THE AGE
of EXTREMES

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Also by Eric Hobsbawm
Labour's Turning Point
Primitive Rebels
The Age of Revolution
Labouring Men
Industry and Empire
Bandits
Captain Swing (with George Rude)
Revolutionaries
The Age of Capital
Workers
The Age of Empire
Nations and Nationalism
The Jazz Scene
the national economy as a whole and estimating the size of its total product or income.

The third option was fascism, which the slump transformed into a world movement and, more to the point, a world danger. Fascism in its German version (National Socialism) benefited both from the German intellectual tradition which (unlike the Austrian one) had been hostile to the neoclassical theories of economic liberalism that had become the international orthodoxy since the 1880s, and from a ruthless government determined to get rid of unemployment at all costs. It dealt with the Great Slump, it must be said, rapidly and more successfully than any other (the record of Italian fascism was less impressive). However, this was not its major appeal in a Europe that had largely lost its bearings. But as the tide of fascism rose with the Great Slump, it became increasingly clear that in the Age of Catastrophe not only peace, social stability and the economy, but also the political institutions and intellectual values of nineteenth century liberal bourgeois society, were in retreat or collapse. To this process we must now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Fall of Liberalism

In Nazism we have a phenomenon which seems scarcely capable of subjection to rational analysis. Under a leader who talked in apocalyptic tones of world power or destruction and a regime founded on an utterly repulsive ideology of race-hated, one of the most culturally and economically advanced countries in Europe planned for war, launched a world conflagration which killed around 50 million people, and perpetrated atrocities – culminating in the mechanized mass murder of millions of Jews – of a nature and scale as to defy imagination. Faced with Auschwitz, the explanatory powers of the historian seem puny indeed.

– Ian Kershaw (1993, pp. 3-4)

To die for the Fatherland, for the Ideal ... No, that is a cop-out. Even at the front killing's the thing ... Dying is nothing, it's non-existent. Nobody can imagine his own death. Killing's the thing. That's the frontier to be crossed. Yes, that is a concrete act of your will. Because there you make your will live in another man's.

– From the letter of a young volunteer for the Fascist Social Republic of 1943-45 (Pavone, 1991, p.431)

I

Of all the developments in the Age of Catastrophe, survivors from the nineteenth century were perhaps most shocked by the collapse of the values and institutions of the liberal civilization whose progress their century had taken for granted, at any rate in 'advanced' and 'advancing' parts of the world. These values were a distrust of dictatorship and absolute rule; a commitment to constitutional government with or under
freely elected governments and representative assemblies, which guaranteed the rule of law; and an accepted set of citizens' rights and liberties, including freedom of speech, publication and assembly. State and society should be informed by the values of reason, public debate, education, science and the improbability (though not necessarily the perfectibility) of the human condition. These values, it seemed clear, had made progress throughout the century, and were destined to advance further. After all, by 1914 even the two last autocracies of Europe, Russia and Turkey, had made concessions in the direction of constitutional government, and Iran had even borrowed a constitution from Belgium. Before 1914 these values had been challenged only by traditionalist forces like the Roman Catholic church, building defensive barricades of dogma against the superior forces of modernity; by a few intellectual rebels and prophets of doom, mainly from 'good families' and established centres of culture, and thus somehow part of the civilization they challenged; and the forces of democracy, on the whole a new and troubling phenomenon (see Age of Empire). The ignorance and backwardness of these masses, their commitment to the overthrow of bourgeois society by social revolution, and the latent human irrationality so easily exploited by demagogues, were indeed a cause for alarm. However, the most immediately dangerous of these new democratic mass movements, the socialist labour movements, were actually, both in theory and in practice, as passionately committed to the values of reason, science, progress, education and individual freedom as anyone. The German Social Democratic Party's May Day medal showed Karl Marx on one side, the Statue of Liberty on the other. Their challenge was to the economy, not to constitutional government and civility. It would not be easy to regard a government headed by Victor Adler, August Bebel or Jean Jaurès as the end of 'civilization as we know it'. In any case such governments seemed, as yet, remote.

Politically, indeed, the institutions of liberal democracy had advanced, and the eruption of barbarism in 1914-18 had, it seemed, only hastened this advance. Except for Soviet Russia, all the regimes emerging from the first World War, old and new, were, basically, elected representative parliamentary regimes, even Turkey. Europe, west of the Soviet border, consisted entirely of such states in 1920. Indeed, the basic institution of liberal constitutional government, elections to representative assemblies and/or presidents was almost universal in the world of independent states by this time, although we must remember that the sixty-five or so independent states of the inter-war period were primarily a European and American phenomenon: one third of the world's population lived under colonial rule. The only states which had no elections whatever in the period 1919-47 were isolated political fossils, namely Ethiopia, Mongolia, Nepal, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Another five states had only one election during this period, which does not argue a strong inclination towards liberal democracy, namely Afghanistan, Kuomintang China, Guatemala, Paraguay and Thailand, then still known as Siam, but the very existence of elections is evidence of at least some penetration of liberal political ideas, at least in theory. One would not, of course, wish to suggest that the mere existence or frequency of elections proves more than this. Neither Iran, which had six elections after 1930, nor Iraq, which had three, could even then count as strongholds of democracy.

Still, representative electoral regimes were frequent enough. And yet the twenty years between Mussolini's so-called 'March on Rome' and the peak of the Axis success in the Second World War saw an accelerating, increasingly catastrophic, retreat of liberal political institutions.

In 1918-20 legislative assemblies were dissolved or became ineffective in two European states, in the 1920s in six, the 1930s in nine, while German occupation destroyed constitutional power in another five during the Second World War. In short, the only European countries with adequately democratic political institutions that functioned without a break during the entire inter-war period were Britain, Finland (only just), the Irish Free State, Sweden and Switzerland.

In the Americas, the other region of independent states, the situation was more mixed, but hardly suggested a general advance of democratic institutions. The list of consistently constitutional and non-authoritarian states in the western hemisphere was short: Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, the USA and that now forgotten 'Switzerland of South America' and its only real democracy, Uruguay. The best we can say is that the movements between the end of the First World War and that of the Second World War were sometimes to the Left as well as to the Right. As for the rest of the globe, much of which consisted of colonies, and was thus non-liberal by definition, it plainly moved away from liberal constitutions, insofar as it had ever had them. In Japan a moderate Liberal regime gave way to a nationalist-militarist one in 1930/31. Thailand made some tentative steps towards constitutional government, and Turkey was taken over by the progressive military modernizer Kemal Atatürk in the early 1920s, not a man to let any elections stand in his way. In the three continents of Asia, Africa and Australasia only Australia and New Zealand were consistently democratic, for the majority of South Africans remained strictly outside the ambit of the white men's constitution.
The Age of Catastrophe

In short, political liberalism was in full retreat throughout the Age of Catastrophe, a retreat which accelerated sharply after Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor in 1933. Taking the world as a whole, there had been perhaps thirty-five or more constitutional and elected governments in 1920 (depending on where we situate some Latin American republics). Until 1938 there were perhaps seventeen such states, in 1944 perhaps twelve out of the global total of sixty-four. The world trend seemed clear.

It may be worth reminding ourselves that in this period the threat to liberal institutions came exclusively from the political right, for between 1945 and 1989 it was assumed, almost as a matter of course, that it came essentially from communism. Until then the term ‘totalitarianism’, originally invented as a description or self-description of Italian Fascism, was applied virtually only to such regimes. Soviet Russia (from 1922: the USSR) was isolated and neither able nor, after the rise of Stalin, willing to extend communism. Social revolution under Leninist (or any) leadership ceased to spread after the initial post-war wave had ebbed. The (Marxist) social-democratic movements had turned into state-sustaining rather than subversive forces, and their commitment to democracy was unquestioned. In most countries’ labour movements communists were minorities, and where they were strong, in most cases they were, or had been, or were about to be, suppressed. The fear of social revolution, and the communists’ role in it, was realistic enough, as the second wave of revolution during and after the Second World War proved, but in the twenty years of liberal retreat not a single regime that could be reasonably called liberal-democratic had been overthrown from the left. The danger came exclusively from the Right. And that Right represented not merely a threat to constitutional and representative government, but an ideological threat to liberal civilization as such, and a potentially world-wide movement, for which the label ‘fascism’ is both insufficient and not wholly irrelevant.

It is insufficient, because by no means all the forces overthrowing liberal regimes were fascist. It is relevant, because fascism, first in its original Italian form, later in its German form of National Socialism, both inspired other anti-liberal forces, supported them and lent the international Right a sense of historic confidence: in the 1930s it looked like the wave of the future. As has been said, by an expert in the field: ‘It is no accident that ... the eastern European royal dictators, bureaucrats, and officers, and Frasco (in Spain) should have mimicked fascism.’ (Linz, 1975, p. 206).

The forces overthrowing liberal-democratic regimes were of three kinds, omitting the more traditional form of military coups installing Latin American dictators or caudillos which had no particular political colouring a priori. All were against social revolution, and indeed a reaction against the subversion of the old social order in 1917–20 was at the root of all of them. All were authoritarian and hostile to liberal political institutions, though sometimes for pragmatic reasons rather than on principle. Old-fashioned reactionaries might base some parties, notably the communist, but not all. After the overthrow of the shortlived Hungarian soviet republic of 1919, Admiral Horthy, head of what he maintained was the kingdom of Hungary, though it no longer had either king or navy, governed an authoritarian state which remained parliamentary, but not democratic, in the old eighteenth century oligarchic sense. All tended to favour the military and foster the police, or other bodies of men capable of exercising physical coercion, since these were the most immediate bulwarks against subversion. Indeed, their support was often essential for the Right to come to power. And all tended to be nationalist, partly because of resentment against foreign states, lost wars, or insufficient empires, partly because waving national flags was a way to both legitimacy and popularity. Nevertheless, there were differences.

Old-fashioned authoritarians or conservatives - Admiral Horthy, Marshal Mannerheim of Finland, winner of the civil war of white vs. red in newly independent Finland; Colonel, later Marshal, Pilsudski, the liberator of Poland; King Alexander, formerly of Serbia, now of the newly united Yugoslavia; and General Francisco Franco of Spain - had no particular ideological agenda, other than anti-communism and the prejudices traditional to their class. They might find themselves allied to Hitler Germany and to fascist movements in their own countries, but only because in the inter-war conjuncture, the ‘natural’ alliance was one of all sectors of the political right. Of course national considerations might cut across this alliance. Winston Churchill, a strongly Right-wing Tory in this period, though an uncharacteristic one, expressed some sympathy for Mussolini’s Italy, and could not bring himself to support the Spanish Republic against General Franco’s forces, but Germany’s threat to Britain made him into the champion of international anti-fascist union. On the other hand, such old reactionaries might also have to confront the opposition of genuinely fascist movements in their own countries, sometimes with substantial mass support.

A second strand of the Right produced what has been called ‘organic
century Enlightenment, the French Revolution and all that in the Church's opinion derived from it: democracy, liberalism and, of course, most urgently, 'godless communism'.

In fact, the fascist era marked a turning-point in Catholic history largely because the Church's identification with a Right whose major international standard-bearers now were Hitler and Mussolini created substantial moral problems for socially-minded Catholics, not to mention, as fascism retreated towards inevitable defeat, substantial political problems for insufficiently anti-fascist hierarchies. Conversely, anti-fascism, or just patriotic resistance to the foreign conqueror, for the first time gave democratic Catholicism (Christian Democracy) legitimacy within the Church. Political parties mobilizing the Roman Catholic vote had come into existence, on pragmatic grounds, in countries where Catholics were a significant minority, normally to defend Church interests against secular states, as in Germany and the Netherlands. The Church resisted such concessions to the politics of democracy and liberalism in officially Catholic countries, although it was sufficiently worried by the rise of godless socialism to formulate – a radical innovation – a social policy in 1891, which stressed the need to give workers their due while maintaining the sacredness of family and private property, but not of capitalism as such. This had provided a first foothold for social Catholics, or others prepared to organize such forms of worker defence as Catholic labour unions, also more inclined by such activities to the more liberal side of Catholicism. Except in Italy, where Pope Benedict XV (1914 – 22) briefly permitted a large (Catholic) Popular Party to emerge after the First World War, until fascism destroyed it, democratic and social Catholics remained politically marginal minorities. It was the advance of fascism in the 1930s which brought them into the open, even though the Catholics who declared their support for the Spanish Republic were a small, if intellectually distinguished band. The support of Catholics went overwhelmingly to Franco. It was the Resistance, which they could justify on grounds of patriotism rather than ideology, which gave them their chance, and victory which allowed them to take it. But the triumphs of political Christian Democracy in Europe, and some decades later in parts of Latin America, belong to a later period. In the period when liberalism fell, the Church, with rare exceptions, rejoiced at its fall.

* This was the Encyclical Humanum, issued on the centenary of Resursum. However, the precise balance of condemnation has varied with political context.
II

There remain the movements which can be truly called fascist. The first of these was the Italian one which gave the phenomenon its name, the creation of a renegade socialist journalist, Benito Mussolini, whose first name, a tribute to the Mexican anti-clerical president Benito Juárez, symbolized the passionate anti-papalism of his native Romagna. Adolf Hitler himself acknowledged his debt to, and respect for, Mussolini, even when both Mussolini and fascist Italy had demonstrated their feebleness and incompetence in the Second World War. In return Mussolini took over from Hitler, rather late in the day, the anti-semitism which had been totally absent from his movement before 1938, and indeed from the history of Italy since its unification.* However, Italian Fascism alone did not exercise much international attraction, even though it tried to inspire and finance similar movements elsewhere, and showed some influence in unexpected quarters, as on Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of Zionist 'Revisionism', which became the government of Israel under Menachem Begin in the 1970s.

Without the triumph of Hitler in Germany in early 1933, fascism would not have become a general movement. In fact, all the fascist movements outside Italy that amounted to anything were founded after his arrival in power, notably the Hungarian Arrow Cross which scored 25 per cent of votes in the first secret ballot ever held in Hungary (1939), and the Rumanian Iron Guard, whose real support was even greater. Indeed, even movements virtually financed entirely by Mussolini, like the Croatian Ustaša terrorists of Ante Pavelich, did not gain much ground, and became ideologically fascistized until the 1930s, when part of them also looked for inspiration and finance to Germany. More than this, without Hitler's triumph in Germany, the idea of fascism as a universal movement, a sort of right-wing equivalent of international communism with Berlin as its Moscow, would not have developed. This did not produce a serious movement, but only, during the Second World War, ideologically motivated collaborators with the Germans in occupied Europe. It was on this point that, notably in France, many on the traditional ultra-Right, however savagely reactionary, refused to follow:

* It should be said, in honour of Mussolini's countrymen, that during the war the Italian army flatly refused to deliver Jews for extermination to the Germans or anyone else in the areas it occupied — mainly south-eastern France and parts of the Balkans. Though the Italian administration also showed a conspicuous lack of zeal in the matter, about half of the small Italian Jewish population perished; some however, as anti-fascist militants rather than mere victims (Steinberg, 1990; Hughes, 1983).

they were nationalists or they were nothing. Some even joined the Resistance. Moreover, without the international standing of Germany as an evidently successful and rising world power, fascism would have had no serious impact outside Europe, nor indeed would non-fascist reactionary rulers have bothered to dress up as fascist sympathisers, as when Portugal's Salazar claimed in 1940 that he and Hitler were 'linked by the same ideology' (Delzell, 1970, p. 348).

What the various brands of fascism had in common, other than — after 1933 — a general sense of Germany's hegemony, is not so easy to discern. Theory was not the strong point of movements devoted to the inadequacies of reason and rationalism and the superiority of instinct and will. They attracted all kinds of reactionary theorists in countries with an active conservative intellectual life — Germany is an obvious case in point — but these were decorative rather than structural elements of fascism. Mussolini could have readily dispensed with his house philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, and Hitler probably neither knew nor cared about the support of the philosopher Heidegger. Fascism cannot be identified either with a particular form of state organization, such as the corporate state — Nazi Germany lost interest in such ideas rapidly, all the more since they conflicted with the idea of a single undivided and total Volksgemeinschaft, or People's Community. Even so apparently central an element as racism was initially absent from Italian fascism. Conversely, of course, as we have seen, fascism shared nationalism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism etc. with other non-fascist elements on the right. Several of these, notably among the non-fascist French reactionary groups, also shared with it a preference for politics as street violence.

The major difference between the fascist and the non-fascist Right was that fascism existed by mobilizing masses from below. It belonged essentially to the era of democratic and popular politics which traditional reactionaries deplored and which the champions of the 'organic state' tried to by-pass. Fascism gloried in the mobilization of masses, and maintained it symbolically in the form of public theatre — the Nuremberg rallies, the masses on the Piazza Venezia looking up to Mussolini's gestures on his balcony — even when it came to power; as also did Communist movements. Fascists were the revolutionaries of counter-revolution: in their rhetoric, in their appeal to those who considered themselves victims of society, in their call for a total transformation of society, even in their deliberate adaptation of the symbols and names of the social revolutionaries, which is so obvious in Hitler's 'National Socialist Workers Party' with its (modified) red flag and its immediate institution of the Reds' First of May as an official holiday in 1933.
Similarly, though fascism also specialized in the rhetoric of return to the traditional past, and received much support from classes of people who would genuinely have preferred to wipe out the past century if they could, it was in no real sense a traditionalist movement like, say, the Carlists of Navarra, who formed one of the main bodies of Franco's support in the Civil War or Gandhi's campaigns for a return to handlooms and village ideals. It stressed many traditional values, which is another matter. They denounced liberal emancipation — women should stay at home and bear a great many children — and they distrusted the corroding influence of modern culture, and especially of the modernist arts, which the German National Socialists described as 'cultural bolshevism' and degenerate. Yet the central fascist movements — the Italian and the German — did not appeal to those historic guardians of the conservative order, Church and King, but on the contrary sought to supplant them by an entirely non-traditional leadership principle embodied in self-made men legitimized by their mass support, and by secular ideologies, and sometimes cults.

The past to which they appealed was an artefact. Their traditions were invented. Even Hitler's racism was not the pride in an unbroken and unmixed line of kinship descent which provides genealogists with commissions from Americans who hope to prove their descent from some sixteenth-century Suffolk yeoman, but a late nineteenth-century post-Darwinian farrago claiming (and, alas, in Germany often receiving) the support of the new science of genetics, or more precisely of that branch of applied genetics ('eugenics') which dreamed of creating a human super-race by selective breeding and the elimination of the unfit. The race destined through Hitler to dominate the world did not even have a name until 1898 when an anthropologist coined the term 'Nordic'. Hostile as it was on principle to the heritage of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French revolution, fascism could not formally believe in modernity and progress, but it had no difficulty in combining a lunatic set of beliefs with technological modernity in practical matters, except where it crippled its basic scientific research on ideological grounds (see chapter 18). Fascism was triumphantly anti-liberal. It also provided the proof that men can, without difficulty, combine crack-brained beliefs about the world with a confident mastery of contemporary high technology. The late twentieth century, with its fundamentalist sects wielding the weapons of television and computer-programmed fund-raising, have made us more familiar with this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the combination of conservative values, the techniques of mass democracy, and an innovative ideology of irrationalist savagery, essentially centered in nationalism, must be explained. Such non-traditional movements of the radical Right had emerged in several European countries in the late nineteenth century in reaction against both liberalism (i.e. the accelerating transformation of societies by capitalism) and the rising socialist working-class movements, and, more generally, against the tide of foreigners that was sweeping across the world in the greatest mass migration of history up to that date. Men and women migrated not only across oceans and international frontiers, but from country to city; from one region of the same state to another — in short from 'home' to the land of strangers and, turning the coin round, as strangers into others' home. Almost fifteen out of every hundred Poles left their country for good plus half a million a year as seasonal migrants — overwhelmingly, as such migrants did, to join the working classes of the receiving countries. Anticipating the late twentieth century, the late nineteenth pioneered mass xenophobia, of which racism — the protection of the pure native stock against contamination, or even submersion, by the invading subhuman hordes — became the common expression. Its strength can be measured not only by the fear of Polish immigration which led the great German liberal sociologist Max Weber into temporary support for the Pangeman League, but by the increasingly febrile campaign against mass immigration in the USA, which eventually, during and after the First World War, led the country of the Statue of Liberty to bar its frontiers to those whom the Statue had been erected to welcome.

The common cement of these movements was the resentment of little men in a society that crushed them between the rock of big business on one side and the hard place of rising mass labour movements on the other. Or which, at the very least, deprived them of the respectable position they had occupied in the social order, and believed to be their due, or the social status in a dynamic society to which they felt they had a right to aspire. These sentiments found their characteristic expression in anti-semitism, which began to develop specific political movements based on hostility to the Jews in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in several countries. Jews were almost universally present, and could readily symbolize all that was most hateful about an unfair world, not least its commitment to the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French revolution which had emancipated them, and in doing so had made them so much more visible. They could serve as symbols of the hated capitalist/financier, of the revolutionary agitator; of the corroding influence of 'rootless intellectuals' and the new mass media; of the competition — how could it be otherwise than 'unfair?' — that gave them a disproportionate share of jobs in certain professions requiring education; and of the foreigner and
outsider as such. Not to mention the accepted view among old-fashioned Christians that they had killed Jesus Christ.

Dislike of Jews was indeed pervasive in the Western world, and their position in nineteenth-century society was indeed ambiguous. Yet the fact that striking workers were apt, even when members of non-racist labour movements, to attack Jewish shopkeepers, and to think of their employers as Jews (often enough correctly, in large zones of central and eastern Europe), should not lead us to seeing them as proto-National Socialists, any more than the matter-of-course anti-semitism of Edwardian British liberal intellectuals, such as the Bloomsbury Group, made them into sympathisers of political anti-semites of the radical Right. The peasant anti-semitism of east-central Europe, where for practical purposes the Jew was the point of contact between the livelihood of the villager and the outside economy on which it depended, was certainly more permanent and explosive, and became more so as Slav, Magyar or Rumanian rural societies became increasingly convulsed by the incomprehensible earthquakes of the modern world. Among such dark people tales of Jews sacrificing Christian children could still be believed, and moments of social explosion would lead to pogroms, which reactionaries in the Tsar’s Empire encouraged, especially after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by social revolutionaries. Here a straight road leads from original grassroots anti-semitism to the extermination of Jewry during the second World War. Certainly grassroots anti-semitism gave such East European Fascist movements as acquired a mass base – notably the Rumanian Iron Guard and the Hungarian Arrow Cross – their foundation. At all events, in the former territories of Habsburg and Romanov this connexion was much clearer than in the German Reich, where grassroots rural and provincial anti-semitism, though strong and deeply rooted, was also less violent; one might even say, more tolerant. Jews who escaped from newly occupied Vienna to Berlin in 1938 were astonished at the absence of street anti-semitism. Here violence came by decree from above, as in November 1938 (Kershaw, 1983). Yet even so, there is no comparison between the casual and intermittent savagery of the pogroms and what was to come a generation later. The handful of dead of 1881, the forty to fifty of the Kishiney pogrom of 1903, outraged the world – and justifiably – because in the days before the advance of barbarism, such a number of victims seemed intolerable to a world which expected civilization to advance. Even the much larger pogroms that accompanied the mass peasant risings of the 1905 Russian revolution had, by later standards, only modest casualties – perhaps eight hundred dead in all. This may be compared with the 3,800 Jews killed in Vilna (Vilnius) by the Lithuanians in three days of 1941 as the Germans invaded the USSR, and before the systematic exterminations got under way.

The new movements of the radical Right which appealed to, but fundamentally transformed, these older traditions of intolerance, appealed particularly to the lower and middle groups of European societies, and were formulated as rhetoric and by nationalist intellectuals who emerged as a trend in the 1980s. The very term 'nationalism' was coined in that decade to describe these new spokesmen of reaction. Middle and lower-middle-class militancy took a turn to the radical Right chiefly in countries where the ideologies of democracy and liberalism were not dominant, or among classes which did not identify with them, that is to say, chiefly in countries which had not undergone a French revolution or its equivalent. Indeed, in the core countries of Western Liberalism – Britain, France, and the USA – the general hegemony of the revolutionary tradition prevented the emergence of any mass fascist movements of importance. It is a mistake to confuse the racism of American Populists or the chauvinism of French Republicans with proto-Fascism: these were movements of the Left.

This did not mean that, once the hegemony of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity no longer stood in the way, old instincts might not attach themselves to new political slogans. There is little doubt that the activists of the Swastika in the Austrian Alps were to be largely recruited from the sort of provincial professionals – veterinary surgeons, surveyors and the like – who had once been the local Liberals, an educated and emancipated minority in an environment dominated by peasant clericalism. Just so, in the later twentieth century, the disintegration of the classical proletarian labour and socialist movements left the instinctive chauvinism and racism of so many manual workers free play. Hitherto, while far from immune to such sentiments, they had hesitated to express them in public out of loyalty to parties passionately hostile to such bigotry. Since the 1960s Western xenophobia and political racism is found mainly among the manual labouring strata. However, in the decades when fascism was incubated, it belonged to those who did not get their hands dirty at work.

The middle and lower-middle strata remained the backbone of such movements throughout the era of the rise of fascism. This is not seri-
were white-collar, office workers and public employees, and 14 per cent were blue-collar. Of the Nazis elected in five Austrian assemblies outside Vienna in the same year, 16 per cent were self-employed and farmers, fifty-one were office-workers etc. and 10 per cent were blue-collars (Larsen et al., 1978, pp. 766-67).

This does not mean that Fascist movements could not acquire genuine mass support among the labouring poor. Whatever the composition of its cadres, the Rumanian Iron Guard’s support came from the poor peasantry. The Hungarian Arrow Cross electorate was largely working-class (the Communist Party being illegal and the Social Democratic Party, always small, paying the price for its toleration by the Horthy regime) and, after the defeat of Austrian Social Democracy in 1934, there was a noticeable swing of workers to the Nazi Party, especially in the Austrian provinces. Moreover, once fascist governments with public legitimacy had established themselves, as in Italy and Germany, far more formerly socialist and communist workers than the Left tradition likes to dwell on, fell into line with the new regimes. Nevertheless, since fascist movements had trouble in appealing to the genuinely traditional elements in rural society (unless reinforced, as in Croatia, by organizations like the Roman Catholic Church), and were the sworn enemies of the ideologies and parties identified with the organised working classes, their core constituency was naturally to be found in the middle strata of society.

How far into the middle class the original appeal of fascism extended is a more open question. Certainly its appeal to middle-class youth was strong, especially to Continental European university students who, between the wars, were notoriously on the ultra-Right. Thirteen per cent of the members of the Italian Fascist movement in 1921 (i.e. before the ‘March on Rome’) were students. In Germany between 5 and 10 per cent of all students were party members as early as 1930, when the great majority of future Nazis had not begun to take an interest in Hitler (Kater, 1985, p. 467; Noelle-Neumann, 1967, p. 196). As we shall see, the element of middle-class ex-officers was strongly represented: the sort for whom the Great War, with all its horrors, marked a mountain-peak of personal achievement, from which the view showed only the disappointing lowlands of their future civilian life. These were, of course, segments of the middle strata particularly receptive to the appeals of activism. Broadly speaking, the appeal of the radical Right was the stronger, the greater the threat to the standing, actual or conventionally expected, of a middle-class occupation, as the framework buckled and broke that was supposed to hold their social order in place. In Germany the double blow of the Great Inflation which reduced the value of money to zero, and the subsequent Great Slump, radicalized even strata of the middle class such as middle and higher civil servants, whose position seemed secure, and who would, under less traumatic circumstances, have been happy to continue as old-style conservative patriots, nostalgic for Kaiser William, but willing to do their duty to a Republic headed by Field Marshal Hindenburg, had it not been visibly collapsing under their feet. Most nonpolitical Germans between the wars looked back to William’s empire. As late as the 1960s, when most West Germans had (understandably) concluded that the best times in German history were now, 42 per cent of those over sixty years old still thought that the time before 1914 was better than the present, as against 32 per cent who were converted by the Wirtschaftswunder (Noelle-Neumann, 1967, p. 196). The voters of the bourgeois Centre and Right defected in massive numbers to the Nazi Party between 1930 and 1932. Yet these were not the builders of fascism.

Such conservative middle classes were, of course, potential supporters or even converts to fascism, because of the way the inter-war lines of political battle were drawn. The threat to liberal society and all its values seemed to come exclusively from the Right; the threat to the social order from the Left. Middle-class people chose their politics according to their fears. Traditional conservatives usually sympathized with the demagogues of fascism and were prepared to ally with them against the major enemy. Italian Fascism had a rather good press in the 1920s and even in the 1930s, except from Liberalism leftwards. ‘But for the bold experiment of fascism the decade has not been fruitful in constructive statesmanship,’ wrote John Buchan, the eminent British Conservative and thriller-writer, (A taste for writing thrillers has, alas, rarely gone with left-wing convictions.) (Graves/Hodge, 1941, p. 248.) Hitler was brought to power by a coalition of the traditional Right, which he subsequently swallowed. General Franco included the then not very significant Spanish Falange in his national front, because what he represented was the union of the entire Right against the spectres of 1879 and 1917, between which he did not make fine distinctions. He was lucky enough not actually to join in the Second World War on Hitler’s side, but he sent a volunteer force, the ‘Blue Division’, to fight the godless communists in Russia side by side with the Germans. Marshal Pétain was certainly not a fascist or Nazi sympathiser. One reason why it was so difficult after the war to distinguish between wholehearted French fascists and pro-German collaborators on one hand, and the main body of support for Marshal Pétain’s Vichy regime on the other, was that there was in fact no clear line. Those whose fathers had hated Dreyfus, the Jews and the bitch-Republic – some Vichy figures were old enough to have done so themselves – shaded
insensibly into the zealots for a Hitlerian Europe. In short, the ‘natural’ alliance of the Right between the wars went from traditional conservatives via old-style reactionaries to the outer fringes of fascist pathology. The traditional forces of conservatism and counter-revolution were strong, but often inert. Fascism provided them both with a dynamic and, perhaps even more important, with the example of victory over the forces of disorder. (Was not the proverbial argument in favour of fascist Italy, that ‘Mussolini made the trains run on time’? Just as the dynamism of the communists exercised an attraction on the disoriented and rudderless Left after 1933, so the successes of fascism, especially after the National Socialist takeover in Germany, made it look like the wave of the future. The very fact that at this time fascism made a prominent, if brief, entrance on – of all countries – the political scene of Conservative Great Britain, demonstrates the power of this ‘demonstration effect’. That it converted one of the most prominent of the nation’s politicians and won the support of one of its major press-lords is more significant than the fact that Sir Oswald Mosley’s movement was quickly abandoned by respectable politicians and Lord Rothermere’s Daily Mail soon dropped its support of the British Union of Fascists. For Britain was still universally and rightly seen as a model of political and social stability.

III

[The rise of the radical Right after the First World War was undoubtedly a response to the danger, indeed to the reality, of social revolution and working-class power in general, to the October revolution and Leninism in particular. Without these, there would have been no fascism, for though the demagogic Right-wing Ultras had been politically vocal and aggressive in a number of European countries since the end of the nineteenth century, they had almost invariably been kept well under control before 1914. To this extent apologists for fascism are probably right in holding that Lenin engendered Mussolini and Hitler. However, it is entirely illegitimate to exculpate fascist barbarity by claiming that it was inspired by and imitated the allegedly earlier barbarities of the Russian Revolution, as some German historians came close to doing in the 1980s (Nolte, 1987).

However, two important qualifications must be made to the thesis that the Right backlash was essentially a response to the revolutionary Left. First, it underestimates the impact of the First World War on an important stratum of, largely middle and lower middle-class, nationalist soldiers or young men who, after November 1918, resented their missed chance of heroism. The so-called ‘front-line soldier’ (frontsoldat) was to play a most important part in the mythology of radical-Right movements – Hitler was one himself – and it was to provide a substantial bloc of the first ultra-nationalist strong-arm squads, such as the officers who murdered the German communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in early 1919, the Italian squadristi and German freikorps.

Fifty-seven per cent of the early Italian fascists were ex-servicemen. As we have seen, the First World War was a machine for brutalizing the world, and these men gloried in the release of their latent brutality.

The strong commitment of the Left, from the liberals onwards, to anti-war and anti-militarist movements, the huge popular revulsion against the mass killing of the First World War, led many to underestimate the emergence of a relatively small, but absolutely numerous, minority for whom the experience of fighting, even under the conditions of 1914–18, was central and inspirational; for whom uniform and discipline, sacrifice – of self and others – and blood, arms and power were what made masculine life worth living. They did not write many books about the war, though (especially in Germany) one or two did. These Rambos of their time were natural recruits for the radical Right.

The second qualification is that the Right-wing backlash responded not against Bolshevism as such, but against all movements, and notably the organized working class, which threatened the existing order of society or could be blamed for its breakdown. Lenin was the symbol of this threat rather than the actual reality, which, for most politicians, was represented not so much by the socialist labour parties, whose leaders were moderate enough, but by the upsurge of working-class power, confidence and radicalism, which gave the old socialist parties a new political force and, in fact, made them the indispensable props of liberal states. It is no accident that in the immediate post-war years the central demand of socialist agitators since 1889 was conceded almost everywhere in Europe: the eight-hour day.

It was the threat implicit in the rise of labour’s power which froze the blood of conservatives, rather than the mere transformation of labour union leaders and opposition orators into government ministers, though this was bitter enough. They belonged by definition to ‘the Left’. In an era of social upheaval, no clear line divided them from the Bolsheviks. Indeed, many of the socialist parties would have happily joined the communists in the immediate post-war years, had these not rejected their affiliation. The man whom Mussolini had assassinated after his ‘March
on Rome' was not a CP leader but the Socialist, Matteotti. The traditional Right may have seen godless Russia as the embodiment of all that was evil in the world, but the rising of the Generals in 1936 was not directed against the communists, as such if only because these were the smallest part of the Popular Front (see chapter 5). It was directed against a popular upsurge which, until the Civil War, favored Socialists and Anarchists. It is an ex post facto rationalization which makes Lenin and Stalin the excuse for fascism.

And yet, what must be explained is why the Right-wing backlash after the First World War won its crucial victories in the form of fascism. For extremist movements of the ultra-Right had existed before 1914 - hysterically nationalist and xenophobic, idealizing war and violence, intolerant and given to strong-arm coercion, passionately anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-proletarian, anti-socialist and anti-rationalist, dreaming of blood and soil and a return to the values which modernity was disrupting. They had some political influence, within the political Right, and in some intellectual circles, but nowhere did they dominate or control.

What gave them their chance after the First World War, was the collapse of the old regimes and, with them, of the old ruling classes and their machinery of power, influence and hegemony. Where these remained in good working order, there was no need for fascism. It made no progress in Britain, in spite of the brief flurry of nerves noted above. The traditional Conservative Right remained in control. It made no effective progress in France until after the defeat of 1940. Though the traditional French radical Right — the monarchist Action Française and Colonel La Rocque's Croix de Feu (Fiery Cross) — were ready enough to beat up Leftists, it was not strictly fascist. Indeed, some elements of it would even join the Resistance.

Again, fascism was not needed where a new nationalist ruling class or group could take over in newly independent countries. These men could be reactionary and might well opt for authoritarian government, for reasons to be considered below, but it was rhetoric that identified every turn to the antidemocratic Right in Europe between the wars with fascism. There were no fascist movements of importance in the new Poland, which was run by authoritarian militarists and in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, which was democratic, nor in the (dominant) Serbian core of the new Yugoslavia. Where significant fascist or similar movements existed in countries whose rulers were old-fashioned Right-wingers or reactionaries — in Hungary, Rumania, Finland, even in Franco Spain, whose leader was not himself a fascist — they had little trouble in keeping them under control unless (as in Hungary in 1944) the Germans put the screw on them. This does not mean that minority nationalist movements in old or new states might not find fascism attractive, if only because they could expect financial and political support from Italy and, after 1933, from Germany. This was clearly so in (Belgian) Flanders, in Slovakia and in Croatia.

The optimal conditions for the triumph of the crazy ultra-Right were an old state and its ruling mechanisms which could no longer function; a mass of disenchanted, disoriented and discontented citizens who no longer knew where their loyalties lay; strong socialist movements threatening or appearing to threaten social revolution, but not actually in a position to achieve it; and a move of nationalist resentment against the peace treaties of 1918-20. These were the conditions in which helpless old ruling elites were tempted to have recourse to the ultra-radicals, as the Italian Liberals did to Mussolini's fascists in 1920-22 and as the German Conservatives did to Hitler's National Socialists in 1932-33. These, by the same token, were the conditions that turned movements of the radical Right into powerful organized and sometimes uniformed and paramilitary forces (quadristi; storm-troopers) or, as in Germany during the Great Slump, into massive electoral armies. However, in neither of the two fascist states did fascism 'conquer power', though in both Italy and Germany it made much of the rhetoric of 'capturing the street' and 'marching on Rome'. In both cases fascism came to power by the connivance of, indeed (as in Italy) on the initiative of, the old regime, that is to say in a 'constitutional' fashion.

The novelty of fascism was that, once in power, it refused to play the old political games, and took over completely where it could. The total transfer of power, or the elimination of all rivals, took rather longer in Italy (1922-28) than in Germany (1933-34) but, once it was achieved, there were no further internal political limits on what became, characteristically, the untrammeled dictatorship of a supreme populist 'leader' (Duce, Führer).

At this point we must briefly dismiss two equally inadequate theses about fascism, the one fascist, but taken over by many liberal historians, the other dear to orthodox Soviet Marxism. There was no 'fascist revolution' and neither was fascism the expression of 'monopoly capitalism' or big business.

Fascist movements had the elements of revolutionary movements, inasmuch as they contained people who wanted a fundamental transformation of society, often with a notably anti-capitalist and anti-oligarchic edge. However, the horse of revolutionary fascism failed either to start
or to run. Hitler rapidly eliminated those who took the 'socialist' component in the name of the National Socialist German Workers' Party seriously – as he certainly did not. The utopia of a return to some kind of little man's Middle Ages, full of hereditary peasant-proprietors, artisan craftsmen like Hans Sachs and girls in blonde plaits, was not a programme that could be realized in major twentieth-century states (except in the nightmare version of Himmler's plans for a racially purified people), least of all in regimes which, like Italian and German Fascism, were committed in their way to modernisation and technological advance.

What National Socialism certainly achieved was a radical purging of the old Imperial elites and institutional structures. After all, the only group which actually launched a revolt against Hitler – and was consequently decimated – was the old aristocratic Prussian army in July 1944. This destruction of the old elites and the old frameworks, reinforced after the war by the policies of the occupying Western armies, was eventually to make it possible to build the Federal Republic on a much sounder basis than the Weimar Republic of 1918–33, which had been little more than the defeated empire minus the Kaiser. Nazism certainly had, and partly achieved, a social programme for the masses: holidays; sports; the planned 'people's car', which the world came to know after the Second World War as the Volkswagen 'beetle'. Its chief achievement, however, was to liquidate the Great Slump more effectively than any other government, for the anti-liberalism of the Nazis had the positive side that it did not commit them to an a priori belief in the free market. Nevertheless, Nazism was a revamped and revitalized old regime rather than a basically new and different one. Like the imperial and militarist Japan of the 1930s (which nobody would claim to have been a revolutionary system), it was a non-liberal capitalist economy which achieved a striking dynamization of its industrial system. The economic and other achievements of fascist Italy were considerably less impressive, as was demonstrated in the Second World War. Its war economy was unusually feeble. Talk of a 'fascist revolution' was rhetoric, though no doubt for many Italian rank-and-file fascists sincere rhetoric. It was much more openly a regime in the interests of the old ruling classes, having come into existence as a defence against post-1918 revolutionary unrest rather than, like in Germany, as a reaction to the traumas of the Great Slump and the inability of Weimar governments to cope with them. Italian fascism, which in one sense carried on the process of Italian unification from the nineteenth century, thus producing a stronger and more centralized government, had some significant achievements to its credit. It was, for instance, the only Italian regime successfully to suppress the Sicilian Mafia and the Neapolitan Camorra. Yet its historical significance lay, not in its aims and achievements, but in its role as the global pioneer of a new version of the triumphant counter-revolution. Mussolini inspired Hitler, and Hitler never failed to acknowledge Italian inspiration and priority. On the other hand Italian fascism was, and for a long time remained, an anomaly among radical Right-wing movements in its toleration of, even a certain taste for, artistic avantgarde 'modernism', and in some other respects – notably, until Mussolini fell into line with Germany in 1938, a complete lack of interest in anti-Semitic racism.

As for the 'monopoly capitalist' thesis, the point about really big business is that it can come to terms with any regime that does not actually expropriate it, and any regime must come to terms with it. Fascism was no more 'the expression of the interests of monopoly capital' than the American New Deal or British Labour governments, or the Weimar Republic. Big business in the early 1930s did not particularly want Hitler, and would have preferred more orthodox conservatism. It gave him little support until the Great Slump, and even then support was late and patchy. However, when he came to power, business collaborated wholeheartedly, up to the point of using slave-labour and extermination camp labour for its operations during the Second World War. Large and small business, of course, benefited from the expropriation of the Jews.

It must nevertheless be said that fascism had some major advantages for business over other regimes. First, it eliminated or defeated Left-wing social revolution, and indeed seemed to be the main bulwark against it. Second, it eliminated labour unions and other limitations on the rights of management to manage its workforce. Indeed, the fascist 'leadership principle' was what most bosses and business executives applied to their subordinates in their own businesses and fascism gave it authoritative justification. Third, the destruction of labour movements helped to secure an unduly favourable solution of the Depression for business. Whereas in the USA the top 5 per cent of consuming units between 1929 and 1941 saw their share of total (national) income fall by 20 per cent (there was a similar but more modest egalitarian trend in Britain and Scandinavia), in Germany the top 5 per cent gained 15 per cent during the comparable period (Kuznets, 1956). Finally, as already noted, fascism was good at dynamising and modernising industrial economies – although actually not as good at adventurous and long-term techno-scientific planning as the Western democracies.
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Would fascism have become very significant in world history but for the Great Slump? Probably not. Italy alone was not a promising base from which to shake the world. In the 1920s no other European movement of radical Right counter-revolution looked as though it had much of a future, for much the same reason as insurrectionary attempts at communist social revolution failed: the post-1917 revolutionary wave had ebbed, and the economy seemed to recover. In Germany the pillars of imperial society, generals, civil servants and the rest, had indeed given some backing to the free-lance paramilitaries and other wild men of the Right after the November revolution, though (understandably) putting their main effort in keeping the new republic conservative, anti-revolutionary and, above all, a state capable of maintaining some international room for manoeuvre. However, when forced to choose, as during the Right-wing Kapp Putsch of 1920 and the Munich revolt of 1923, in which Adolf Hitler first found himself in the headlines, they hesitatingly backed the status quo. After the economic upturn of 1924, the National Social Workers’ Party was reduced to a rump of 2.5–3 per cent of the electorate, scoring little more than half of even the small and civilised German Democratic Party, little more than a fifth of the communists and well under a tenth of the Social Democrats in the elections of 1928. Yet two years later it had risen to over 18 per cent of the electorate, the second-strongest party in German politics. Four years later, in the summer of 1932, it was by far the strongest, with over 37 per cent of the total vote, though it did not maintain this support while democratic elections lasted. It was patently the Great Slump which turned Hitler from a phenomenon of the political fringe into the potential, and eventually the actual, master of the country.

However, even the Great Slump would not have given fascism either the force or the influence it plainly exercised in the 1930s, if it had not brought a movement of this kind to power in Germany, a state destined by its size, economic and military potential, and, not least, geographical position, to play a major political role in Europe under any form of government. Utter defeat in two world wars has, after all, not prevented Germany from ending the twentieth century as the dominant state on that continent. Just as, on the Left, the victory of Marx in the largest state of the globe (‘one sixth of the world’s land surface’, as communists liked to boast between the wars) gave communism a major international presence, even at times when its political force outside the USSR was negligible, so the capture of Germany by Hitler appeared to confirm the success of Mussolini’s Italy and to turn fascism into a powerful global political current. The successful policy of aggressive militarist expansionism by both states (see chapter 5) – reinforced by that of Japan – dominated the international politics of the decade. It was therefore natural that suitable states or movements should be attracted and influenced by fascism, should seek the support of Germany and Italy, and – given these countries’ expansionism – should often receive it.

In Europe, for obvious reasons, such movements belonged overwhelmingly to the political Right. Thus within Zionism (which at this time was overwhelmingly a movement of Ashkenazi Jews living in Europe), that wing of the movement which looked towards Italian fascism, Vladimir Jabotinsky’s ‘Revisionists’, were clearly seen and classified themselves on the Right, against the (predominant) socialist and liberal Zionist bodies. Yet the influence of fascism in the 1930s could not but be to some extent global, if only because it was associated with two dynamic and active powers. Yet outside Europe the conditions which created fascist movements in the home continent hardly existed. Hence, where fascist, or plainly fascist-influenced movements emerged, their political location and function was far more problematic.

Of course certain characteristics of European fascism found an echo overseas. It would have been surprising if the Mufti of Jerusalem and other Arabs resisting Jewish colonization in Palestine (and the British who protected it) had not found Hitler’s anti-semitism to their liking, though it bore no relation to the traditional modes of Islamic coexistence with unbelievers of various kinds. Some upper-caste Hindus in India were, like modern Sinhalese extremists in Sri Lanka, conscious of their superiority as certified – indeed as the original – ‘Aryans’ to darker races on their own subcontinent. And the Boer militants who were interned as pro-Germans during the Second World War – some became their country’s leaders in the era of apartheid after 1948 – also had ideological affinities with Hitler, both as convinced racists and through the theological influence of elitist ultra-Right-wing Calvinist currents in the Netherlands.

Yet this hardly qualifies the basic proposition that fascism, unlike communism, was non-existent in Asia and Africa (except perhaps among some local European settlers) because it appeared to have no bearing on the local political situations.

This is broadly true even of Japan, though that country was allied to Germany and Italy, fought on the same side in the Second World War, and its policies were dominated by the Right. The affinities between the dominant ideologies of the eastern and western ends of the ‘Asia’ are indeed strong. The Japanese were second to none in their conviction of
racial superiority and the need for racial purity in their belief in the military virtues of self-sacrifice, absolute obedience to orders, self-abnegation and stoicism. Every Samurai would have subscribed to the motto of Hitler’s SS (‘Meine Ehre ist Treue’, best translated as ‘Honour means blind subordination’). Theirs was a society of rigid hierarchy, of the total dedication of the individual (if such a term had any local meaning in the Western sense at all) to the nation and its divine Emperor, and the utter rejection of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. The Japanese had no trouble in understanding the Wagnerian brand of myths about barbarian gods, pure and heroic medieval knights and the specifically German nature of mountain and forest, both filled with German volkisch dreams. They had the same capacity to combine barbaric behaviour with a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility: the concentration camp torturer’s taste for playing Schubert quartets. Insofar as fascism could have been translated into Zenn terms, the Japanese might well have welcomed it, though they had no need of it. And indeed, among the diplomats accredited to the European fascist powers, but especially among the ultra-nationalist terror groups given to assassinating insufficiently patriotic politicians, and in the Kwanton army which was conquering, holding and enslaving Manchuria and China, there were Japanese who recognized these affinities and campaigned for closer identification with the European fascist powers.

Yet European fascism could not be reduced to an oriental feudalism with an imperial national mission. It belonged essentially to the era of democracy and the common man, while the very concept of a ’movement’ of mass mobilization for novel, indeed for would-be revolutionary purposes, behind self-selected leaders, made no sense in Hirohito’s Japan. The Prussian army and tradition, rather than Hitler, fitted their view of the world. In short, despite the similarities with German nationalism (the affinities with Italy were far less), Japan was not fascist.

As for the states and movements which looked for support from Germany and Italy, especially during the Second World War when the Axis looked very much like winning, ideology was not their major motive, though some of the minor nationalist regimes in Europe, whose position depended entirely on German backing, readily advertised themselves as more Nazi than the SS, notably the Croatian Ustaša state. Yet it would be absurd to think of the Irish Republican army or the Berlin-based Indian nationalists as in any sense ‘fascist’ because, in the Second World War as in the First, some of them negotiated for German support on the principle that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’. Indeed, the Irish Republican leader Frank Ryan, who entered such negotiations, was ideologically so anti-fascist that he had actually joined the International Brigades to fight General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, before being captured by Franco’s forces and sent to Germany. Such cases need not detain us.

However, there remains a continent on which the ideological impact of European fascism is undeniable: the Americas.

In North America men and movements inspired by Europe were not of great significance outside particular immigrant communities whose members brought the ideologies of the old country with them, as the Scandinavians and Jews had brought a proclivity towards socialism, or who retained some loyalty to the country of their origin. Thus the sentiments of Germany — and to a much smaller extent, Italian — Americans contributed to US isolationism, though there is no good evidence that they became fascists in large numbers. The paraphernalia of militias, coloured shirts and arms raised in salutes to leaders did not belong to the native Right-wing and racist mobilisations, of which the Ku Klux Klan was the most familiar. Anti-semitism was certainly strong, though its contemporary Right-wing US version — as in Father Coughlin’s popular radio sermons out of Detroit — probably owed more to the Right-wing corporatism of European Catholic inspiration. It is characteristic of the USA in the 1930s that the most successful and possibly dangerous demagogic populism of the decade, Huey Long’s conquest of Louisiana, came from what was, in American terms, a clearly radical and Left-wing tradition. It cut down democracy in the name of democracy and appealed, not to the resentments of a petty-bourgeoisie or the anti-revolutionary instincts of self-preservation of the rich, but to the egalitarianism of the poor. Nor was it racist. No movement whose slogan was ‘Every Man a King’ could belong in the fascist tradition.

It was in Latin America that European fascist influence was to be open and acknowledged, both on individual politicians, like Colombia’s Jorge Eliecer Gaitán (1898–1948) and Argentina’s Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974), and on regimes, like Getulio Vargas’ Estado Novo (New State) of 1937–45 in Brazil. In fact, and in spite of baseless US fears of Nazi encirclement from the south, the main effect of fascist influence in Latin America was domestic. Apart from Argentina, which clearly favoured the Axis — but did so before Perón took power in 1943 as well as after — the governments of the Western hemisphere joined the war on the US side, at least nominally. It is, however, true that in some South American countries their military had been modelled on the German system or trained by German or even Nazi cadres.

Fascist influence south of the Rio Grande is easily explained. Seen
from the south, the US after 1914 no longer looked, as it had in the
nineteenth century, like the ally of the domestic forces of progress and
the diplomatic counterweight to the imperial or ex-imperial Spaniards,
French and British. US imperial conquests from Spain in 1898, the
Mexican revolution, not to mention the rise of the oil and banana
industries, introduced an anti-Yankee anti-imperialism into Latin Ameri-
can politics, and one which the obvious taste of Washington in the first
third of the century for gunboat diplomacy and landing marines did
nothing to discourage. Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, founder of the anti-
imperialist APRA (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) whose
ambitions were pan-Latin American, even if APRA only established
itself in his native Peru, planned to have his insurrectionaries trained by
the cadres of the celebrated anti-Yankee rebel Sandino in Nicaragua.
(Sandino’s long guerrilla war against US occupation after 1927 was to
inspire the ‘Sandinista’ revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s.) Moreover,
the USA of the 1930s, enfeebled by the Great Slump, did not look
anything like as formidable and dominant as before. Franklin D.
Roosevelt’s abandonment of the gunboats and marines of his predecessors could be
seen not only as a ‘good neighbour policy’ but also (mistakenly) as a sign
of weakness. Latin America in the 1930s was not inclined to look north.

But, seen from across the Atlantic, fascism undoubtedly looked like
the success story of the decade. If there was a model in the world to be
imitated by up-and-coming politicians of a continent that had always
taken its inspiration from the culturally hegemonic regions, such potential
leaders of countries always on the look-out for the recipe to become
modern, rich and great, it was surely to be found in Berlin and Rome,
since London and Paris no longer provided much political inspiration
and Washington was out of action. (Moscow was still seen essentially as a
model for social revolution, which restricted its political appeal.)

And yet, how different from their European models were the political
activities and achievements of men who made no bones about their
intellectual debt to Mussolini and Hitler! I still recall my shock at hearing
the President of revolutionary Bolivia admitting it without hesitation in a
private conversation. In Bolivia soldiers and politicians with their eye on
Germany found themselves organizing the revolution of 1952 which
nationalized the tin-mines and gave the Indian peasantry radical land
reform. In Colombia the great people’s tribune Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, so
far from choosing the political Right, captured the leadership of the
liberal Party and would certainly as president have led it in a radical
direction, had he not been assassinated in Bogotá on 9 April 1948, an
event which provoked the immediate popular insurrection of the capital
(including its police) and the proclamation of revolutionary communes in
many a provincial municipality of the country. What Latin American
leaders took from European fascism was its deification of populist leaders
with a reputation for action. But the masses they wanted to mobilize, and
found themselves mobilizing, were not those who feared for what they
might lose, but those who had nothing to lose. And the enemies against
whom they mobilized them were not foreigners and outgroups (even
though the element of anti-semitism in Perónist, or other Argentine
politics is undeniable), but ‘the oligarchy’ – the rich, the local ruling class.
Perón found his core support in the Argentine working class, and his
basic political machine in something like a labour party built around
the mass labour union movement he fostered. Getulio Vargas in Brazil made
the same discovery. It was the army that overthrew him in 1945 and,
again, forced him into suicide in 1954. It was the urban working class, to
which he had given social protection in return for political support,
which mourned him as the father of his people. European fascist regimes
destroyed labour movements, the Latin American leaders they inspired
created them. Whatever the intellectual filiation, historically, we cannot
speak of the same kind of movement.

V

Yet these movements too must be seen as part of the decline and fall of
liberalism in the Age of Catastrophe. For if the rise and triumph of
fascism was the most dramatic expression of the liberal retreat, it is a
mistake, even in the 1930s, to see this retreat exclusively in terms of
fascism. So at the conclusion of this chapter we must ask how it is to be
explained. However, a common confusion which identifies fascism and
nationalism must first be cleared away.

That fascist movements tended to appeal to nationalist passions and
prejudices is obvious, though the semi-fascist corporate states, like
Portugal and Austria 1934–38, being largely under Catholic inspiration,
had to reserve their unqualified hatred for peoples and nations of another
religion or godless ones. Moreover, simple nationalism was difficult for
local fascist movements in countries conquered and occupied by Ger-
many or Italy, or whose fortunes depended on the victory of those states
against their own national governments. In suitable cases (Flanders, the
Netherlands, Scandinavia) they could identify themselves with the Ger-
mans as part of a greater Teutonic racial group, but a more convenient
stance (strongly backed by Dr Goebbels’ propaganda during the war),
was paradoxically internationalist. Germany was seen as the core and only guarantee of a future European order, with the usual appeals to Charlemagne and anti-communism; a phase in the development of the European idea on which historians of the post-war European Community do not much like to dwell. The non-German military units which fought under the German flag in the Second World War, mainly as part of the SS, usually stressed this transnational element.

On the other hand it ought to be equally obvious that not all nationalisms sympathized with fascism, and not only because the ambitions of Hitler, and to a lesser extent Mussolini, threatened a number of them — e.g. the Poles and the Czechs. Indeed, as we shall see (chapter 5) in a number of countries mobilisation against fascism was to produce a patriotism of the Left, especially during the war, when resistance to the Axis was conducted by ‘national fronts’ or governments spanning the entire political spectrum, excluding only fascists and their collaborators. Broadly speaking, whether a local nationalism found itself on the side of fascism depended on whether it had more to gain than to lose by the advance of the Axis, and whether its hatred of communism or some other state, nationalism or ethnic group (the Jews, the Serbs) was greater than its dislike of Germans or Italians. Thus the Poles, though strongly anti-Russian and anti-Jewish, did not significantly collaborate with Nazi Germany, whereas the Lithuanians and some of the Ukrainians (occupied by the USSR from 1939–41) did.

Why did liberalism recede between the wars, even in states which did not accept fascism? Western radicals, socialists and communists who lived through this period were inclined to see the era of global crisis as the final agony of the capitalist system. Capitalism, they argued, could no longer afford the luxury of ruling through parliamentary democracy, and under liberal freedoms, which, incidentally, had provided the power-base for moderate, reformist labour movements. Faced with insoluble economic problems and/or an increasingly revolutionary working class, the bourgeoisie now had to fall back on force and coercion, that is to say, on something like fascism.

As both capitalism and liberal democracy were to make a triumphant comeback in 1945, it is easy to forget that there was a core of truth in this view, as well as rather too much agitational rhetoric. Democratic systems do not work unless there is a basic consensus among most citizens about the acceptability of their state and social system, or at least a readiness to bargain for compromise settlements. This, in turn, is much facilitated by prosperity. In most of Europe these conditions were simply not present between 1918 and the Second World War. Social cataclysms seemed to be impending or had happened. The fear of revolution was such that over most of eastern and south-eastern Europe as well as part of the Mediterranean, communist parties were barely ever allowed to emerge from illegality. The unbridgeable gap between the ideological Right and even the moderate Left wrecked Austrian democracy in 1930–34, though it has flourished in that country since 1945 under exactly the same two-party system of Catholics and Socialists (Seton Watson, 1962, p. 184). Spanish democracy broke under the same tensions in the 1930s. The contrast with the negotiated transition from the Franco dictatorship to a pluralist democracy in the 1970s is dramatic.

What chances of stability there were in such regimes could not survive the Great Depression. The Weimar Republic fell largely because the Great Slump made it impossible to keep the tacit bargain between state, employers and organized workers, which had kept it afloat. Industry and government felt they had no choice but to impose economic social cuts and mass unemployment did the rest. In mid-1932 National Socialists and communists between them polled an absolute majority of all German votes, and the parties committed to the Republic were reduced to little more than a third. Conversely, it is undeniable that the stability of democratic regimes after the Second World War, not least that of the new German Federal Republic, rested on the economic miracles of those decades (see chapter 9). Where governments have enough to distribute to satisfy all claimants, and most citizens’ standard of life is steadily rising at any case, the temperature of democratic politics rarely rises to fever-pitch. Compromise and consensus tended to prevail, as even the most impassioned believers in the overthrow of capitalism found the status quo less intolerable in practice than in theory, and even the most uncompromising champions of capitalism took social security systems and regular negotiations of wage rises and fringe benefits with labour unions for granted.

Yet, as the Great Slump itself showed, this is only part of the answer. A very similar situation — the refusal of the organized workers to accept Depression cuts — led to the collapse of parliamentary government and, eventually, to the nomination of Hitler as head of government in Germany, but in Britain merely to a sharp shift from a Labour to a Conservative ‘National Government’ within a stable and quite unshaken parliamentary system. The Depression did not automatically lead to the

* A Labour government in 1931 split over this issue, some Labour leaders and their Liberal supporters went over to the Conservatives, who won the subsequent election by a landslide and remained comfortably in power until May 1940.
government. Moreover, the botched peace settlements after 1918 multiplied what we, at the end of the twentieth century, know to be the fatal virus of democracy, namely the division of the body of citizens exclusively along ethnic-national or religious lines (Glenny, 1992, pp. 146–48), as in ex-Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland. Three ethnic-religious communities voting as blocks, as in Bosnia; two irreconcilable communities, as in Ulster; sixty-two political parties each representing a tribe or clan, as in Somalia, cannot, as we know, provide the foundation for a democratic political system, but — unless one of the contending groups or some outside authority is strong enough to establish (non-democratic) dominance — only for instability and civil war. The fall of the three multinational empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia and Turkey replaced three supranational states whose governments were neutral as between the numerous nationalities over which they ruled, with a great many more multinational states, each identified with one, or at most with two or three, of the ethnic communities within their borders.

The third condition was that democratic governments did not have to do much governing. Parliaments had come into existence not so much to govern as to control the power of those who did, a function which is still obvious in the relations between the US Congress and the US presidency. They were devices designed as brakes which found themselves having to act as engines. Sovereign assemblies, elected on a restricted but expanding franchise, were, of course, increasingly common from the Age of Revolution on, but nineteenth-century bourgeois society assumed that the bulk of its citizens’ lives would take place, not in the sphere of government, but in the self-regulating economy and in the world of private and unofficial associations (‘civil society’).* It side-stepped the difficulties of running governments through elected assemblies in two ways: by not expecting too much governing, or even legislation, from their parliaments, and by seeing that government — or rather administration — could be carried on regardless of their vagaries. As we have seen (see chapter 1) bodies of independent, permanently appointed public officials had become an essential device for the government of modern states. A parliamentary majority was essential only where major and controversial executive decisions had to be taken, or approved, and organizing or maintaining an adequate body of supporters was the major task of government leaders, since (except in the Americas the executive in parliamentary regimes was

* The 1980s in West and East were to be full of nostalgic rhetoric seeking an entirely impracticable return to an idealized nineteenth-century constructed on these assumptions.
usually not directly elected. In states with a restricted suffrage (i.e., an electorate composed mainly of the wealthy, powerful or influential minority) this was made easier by a common consensus of what constituted their collective interest (the 'national interest'), not to mention the resources of patronage.

The twentieth century multiplied the occasions when it became essential for governments to govern. The kind of state which confined itself to providing the ground rules for business and civil society, and the police, prisons and armed forces to keep internal and external dangers at bay, the 'nightwatchman state' of political wits, became as obsolete as the 'nightwatchmen' who inspired the metaphor.

The fourth condition was wealth and prosperity. The democracies of the 1920s broke under the tension of revolution and counter-revolution (Hungary, Italy, Portugal) or of national conflict (Poland, Yugoslavia); those of the thirties, under the tensions of the Slump. One has only to compare the political atmosphere of Weimar Germany and 1920s Austria with that of Federal Germany and post-1945 Austria to be convinced. Even national conflicts were less unmanageable, so long as each minority's politicians could feed at the state's common trough. That was the strength of the Agrarian Party in east-central Europe's only genuine democracy, Czechoslovakia: it offered benefits across national lines. In the 1930s, even Czechoslovakia could no longer hold together the Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians and Ukrainians.

Under these circumstances democracy was, more likely than not, a mechanism for formalizing divisions between irreconcilable groups. Very often even in the best circumstances, it produced no stable basis for democratic government at all, especially when the theory of democratic representation was applied in the most rigorous versions of proportional representation.* Where, in times of crisis, no parliamentary majority was available, as in Germany (as distinct from Britain)† the temptation to look elsewhere was overwhelming. Even in stable democracies the political divisions the system implies are seen by many citizens as costs rather than benefits of the system. The very rhetoric of politics advertises candidates and party as the representative of the national rather than the

* The endless permutations of democratic electoral systems – proportional or otherwise – are all attempts to ensure or maintain stable majorities permitting stable governments in political systems which, by their very nature, make this difficult.
† In Britain the refusal to entertain any form of proportional representation ('winner takes all') favoured a two-party system, and marginalized other parties – since the First World War the once dominant Liberal Party, though it continued to

narrow party interest. In times of crisis the costs of the system seemed unsustainable, its benefits uncertain.

Under these circumstances it is easy to understand that parliamentary democracy in the successor states to the old empires, as well as in most of the Mediterranean and in Latin America, was a feebly plant growing in stony soil. The strongest argument in its favour, that, bad as it is, it is better than any alternative system, is itself half-hearted. Between the wars it only rarely sounded realistic and convincing. Even its champions spoke with muted confidence. Its retreat seemed to be inevitable, as even in the United States serious, but needlessly gloomy observers noted that 'It Can Happen Here' (Sinclair Lewis, 1935). Nobody seriously predicted or expected its post-war renaissance, still less its return, however brief, as the predominant form of government across the globe in the early 1990s.

For those who looked back on the period between the wars at this time, the fall of liberal political systems seemed a brief interruption in their secular conquest of the globe. Unfortunately, as the new millennium approached, the uncertainties surrounding political democracy no longer seemed quite so remote. The world may be unhappily re-entering a period when its advantages no longer seem as obvious as they did between 1950 and 1990.

poll a steady 10 per cent of the national vote (this was still the case in 1992). In Germany the proportional system, though slightly favouring larger parties, produced none after 1920 with even one third of seats (except the Nazis in 1932) among five major and a dozen or so minor groupings. In the absence of a majority the constitution provided for (temporary) executive rule by emergency powers, i.e., the suspension of democracy.