

Running for power

The ‘spectrum concept’ of fascism

In 1984, several members of the European Parliament signed a proposal to examine the rise of fascism and racism in Europe. The committee submitted a report in December 1985. Despite the persistence of extremist groups, the violence to which they resorted, and growing xenophobia – the committee said – Europe’s fascist fringes were “controllable” and unlikely to undermine Europe’s democracies any time soon. “The armoury of defence against these dangers should be constantly improved”, its report concluded, “for the time being, the climate of mistrust and xenophobia existing here and there has not weakened overall confidence in the democratic institutions. But this confidence could be eroded.”

Today, confidence in democracy is being eroded worldwide. Politicians such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Viktor Orbán in Hungary are causing alarm among many. A wave of articles, books and op-eds warns us that we are in fact witnessing the return of fascism – “fascism 2.0”, as the Italian journalist Ezio Mauro puts it. The philosopher Jason Stanley’s *How Fascism Works* belongs to this wave. He is joined by politicians (Madeleine Albright’s *Fascism: A warning*), historians (Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny*), constitutional lawyers (Paul Neuborn’s *When The Mob Gets Swayed*) and psychologists (John Gartner’s contribution to *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*). The Philippines, Rwanda, Myanmar, Brazil, Russia, Hungary, Poland and the US are just some of the countries Stanley diagnoses as affected by fascist politics today.

Establishing whether fascism has come back involves the delicate task of clarifying what “fascism” means. If we use the term “fascism” very narrowly, and confine it to Italy under Mussolini (say), we miss the chance to identify similar things – not even Nazism would count as a form of fascism. But if we use “fascism” very broadly, we may end up diluting the term so much that the most alarming political phenomena our societies can face might escape our notice. This, George Orwell warned us in 1944, is why one should “use [‘fascism’] with a certain amount of circumspection and not, as is usually done, degrade it to the level of a swearword”.

The European committee of 1984 took time to agree on a characterization of fascism. In the end, it decided it was not its place “to solve theoretical problems”, and settled on a liberal take: “fascism” is a term incorporating a variety of expressions, including “the extreme nationalism of the right”, “neo-nazism” and “neo-fascism”. Stanley embraces the theoretical challenge, however, and characterizes fascism as “a set of tactics devoted to achieving power”. In his view, it is not necessary to assume that fascist politics aims at world domination; in this sense, its ends are flexible. It is the *methods* of fascism, rather than any specific doctrine, that remain constant across decades and countries.

What Stanley calls “fascism” is in fact fascist *rhetoric*. He makes this explicit himself in an interview for *Vox*: “I think of fascism as ... a

SIMONA AIMAR

Jason Stanley

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rhetoric, a way of running for power”. His interest in the demagogic side of politics goes back at least to his 2016 book, *How Propaganda Works*. In an essay of 1995, Umberto Eco also warns about what he calls “Ur-Fascism”, an archetypal narrative that lurks over our democracies. Both Eco and Stanley assume that fascism has to do with *language*. It is a way of talking about things, a narrative so well-built that it manipulates people into endorsing authoritarian regimes. Fascism becomes a discourse that erodes democracies away.

Essentially, Stanley’s fascist demagogues rely on a divide-and-rule strategy. They foment biases and hatred to separate the people they claim to stand for. Hitler persuaded Germany that its enemy was the Jew. Trump scapegoats Muslims and illegal immigrants. Several European politicians are building careers on anti-immigration stances, from Orbán to the head of the Lega Matteo Salvini (whose “let’s close the harbours” slogan helped his party gain 34 per cent of the votes at the last European elections). In a radio interview, Stanley also describes the politics of Brexit as “completely fascist”. This is partly because some politicians in the Leave campaign gave voters two enemies: immigrants and Europe. In fact, fascist demagogues divide us along *many* dimensions: rural versus urban, religion-A versus religions-B/C/D, hardworking versus lazy, men versus women, white versus the rest, and so on. The more people learn not to trust each other, the more they lose the political strength of their union, and the more fascist leaders can take control.

Unfortunately, demagogues sell their stories well. By the *Washington Post*’s count, the current US president has stated falsehoods on average thirteen times a day while in power. “Donald is a believer in the big-lie theory: if you say something again and again, people will believe you”, one of his attorneys told a journalist. Demagogues also rely on propaganda and attack whoever might expose their lies. Hitler’s second speech in power was about “the lying press” (*die Lügenpresse*). Trump often charges “the lying media” – some supporters saw the analogy in 2016, and adopted the hashtag #Lügenpresse. Fascist leaders also frame their false picture of reality in a mythic past. Just as Mussolini appealed to the Roman Empire, Erdoğan refers to the greatness of the Ottoman Empire, and Trump’s “MAGA” is on his fans’ caps. Thus lies create pseudo-problems (the threats of outsiders), symptoms (nostalgia for a glorious past) and a solution (a fascist takeover). There is no scam like fascism.

Precisely because words are powerful, this narrative of describing fascism as a rhetorical



Matteo Salvini, Milan, 2014

strategy will have an impact. Treating fascism as mere rhetoric may make it easier for some readers to find fascism palatable, or to conclude that fascism is not as dangerous as it actually is. “I never thought I’d die a fascist, and yet!”, a man recently told me in Italy, “I am a Salvini supporter.” He agreed that Salvini is a fascist, but thought of fascism as a *good* thing. From his perspective, the rhetoric of fascism is direct, authentic and effective. He also acknowledged that he went from finding fascism negative (when he didn’t think he would die as a fascist) to positive (when he did). One wonders whether a shift in the meaning of “fascism” facilitated this turn. By confining fascism to a rhetoric, authors such as Stanley might dilute “fascism” just enough to make it look more respectable than historical fascisms like Mussolini’s ever were.

There is more to fascism than rhetoric. In 1923, Mussolini published a piece titled “Force and Consensus”. Consensus, he writes, is “as changeable as the shapes of sand on the beach”. “One cannot always have it. And it can never be total.” To seize and stay in power, Mussolini concludes, one also needs force – “physical and military force”, he clarifies. When Mussolini says that violence is essential to fascism, he is not lying. Without the raids of the fascist squads, and the fear they created, King Vittorio Emanuele III would not have put him in charge of the government. Hitler was initially elected, but also relied on violence to get to power. In the 1920s, while he delivered effective speeches, the SA engaged in street violence on a regular basis. Nor was these leaders’ rhetoric confined to persuading people to hand them power. A key role of their rhetoric was to apply a veil of respectability over their parties’ violence.

Stressing the violent side of fascism is important also when addressing an audience that hasn’t the slightest sympathy for the political actors that Stanley describes as fascist. Some of these readers may find a book like Stanley’s useful, in that it shows that some current politicians are not acting at random but pursuing strategies that may help dismantle democracy. Yet presenting fascism as a mere rhetoric might also create the impression that understanding and recognizing the mechanisms of such a rhetoric is sufficient to protect democracy. If all there is to fascism is a scam-building narrative, figuring out the scam should suffice for one not to fall for it. Treating

fascism as a rhetoric risks not only making fascism appear acceptable to some, but also making complacency too easy for others.

History does teach us that the charge of fascism can backfire. In 1930, the German Communist party (KPD) declared most of its opposition “fascist”. It stated that Heinrich Brüning’s right-wing government was “a fascist takeover”; it described the Social Democrats as “social fascists” who deceived the population with pseudo-socialist *rhetoric* – “they are just as bad as Hitler”, a party member said. “Nothing could be more fatal for us than to opportunistically overestimate the danger posed by Hitler-fascism”, the KPD leader Ernst Thälmann affirmed in 1932. It took Hitler one more year to seize power and start proving him wrong. The KPD’s lumping of Hitler together with other politicians – on the basis of rhetoric – made him look less dangerous. There is a risk that by using “fascism” too freely, one makes it easier for the most dangerous politicians to get by until it is too late.

Even if one were to include violence in one’s concept of fascism, there are still grounds to worry that warnings of fascism 2.0 will remain ineffective. Some have been quick to dispute such warnings, noting that figures like Trump haven’t yet committed a crime as grievous as genocide. In a note to reply to critics, Stanley writes that the concept of fascism is a spectrum concept: Trump’s politics are fascist, but fascist to a lesser degree than, say, Rodrigo Duterte’s. This might well be true. But it may not be enough to make the worry go away.

In the context of sparking a danger alarm, spectrum concepts tend to be used in discrete, well-defined ways. Colour is a spectrum concept, but in the context of a traffic light, red and amber give quite different instructions. If someone shouts at you “Stop at the light, it’s red!”, you certainly don’t take them to mean that the light is amber. If you look at the lights, and find that it *is* in fact amber, you might too easily conclude that the person who shouted at you is just an alarmist. Since the Second World War, warnings of fascism tend to be interpreted as warnings of genocide. From this perspective, the lights of some of the contemporary politicians that Stanley has in mind are currently amber, rather than red. And calling an amber light “red” is probably not the best way to persuade anyone to stop. It might be more effective not to lump much of current politics under “fascism” after all.