The concept of democracy is not tied to a particular time and place. Even if democracy originated at some point, perhaps 5th and 4th Century BC in Athens, the concept of democracy describes a structure that is realized in different places under very different material conditions. We can understand democracy as a voting system, one that reflects majority rule. We can also understand democracy as a culture, one that values liberty and equality (on some suitable interpretation). Both democracy as a voting system and democracy as an ideology (that is, a culture) have wide generality. Democracy has drawn popular support in countries with widely different histories and social conditions. Its appeal to a population does not depend solely on historically quite specific social structures existing – or if it does, these would be very general ones, shared by otherwise distant societies.

What about concepts like liberalism, socialism, communism, and capitalism? These are more specific than the concept of democracy; their origin times are more recent. In the case of these concepts, one must be attentive to the possibility that their elucidation reflects social structures local to their origins. The aim of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s classic essay, “The African Road to Socialism: Attempt at a Definition”, is to formulate a concept of socialism that is applicable to the countries in Africa. The obstacle to this project, he argues, is that many of the tools and concepts of socialist thinking involve assumptions that are local to a European historical context. Take, for example, Marx’s concept of dialectical materialism. Senghor argues that dialectical materialism cannot serve as an instrument for “fully interpreting” African societies because its applicability assumes that all societies have structures that African societies lack (for example, Senghor argues that many African
societies are classless). Senghor, however, is not pessimistic about the concept of socialism. He holds that there is some concept of socialism that is important to characterize, and has the kind of generality that makes it also applicable to African countries. But because of the problems of historically contingent assumptions, he also recognizes that the original concept may have to be altered.

What about fascism? Is it completely historically located? Senghor writes, about the concept of dialectical materialism, that it is “born of history and geography; it was born in the 19th Century and Western Europe.” According to Senghor it is no longer applicable, and is no longer used by those “seeking to penetrate realities no longer of the nineteenth but of the twentieth century.” Is fascism a concept like this? If so, it should no longer be used to penetrate twenty first century realities, because the assumptions about society that make it useful as an interpretive tool in social theory would no longer remain true. If so, fascism is only useful as an interpretive tool historically.

A second possibility is that fascism is akin to Senghor’s understanding of socialism – it is a concept of too much use to ignore completely, but it must be modified over time – fascism no, but modern fascism yes.

Finally, it could be that fascism is a concept like democracy – with an ahistorical core that can be brought out and described as a pattern that can take root in countries that otherwise differ quite radically in their social structures and problems.

The view that Senghor held of dialectical materialism is a widespread assumption, usually tacit, about the concept of fascism. Fascism is often treated as a completely historically located concept, of little use in the present day. This view has the consequence of justifying treating contemporary charges of “fascism” as absurd; at the very least, wildly implausible and exaggerated. Such a reaction is only justifiable given the assumption that fascism is an historically located concept. If fascist ideology has very wide appeal in different countries at different times, then one needs special justification to think one’s own country is immune. Someone who dismisses the possibility of fascism without special reasons of this sort is treating fascism as an historically located concept.

I AIM TO RESCUE THE CONCEPT OF FASCISM FROM THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY AND MAKE A CASE FOR ITS CENTRALITY IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

In my book How Fascism Works, I argue that the concept of fascism has wide interpretive applicability across societies that otherwise differ quite drastically from one another. If I am right, fascism is not one of Senghor’s “completely historically located” concepts. I aim to rescue the concept of fascism from the discipline of history and make a case for its centrality in political and social philosophy. Such a rescue would in fact constitute a return; some of the greatest theorists of fascism, such as Theodore Adorno and Hannah Arendt, were philosophers.
To rescue the concept of fascism for philosophy requires arguing that fascism has the kind of universal significance and centrality characteristic of philosophical concepts. It must have a recognizable structure that abstracts from local historical contexts, and be capable of being interpretively useful in locations that differ significantly from one another. Only then can one argue that it should be included in philosophical discussions about the kinds of cultures that can emerge in otherwise very different circumstances. If fascism is an historically located concept, however, then we do not need to be worried about confronting it. Fascism cannot reoccur, and political philosophers in recent decades have been right to ignore it.

What is the case that fascism is not an historically loaded concept? In recent years, across the world, a certain form of politics has emerged that embraces hyper-nationalism, xenophobia and other kinds of virulent racism to draw support for a leader with authoritarian tendencies. Those who practice it act in harshly patriarchal ways. They denounce the media, the cultural producers, and the teachers as corrupt liars with a masked leftist agenda. They claim that their country was once great among the nations, but has been humiliated as a consequence of the embrace of liberalism, which is mocked as weakness or denounced as treachery. Liberal elites are said to have weakened the immigration laws, allowing or threatening to allow immigrants to pour in and ruin the country. Weakness, under the mask of liberal ideals, has led to humiliation on the international level. Marxism, Socialism and Gender Ideology, supposedly spread in universities and schools, are mortal threats to the nation. The military is treated as a holy institution, whose ideals should be emulated and its leaders given political power. When in power, the movement tries to create a one-party state, demanding loyalty to that party over the multi-party nature of democratic state. The arrival of this political culture is heralded by a noticeable decrease in the political importance of truth.

The kind of politics I have just described has increased in salience and power. Clear examples include Hungary, Poland, Russia, India, Israel, Brazil, Italy, and the United States; political parties with this character have also achieved varying degrees of electoral success in France, Germany, and elsewhere. The ideology was clearly a force behind Brexit in the UK, which appealed to hysteria about immigration. Under very different social and historical conditions we see a common ideology surface and gain a broad

IF I AM RIGHT, THE VIEW THAT FASCISM IS AN HISTORICALLY LOCATED CONCEPT IS NOT JUST FALSE, IT IS DANGEROUSLY FALSE

If I am right, the view that fascism is an historically located concept is not just false, it is dangerously false. If fascism describes a dangerous ideology with universal appeal, representing it as an artifact of particular past historical circumstances masks a real danger. By not studying fascism philosophically, philosophy lends credence to the view that fascism is not a risk. How Fascism Works is a case for revisiting thinking in political philosophy, to reopen the case that philosophers should study fascism.
swath of support, suggesting that otherwise very different material conditions can lead to receptivity to its messages. Most people writing and discussing the political situation currently not only agree but even seem to presuppose that there is a basically uniform ideological structure that is achieving surprising support in countries that otherwise differ along many dimensions. There is, in short, agreement about a common phenomenon. But analysts have struggled to come up with similar agreement about vocabulary. Is this widespread ideology “right wing authoritarianism”? Nationalism? Right wing populism? In How Fascism Works, I argue that the proper term we need is fascism. If so, then fascism is not an historically located concept.

If “fascism” is not the right word to use, what is? One of the attractions of the ideology to its supporters is that it promises to provide a strong leader whose decisions will not be filtered through the mechanisms of democracy, discussion and deliberation, but imposed by strength and will and even cruelty. In other words, this ideology involves an element of authoritarianism. But authoritarianism does not do much to explain the structure of its ideology, or its appeal. China is an authoritarian state. Yet its leaders seem to have a very different ideology than the ones promulgated in the countries I listed. China’s leaders do not, for example, raise panic about immigrants coming into the country causing a wave of rape and gang violence. Similarly, Singapore is an authoritarian state. The rhetoric associated with these forms of authoritarianism is completely different than the rhetoric associated with the far right nationalist movements we see gaining currency across the world. Even the rhetoric and ideology of Cuba’s authoritarian leaders are and have been recognizably different – their leaders praise the ideal of equality. One can multiply examples to show that authoritarianism is not very helpful in identifying the ideology between these contemporary movements, or even the feature most responsible for gathering supporters. There are different kinds of authoritarianism. What we need to describe current social and political reality is a narrower concept that explains the attractions of the particular form of anti-democratic nationalist rhetoric that is proving successful in so many countries today.

Perhaps we should add a modifier to authoritarianism, and if so, will “right-wing authoritarianism” do the explanatory task we want? One problem is that the expression “right-wing” is taken, in the United States at least, to include very different ideologies. An economic libertarian and a social conservative may each consider themselves right-wing, but for very different reasons. It is also easy to imagine a country in which the ruling party has authoritarian tendencies, and strongly values tradition, but nevertheless confronts the negative parts of the nation’s history. Such a country would, for example, possess a culture that does not celebrate a history of exclusion or war crimes. A traditional monarchy is a right-wing authoritarian structure. But the ideology of monarchy and the ideology of fascism are not the same – dynastic ideology need not, and often was not, based on ethno-nationalism. Right-wing authoritarianism is not a good name for what we are witnessing as the ideology of leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Victor Orban, Vladimir Putin, Bibi Netanyahu, and similar politicians. Right-wing authoritarianism does not necessarily involve valorizing violence and domination; but, as we see in its rhetoric, the ideology we are seeking to describe does. As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump repeatedly praised the practice of torture and promised not just to bring it back
but to expand it. In speaking to police officers, he encouraged them to make their practices more casually violent. Jair Bolsonaro promised to allow extra-judicial killings of suspected criminals. Perhaps most importantly, right-wing authoritarianism does not need to be based on extreme nationalism. Nationalism is at the very core of the rhetoric and the ideology of Putin, Netanyahu, Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, and the other leaders who fall within the general category of political movements many analysts are trying to describe.

Why, then, is the concept of nationalism not the right description for the common social and political ideology underlying the current wave in the countries I have listed? I considered this and responded in detail in Chapter 6 of How Fascism Works. I argue that nationalism is not the concept we need, because nationalist rhetoric is central to political movements that we would never think of as a version of the same ideology we find in the speeches of Victor Orban, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, and other political leaders who seem to share a common ideology. Anti-colonial movements regularly appeal to the rhetoric of nationalism, seeking to preserve the country’s resources, cultural traditions, and language from the colonial threat. Black nationalism in the United States also employs nationalist ideology and rhetoric. These ideologies are distinct as a consequence of their very different origins. Black nationalism and various anti-colonial ideologies emerged as a result of actual victimization and historical marginalization, enforced by violence. The ultimate goal of these movements is to end the oppression and exclusion; the ultimate goal is equality. In contrast, the nationalism we see in Hungary and in India and in the United States is a nationalism of majority groups, whose feeling of victimization is not based in a comparable history of actual victimization and marginalization. More often, it is caused by a sense that slight increases of equality for marginalized groups are losses to them.

So, “nationalism” is not a good name for the movements we are seeking a concept to describe. In the Hindutva Movement, in Trump’s rhetoric, and in Orban’s speeches we see allegiance to the form of nationalism that includes only members of the traditionally dominant group. In these speeches, the leaders try to convince the dominant group that slight improvements in democratic values – for example equality – place their traditional dominance at risk, by giving power to members of historically marginalized groups. Their rhetoric stokes irrational fear about status threats to their dominant position – for example, threats to their masculinity or their ability to protect their wives and daughters from threats posed by immigrants or minorities. The ideology is nurtured by fostering a sense of deep grievance at the loss of earlier greatness, which was due to the heroic and yet tragically uncelebrated efforts of the dominant group. Anti-colonial nationalist movements seek equality – in the ideology we are seeking to describe, equality is represented as the source of the nation’s ills, the loss of its greatness. Anti-colonial movements often use military methods; but it’s not true that the military has a special symbolic ideological role in anti-colonial movements. Anti-colonial movements do not single out universities and raise panic about “gender ideology” and leftist indoctrination. We are looking at ideologies that involve extreme nationalism by the dominant group, which has been convinced that liberal ideals pose a profound threat to something that this ideology gives a most central value – that group’s traditional dominant status. According to the ideology, liberalism has led to a loss of status for a once great dominant group, which is
now at risk of cultural and physical annihilation by members of groups that traditionally received less respect. The concept we are looking for is fascism. Its reemergence on the world stage today teaches us that fascism is an ideology that will remain attractive into the future, in very different circumstances. Fascism is not an historically located concept.

PHILOSOPHY MUST REABSORB THE CONCEPT OF FASCISM, KEEPING ITS STUDY ALIVE FOR SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS

The possibility that fascism could reemerge as a popular force has not been kept sufficiently salient. From my perspective as a philosophy professor, the fact that classes in political philosophy rarely if ever investigated it seemed to be my discipline’s attempt at justification of this error. In philosophy, fascism has been treated as a completely historical concept, the province of historians. Philosophy must reabsorb the concept of fascism, keeping its study alive for today’s challenges, and for those facing subsequent generations.

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