

The Rhetoric of Fascism: Or, This Is the Way the World Ends

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Review Essay

The Rhetoric of Fascism: Or, This Is the Way the World Ends

Fascism: The Career of a Concept, by Paul E. Gottfried. DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2017. 256 pp. \$29.00 (paper).

Fascism: A Warning, by Madeleine Albright. New York: Harper, 2018. 288 pp. \$27.99 (cloth).

How Democracies Die, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. New York: Crown. 312 pp. \$26.00 (cloth).

How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them, by Jason Stanley. New York: Random House. 218 pp. \$26.00 (cloth).

The next decade will be one of the most decisive periods in human history. We currently face the reality of a coming climate catastrophe brought about by centuries of industrial resource extraction from the planet and the accompanying mass exploitation of its human population, and as a result “we will soon find ourselves confronted by movements of disadvantaged people across borders that dwarfed those of previous eras” (Stanley 192). According to Jason Stanley, these conditions make a situation ripe for the rise of fascism: “Traumatized, impoverished, and in need of aid, refugees, including legal immigrants, will be recast to fit racist stereotypes by leaders and movements committed to maintaining hierarchical group privilege and using fascist politics” (192). The fact that climate change now threatens everyone’s existence simultaneously and demands such thorough reconstruction of virtually every aspect of social life makes it predictable that fascism would spring up across the face of the earth in different guises to resist these imperatives. Rhetoricians today face no more pressing challenge than to diagnose and counter this global movement as part of a larger effort to stave off the barbarism that fascism eagerly unleashes on history.

This review essay contributes to this effort by reading four popular books that purport to confront this challenge head-on without reducing fascism to a caricature that gratifies its critics while casting the real issues into shadow. That temptation is why Gottfried’s *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* is so valuable as a provocation, for it was written to correct the sloppy use of the epithet “fascist” to condemn whatever politician or movement one finds distasteful. Gottfried

argues that there is a great deal that fascism is *not*. Fascism is not conservative nationalism, and “the fascist should not even be equated with any nationalist Right that saw fit to operate in a parliamentary context” (20). Fascism is not equivalent to totalitarianism, or the system of technologically enabled centralized control over all aspects of a population within an expansionist bureaucratic state, such as the Soviet Union: “Hitler may have been a more savage murderer, but he was not as obsessed as a Soviet counterpart with ideological conformity” (54). So Hitler was not a fascist either, for fascism has nothing to do with murderous, racist, anti-Semitic regimes like Hitler’s Germany, “which combined mass murder with ethnic cleansing and a stubborn resistance to human progress” (58). Additionally, fascism is not antimodern, for “fascist regimes embody their own form of organizational modernity” (58). Drawing from history, theory, and rhetoric, Gottfried persuasively and systematically undermines the stereotype of fascism—at least in its beginnings and imagined by its originators—as a rigid, bureaucratic totalitarian state committed to genocidal race policies whose aim is to expand its power across the globe through military conquest.

What Gottfried presents instead is a vision of fascism as an energetic movement of the revolutionary right, embodied in what he calls the “Latin” fascism of Mussolini, the term chosen to indicate its continuity with a Roman rather than a particularly Italian character. What this civilized Latin fascism represents, for Gottfried, is a reaction against globalism, multiculturalism, and progressivism and an embrace of a revivalist cultural nationalism with an “emphasis on particularity, identitarian politics, and hierarchy” (158). In his narrative, the originators of fascism “were opposing an ideology that was predicated on a global transformation, and so fascists countered it with an anti-utopian anthropology that was intended to depict people as they actually were—that is, combative and in need of authority, as opposed to how the left might have wished to see the human race. In contrast to their foes, fascists were focused on the mythic past in which they saw their mission prefigured” (11). The fact that this movement was corrupted by its association and eventual subordination to Nazi militarism and race policies is undoubtedly tragic, but, in his eyes, that does not make it any less worthy of attention. Indeed, recapturing the spirit of this civilized Latin fascism thus is the *de facto* purpose of his book.

The ironic value of Gottfried’s book to understanding the rhetoric of fascism is that it presents a utopian vision of fascism purified of its twentieth-century flaws and advanced as a normative ideal in the twenty-first century, thus providing an invaluable insight into the motives that animate the new fascisms. For him, the rhetoric of fascism has two components, one reactionary and the other revolutionary. Like its forebears, the reactionary components of fascist rhetoric stand in militant opposition to the threat of an energized Left, in effect exposing and rejecting “the totalitarian behavior of politically correct, overbearing Western elites” and their policies of “snatching people’s minds and infantilizing one’s

population” (172). Against what it sees as the transformation of the globe into a monolithic, materialist, secularist, multiculturalist global nanny state, fascism presents a revolutionary alternative—the renewal of ethnically specific homelands, each of which asserts a right to its own particularity by selective reclaiming of the past in order to establish its own unique homeland alongside others. The promise Gottfried perceived during the early years of Mussolini’s Italy and now sees again in the rise of the revolutionary right is the promise of a nonviolent political movement that would sweep away both the international Left and establishment Right and reclaim the Nation in the name of a new hardened type of individual accepting of inequality, embracing of hierarchy, and proud to carry the identitarian banner of a mythic past into the unclaimed future.

Gottfried is, of course, fundamentally deluded. There is no other outcome to a neo-medieval political system imposed on an interconnected global population that inhabits a finite terrestrial globe than constant suicidal war. Nonetheless, Gottfried’s vision for the rhetoric of fascism astutely captures the very real feelings of disruption, claustrophobia, resentment, humiliation, and disillusionment that have resulted from the exhaustion of the modern project of infinite acceleration through unlimited exploitation. But the central delusion is the idea that one can retreat from the Globe into the Nation, as if the part could somehow stand apart from the whole to which it belongs—the great dream of fascist “autarchy,” or self-rule. Recalcitrance inevitably exposes this fascist fantasy to be one more pseudo-statement that inhabits a mystic No Place, but unfortunately this fact is all too often revealed only after fascists have transformed an actual plot of land into a No Man’s Land.

For all its blind spots, however, Gottfried’s utopian delusion often sees fascism with more clarity than the fairy tale of Madeleine Albright’s *Fascism: A Warning*. This characterization does not deny that she touches, ever so briefly, on important insights. For instance, Albright in her opening chapter makes a key distinction between fascists and dictators; the latter tend to be “wary of their citizens, which is why they create royal guards and other elite security units to ensure their personal safety” (12). By contrast, a fascist leader “expects the crowd to have his back. Where kings try to settle people down, Fascists stir them up so that when the fighting begins, their foot soldiers have the will and the firepower to strike first” (12). Here, Albright rightly attributes agency to the people, showing them to be actively participating in propelling a fascist leader to prominence rather than portraying them as passive followers of leaders once they are in power. In the sole paragraph in the book that actually speaks to this insight, Albright turns her attention to such people and interrogates their “true motives” (63). She writes:

Oral histories from the period testify to the hope and excitement that Fascism generated. Men and women who had despaired of political change suddenly felt in touch with the answers they have been seeking. Eagerly they traveled long distances to attend Fascist rallies, where they discovered kindred souls keen to

restore greatness to the nation, traditional values to the community, and optimism about the future. Here, in this crusade, they heard explanations that made sense to them about the powerful currents that were at work in the world.... In the congenial company of fellow Fascists, they could share an identity that seemed right to them and engage in a cause that each could serve with gladness and singleness of heart. (63)

What made people so susceptible to fascist identifications? Albright offers no systematic explanation but does make passing mention of possible causes. The new mass communication technology of radio allowed fascist leaders “to reach eighty million people in a single instant with a unifying summons” (40). The rapid development of technology produced “angst and revulsion at governments that appeared to be both corrupt and relics of an earlier age” (56). The “bewildering rush of globalization prompted many to find solace in the familiar rhythms of nation, culture, and faith” (56). Nativism sprang from the dread that “immigration—whether legal or illegal—will swamp countries, drown them economically, and further dilute people’s sense of who they are” (180). Taken together, these situational characteristics might have established a basis to investigate why ordinary people would willingly enroll to be the foot soldiers of fascist leaders they believed to be “the trailblazers, the visionaries firmly in touch with the disturbing yet exhilarating zeitgeist, the spirit of the time” (63). That would have been a worthwhile inquiry.

But Albright refuses to follow her own intuitions. Rather than challenge her readers with a warning about what makes fascism a genuine option for millions of people, she titillates them with stories of how Bad Guys do Very Bad Things (and the Good Guys who Occasionally Bomb Them). When she is not praising “the West” for initiating airstrikes on the Serbs or “forging a military alliance (NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]) in helping Greece and Turkey to fend off Communist subversion,” human agency falls entirely on the so-called Fascist leaders, each of whom uses a familiar bag of tricks to manipulate the people and gain power, such as catering to prejudices, controlling the press, stacking the judiciary, imprisoning enemies, and the like (88). Eventually, then, her definition of fascism reduces to autocratic rule before dissolving into the motive for all fairy tale Bad Guys: “the willingness to do whatever is necessary—including the use of force and trampling on the rights of others—to achieve victory and command obedience” (229). The pointlessness of this whole exercise is revealed in the closing chapter when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is declared the only “true Fascist” of the bunch, despite the fact that he fits precisely her early definition of a dictator! (246). But this reversal was inevitable given her preferred rhetoric for fighting fascism, which amounts to exposing the Bad Guy.

Although Albright deserves credit for attempting to sound the alarm against the fascist threat, by reducing fascism to Machiavellian strategies of modern day princes, her rhetoric has completely occluded the root causes of fascism as a popular

movement. The utter vacuity of her analysis is revealed in the climax of the book, when she treats the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump. Having supposedly laid the groundwork for a sophisticated political survey of fascism, she has virtually nothing at all to say about the reasons that millions of Americans supported him, muttering only that he was “greeted with whistles and handclaps by the many Americans who, for one reason or another, feel aggrieved,” such reasons being “economic hardship, discomfort with social and cultural changes, or a skeptic’s conviction that most public servants are incompetent, crooked, or both” (215). The fact that one could cut and paste that description to account for every presidential election in history does not seem to bother Albright. Instead, she rests content with identifying—for those who have had their head in the sand—the signposts that indicate our slide into fascism, including “the corroding effects of power, the American president’s disrespect for the truth, and the widening acceptance of dehumanizing insults, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism as being within the bounds of normal public debate” (224). But as to *why* such rhetoric is normalized, she can only nod in the direction of the Bad Guy and then shake her head with the grave pathos of a retired diplomat who yearns for the Good Old Days under President Clinton.

Critical attention focuses more inward in *How Democracies Die* by Harvard professors Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, warning us, particularly in light of Trump’s election, how the death of democracies occurs not from outside invasion but from the internal corruption and weakening of democratic institutions by authoritarian leaders. Relying on extensive scholarly research, they propose four key indicators of authoritarian behavior that should set off alarm bells. We should thus “worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of political opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including the media” (21–22). Some past examples of when democracies die mirror the list provided by Madeleine Albright—Italy under Benito Mussolini, Germany under Adolf Hitler, and Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. But Levitsky and Ziblatt differ from Albright in also describing cases in which democracies did *not* die, such as in Belgium, Finland, and Austria, when conservative leaders and Catholic parties worked across the aisle to prevent fascists from concentrating power. These cases teach us an essential lesson:

Potential demagogues exist in all democracies, and occasionally, one or more of them strike a public chord. But in some democracies, political leaders heed the warning signs and take steps to ensure that authoritarians remain on the fringes, far from the centers of power. When faced with the rise of extremists or demagogues, they make a concerted effort to isolate and defeat them. Although mass responses to extremist appeals matter, what matters more is whether political elites, and especially parties, serve as filters. Put simply, political parties are democracy’s gatekeepers. (20)

Levitsky and Ziblatt adopt a more analytical and less moralistic tone than Albright, and in doing so provide clear rubrics for measuring a democracy's decline. Rhetorically, the book represents a concerted appeal for ordinary citizens to read the signs of contemporary politics that tell us that there are demagogues in our midst striking a chord with mass constituencies of the public. Their answer is to call for a revitalization of our political parties as "Big Tents" that represent working alliances between multiple groups and interests capable of overcoming polarization.

As accurate and valuable as their list of warning signs is, the book as a whole falls victim to the rhetoric of *Having It Both Ways* insofar as it speaks with two voices. One voice, which we might call the Harsh Truth, calls attention to uncomfortable facts, both in history and in the present, that challenge America's self-image as a democracy-loving land of freedom. The Harsh Truth tells us, for instance, that we might be "living through the decline and fall of one of the world's oldest and most successful democracies" and claims that there are "two underlying forces driving American polarization: racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality" (2, 222). But the provocations of the Harsh Truth are always calmed by the reassurances of the Steady Hand. Whereas the Harsh Truth presents itself as a youthful, clear-eyed, and courageous speaker of facts that carry potentially revolutionary implications, the Steady Hand speaks with the avuncular, nostalgic tone of experience that bolsters the legitimacy of venerable institutions. Consequently, when faced with democratic breakdown, the Steady Hand looks to the past, reassuring its anxious readers that "two basic norms have preserved America's checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives" (8–9). Their appeal to the past amounts to the rhetoric of *Having It Both Ways* precisely because it can demand that we face up to Harsh Truths of empirical reality while simultaneously using those truths to legitimate the Steady Hand of traditional authority.

The problem with this defense of American tradition (as the Harsh Truth tells us) is that it was built upon injustice. The Steady Hand argues, for instance, that we must cultivate attitudes that create a "collective willingness to agree to disagree" in order to respect opposing viewpoints (mutual toleration) and resist "issuing dirty tricks or hardball tactics in the name of civility and fair play" in order to respect the integrity of the game (institutional forbearance) (102, 107). These tactics seem common sense until the Harsh Truth reminds us that these attitudes only developed after the collapse of Reconstruction after the Civil War, such that the "norms that would later serve as a foundation for American democracy emerged out of a profoundly undemocratic arrangement: racial exclusion and the consolidation of single-party rule in the South" (125). In

a masterpiece of *Having it Both Ways*, the Harsh Truth laments that “racial exclusion contributed directly to the partisan stability and cooperation that came to characterize twentieth-century American politics” while the Steady Hand commends the fact that, by the turn of the twentieth century, “norms of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance were well-established” and “became the foundation of our much admired system of checks and balances” (143, 125). The result is that the authors lament the decline of political norms that were, by their own account, explicitly based on racism.

By *Having it Both Ways*, Levitsky and Ziblatt are unable to acknowledge the degree to which the polarization that they see as a threat to democracy can also be seen as an effort to *revitalize* democracy by confronting the systemic injustices on which the dying political order was built. Indeed, the authors often attribute the appeal of authoritarianism to the breakdown of the system of white supremacy in the United States by which millions of Americans voted for their own exploitation as long as they could be complicit in the exploitation of the racial or immigrant Other. Yet Levitsky and Ziblatt refuse to confront the full implications of their own analysis. Rather than embrace a new conception of American politics that, in part, recognizes the need for polarization as a means of confronting the recalcitrance of a fascist movement that refuses compromise, they retreat into wishful thinking, arguing that “Republicans must marginalize extremist elements; they must build a more diverse electoral constituency, such that the party no longer depends so heavily on its shrinking white Christian base; and they must find ways to win elections without appealing to white nationalism” (223). How asking fascists to stop being fascists is a solution to the problem of fascism is difficult to fathom. There are crucial insights into the creeping threat of authoritarianism in *How Democracies Die*, but the book is also an object lesson in how the rhetoric of *Having it Both Ways* fails to see the situation clearly.

Only Jason Stanley’s *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* matches the conceptual clarity and originality of Gottfried, with the advantage of desiring to confront and eliminate fascism rather than to purify and redeem it. Composed with conceptual clarity and a flair for dramatic anecdotes, Stanley’s book speaks to a public audience of citizens and students who seek a roadmap for understanding and resisting twenty-first-century fascism. The book is structured to map out ten mobilizing passions and their accompanying rhetorical strategies of fascism. These include a yearning for a “myth of a patriarchal past” (12), the reliance on propaganda “to conceal politicians’ or political movements’ clearly problematic goals by masking them with ideals that are widely accepted” (24), an anti-intellectualism that accepts “only one legitimate viewpoint, that of the dominant nation” (36), an exchange of reality “for the pronouncements of a single individual, or perhaps a political party” (57), the positing of natural “hierarchies of power” with the fascists on top (79), and an embrace of a fascist leader who “employs a sense of collective victimhood to create a sense of group identity that

is by its nature opposed to the cosmopolitan ethos and individualism of liberal democracy” (106). In each case, Stanley attributes the power of fascism to specific rhetorical appeals that constitute for its willing public audience a rhetorical exigence that makes fascism not only necessary but virtuous.

But Stanley is strongest in his closing four chapters, each of them contributing to the construction of a powerful interpretation symbol to communicate the essence of fascism—the fear of Sodom and Gomorrah. What this symbol represents is made readily clear by Donald Trump, for “Trump’s rhetoric about cities makes sense in the context of a more general fascist politics, in which cities are seen as centers of disease and pestilence, containing squalid ghettos filled with despised minority groups living off the work of others” (149). This fear of invasion of “their” nation by these barbarian hordes thus leads a panic-stricken population to cling to a “fascist law and order rhetoric” that functions “to divide citizens into two classes: those of the chosen nation, who are lawful by nature, and those who are not, who are inherently lawless” (110). Fear of invasion also increases sexual anxiety, with fascist propaganda promoting “fear of interbreeding and race mixing, of corrupting the pure nation” with “inferior blood” (127). And it generates hatred for social welfare programs, which are seen as providing aid for parasites who can only “be cured of laziness and thievery by hard labor” (157). Fascism thus feeds on the fear of Sodom and Gomorrah—that is to say, the fear of the mass invasion of the undeserving and predatory Other—especially when those changes threaten privileges built on long rationalized injustice.

The lesson I take away from reading these books, whether intended by the authors or not, is that fascism can only be understood through the lens of earthly tragedy. From the perspective of its participants, this drama narrates the heroic choice of a Chosen People to struggle against cosmic foes, both internal and external, in the noble effort to forge a true Nation in the mythic image of group purity. For an observer like Stanley, by contrast, it involves “waving the banner of nationalism in front of middle- and working-class white people in order to funnel the state’s spoils into the hands of oligarchs” (191). Thus understood, the seduction of the tragic myth of No Place outlined by Gottfried can be thwarted neither by ordering NATO to fire cruise missiles at Bad Guys nor by the effort at Having it Both Ways, particularly when the decline of the political order it laments is one directly responsible for producing the current levels of economic inequality, environmental degradation, and racial and ethnic divisions. A rhetoric capable of confronting fascism must persuade us to face up to the tragic arc of modern human civilization as a whole. In the new climate regime that binds us all together in a shared fate, to view our situation from a narrower circumference is to validate the tunnel-vision of fascism. Stanley writes that confronted with global warming and the massive disruptions it entails, the “challenges we will face are enormous. How do we maintain a sense of common humanity, when fear and insecurity will lead us to flee into the comforting arms of mythic superiority in vain pursuit of

a sense of dignity?" (193). There is no easy answer to that question. But one thing is certain. If we remain trapped within nostalgia for a dying order and wedded to our trained incapacities, our fate is already inscribed into the earth. For This is the Way the World Ends, with the defiant last gasps of a thousand Chosen Peoples proclaiming their uniqueness to the Wasteland and the Void.

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