at that time where they would lead their countries. They only had general goals, and goals that were remarkably similar to Trump's "Make America Great Again". In his *To Hell and Back*, Ian Kershaw described the guiding thoughts of the early fascists as follows: "Italy could never be great under the leadership of the old notables."² However, Hitler and Mussolini had very

² Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back. Europe, 1914-1949* (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 135.

little in the way of blueprints for the immediate first steps. In fact, it was anything but clear whether Hitler and Mussolini would stay in office for long: their rule did not stabilize for more than a year after they came to power. It was quite plausible in 1922 and 1933 that Mussolini and Hitler would turn into noisy but brief episodes with little in the way of lasting significance, and the same holds true for Trump in 2017: he may just flame out in a twitter-based supernova. But in spite of these similarities, there are a number of important differences:

1. Trump operates in a completely different constitutional context. Both Mussolini and Hitler came to power in ways that were technically constitutional, but they swiftly moved beyond constitutional rule. The Nazi's Enabling Act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), passed by parliament in March 1933, marked the end of the Weimar constitution. A lot has been said about how Trump is "breaking the rules", but none of that means that he will be unaccountable under the rules of the world's oldest democracy. In two days, Donald Trump will swear to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States" to the best of his ability, and this Constitution places great emphasis on checks and balances – far more than constitutions in other Western democracies. Trump will need to work with two houses of parliament, with an independent judiciary, and with a vibrant civil society that can challenge the Trump administration in many different ways. In short, Trump will need to engage with a set of institutions that impose significant limits on autocratic rule. Of course, checks and balances do not work automatically. The institutional scaffolding of America's democracy is already facing a test, as we see in the Senate confirmation hearings, and wrestling with that scaffolding may emerge as a defining characteristic of Trump's presidency – but I very much doubt that Trump can eliminate other powers to the extent that Hitler and Mussolini could.
2. A second crucial difference lies in the state of the economy. When Hitler came to power, the economy had effectively collapsed, and that gave him a mandate to shift economic policy in a new direction with deficit spending and a mandatory labor service. He was in a situation that was as close to a clean slate as you can be in a modern economy, and nothing of that kind exists in today's America. Trump takes over a growing economy with low unemployment, and a lot of people will suffer if America really turns its back to economic globalization. To be sure, I do not think that the American economy is free of problems, but any problems that *exist* pale in comparison with the problems that Trump *may create*. Trump can create a lot of problems with trade wars, a botched health care law, or infrastructure investments that do not pay (read: the wall to Mexico), and no blizzard of twitter messages will distract from his responsibility for these crises.

In a way, Trump is a test for the power of globalization as an economic system. Unlike Trump, Hitler did not have to worry about the global economic context. World trade had already collapsed, and he could plot his economic recovery with a degree of autonomy that is unthinkable in the twenty-first century. Just think of the Mefo bills (*MEFO-Wechsel*), the clandestine financial tool that provided Nazi Germany with the fiscal resources for economic recovery: no government can pull off such a feat in today's world economy.

I also doubt that investments in infrastructure will have the same effect on unemployment as in the 1930s: building is a matter of expertise and technology rather than manual labor nowadays. And it is anyone's guess how America's growing debt burden will play out and how the Federal Reserve will react. Trump may squeeze some extra percentage points in short-term economic growth out of infrastructure investments and expansion of fossil fuel production, but that leaves a long way to go towards an "economic miracle". Or, to phrase it differently: a boost for Trump's personal finances is more likely than a boost for America's economy.

3. A third difference lies in the demographics that underpin the regimes' policies. Publications by Michael Wildt and others have shown the extent to which Nazi rule relied on support from a new generation of relatively young people, the "uncompromising generation" (*Generation des Unbedingten*).³ Born in the years after 1900 and often academically trained, these people moved into powerful positions with unprecedented speed and contributed greatly to the dynamism of Nazi rule. Nothing of this kind exists today, and all evidence suggests that Trump gained a lot of support from older people. While the Nazis were to a significant extent a youth revolt, Trump thrived on bitter people in retirement or close to retirement – a political constituency that did not exist in the interwar years because people lived shorter lives at that time. Dealing with bitter old people is an important challenge for aging Western societies, and on this issue, the past does not provide, and cannot provide, very much by way of orientation.
4. Mussolini and Hitler rose against the specter of another revolutionary threat, namely a communist revolution, and effectively sold themselves to the bourgeoisie as the lesser evil. No such specter exists in the United States: Bernie Sanders' socialism is not revolutionary, if it is socialism at all, and radical Islam does not stand a chance to win the next election. Of course, Trump railed against "the establishment" during his campaign, but I doubt that fear of the establishment can serve as the equivalent to fear of a socialist revolution in the interwar years. After all, the American people know what establishment rule is like. They know that America's establishment never sent people to Siberia, seized their land and property, or set up collectives.
5. Mussolini and Hitler had command over paramilitary units. Mussolini's blackshirts and the Nazis' SA units were serious challenges for the powers of the state, and they played a significant role in their rise to power and subsequent rule. To the best of my knowledge, Trump never sought to build his own cadre of men under arms, and it would be rather odd to set up paramilitary units if you are in command of the U.S. security apparatus. When it comes to the use of violence, Trump will need to work with the institutions that exist.

³ Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation. The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

But maybe we should not overstate the difference between the interwar years and today's society on this point. Today's political parties no longer maintain paramilitary units, but they do operate in societies that bear the marks of brutalization. In the interwar years, those who stood up for democracy faced a serious risk of getting killed, and we are slowly inching towards a similar situation in our own time: just think of Jo Cox, Gabrielle Giffords, or Trump's casual talk about gun violence against Hilary Clinton. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that during the interwar years, the threat came not just from the *use* of violence but also from the *imagination* of violence. Anger and guns make for a dangerous mix, and the imagination of armed struggle is a standing theme in America's political discourse. Just listen to a right-wing media outlet of your choice.

Violence is typically the measure of last resort in politics, an act of desperation after everything else has failed. In a way, it is odd that Trump focuses so much on brute force: after all, the president of the United States has plenty of other means at his disposal. But then, does Trump think this way? His rhetoric suggests an America on the verge of collapse, with all sorts of threats around it – and a desperate situation calls for desperate measures. As Trump said when he pitched his candidacy to black voters in August, “what the hell do you have to lose?” It is a slogan that resembles the famous 1932 election poster of the Nazis that called Hitler “our last hope” (*Unsere letzte Hoffnung: Hitler*). If the situation is desperate, everything looks legitimate.

The difference is that this self-perception made far more sense in late Weimar Germany than in today's United States. In 1932, Germany was at the nadir of the Great Depression, and it did not have a military that could defend the country. Today's United States has the world's most powerful military, it has top credit ratings from Moody's and Fitch, and it can pay pensions for a huge baby boomer generation – so it does have a lot to lose. However, we know from the history of fascism how imagined crises can linger and have consequences in the real world: think of “Jewish capitalism” or “Jewish bolshevism” or Italy's “wasted victory” in World War One. It is not that these notions were hard to disprove, but few people had an interest in speaking out on behalf of the Jews or Italy's gains in the Great War, and it is an interesting question whether that is different today. We may soon observe a stark imbalance of political representation. There are a lot of multinational corporations that stand to lose from protectionism, and these corporations can pay for large hordes of lobbyists. But is there a powerful group that is interested in speaking up on behalf of illegal immigrants, or Muslims, or poor people who lose their health insurance? And even if there are powerful voices, it remains to be seen whether it will gradually dawn on the Trump administration that the perceived crisis is more imagined than real.

In a famous book of 1955, the recently deceased political scientist Karl Dietrich Bracher spoke of a “dissolution” of the Republic of Weimar.⁴ Bracher argued that Germany's first

⁴ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik. Eine Studie zum Problem des Machtverfalls in der Demokratie* (Stuttgart: Ring-Verlag, 1955).

parliamentary democracy did not collapse suddenly on January 30, 1933. It suffered from a gradual and escalating crisis that sucked the lifeblood out of the democratic system. It is a precedent that has haunted Western democracies ever since, and one that makes for the most powerful connection between the experience of fascism and the events of 2016: America's democracy is in crisis, and its decline began long before Trump launched his bid for the Republican nomination. For those who know the pre-1933 critique of Weimar democracy, a lot sounds terribly familiar: the obsession with scandals (real and imagined), charges of corruption and weakness, an obsession with nationalism that depicts opponents as unpatriotic (rather than people with other goals), and a disregard for institutions and the rule of law.

I am particularly eager to stress the last point. I have mentioned the permanence of the Constitution as one of the defining differences between Hitler and Trump, and that makes it particularly worrying that Republicans did not appear too much concerned about the Constitution in recent years. I do not think that it is an overstatement to speak of a silent crisis of the American Constitution. The Republicans refused to hold a hearing on Obama's nominee for the Supreme Court, they held up confirmation hearings for many of his top officials for long times without a clear rationale, they risked default on America's federal debt in their quest to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and they did not raise their voice when Trump suggested mass election fraud after the election without a trace of evidence. In short, they have met the rules and procedures of democracy with contempt unless it played out to their advantage, and that is a deeply disturbing thing. After all, rules and procedures are not some kind of addendum in a democracy – they are the soul of democracy, an essential feature that distinguishes democratic rule from the law of the jungle.

In some respects, today's crisis of democracy is even more dramatic than the crisis of the Weimar Republic. I am thinking of the media. Weimar Germany had plenty of news outlets and legions of journalists while today's media outlets have suffered from declining readerships and declining revenues for years on end, and they are now faced with a Teflon president that seems strangely immune to scrutiny and criticism. Years of right-wing criticism of the "mainstream media", along with a citizenry that thinks news are for free, have taken their toll.

The fabric of America's democracy is eroding, and there can be no doubt about who is at fault. As the German chancellor Joseph Wirth declared after the murder of the German secretary of state Walter Rathenau in 1922, "*dieser Feind steht rechts*" – the enemy is a right-wing enemy. And yet it would be shortsighted to focus only on the ranks of the enemies in the defense of democracy. We can also read Weimar democracy as a lesson on how the democratic camp changes in the face of a mortal threat. If the Republic of Weimar looked weak and indecisive more often than not, this had a lot to do with how the forces of democracy were locked into unloved coalition governments for lack of a choice. Democracy changes if there is no viable alternative, and so do the democrats themselves: their discipline inevitably languishes if they see themselves as beyond serious competition. Hilary Clinton's campaign, which always presented her as the inevitable candidate, should be a warning to democrats everywhere: if

candidates think that they are the only thing that can forestall a disaster, they may learn that the voters actually prefer the disaster.

Scholars have long recognized that fascism did not come to power in an instant: it rose against the background of long-standing weaknesses in the political system. We can make a similar statement about Trump: he is not only the *cause* of America's political crisis but also the *symptom* of a fundamental crisis of American democracy. However, the experience of fascism is not just about long-term trends – it also teaches lessons about the significance of random events. Hitler's rule took an unexpected turn when the Reichstag was on fire and another turn when he arrested and killed the leaders of his SA in order to forestall a presumed putsch. Mussolini's rule changed irrevocably after the murder of Giacomo Matteotti. Events of this kind are difficult to anticipate by nature, but they matter enormously: a fundamental crisis can suspend the rules that usually govern an administration, and they can put a ruler and his reign on a new trajectory. Carl Schmitt famously argued that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception".⁵ Having read Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, I am inclined to agree with Schmitt's assessment.⁶ In a society with plenty of rules and entrenched interests, emergency situations provide a kind of leverage that goes beyond politics as usual. (However, unlike Carl Schmitt, I do not think that authoritarian rule is a good thing.)

Trump could use a crisis to his advantage: a major terrorist attack, or a riot. In fact, I am inclined to say that he does not stand much of a chance without a major crisis: politics as usual may grind him and his revolutionary ambitions to pieces. But would it really work? A major terrorist attack may trigger memories of 9/11 and George W. Bush and all the lies and deceptions that he used to drag America into a disastrous war. But Bush seems to have disappeared from America's collective memory in mysterious ways. It began during his second term when he was slowly sliding towards insignificance, and now it is almost as if his presidency had never happened. Could a president Trump use an existential crisis in the way that Bush did? Even after 9/11, Bush had to fight hard to gain Congressional approval for war against Iraq – now imagine Trump requesting Congressional approval for war against North Korea or Iran! As it stands, this is an open question, and one with broader significance. When it comes to the future of democracy in the twenty-first century, one of the crucial questions is whether we still learn from experience.

In sum, we can and should reflect our current predicament in light of the experience of the interwar years and the rise of fascism. Democracy and the rule of law was ascendant in the decades before 1914, it was remarkably stable all over the West after 1945 – but something happened in the interwar years that made democracy unstable and unattractive. But then, the return of a crisis situation does not explain one crucial thing: why Trump? There were quite a few dictators who came to power in the interwar years, but to the best of my knowledge, none

⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 5.

⁶ Cf. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

of them was a real state mogul with bad hair. As a billionaire investor with a penchant for gold, Trump looks unique among the rulers of Western democracies. But is he?

I think there is a fascist template for Trump, a political profile that matches his personal CV: the builder. Fascism thrived on large building projects that showed national determination and strength: land reclamation in the Pontine Marshes in Italy, the autostrada and the Autobahn projects, monumentalist urban construction programs. To be sure, the builder was not a fascist peculiarity, as the link between political charisma and charismatic building projects worked in the United States as well. Just think of Eisenhower and the interstate system or Franklin D. Roosevelt and the programs of the New Deal: they provided concrete evidence that government made a difference, and they left an impression with voters. After 1960, infrastructure programs were more of a source of troubles for political leaders: think Khrushchev and his Virgin Lands campaign, China and the Three Gorges dam, Berlin and its defunct new airport. But in the 1930s, politicians could build their careers on the quick and successful completion of large construction projects, and Donald Trump shows that the charisma of someone who “gets things built” is not dead. In fact, it may come back as a result of the opaque nature of today’s economy. In the twenty-first century world, a large building is one of the few achievements that everyone can grasp. When it comes to pop stars, or bankers, or Premier League football players, we are all struggling to understand the correlation between their achievements and their personal wealth. But if you have a large downtown building with your name on it, everybody understands that you have made it.

It is rewarding to look at the scholarly literature on the Nazi era in this light, for the builder is a notable gap in our body of publications. We have a number of good works on the Nazi’s Autobahn project that have smoked out many of the project’s lingering myths – but we know surprisingly little about Fritz Todt, the man who built the Autobahn as *Generalinspektor für das deutsche Straßenwesen*. Todt is perhaps the last big Nazi for whom we are lacking a decent book-length biography.⁷ The same holds true for the institution that carried his name, the Organisation Todt, in spite of the fact that it is one of only two large organizations of the Nazi era that was named after an individual (the other was the Hitler Youth).

The Organisation Todt was a mushrooming institution that grew from small beginnings into a distinct political empire. It was a new creation of the Nazi regime, it stood outside the existing bureaucracy, and the standing of the Organisation Todt hinged on the quick realization of construction projects. These mushrooming administrative bodies were a key feature of the Nazi regime – the SS with its huge business empire was another example – and they contributed greatly to the dynamism of Nazi rule. They were not classic bureaucracies with rules and traditions – they were, in the words of Reinhard Heydrich, “*kämpfende Verwaltungen*”, administrations in fighting mode: government bodies beyond traditional modes of accountability that strived to “get things done” irrespective of costs. And as we know today, these bodies turned

⁷ I am aware of Franz W. Seidler, *Fritz Todt. Baumeister des Dritten Reiches* (Schnellbach: Bublies, 2000 [originally Munich: Herbig, 1986]). It is a book-length biography, but not decent.

into monsters that did not stop until the end of Nazi rule, and their toll in monetary and human terms was obscene.

We should keep memory of these runaway institutions alive because Trump may soon face an important choice. Should he entrust his pet projects like infrastructure spending and deportation of illegal immigrants to *existing* institutions that are bound to the rule of law? Or should he create *new* institutions with weak oversight where everything depends on speed and “getting things done”? The Nazi experience suggests that the latter could make a world of difference. A new deportation task force would strive to achieve ever higher numbers of deportations and care about little else. More specifically, it would see government oversight and legal challenges as mere obstacles to its core mission – rather than the natural obligation of every agency of the U.S. government – and a deportation task force would compel the Trump administration to give it as much leeway as possible. In short, a new deportation task force may put the U.S. government on a path to a humanitarian disaster that could tarnish America’s international reputation beyond recall.

You may have noticed that I have not made a connection that seems to offer itself: Hitler was a racist, and so is Trump. I think the verdict is still out on this point. Of course, there can be no doubt that he has *said* racist things about Latinos and Muslims and that he depicted African Americans with stereotypes that are inherently racist (keywords: inner-city, lack of education), and there is no excuse for these statements. But does he really *mean* these things? Nobody can doubt that Hitler hated Jews, and he swiftly had them eliminated from the payroll of government institutions after he came to power. I do not see a similar rush towards action in Trump’s administration. The Muslim travel ban seems to have disappeared from his agenda, and in a CBS interview just days after his election, Trump reduced the target number for deportations to two or three million. It is clear that many of Trump’s voters hate Latinos and Muslims but whether Trump himself hates them remains to be seen. It may just be the case that he simply does not care about them. Don’t get me wrong: I do think that this would be outrageous, too. It would mean that millions of American residents have to live with existential uncertainties for years on end, and that would inevitably claim a toll in people’s lives. A government that does not care about the people within its realm is shameful. But it is different from a government that seeks to get rid of these people.

Trump may not care about Latinos and Muslims, but he does care about his business interests. This deserves reflection in the present context because the link between fascism and capitalism has been a perennial discussion point. The Marxists famously argued that fascism was simply camouflage for the rule of capitalism, but it never really worked: Hitler and Mussolini showed way too much agency, along with their camarillas, as to make them appear as mere puppets. Marxists depicted fascism as a stage in history – while in fact, fascists made history not because of what they *were* but for how they *developed*. Now we have a real-life businessman in power, and for all the noise that he generates, I can see an emerging refrain that may define his administration: don’t do anything that hurts business. But does that make him the embodiment of capitalist rule?

Just like Adolf Hitler, Donald Trump has published an autobiographical book that provides us with a window into his thinking. That is as far as this similarity goes, for Trump's *The Art of the Deal* is rather different from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*—it's a business book, for one. *The Art of the Deal* shows how Trump does business. He sets high goals, then builds up pressure to the best of his ability, and then settles for a deal when the moment seems right. It is a revealing approach, not least for the things that it ignores. Trump does not seem to value research and development or creativity, two pillars of the American economy. His business case is also inherently skeptical of laws and institutions, as they may stand in the way of a deal. To put it more bluntly, Trump's approach to business is about bending and breaking the rules, to an extent that is corrosive and deeply anti-social: if every businessman used the courts of law in the way that Trump did, America's legal system would probably collapse. Now it seems that it has made him rich, but I doubt that this is a good approach to economic policy.

After all, reliable rules are crucial for a modern economy. Investors rely on all sorts of rules when they make decisions: copyright law, contract law, property law, tax law, tariff law, etc. When a businessman signs a contract, he trusts that the other party cannot cancel it with a tweet. As we all know, Trump has sent tweets that suggest he can do exactly that, and I am sure that a lot of managers will follow closely what comes out of this. Is this the harbinger of a Trump administration where any rule can change at any moment? It would be a great opportunity for speculators and a nightmare for businesses that make long-term investments, and the latter are arguably more important for economic growth in the long term. Much has been made of the recent boom of the stock market, but in the long run, it's the investments that count, and whether Trump can create a reliable framework for investments remains to be seen.

I mention all this not only to show that "capitalist rule" is a more ambiguous concept than orthodox Marxism suggests, as there are different types of capitalists with divergent interests. The Nazi era also provides insights into what happens if a ruler is prone to erratic decisions and unexpected bursts of activism. For one thing, erratic rule relies on a second tier of decision makers who provide more stability and permanence, and Hitler was notably reluctant to fire people (it remains to be seen how this will be the case with Trump). For another, unpredictability can create leverage, and some of Hitler's successes were only possible because he was so hard to figure out. In other words, the jokes about Trump's twitter use are missing a much bigger question: what is the role of twitter in his emerging style of governance? For those who know Nazi historiography, it may be a return of the intentionalism versus functionalism debate in a new disguise. Is Trump's twitter use a conscious strategy to draw attention away from other, more contentious issues? Is it camouflage for clever deals that are currently forged behind the scenes, deals that will emerge when the moment is right? Or is it just an obsession that incidentally generates noise that just happens to cloud people's minds? Twitter is a new medium, but it brings up questions that are anything but new, and the example shows that we can also learn from how historians of the Nazi era *think* (and not just from what they *say*).

Let me summarize my remarks in the following ten points.

1. Trump will need to work with a rigid institutional framework and a responsive civil society for the foreseeable future, and that makes for a crucial difference to Mussolini and Hitler, who quickly moved beyond these constraints. What that means is that Trump's rule will depend to a great extent on other policymakers and society at large. Unlike what his rhetoric suggests, he can actually achieve very little without a population that is willing to go along. In other words, Trump's rule may become a test for America's political institutions and American society. Do checks and balances actually work? And how far do people go in pleasing a president who relishes in self-admiration? As you may know, Trump sent a self-congratulatory tweet after executives from the Sprint telecommunications company called him to say that they have created 5,000 jobs. The Obama administration blocked a merger of Sprint and T-Mobile in 2014, and when Sprint tries again, a lot of managers will watch to see whether that phone call was a clever strategy. Another place to look at will be Trump's hotels and resorts in Washington and elsewhere: will this be the place that politicians and lobbyists go to in droves? Or will this be the place that every respectable person avoids because they know that this is where the cronies are? We may soon learn a lot about the corporate ethics of America's business world.
2. Fascism in Italy and Germany had a clear set of goals and priorities. Whether Trump has clear priorities beyond his personal business interests is an open question. As it stands, there are stark tensions between his guiding thoughts and enormous tensions within his administration, and it remains to be seen how, and to what extent, these tensions will iron out. Trump has pledged to change the way Washington works, to "drain the swamp", but maybe things are more complicated: maybe Trump just does not care about the swamp. Maybe America has elected a president that does not care for anything beyond his ego and his personal business interests. It is quite possible that we will need to criticize Trump not for what he does but for what he does *not* do. His administration may not repeal civil rights legislation, but it may not care about enforcing it. Trump may not deport millions of migrants, but he may not care about leaving them in a state of uncertainty. It will be important to criticize this negligence, but it will be a type of critique that is different from the critique of fascism. No one ever criticized Hitler for not enforcing the Nurnberg Laws.
3. An erratic, unpredictable leader depends on a second tier of policymakers and officials who "work towards the Führer", to use the phrase made famous by Ian Kershaw. Hitler drew that second tier from the ranks of the Nazi movement, and he stuck with loyalists even if there proved incompetent or corrupt. Trump does not have anything of this kind. Hitler could trust in the loyalty of his inner circle because, first, they had been with him during the years of struggle (the *Kampfzeit*, in Nazi language), and, second, they were nothing without him. Trump's inner circle is full of people who owe him very little – and certainly not their careers – and who know how loyalty has played out for Chris Christie and Rudy Giuliani. (And I do not even mention the administrative rank and file that is unlikely to "work towards Trump" in the way German officials worked towards

Hitler.) In other words, loyalty may emerge as a critical issue in the Trump administration very soon. For example, the designated Secretary of State Rex Tillerson may soon wonder whether his commitment to Donald Trump, who selected him on the base of several recommendations and a two-hour interview, really matters more than his lifelong commitment to ExxonMobil.

4. This discussion has focused overwhelmingly on the years before and after the fascists came to power in Germany and Italy. It is in these years that we find similarities and inspiration for our current predicament. I have not completely ignored the latter years of Nazi rule: the cancerous growth of unaccountable institutions did not become a problem until after the consolidation of Nazi rule, and the intentionalism versus functionalism controversy is about the origins of the holocaust (though that reference was about analogous methodologies, not a comparison of actual events). In short, I find it very difficult to draw lessons from the last six or seven years of Nazi rule that would matter with a view to Trump, and maybe we should reflect on why this period figures so prominently in research, teaching, and collective memory. I say this specifically with a view to holocaust and genocide studies, an academic fields whose rationale has always been political as well as academic, and where it is customary to fast-forward until 1938 or so when things get interesting: this approach may not be as helpful for the challenges of the twenty-first century as we tend to assume. It is time to reflect on the political case for holocaust studies.
5. I have stressed the similarities in the early years of fascism, but maybe I should be more specific about the nature of these similarities: they are about the threat to democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the social and cultural scaffolding of an open society. Similarities are less clear when it comes to the precise *nature* of the threat: the fascist movement was very different from Trump's movement, he operates in an economic and political context that is vastly different, and treating Trump as fascism 2.0 may obscure more than it reveals. In short, the key story is about the erosion of democracy, and it is helpful to remember that it did not only occur in Italy and Germany: it was a pan-European phenomenon during the interwar years, and the collapse of democracy did not inevitably lead to fascist rule. Authoritarian rule comes in different forms. Only some of them are fascist, but they are all despicable.
6. Fascism was inherently unstable in Italy and Germany, and its trajectory was subject to intended and unintended oscillations.⁸ We know from the historical record that these oscillations provoked dramatic fluctuations in contemporary assessments: few people made it through the twelve years of Nazi rule without a change of opinions – a point that is often lost on scholars who seek to identify previously unknown Nazi connections. We should not repeat this mistake in our critique of Trump and look at criticism in terms of

⁸ It was different in Spain and Portugal – part of the reason why these countries are not discussed in this presentation.

“the stronger, the better” (or, on a personal note, the more fascist Trump looks, the more convincing a presentation). For example, if Trump brings China to end its blatant subsidies on steel production, why not give him his due?

7. We would probably be more relaxed in our approach to Trump if the experience of fascism had not taught us to think in terms of moral absolutes. A powerful strand in our current political discourse treats Nazism as a form of evil. In fact, I would argue that moral clarity (or the illusion thereof) ranks among the attractions that Nazi history has to offer in the twenty-first century: in a contemporary society full of moral ambiguities, it is strangely reassuring to have one regime where everything is clear. However, a sense of moral clarity leaves no option beyond fierce resistance: you cannot negotiate with evil. The West went to war against fascism, but going to war against Trump is foolish politically and intellectually. When it comes to political commentary, we should value accuracy and sophistication over moral vigor, and maybe we should also rethink our narratives of the Nazi era accordingly: maybe we should give more room to the ambiguous stories, to the people who faced moral dilemmas where it is difficult to say even in retrospect who was right and who was wrong.⁹
8. The political case for holocaust studies rests on teleology. The Nazi experience teaches us what racism, eugenics, nationalism, anti-Semitism and the like can lead to – namely to genocide. It is a powerful case, and I am gratified to see that it is part of the West’s political DNA: never again! But teleologies are tricky in that they focus attention on a potential upcoming disaster. In other words, it brings us to criticize racism for what it can produce in the long run, rather than to criticize racism in its own right. It is easy to see an infatuation with a great upcoming disaster in anti-Trump rhetoric, an anticipation of escalation – but what about the small disasters: the sense of insecurity among Muslims and Latinos, the brutalization of society, the emptiness of the political discourse, the collusion of interests? The Trump presidency may not lead to mass incarceration, or a stock market crash, or another war, and yet it may be a disastrous presidency.
9. When it comes to the erosion of democracy and the slide towards authoritarian rule, fascism is the experience that defines our collective memory. However, it defines our collective memory only because we look at the history of democracy in such a narrow way: we look only at the West, and only at the big countries. Authoritarian rule in inter-war Poland and Hungary has not entered the collective memory of Western democracies, nor have the many collapses of democratic rule in the Global South. Failing non-Western democracies appear as “something completely different” – but why? For scholars of the Global South, Trump looks very familiar: a rich man who wins an election with dubious means. In 2014, the *Economist* proclaimed a new age of crony capitalism and launched

⁹ For my own attempt to tell these ambiguous stories, see Frank Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown. A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

an index to gauge the extent of crony capitalism in various countries.¹⁰ It seems that the United States has joined the trend.

10. What all this comes down to is that we should reflect critically on why we are so obsessed with fascism in our critique of Trump. We can learn something from the experience of fascism: it provides lessons on democracies in danger, the dynamisms of power, and erratic leaders. But we can also learn from the many other open societies that have faced an authoritarian challenge. Democracy and human rights are always under threat, and the threat can come from many sides: from racist prejudice, from capitalist interests, or from smartphone users who think that reliable news come for free. In other words, our infatuation with fascism grows from a sense of Western exceptionalism: a lingering Western arrogance that this is the only challenge to democracy that matters for us. And our infatuation with fascism stems from the discreet charm of dialectic thinking: the neat all-inclusive package of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that frames collective memory. It goes like this: at some point, the West committed itself to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law; then it failed to honor this commitment when it succumbed to fascism; and now we can make good on this failure by keeping memory of our past sins alive. It's a popular triad, easy to understand and remember, and it's a terribly incomplete history of modern democracy.

For a long time, America nourished a sense of moral exceptionalism: the city on the hill that committed itself to a higher standard than other countries. It has always been more convincing as a myth than as a description of reality, and the election of Donald Trump may well mark the end of the entire idea: neither Trump nor his voters seem to care about the idea of America as a moral example, or about the president as the leader of the free world. So if America no longer sees itself as exceptional, why should we treat it as such and compare it only to large advanced modern countries of the West? The story of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is a global one, and we should situate the story of Trump accordingly. The story of fascism is an important part of this global story. But it is just one of many stories that are waiting to be told.

¹⁰ The Economist of March 15th, 2014.