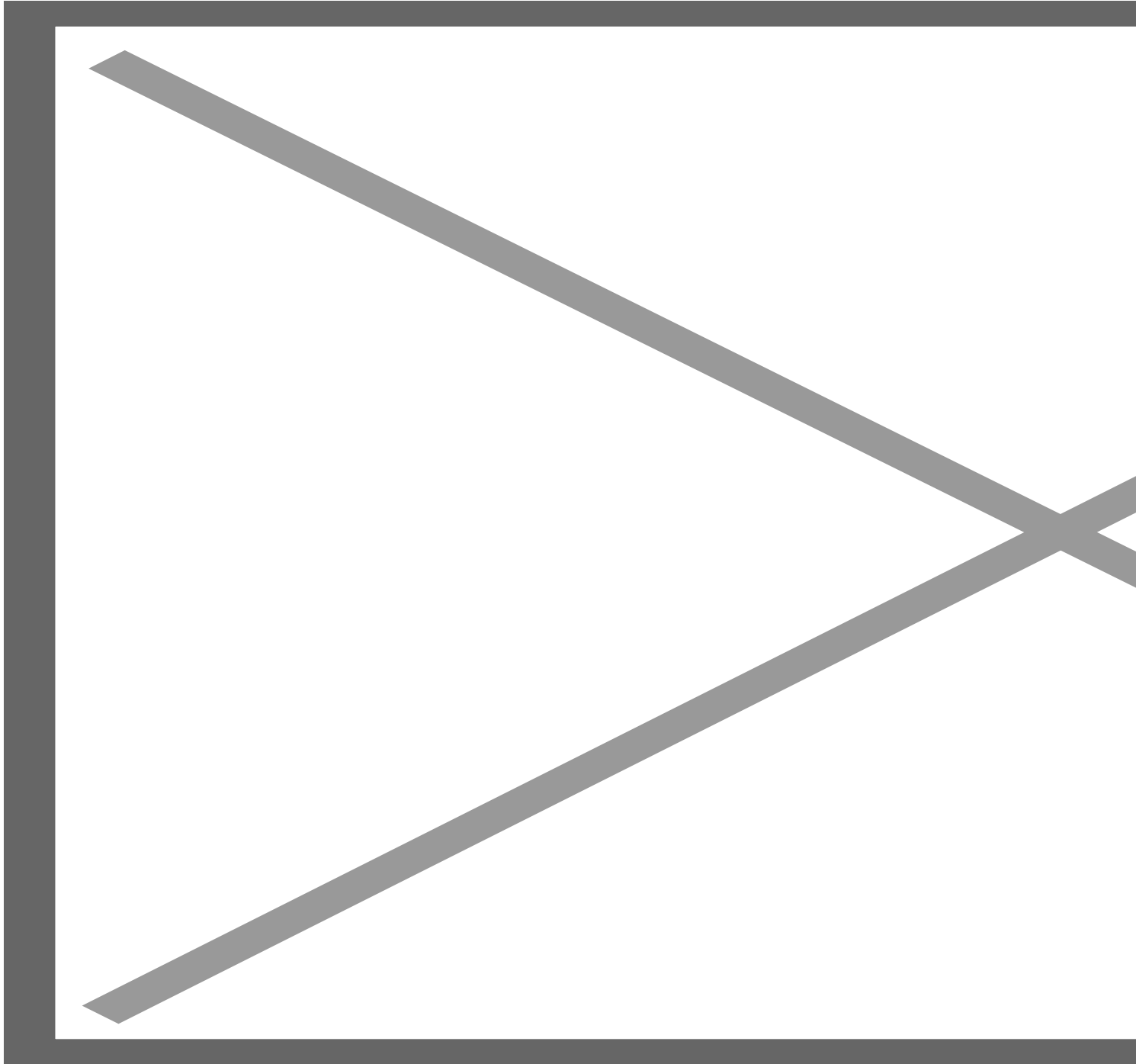


Is fascism inherently Christian?

Antifascist writers of the last century grappled with the same bewilderment we do—and they made sense of their politics theologically.

by [Mac Loftin](#)
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This semester I've been teaching a graduate seminar on Christianity and fascism. We're reading texts mostly from 1922-1945 (the years of "fascism proper") that, even though written by a variety of authors who agree on little else, nonetheless hint at a broadly similar argument. The argument is that fascism is better understood not as a strictly political movement, but as a religious movement, and specifically as a *Christian* movement.

These authors knew how Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany could be outright hostile towards Christianity. But that occasional hostility, they argued, was surface-level and late-coming. Fascism as a political movement made sense to its followers because it followed a much deeper and broader theological logic—theology's way of thinking about power, sovereignty, community, sacrifice, history—that already made sense to the people of Western Europe. If theology provided the logic of fascist politics, these authors warned, then a merely military or political defeat wouldn't be enough. You had to attack that underlying theological logic so that fascist politics would no longer make sense. Otherwise, it would only be a matter of time before something like fascism took hold again. Theology was the terrain on which the struggle against fascism had to be waged.

I had intended the seminar to be historical, to stay in that twentieth-century moment of "fascism proper," but a seminar room isn't a sterile lab, and the world has its way of getting in. My students, after all, mostly didn't sign up for the class out of a passion for interwar intellectual history. They came to my class because they were worried and confused by the political catastrophe all around them, and they were hoping last century's antifascists might be able to give them some clarity. I was right there with them. Week after week, outside the classroom, some line was crossed that probably cannot be uncrossed—masked thugs deputized by the state to snatch people off the street, the war machine assembled off the coast of Venezuela for a hemispheric war of conquest, the idea of a lifetime presidency tossed out as a joke and repeated again and again until it suddenly isn't. Every week, we read authors trying to make sense of dying democracies, societies living for nothing but war, the erosion of every freedom one by one. Maybe these authors had the answers?

This is basically another version of the stale fascism question that has been with us for the last decade. Is the current turn in rightwing politics similar enough to twentieth-century fascism that it makes sense to call it "fascist"? Or are there so many differences between our century and the last (no world war, no revolutionary communist movement, no more mass politics) that the term "fascist" is anachronistic and obscures what it's supposed to describe? If we want to learn from antifascist writers how to better respond to our own moment, we might first need to ask if what they were writing about is really all that similar to what we're experiencing today.

As I prepared my syllabus, however, I came to see the fascism question as a distraction. Antifascist writers from the last century do have much to teach us about our own moment, but not because far-right politics today is the same as it was then. Instead, I've come to see the parallel between their moment and our own in that, just like them, *we don't know what we're seeing*. Twentieth-century writers can't help my students get over their fear and confusion. What they can offer is their own fear and confusion and a model for navigating them, as they too grappled in the dark with something they could hardly see.

The fascism debate is evidence that we don't have a clear picture of our terrifying authoritarian and racial-nationalist present. So we grope for historical parallels that might help us get our bearings: Maybe what's happening is like what happened a hundred years ago? And a hundred years ago, people did just the same. Leon Trotsky tried to understand his present by describing a return of nineteenth-century "Bonapartism." Antonio Gramsci looked back further and saw a new "Caesarism." Just like we do with "fascism," they hoped to make sense of their present with inexact analogies to the past. And just like us, the evil in front of them slipped through whatever label they hoped to catch it in. As Leon Blum, leader of France's Popular Front, put it: "One has the impression despite oneself of sliding down a steep slope, and being swept along by the laws of gravity much more than by one's own choice."

Trump isn't a fascist any more than Mussolini was a Bonapartist. The authors we are reading warn that something like fascism could return if it wasn't defeated theologically, but we don't get much clarity by saying our moment is something like a different historical moment. It's that lack of clarity itself that can teach us something.

By looking at how antifascist writers navigated their own terrified bewilderment—their desperate search for historical parallels, the way they tried out terms and discarded them, how they dug deep into the history of philosophy and theology for concepts that could help—we might learn how to navigate our own. Like them, we're faced with a foe that prizes violence over ideological consistency and so can never be nailed down with what it “really” means or wants. To try and wrap your head around our present is to feel yourself sliding with Blum down a steep slope. But also like the antifascists of the last century, we have one foothold of certainty to hang on to: Whatever you call it, this is evil, and it has to be stopped.