



Fascism's Centennial Legacy

Scott Atran, October 2022

One hundred years ago, in late October 1922, Italian Fascists under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, a former socialist newspaper editor and politician, marched on Rome and onto the world stage. The goal was to make Italy and its capital great again, as under the Caesars. When the fascist supporters and Blackshirt militia entered the city, King Victor Emmanuel II, transferred power to Mussolini to avoid fascist promises of violence should rule be denied them. The New Order's watchwords were "belief" and "obedience": *belief* in fascism's spiritual values, rooted in religious readiness to sacrifice the self for the Nation to save it both from the materialism of socialism's egalitarian descent to mediocrity and from democracy's apparent weakness, chaos and corruption; and *obedience* to the cult of the leader, *Il Duce* (or *Der Fuehrer*, *El Caudillo*, and the like), who alone could impart revolutionary enthusiasm to the people, imbuing them with the faith to overcome and even despise rational doubts, the country's existing institutions, and the indiscipline of dissent that comes with disbelief.

Lost in the haze of [collective euphoria](#) as supporters exulted in their leader's incendiary oratory, and as other leaders and peoples took up the call, were its potentially horrific consequences for Italy and a world that would corrode into total war.

Fascism as a coherent political philosophy – authoritarian, ultranationalist, and supremacist – was rooted in developments during the First World War, when the citizenry and industry of most European societies, whether democracies or monarchies, were mobilized in mass and militarized to an extent not seen since the revolution in France more than a century before. The post-revolutionary European order collapsed that had more or less held from Napoleon's defeat in 1815 until the onset of WWI in 1914, and de-globalization of the international economic system and of information exchange owing to deep ideological fissures began a run that would last through World War II and into the Cold War.

From the ruins of the WWI and the subsequent economic deterioration, political disarray, and popular bewilderment at the passing of familiar social structures and moral norms, such as class hierarchies, centralized militaristic autocracies began emerging across the continent under dictatorial leaders. From Poland to Portugal, these totalitarian one-party states aimed to achieve national self-sufficiency (autarky) by subjugating labor and industry to the state and by forcibly suppressing opposition. Except for the equally totalitarian and *dirigiste* pro-Soviet communists, they also promoted political violence against peoples alleged to be racially perverse (Jews, Romani) or inferior (Slavs, non-Indo Europeans) as a means of national rejuvenation and colonial expansion.

Nazi Germany emerged as the most brutal, aggressive and dominant of these states as it endeavored to forge a world-conquering alliance of Fascist-friendly nations that ultimately torched much of Europe and parts of Africa and Asia before succumbing to overwhelming US-led firepower and Soviet-led manpower. Yet, as [George Orwell](#) noted in his review of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*:

[T]he situation in Germany, with its seven million unemployed, was obviously favourable for demagogues. But Hitler could not have succeeded against his many rivals if it had not been for the attraction of his own personality... [H]e has grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life. Nearly all western thought since the last war, certainly all 'progressive' thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. Hitler... knows that human beings don't only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades. However they may be as economic theories, Fascism and Nazism are psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life.

Here's a telling anecdote: During a showing of Leni Riefenstahl's visual paean to National Socialism, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Charlie Chaplin laughed but French film-maker René Clair was terror-stricken, fearing that, if it were shown more widely, all might be lost in the West. Indeed, Hitler's inspiration and his party's success in inculcating youth into the Nazi worldview as a sacred cause made [German soldiers](#) more willing to fight and less willing to surrender than allied combatants in World War II.

Today, liberal democratic values increasingly appear to be losing ground as the middle class, the mainstay of liberal democracies, [shrinks](#). In a [World Values Survey](#), the majority of Europeans less than 30 years old think their living in a democracy is *not* "absolutely important." In [one US survey](#), almost half of Americans lacked faith in democracy, and more than one-third of young people with high incomes approved of military rule, presumably to arrest growing social agitation tied to vast income inequality (now surpassing the 19th century's Gilded Age), political polarization, and unrelenting problems of cultural assimilation, racial integration, and lack of consensus in an era of identity politics.

An October 2002 [New York Times/Siena College poll](#) found that 71 percent of Americans see democracy in jeopardy but only 7 percent consider rescuing it an election priority. America's constitutional structure allows the Electoral College and composition of the Senate to presently advantage the party of candidates who deny the legitimacy of the last presidential election; however institutional advantages and political success at gerrymandering and voter suppression cannot explain why a clear majority of Americans also express willingness to vote for election deniers as long as the candidates support voters' other economic and socio-cultural priorities. According to [another nation-wide survey](#), more than 90 percent of US Republican Party supporters believe in America as a force for moral good in the world, with one-third of party supporters willing to condone political violence even against fellow citizens thought to hinder pursuance of that moral good and so undermine national identity.

Over the course of this century, ["illiberal" democracy](#) has been growing, where constitutional limits and elections are acceptable only if they affirm the legitimacy of one political party or faction usually associated with, or at least tolerant of, the far-right. Illiberal democracies tend to evolve into ever more authoritarian and intolerant ["tight" societies](#) rather than into open

societies respectful of divergent opinions and diverse cultural traditions and preferences. Far-right extremism and attendant violence has been [rising steadily](#) in the US and across Europe. Relegated to the political fringe after World War II, with practically no legislative representation, the far-right today has become the strongest political force in Italy (Brothers of Italy), the second largest in France (Rassemblement National), the third most powerful in Spain (Vox) and Austria (Freedom Party), and a viable force in Germany (Alternative for Germany). Far-right parties now wield power in the ruling coalition in Sweden (Sweden Democrats) and in opposition in the Netherlands (Party of Freedom), while effectively ruling Hungary (Jobbik) and Poland (Law and Justice). Although these political formations reject an overtly fascist philosophy, they borrow many of the exclusionary ethno-nationalist elements first popularized by fascism, and they embrace a decidedly illiberal agenda.

A healthy democracy depends on the relational bonds between citizens, which have been progressively fraying, especially in the United States, [since the 1960s](#). As the Cold War wound down, inequalities in wealth, education, access to healthcare, and sentiments of relative deprivation, political exclusion and social injustice increased markedly to levels [not seen for a century](#). Democratic consensus within society began fragmenting into an increasing number of [rival and polarizing identity groups](#). Each has sought power to redress (often real) grievances through growing denial of others' legitimacy—commencing with a rightward shift of the left's formerly prototypical class of white male proletarians as women and minorities have gained greater voice. Many on the left now ignore this group, whose communities have been devastated by job loss through globalization to cheaper foreign labor; or worse, they stigmatize it with the original sins of racism and sexism. As sociopolitical consensus wanes, overriding preoccupation with individual self-interest becomes the norm, leaving many yearning for a sense of intimate community and transcendent purpose, which the authoritarian right is better at explaining and providing.

Orwell's analysis of fascism's emotional power to electrify and solidify masses of people remains apt for the current revival of the authoritarian right. Far-right canon provides people a shared [sense of significance](#) in life through an audacious (initially rebellious), fast-moving, and excitingly dangerous sacred mission that legitimizes violent action on its behalf. Authoritarian leadership, if left unchecked, has greater persuasive power than democratic consensus to fuse people together in unstable times. It infuses a feeling of belonging that ends the bewilderment of uncertainty and the [anxiety of freedom](#) of choice that goes with the forced gambles of cultural diversification and economic globalization (compete or suffer "creative destruction"), which sweep away traditional supports when the gambles fail.

For several years now, our research team has involved a partnership between Artis International, the Changing Character of War Centre at the University of Oxford, and the National University of Distance Education and the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain. Behavioral and brain studies by this team indicate that factual evidence that the world is not the way it is ideologically perceived, and analytical argument that key elements of authoritarian programs are logically incoherent, provide no real check on this power and may even help to entrench it (as [when prophecy fails](#) in religious cults). For example, [far-right supporters in the US and Europe](#) are more likely to elevate misinformation to the "sacred sphere" of the absolute and non-negotiable when communicating arguments that immigrants threaten their cultural purity, while [social media messages generally tend to become viral](#) and enduring in causal narratives that contain apparent violations of core values.

[Recent behavioral and brain research](#) also shows that people more readily make costly sacrifices for sacred values, including fighting and dying, than for more normative values achieved through consensus and deliberation. But of the thousands of Western European youth we surveyed, few were willing to make costly sacrifices for democratic values (although our most recent work concerning the Russia-Ukraine War suggest an uptick in readiness to sacrifice for freedom and democracy, which have become more salient under palpable threat). A majority of eligible 18 to 24 year-olds won't even participate in national elections in France or the U.S. And it is this seeming lack of commitment to finding consensus around liberal democracy's own core values to secure the relational bonds between its peoples, rather than threats from extremism or outside forces, which may be open society's gravest existential challenge.

How, then, to check this reviving world trend towards ethno-nationalist authoritarianism? One could argue, as [Francis Fukuyama](#) does, that despite democracy's current retreat across the world there are good reasons to suppose that it will win out over authoritarian states and leaders in the long run for two reasons:

First, the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader at the top all but guarantees low-quality decision making, and over time will produce truly catastrophic consequences. Second, the absence of public discussion and debate in "strong" states, and of any mechanism of accountability, means that the leader's support is shallow, and can erode at a moment's notice.

The first point is exemplified by Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin, whose political and military miscalculations in invading Ukraine not only indicate poor intelligence on Ukraine's will to fight (the US, UK and EU made [similar initial misjudgments](#)), but more importantly inability to acknowledge mistakes and the fear he instills in those around him to even inform him of what has and is likely to happen. The increasing concentration of power and decision-making in China's Xi Jinping, who is poised to rule his nation longer than anyone since Mao, also has produced potentially serious errors in judgment on important issues: for example, the still-developing economic and social downsides of "Zero-Covid" policy, or the crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong that has alienated Taiwanese and increased prospects of a costly war to unite their island with the mainland.

The second point is borne out by the domino effect of the sudden fall of communist dictatorships in the early 1990s, and by the recurring post-colonial rise and collapse of strongman regimes across Africa, Asia and Latin America. There are, for example, considerable parallels between the progressively larger and more enduring popular demonstrations that led to the downfall of the Shah of Iran and current unrest in Iran, which bodes ill for the long-term survival of the theocracy that replaced him.

Admittedly, this perspective on the near inevitability of democracy's triumph has a powerful logic to it, much as fascism and communism had in their time. Their philosophers also had a Hegelian view of the near-inevitability of historical trends and ultimate triumph with the end of history that the then-contemporary geopolitical landscape appeared to underscore. But the time frame involved in the arc of history is likely still too short to warrant any such generalization or prediction. Even these Hegelians uniformly acknowledge that commitment and costly sacrifice are required for their preferred take on history to realize itself.

So, in the meantime, as we wait for the inherent weaknesses of authoritarians and the inherent strengths of democrats to play themselves out, we must address a critical psycho-political challenge of our age: How in the here-and-now can the “unalienable” rights of individuals be maintained in an open and competitive political system of mutual tolerance and respect, and which is able to secure devotion to values that are resistant to other devoted but malign actors? What sort of intimate counter-engagement, rather than socially disembodied counter-narrative, is most apt to persuade people that democratic values and deliberations will triumph in the end rather than messianic conquest of the heart with faith, sacrifice, and promise of great rewards – given that free and fair elections, the affordances of science for health and happiness, and protection of individual rights under law are obviously not enough?

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