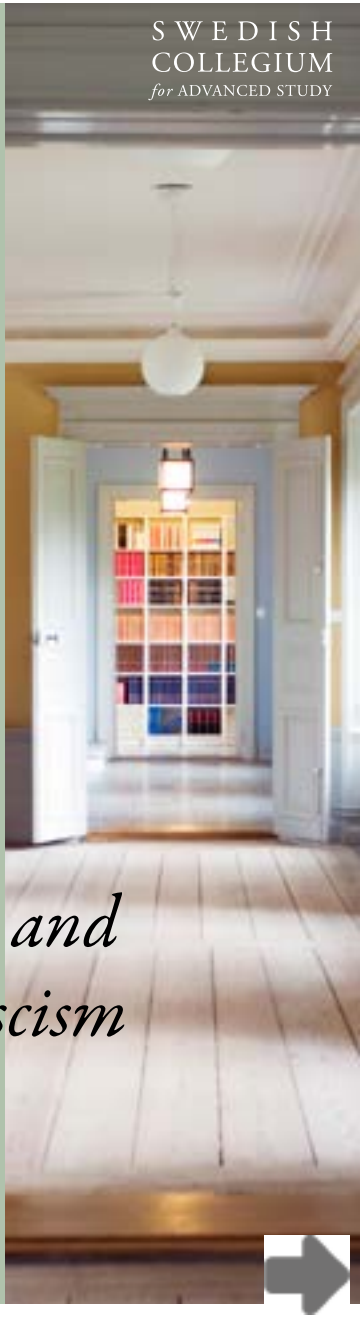
SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

The Wittrock Lecture Book Series
No. VIII

MICHAEL
GOODHART

Human Rights and Resurgent Fascism





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MICHAEL GOODHART

The Eighth Wittrock Lecture,
held in Uppsala on 12 February 2026

SWEDISH COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDY (SCAS)

Contents

Foreword.....9

Human Rights and Resurgent Fascism.....11

Endnotes.....38

About the Author.....45

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Foreword

The Wittrock Lecture Series was instigated in 2019, in honour of the contributions of Professor Björn Wittrock. As Principal of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in the years 1996-2018, and the driving force ever since its creation in 1985, Björn Wittrock has contributed significantly to the institute's strong position as an internationally renowned institute for advanced study, in addition to the social sciences and the humanities in Sweden, Europe, and beyond. His research has advanced several intellectual fields that include the sociology of ancient, medieval and modern societies, global history, intellectual history, and civilizational analysis.

The Wittrock Lecture Series is arranged annually by the Collegium. At these events, internationally renowned and state-of-the-art scholars are invited to give a public lecture on a theme that resonates with the scholarly profile of SCAS. Topics may range across the humanities and social sciences, and cover a broad spectrum of issues related to global history and modernity, globalization processes and social change, intellectual history, and the plurality of knowledge cultures. The lecture series also aims to address complex challenges facing contemporary society – from the shifting nature of globalization, to crises in democracy, or the future of governance and human civilization.

Christina Garsten
Principal, SCAS

Human Rights and Resurgent Fascism

Michael Goodhart, University of Pittsburgh[1]

Good afternoon. It is an honor and a privilege for me to deliver this Eighth Wittrock lecture, and to do so in the presence of both the man for whom it is named and such a distinguished audience. I'm sorry that we're not talking about a happier topic, but there is no more important subject on which I feel I could remark today.

The expected outline for a talk with this title might be something like this:

- Begin with a list of all of the ways in which resurgent fascism threatens or undermines human rights;
- Next, remind listeners that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was, if not a direct response to fascism, a condemnation of the horror and devastation that it unleashed upon the world and an expression of the aspirations of people everywhere for peace, justice, dignity, and equality;
- Continue by cataloging some of the many ways that human rights have spoken to those aspirations; and, finally,
- Conclude with an exhortation to listeners to maintain the faith and defend human rights and the liberal order from this latest assault.

This is not the talk you will hear this afternoon. Not because resurgent fascism poses no threat to human rights; I could rip countless examples from the headlines to prove that it does. And not because I see no role for human rights in the

antifascist struggle; as I'll argue at the end, human rights, properly understood, can be vital tools for containing and defeating fascism. I won't give that talk because I can't let liberalism and human rights off the hook so easily.[2] Doing so would make it impossible to understand what we're up against and how we might counter it effectively. However reassuring that story might be, it would mislead us about the character and causes of fascism, cover up the role that liberalism and a certain neoliberal idea of human rights have played in its contemporary resurgence, and mislead us about the wisdom and the political efficacy of doubling down in defense of the liberal order.

Now, with your permission, and in good Aristotelian fashion, I'd like to start over. Aristotle would often begin an inquiry along one vector, follow it to some important conclusions, and then make a new approach from another angle as he built up his argument. Given the complexity of our subject, I think this will be a useful approach for us today.

***

Let me begin again, then, with the notion of "resurgent fascism." The term may seem question-begging to some of you, perhaps even alarmist. How do we know that what we're witnessing and confronting is, in fact, fascism? What is the basis for the claim that it is resurgent? I know that many of us find some refuge in the idea that, whatever *this* is today, it is not, or not yet, or not fully, fascism.

One way to get at the question is by considering fascism's core or unifying beliefs. This proves tricky, as most scholars regard historical fascism as ideologically eclectic. Compared to other significant "isms"—liberalism, conservatism, socialism—fascism might be described as doctrinally flexible and opportunistic. Roger Griffin, a leading figure in the comparative study of fascism, argues that we can get around this problem by focusing on how fascism appealed to its actual historical proponents and adherents.[3] According to Griffin, the key idea animating fascist politics is regenerative ultranationalism.[4] Fascists of all stripes appeal to the rebirth of the pure race or nation as the solution to economic insecurity and social decline. Fascism is therefore a revolutionary program: restoring the race or nation requires strength and violence, and the violence often serves as a kind of proof that the rebirth is underway. These ideas form the core of the so-called "new consensus" in comparative fascist studies that Griffin has played a key role in forging.

I would like to propose two friendly amendments to this definition. The first was originally introduced by Andreas Malm and his colleagues in the Zetkin collective, who argue persuasively that fascist ultranationalism can also be *defensive*. Defense and regeneration are often connected. Defending the nation from its enemies without and within is a kind of condition of its regeneration.[5]

My second amendment is an addition. Fascism is always deeply patriarchal. Its concern with national regeneration implicates women, and women's bodies, in a project of patriotic fertility. It conscripts women of child-bearing age into the crucial biological task of birthing the nation anew, replenishing the dwindling racial stock and strengthening the people against looming threats of replacement. This task is celebrated, often heroized, within fascism, and some women have found it appealing and even liberating—in the depressing sense that, for once, some social value is assigned to reproductive labor.

This rebirth of the nation thus requires conformity with traditional gender roles as a patriotic duty. The paranoid fury of the fascist assault on those perceived as sexually deviant is

part of the broader hyper-heteronormativity needed to ensure that every womb is enlisted in the cause. As Paisley Currah has wisely warned, the ultra-Right's command to trans people to "act your sex" has implications far beyond its present deployment in sports and bathroom politics. It is, after all, the command against which feminists struggled for centuries.[6] If you think I'm exaggerating, think of US Vice President JD Vance's views on "childless cat ladies" who supposedly hate themselves and hate America.[7]

So, with my amendments, we can understand fascism as a violent, patriarchal politics of defensive or regenerative ultra-nationalism. That's helpful, but it's still pretty raggedy—less an ideology than a genre or a repertoire. With that worry in mind, many observers have focused on what we might call the forms, tools, and tactics of fascistic politics. The philosopher Jason Stanley has detailed how fascists appeal to the mythic past; make racist and conspiratorial propaganda; attack intellectuals; trade in unreality and irrationality; celebrate hierarchy and their own victimhood; promote law and order (while of course exempting themselves); and attack sexual deviance, decadence, laziness, parasitism, and moral decline.[8] To this list, Umberto Eco adds adherence to a cult of tradition, promotion of a sense of belonging in the great race or nation, and reliance on Orwellian Newspeak.[9]

Whether we focus on fascists' beliefs[10] or on what they do, it seems undeniable that we are witnessing—experiencing—a resurgence of fascism today. The evidence is everywhere. You don't have to take my word for it. Let me read to you from a letter written by some 400 prominent thinkers, including 31 Nobel Prize laureates and many leading scholars of fascism including Stanley and Timothy Snyder, a letter since signed by thousands:

> ...in the past two decades we have witnessed a renewed wave of far-right movements, bearing unmistakably fascist traits: attacks on democratic norms and institutions, a reinvigorated nationalism laced with racist rhetoric, authoritarian impulses, and systematic assaults on the rights of those who do not fit a manufactured traditional authority rooted in religious, sexual and gender normativity. These movements have re-emerged across the globe, including in long-standing democracies, where widespread dissatisfaction with political failure to address mounting inequalities and social exclusion has once again been exploited by new authoritarian figures.[11]

The letter concludes: "As in 1925, we scientists, philosophers, writers, artists and citizens of the world have a responsibility to denounce and resist the resurgence of fascism in all its forms." Their words, not mine.

I acknowledge and deeply regret that many of the most egregious examples of this politics today emanate from my own country. But I also caution that this politics has been ascendant, and arguably for longer, on this side of the Atlantic as well. It's important to pay attention to how these movements work in close coordination with one another.

***

So far, I've argued that the noxious ideas, ugly tropes, and violent tactics of fascism are on the rise today. If you'll allow me a brief but important digression, it's important to use terms like "resurgent" and "on the rise" rather than "emergence" or "reappearance." Fascism, Alberto Toscano observes in his probing book *Late Fascism,* never fully goes away. For many victims of racialized state violence, fascism is an enduring reality. The

state is not one, he reminds us, but is experienced differently by differently situated people.[12] No person of color in the United States, living in dread of the police-judicial-carceral system, could doubt the constancy of fascism. No person housed in the refugee-filled concentration camps on the edges of fortress Europe could fail to understand this.

Still, there are those who deny that we are experiencing fascism today. Larry Diamond, a prominent American sociologist, said recently in an interview that he prefers "to talk about fascistic properties or features rather than fascism *per se*, because I don't think we have the fully formed, classic version of it in many places today. But there is a lot of fascistic behavior, organization, and intent that's spreading around the world."[13] In the same interview, Diamond defines fascism as consisting in extreme authoritarianism, violations of civil liberties and individual rights, a leader cult, suppression of the opposition, expansionist threats, and the celebration of violence as a way to acquire and maintain political domination—including the reliance on irregular or shock troops. What exactly does he think is missing?

It's hard to know if Diamond is genuinely confused or just pandering. He is a card-carrying member of the conservative establishment, with an appointment at Stanford's Hoover Institution to prove it. What's interesting here is not Diamond's equivocation—which is completely predictable—but his reference to a "classic version" of fascism. For a long time, the European fascisms of the interwar period were treated as archetypes. Today, most serious scholars have abandoned this way of thinking. As we've seen, fascism lacks doctrinal coherence, and its sociological bases were significantly different even in Italy and Germany. That a proper Italian noun was used to refer to broadly similar political movements of the 1920s and 1930s is no reason to assign theoretical priority to interwar European fascisms.

In fact, making capital-F Fascism and Nazism the yardsticks by which we measure all violent ultra-Right politics invites confusion. It rules out instructive cases that we should bear in mind, most notably the United States under the Black Codes and Jim Crow and South African and Israeli apartheid. No less an authority than Robert Paxton has suggested that the KKK might be the originary fascist movement.[14] As Aimee Cesaire, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, Angela Davis and many others have argued, colonialism—whether international or domestic—is an important instance of fascist politics.[15] In short, there's simply no reason to assume that all historical fascisms are or must be alike. The great lesson of comparative history is that *this time will be different*.[16]

***

Fascism is resurgent. Why? How can we account for this terrifying trend? I'd like to begin again by asking how, where, and why fascism emerges and endures. One very promising approach to these questions is that taken by the historian Geoff Eley. Eley investigates what he calls "fascism-producing crises." Historically, he argues, fascists have come to power only when two conditions are met: there is a severe crisis besetting the polity, and some segment of the political elite or establishment is willing to invite fascists into power.[17] It's often said that fascists have always taken power through elections, never by force. That's not quite right: while they come into government through elections, fascists have only come into power by invitation—or today, we might have to add, by acquiescence.

I like Eley's approach, but I agree with Paxton, who insists that we should not limit our interest to cases where fascist

movements obtain formal state power.[18] Other fascisms exert significant influence over political events and social life, often through paramilitary groups—the Proud Boys, the RSS—that mete out violence on the enemies of the ultranation. We should broaden our focus to include all of the crises that enable or foment fascism. We must analyze the putrid soil in which fascism takes root and grows.

So, what kinds of crises enable fascism? The answer, according to the brilliant Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi, is that fascism springs from the insurmountable tension between capitalism and democracy. As he explains in his 1944 masterpiece, *The Great Transformation*, fascism results from twinned economic and political crises.[19] The political crisis consists in the inability or unwillingness of liberal elites to address economic crisis, an unwillingness that Polanyi attributes to their unwavering confidence that the unfettered or self-regulating market will resolve that crisis on its own. This confidence, he wrote, would result in the annihilation of human society (76).

Most of the book traces the genealogy of this blind faith in the market as a mechanism of social organization that maximizes individual freedom—understood narrowly as non-coercion. Polanyi shows how this faith was born and nurtured in a profound misreading of history, one that was encouraged, temporarily and in part, by imperial expansion. Imperialism mitigated—by exporting—some of the most dire social and material consequences of this misguided faith.

Ironically, the liberal elite's refusal to intervene was itself a profound disruption of what Polanyi famously called the "double movement" in society (76). As industrialization and capitalist development proceed according to the principles of the self-regulating market (the first movement), society organically responds with measures to tame and transcend the market by subordinating it to democratic control (the second movement). This second movement Polanyi simply called socialism, which he defined as the extension of the democratic principle to the economic sphere (234).

To liberal elites, any such extension was anathema. They regarded reforms involving planning, regulation, or control of the economy as a kind of freedom-destroying violence and remained steadfast to the point of obstinacy in their conviction that only the self-regulating market could resolve the crisis produced by the self-regulating market. So, as the economic turmoil of the 1920s deepened, the liberal elite refused to act, unleashing a "social calamity" (Polanyi's term) that would systematically "liquidate" (again, his term) all of the cultural institutions and organic relations in society (159).

The ruling elite—variously incompetent, delusional, feckless—could neither acknowledge nor address the fundamental incompatibility of capitalism and democracy. This left only two possible solutions: "the extension of the democratic principle from politics to economics—that is, socialism—or the abolition of the democratic 'political sphere' altogether"—fascism (20).

"Eventually," Polanyi writes, "the moment would come when both the economic and the political systems were threatened by complete paralysis. Fear would grip the people, and leadership would be thrust upon those who offered an easy way out at whatever ultimate price. The time was ripe for the fascist solution" (236).

Polanyi was not alone in recognizing the dual nature of this crisis. Already in 1923, the incisive German communist thinker and organizer Clara Zetkin had described fascism "as the result of the decay and disintegration of the capitalist economy"

and a symptom of the dissolution of the wider society.[20] As she wrote, "the masses flocked to fascism in their thousands. It offered a refuge for the politically homeless, for the socially uprooted, the destitute and the disillusioned" who saw no other revolutionary force willing to address their plight and their hopes.[21] That absence is noteworthy, and I'll return to it later on.

***

If fascism is enabled by dual economic and political crises, what makes it appealing to real people who find themselves living through these crises? To address this question, I'll begin again. In *Late Fascism*, Toscano reads the popular appeal of fascism through an illuminating critical synthesis of work by Theodor Adorno, Norbert Guterman, and Henri Lefebvre. I'm going to quickly summarize, slightly modify, and probably mangle Toscano's analysis here in hopes of clarifying the connection between the social frustration and alienation that people experience during severe economic and political crisis and the distinctive response that fascist politics offers.[22]

Life in complex capitalist societies is increasingly disorienting. One has to reckon with lots of big abstractions: credit, profit, finance, trade, capital itself. These are "real abstractions" in the sense that they shape and constrain people's everyday lives, as when they seek a loan or lose a job due to tariffs or outsourcing. Most people are ill-equipped to make sense of these abstractions, and as a result, they internalize feelings of incapacity and helplessness. Their survival is tied to an economic system that they can neither influence nor comprehend.

Democracy promises to give people control over their society and their shared fate, but liberal democracy cannot deliver on this promise, constrained by the refusal of elites to subordinate the economy to popular management. As a result, people experience political futility on top of economic incapacity. Many people become indifferent to democracy; some may even come to resent or despise it.

The fascist imaginary offers a kind of coherence and stability in response to the vertigo of existence in these conditions. It does so by making the abstractions concrete through stereotypes and conspiratorial thinking in a way that provides people with a false but nonetheless palpable sense of understanding and agency. If finance capital is difficult to understand, a cabal of Jewish bankers is much easier; if high housing costs seem hopelessly complex, blaming migrants for driving up demand makes a certain sense. Fascism "explains" complex social reality by blaming the Jews or the migrants or the queers or the communists, who are made to personify the abstractions in a kind of collective compensatory fantasy. People can direct their fear, rage, and anxiety at these out-groups who embody the abstractions they cannot grasp but nonetheless feel to be the source of their precarity. It's obvious what an easy step it is from the personification of social ills to violence against those who embody them.

Indeed, and here I'm going beyond Toscano, violence provides an affective release for the cognitive dissonance that these non-explanations create. This clarifies why quietly detaining and deporting unauthorized migrants (for example) won't do. The spectacle of masked United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents dragging citizens half-naked from their homes, attacking peaceful protesters with chemical weapons, and almost randomly executing them in the streets, is what does the political work of providing catharsis. The violence, the spectacle itself, allows frustrated, alienated people to experience some release, to take a kind of direct or vicarious

revenge against those who they've become convinced, or allowed themselves to believe, are responsible for the genuine ills they experience every day.

Psychologists have debunked the idea that venting or catharsis might diminish future inclination to anger or aggression. In fact, research shows the opposite: violence predicts future violence.[23] Subsequent research also confirms, however, that people do experience pleasure or release when they engage or participate vicariously in violence.[24] That is precisely my point: that catharsis is not a solution but rather a compensatory non-solution. The compensation comes in the form of pleasure and release that people experience in the moment. That this makes them more likely to experience anger and engage in future violence reaffirms that this fascist "solution" is no solution at all and provides some insight into why violence seems inevitably to ratchet up in fascistic societies.[25]

W. E. B. Du Bois understood this mechanism clearly. He recognized that, for the white working class of the US South, a white supremacist regime of open violence and legal domination of Blacks offered a valuable "psychological wage" that compensated their lack of economic opportunity and political agency with an unshakeable sense of superiority through domination.[26] Plenty of research confirms that this kind of domination can create or solidify in-group bonds.[27] So, when people cheer on ICE agents or celebrate the burning of a Koran in a migrant neighborhood, they are participating in a collective compensatory fantasy. The illusory nature of the solution provided by this violence does not diminish its satisfying effects or reduce its political payoff.[28]

It is also vital to understand that violence against targeted populations is what creates and maintains their status as outsiders and enemies. People become outsiders and enemies through violence, through the degradation they suffer. This is the conclusion of a diverse assemblage of scholars of race, including Du Bois, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Fanon, Fields, Omi and Winant, and many others who argue, from different perspectives, that racism produces race—that laws, institutions, and violence create race as a socially salient category.[29]

Think of it this way: the pure race, the great nation, is a myth, a construct. How is it constructed? Through the domination and dehumanization of its Others. Violence against migrants, whether committed by the mob or by the state, whether spectacular or routine, is what makes them outsiders. *Only people who get treated this way can possibly deserve to be treated this way*. Scholars of genocide have observed the same phenomenon. The victim group must first be created through dehumanization before it can be eradicated. Tutsis had to become cockroaches before they could become targets.[30]

I don't mean to deny that longstanding patterns of discrimination, exclusion and hatred exist in many societies. But these patterns have to be maintained through continual dominance and degradation to remain socially salient. To put the point differently, one is made, not born, an outsider, and the making occurs through violence, whether the spectacular violence of the Brownshirts or the everyday legalized violence of the Black Codes. A few people will always believe in blood libel or replacement theory, but getting the masses on board requires flagrant, systematic, sustained public violence and the rhetoric that justifies it by tying it to a larger compensatory fantasy of blame.

This is one reason, by the way, why simply asserting human rights in response to fascist violence doesn't work. Those who are being targeted are not victimized because people have not realized, or have forgotten, that they are human; they are tar-

geted in order to dehumanize them. Depriving them of their human rights is the point. When others seek to defend their rights, they simply reveal themselves to be enemies of the people, race-traitors, communists, and the like. My larger point is that fascist violence is purposeful, although it can seem random. Violence is part of the non-solution that fascism offers because it can reinforce feelings of superiority and in-group solidarity while providing emotional release for people's real economic and social frustrations.

Mercifully, this is not a solution that appeals to everyone. Many people will see through the absurdity of blaming inflation on migrants or sexual violence on shared bathrooms, and so on. Many people will recoil in horror from the violence and cruelty of fascistic politics. That said, let me remind you of Zetkin's observation that the appeal of such politics is greater in the absence of alternative narratives that might help people make sense of the world they must navigate.

This is a sobering observation when we reflect that, since the 1990s, the parties of the erstwhile Left have fully embraced neoliberalism and tried (on the whole unsuccessfully) to compete with the Right on the terrain of culture. Sheri Berman has been an acute observer and critic of this trend.[31] I'm happy to say more about the politics of this later, but for now let me simply remind you of the open letter I cited earlier, which echoes Zetkin in observing that in the past two decades, far-right movements have surged wherever there is "widespread dissatisfaction with political failure to address mounting inequalities and social exclusion." In short, wherever economic crisis meets political impasse, the ultra-Right is ascendant. For us students of Polanyi, this sounds ominously familiar.

***

I submit, then, that we are in the midst of another fascism-enabling crisis. What happened? To explain, and to finally bring human rights back to the center of the story, we must begin again at the conclusion of the Second World War.

For while fascism was defeated in that epic struggle, liberalism was not. Initially at least, it seemed to have been tamed, chastened. The subordination of capitalist markets to the social logic of democracy was the hallmark of what the French describe as *Les Trente Glorieuses*, the 30 marvelous years of peace, stability, and growing prosperity in western Europe following the war. Globally, a system of international financial institutions, the so-called the Bretton Woods system, was designed to ensure economic growth and stability through international coordination, and the United Nations was intended to maintain peace and facilitate international cooperation. These systems were set up specifically to prevent the recurrence of economic and political crises. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlined the promise of freedom, dignity, and equality for everyone. That, at least, is the official story.

Of course, the Cold War, the UN Charter's irreconcilable commitments to both human rights and sovereignty, the reluctance of Europeans to relinquish empire, the rich countries' rejection of a New International Economic Order to bring economic independence and liberation to the newly politically independent peoples of the Third World, and the enduring scourges of racism and apartheid meant that these efforts were always partial, halting, contradictory, and subordinate to the economic and political interests of the most powerful states. *Les Trente Glorieuses* looked rather less glorious from Saigon or Algiers, or, for that matter, from Tehran, Kinshasa, Budapest, Soweto, Montgomery, or Santiago.

Liberalism was tamed, partly, for a while, for some peo-

ple, but it was never defeated. In fact, an influential group of thinkers who called themselves *neo*liberals was working tirelessly to repair and restore liberalism. Their fidelity to the self-regulating market was unwavering, and they held the economy, which they regarded as mysterious and unknowable, in a kind of mystic reverence. As Quinn Slobodian chronicles in *Globalists*, his masterful study of these men (they were all men), the neoliberals, like Polanyi, had concluded that the self-regulating market was a myth.[32] They drew a rather different lesson from this realization, however. For Hayek, von Mises, and others, the problem in the interwar period was that democratically elected governments, facing popular pressure, failed to protect the foundations of the liberal world economy—the gold standard, low tariffs, nondiscriminatory trade and investment policies, and the like. In their eyes, the crisis consisted in the failure of governments to protect the liberal economic order from democratic interference.

What made these thinkers *neo*liberals in their own minds was their realization that preserving capitalism would require creating international institutions that would encase the liberal economy and protect it from democratic interference (88ff.). They had a "new" appreciation for the necessary role of the state, which alone could create what Slobodian calls the "meta-economic or extra-economic conditions for safeguarding capitalism at the scale of the entire world."

Crucially, they opposed a sovereign world state, for in such a state, democratic pressures might also influence political leaders to make unsound economic choices. Instead, they advocated for what has come to be called neoliberal or market federalism, "double government," where economic policy is set and maintained at the international level, safely out of the reach of democratic citizenries in national states (2-6).[33] If you are unfamiliar with this idea, ask the Greeks.[34]

Neoliberal thinkers helped to transform the post-war order into a new regime of global economic governance that, quoting Slobodian, would rely on "institutions to contain potential disruptions from the democratically empowered masses." This system of double government would create "a world without empires but with rules set by supranational bodies operating beyond the reach of any electorate. It was a world where the global economy was safely protected from the demands of redistributive equality and social justice" (264). Again, the neoliberals shared Polanyi's views on the incompatibility of capitalism and democracy. They chose capitalism.

Human rights played an important role in legitimizing this neoliberal worldview. As Jess Whyte explains in her essential book, *The Morals of the Market*, from the mid-century on, the neoliberals had adopted the language of human rights to justify the global order they envisioned.[35] They didn't so much reject social and economic rights, as is sometimes thought, as redefine them as the rights of capital, the free movement of money, goods, services, and labor.

As Whyte shows, once one defines human rights in this way, it becomes a truism that only a liberal economic order can protect them. If human rights simply mean noncoercion, and the market is, by hypothesis, noncoercive, then protecting the market is a condition of freedom (19). The laws and institutions that secure and protect the global market become matters of logical necessity, insulating capitalism from the kind of popular interference or politicization that had led to such disastrous results in the 1930s. Any attempt to intervene in the market—whether to redistribute, to restrict capital mobility, to limit trade—is a threat to human rights.

On this view, liberty becomes the freedom to engage in

market transactions and to do anything that doesn't interfere with the smooth operation of the capitalist economy. Security on this view is the deployment of state violence to protect the market. Equality is simply non-discrimination in the market, a view that rules out redistribution as a kind of unequal treatment (24-5). "Good governance" becomes the euphemism for all of the state intervention and violence needed to guarantee the rights of capital. Human rights, so understood, would become the bedrock of the global "constitutional" order.

This narrow understanding of human rights as individual liberty and property rights resonated with the ideas and political leanings of the human rights movements that grew to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, as Whyte details. Some of these campaigns were created specifically to provide human rights arguments against the New International Economic Order. While the big human rights organizations were willing to criticize authoritarian regimes for torture, detention, disappearances, and so on, they stayed scrupulously silent on the "political" questions of economic justice (Chapter 4). As Samuel Moyn argues, this tendency was reinforced in the late 1980s, when democratization movements in Eastern Europe emphasized civil rights and individual liberty in their struggle against authoritarian regimes that, despite manifest shortcomings, were solid on social and economic rights.[36]

At the end of the Cold War, the neoliberal understanding of human rights slid neatly into place as the ethical basis for neoliberal global governance. Commenting on the Velvet Revolutions of 1989, Ernst-Ulrich Petersmann, a German neoliberal regarded as the chief architect of GATT/WTO, called for "another 'human rights revolution' in favor of non-discriminatory open markets, global competition and more effective protection of human rights."[37] Instead of subordinating

capitalism to democracy, the neoliberals created a world order that insulated global capitalism *from* democracy through an increasingly intricate and intrusive regime of neoliberal global governance. As Mark Blyth succinctly put it in a blurb for Slobodian's book, neoliberals reinvented global liberalism to make capitalism safe from democracy. Polanyi had been turned on his head.

Under this neoliberal regime inequality has skyrocketed, wealth has been redistributed upwards and concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and organized labor has been subjected to ferocious attacks. Continual tax cuts, paired with endless austerity, have led to the dismantling of social mechanisms meant to cushion people from the vagaries of the market.[38]

Liberal democracy and neoliberal human rights have failed spectacularly as programs of human liberation—*because they never were programs of human liberation.* They were always about liberating capitalism from democracy. The promise of market freedom is liberation *from* taxation and social services, the freedom to compete, to win big or sleep rough.

Unsurprisingly, this program has not won over the masses. Its unpopularity became apparent first in the so-called "developing countries," where the need for good governance and the rule of law meant that democracy had to be constrained and often dispensed with altogether. In good liberal fashion, authoritarianism was often blamed on the backwardness or irrationality of populations not yet ready for freedom and competition; democracy would follow the prosperity that neoliberal capitalism would bring and therefore could not be allowed to prevent or delay it. But there has been a growing need for authoritarian limits on democracy in the so-called "advanced societies" of the North as well. In these countries, capital finds a useful ally in ultra-Right politics that blames

migrants for the economic difficulties and anxieties that many people are experiencing. As Toscano points out, neoliberalism has to be populist because it isn't popular.[39]

The point here is that liberal democracy and human rights are deeply entangled in the production of economic crisis and political paralysis. The ultra-Right sees and is exploiting these connections. To help us see them, we can turn to Jacques Rancière's illuminating critique of human rights. He maintains that there is a widespread feeling in the rich countries that rights have become empty, useless. As he so vividly puts it:

> When [rights] are of no use, you do the same as charitable persons do with their old clothes. You give them to the poor. Those rights that appear to be useless in their place are sent abroad, along with medicine and clothes, to people deprived of medicine, clothes, and rights. It is in this way... that the Rights of Man become the rights of those who have no rights, the rights of bare human beings subjected to inhuman repression and inhuman conditions of existence. They become humanitarian rights.[40]

Rights become empty, Rancière argues, because they have been depoliticized. They are no longer useful in contesting social exclusion and challenging social hierarchies—including, I would emphasize, social inequalities and economic precarity. In the two decades since Rancière wrote, liberal democracy and human rights have come to appear not simply empty and useless, but part of the problem. Numerous critics have condemned human rights as facilitating, as complicit in, or as powerless against neoliberalism and economic injustice.[41]

Contemporary anti-globalism in the rich world parallels this view, stemming in large part from a popular perception

that the global economy unfairly advantages countries with low labor costs. These same countries, in this perception, also benefit from generous aid and nation-building programs funded by the wealthier states. Ironically, people dwelling in the rich countries, which have benefited tremendously from the hierarchical global economic arrangements of the past few centuries, nonetheless feel themselves tremendously aggrieved by globalization.[42]

They are not altogether wrong. Neoliberal capitalism has disproportionately benefitted a rich few globally—while triggering a precipitous drop in living standards and economic security for many people in the "rich" and "poor" countries alike.[43] Meanwhile, as benefits and services suffer cut after cut, trillions of dollars remain available for the "reconstruction" of Afghanistan, for a frankly rather ambivalent defense of Ukraine that appears to help arms manufacturers more than it has helped Ukrainians, and for genocide in Gaza.

People in the rich countries of the North are angry. They feel ignored and betrayed. The chance at a relatively secure and prosperous life that they feel they were promised or owed has been taken away, and they are eager to find someone to blame. Never mind whether those expectations were deserved; the sense of loss and disillusionment that accompanies their disappearance is real. The door to fascism is again open, and the ultra-Right is happy to walk in.

Here's how Stephen Miller, White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Homeland Security Advisor to President Trump, recently characterized the post-War global order in a tweet earlier this year:

> Not long after World War II the West dissolved its empires and colonies and began sending colossal sums

> of taxpayer-funded aid to these former territories (despite having already made them far wealthier and more successful). The West opened its borders, a kind of reverse colonization, providing welfare and thus remittances, while extending to these newcomers and their families not only the full franchise but preferential legal and financial treatment over the native citizenry. The neoliberal experiment, at its core, has been a long self-punishment of the places and peoples that built the modern world.[44]

In light of accounts like these, it is hardly surprising that many people applaud tariffs, huge cuts in foreign aid, mass deportations, and other punitive measures against those they have been told are responsible for their problems. It's no wonder they despise the political class that shamelessly promoted neoliberalism, often while enriching themselves.

The anti-woke cultural politics of the ultra-Right, its venomous attacks on equity, diversity, and inclusion, and on minoritized populations more generally, are the domestic flipside of this reaction against neoliberal globalization. While rights in rich countries may have been discarded as useless by members of privileged majority groups, for minoritized populations, who endure multiple and overlapping forms of oppression, they remain vital. Rights protections for members of these groups matter. Programs that expand their rights are just and necessary. Intersectional politics that attends to people's different social positions and experiences is an integral and urgent part of any broad-based program of liberation.

The problem is that, having abandoned any socialist commitments and increasingly shy even of social-democratic ones, politicians of the erstwhile Left increasingly embraced a version of identity politics that ignored social and economic issues while promoting programs and protections for minoritized populations as a way to burnish their progressive credentials. This politics, cynically shorn of its necessary and historical connection with social and economic liberation and therefore deprived of a solid foundation in a cross-racial, class-based coalition for justice, was easily caricatured by ultra-Right agitators as a "divisive" demand for "special treatment" on the part of minoritized groups and used to whip up resentment among the anxious white majority.[45]

Please don't mistake me: I am not blaming identity politics for resurrecting fascism, as some commentators have done. I am blaming liberals. My point is that, for a long time, liberals have ignored or avoided questions about rising debt, inflation, inequality, unaffordability, social instability, and the collapse of communities. Their instrumental embrace of a hollowed-out identity politics was mainly a strategy of distraction and evasion.

Meanwhile, the ultra-Right does not shy away from these economic questions, even if its answers are ludicrous. When people are angry and afraid, they become more susceptible to fascist propaganda—again, especially in the absence of any genuinely liberatory alternative. (It is worth noting in this connection that ten percent of the people who voted for the new democratic socialist mayor of New York City, Zohran Mamdani, had voted for Donald Trump in a presidential election less than a year earlier.[46])

In addition, it's often not the worst-off, but rather those who feel they still have something to lose, who gravitate toward a politics that promises to restore what's been lost (a point reflected in polling data on support for the ultra-Right). Of course, fascism never restores what's been lost. Like liber-

alism, it seeks mainly to ensure order and property, whatever the cost. But while liberalism can only offer more of the same, fascism offers something ominously different: a new (or restored) political order, built on racial privilege, which pays its psychological wages in the currency of irrational and spectacular violence against those who are made to personify the real abstractions of the neoliberal global economy. In this politics, domination soothes feelings of incapacity and impotence, and a sense of racialized belonging counteracts alienation. None of this solves the real economic problems people are facing, but it does at least acknowledge those problems.

***

Does this mean that democracy and human rights are exhausted? Is there no role for them in resisting and overcoming resurgent fascism? Let me begin one final time, on a somewhat more hopeful note. I should warn you that my colleagues tell me I'm not so good at the hopeful part. I am trying—but hope has to be founded in honesty, not in unwarranted optimism, which is oftentimes just nostalgia for a liberalism that never was.

Given all that I've said this afternoon, human rights might seem hopelessly compromised, like part of the problem, or in any case, inadequate or ill-suited for addressing it. Again, many critics have reached precisely this conclusion, pointing not only to the neoliberal entanglements of human rights, but also to their long and ugly imperial histories and their problematic universality. At the same time, many activists and movements remain committed to human rights as an indispensable part of their practice.

I'm currently finishing up a book that explores the emancipatory potential of human rights. Along the way, I have to explain why people reach such starkly divergent conclusions about them. My argument is that questions about the political character and effects of human rights all too often get treated as questions having to do with their nature or essence—as questions about what human rights *really are.* Instead, I treat them as questions about what people do with human rights.

By focusing on what people do with human rights, it's possible to bypass the rather stale debates over whether they are Western or universal, imperialistic or subversive, neoliberal or radical. Human rights have been used in all of these ways, and many more too. My approach directs our attention away from broad and probably unanswerable metaphysical questions about the nature of rights and toward practical questions about what role human rights have played and might play in emancipatory political struggles.[47] Focusing on what people do with human rights helps to show that we're not stuck with the neoliberal version that protects the rights of capital and facilitates economic globalization.

This is not the time to rehearse the arguments of the book; you have been listening patiently and surely have ideas and objections you are eager to express. Let me conclude with two observations, one about fascism, and one about human rights and antifascist politics.

With respect to fascism, the key is to attack the roots of the political crises that enable it. It won't work, as I think Kamala Harris learned, to try to frighten people about the dangers of fascism in the absence of a program to address the crises that are enabling it. Donald Trump's political success comes not from his policies or his personality but from his promises—always ultimately empty—to address these crises.

On the subject of Mr. Trump, his purposeful dismantling

of the global constitution that neoliberals constructed to protect the global economy from democratic "interference" creates a political opening. One would of course wish that it were happening otherwise—peacefully, respectfully, multilaterally, instead of in a fit of narcissistic grievance and megalomania. Nonetheless, there is an opening. At the moment, this opening is facilitating gangster capitalism, but it might be seized instead to remake the global economy democratically, for people rather than for profit. Sadly, there is every indication that, should liberals regain power, they would rush to restore the neoliberal economic order and hail this as a victory, and themselves as our saviors—which is why I think they are unlikely to regain power. The product they're offering is not only past its use-by date, it is rotten and it reeks. That, I've been arguing, is why we have fascists in the first place.

With respect to human rights, I see striking similarities between the liberatory human rights projects I discuss in the book and the growing anti-fascist resistance that is challenging fascistic violence and fascist politics everywhere it erupts:

- First, the resistance is intersectional. It is broad-based, multi-racial, and intentional about the need for people protected by various kinds of privilege to take frontline roles in confronting the agents of state violence. Tragically, as we have seen lately in Minneapolis, that protection is far from perfect.

- Second, the anti-fascist resistance puts people and communities at the center of its organizing. National-level protests and coordination are essential, but effective agency and resistance have to be locally anchored, especially in a vast country like the United States.

- Third, none of these resistance movements is solely defensive. They are fighting not just against fascism but also for alternative political futures that are free of fascism, because they eradicate fascism's economic and political wellsprings. These alternative futures are reflected in their rhetoric, their strategies, and their organizational models.

- Finally, and closely related, the anti-fascist resistance is consciously anti-neoliberal. Activists and organizers know that fascism did not drop out of the sky. Fascization has been a gradual process linked to neoliberalism's growing reliance on violence to keep capitalism safe from democracy. We see this violence in the schools, in prisons, in the dismantling of the welfare state, at the border, and increasingly, in the streets.

In the book, I argue that human rights *can* be used for emancipation. Given everything that I've said here today, I hope that counts as at least a somewhat optimistic conclusion. The similarities I've just shared with you further suggest that emancipatory human rights might be put to good and important use in a larger anti-fascist politics, which is more optimistic still. In the end, however, fascism is not a theoretical problem; we need to *make* that politics.

Endnotes

1 I am grateful to Christina Garsten and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study for the invitation to deliver this lecture. My thinking about this topic has been shaped and enriched by many conversations, including with Jeannie Morefield, Roger Rouse, and especially Patricia Donohue.

2 Readers in North America should note that liberal and liberalism do not refer to "left" or "Democratic" in this essay. I use these terms strictly to refer to a political philosophy or ideology anchored in individual rights and liberties, including private property, personal responsibility, toleration, limited government, and *laissez-faire* capitalism. That many Democrats and many politicians on the erstwhile left in Europe subscribe to these views is an important factor in the critique I offer here.

3 Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies.* Key Concepts in Political Theory (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 37–8.

4 Griffin's term is "palingenetic," from the Greek *palin* (again) and *genesis* (birth); ibid., 40. Since the term is unfamiliar, I opted for "regenerative" in the text.

5 Andreas Malm and The Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 257ff.

6 Paisley Currah, "The Anti-Trans Playbook," *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 2025. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2025/12/18/the-anti-trans-playbook-paisley-currah/ (accessed March 16, 2026).

7 See https://www.npr.org/2024/07/29/nx-s1-5055616/jd-vance-childless-cat-lady-history (accessed March 16, 2026).

8 Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2020).

9 Umberto Eco, "Eternal Fascism," *Utne Reader*, November–December, 1995.

10 I do not mean to imply that the views espoused by fascist leaders are necessarily sincerely held. I simply refer to the views fascists espouse.

11 "A Century Later: A Renewed Open Letter Against the Return of Fascism," June 14, 2025. https://stopreturnfascism.org/english/ (accessed December 31, 2025).

12 Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso Books, 2023), 46–7.

13 "Professor Diamond: Fascism Isn't Back—But Its Features Are," interview with the European Center of Populism Studies, June 24, 2025. https://www.populismstudies.org/professor-diamond-fascism-isnt-back-but-its-features-are/ (accessed December 31, 2025).

14 Robert O Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *The Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (1998): 12.

15 See Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, New edition (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 2022); Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968);

Angela Y. Davis and Bettina Aptheker, "Preface," in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (New York: Third Press, 1971); Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation," ibid. Malcolm X rarely used the term fascism, but his frequent discussions of white supremacy and colonial relations speak to the issue; Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

16 See Malm and The Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel*, 243.

17 Geoff Eley, "What Is Fascism and Where Does It Come From?," *History Workshop Journal* 91, no. 1 (2021): 14ff.

18 Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," 11ff.

19 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975). To avoid clutter in the notes, I will provide parenthetical page references throughout the section discussing Polanyi's work.

20 In David Beetham, *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-war Period* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1983): 104.

21 Ibid., 106.

22 My discussion in the next three paragraphs recapitulates key arguments and ideas of Chapter 4 of Toscano, *Late Fascism*.

23 Russell G. Geen and Michael B. Quanty, "The Catharsis of Aggression: An Evaluation of a Hypothesis," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Leonard Berkowitz (Academic Press, 1977).

24 B. J. Bushman, R. F. Baumeister, and C. M. Phillips, "Do People Aggress to Improve Their Mood? Catharsis Beliefs, Affect Regulation Opportunity, and Aggressive Responding," *Journal of Personal Social Psychology* 81, no. 1 (2001).

25 There is evidence to suggest that racial hostility increases after acts of violence (for example, Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen, "Explaining Preferences from Behavior: A Cognitive Dissonance Approach," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 2, 2018) and that perception of cultural threat leads to violent extremism (for example, Milan Obaidi et al., "Cultural Threat Perceptions Predict Violent Extremism Via Need for Cognitive Closure," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 20, 2023). In addition, actions shape attitudes, and not simply the other way around (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen, 2018). Together these findings suggest an explanation for the ratchet effect in fascistic societies.

26 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

27 One leading explanation is social dominance theory. For an overview, see Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, "Social Dominance Theory," in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Paul A. M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1999).

28 On the participatory political psychology of cruelty, see Cristina Beltrán, *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

29 See again Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*; Fanon,

Black Skin, White Masks; The Wretched of the Earth; see also Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181, no. 1 (1990); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd edition. (New York Routledge, 2015).

30 Rowan Savage, "Modern Genocidal Dehumanization: A New Model," *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 2 (2013).

31 See, for example, Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019).

32 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

33 Adam Harmes, "New Constitutionalism and Multilevel Governance," in *New Constitutionalism and World Order*, ed. Stephen Gill and A Claire Cutler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Harmes, *The Politics of Fiscal Federalism: Neoliberalism Versus Social Democracy in Multilevel Governance* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); Cristina Lafont, "Neoliberal Globalization and the International Protection of Human Rights," *Constellations* 25, no. 3 (2018).

34 Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?: Europe, Austerity and the Threat to Global Stability* (New York: Random House, 2016).

35 Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso Books, 2019). Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

36 See Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press /Harvard University Press, 2018), 180–185.

37 Cited in Slobodian, *Globalists*, 279.

38 See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2014).

39 Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 70.

40 Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 307.

41 See again Moyn, *Not Enough*.

42 Michael Goodhart, "The Future of Human Rights Is Local," in *Human Rights at the Intersections: Transformation through Local, Global, and Cosmopolitan Challenges*, ed. Anthony Tirado Chase, et al. (London: Bloomsbury/I.B. Tauris, 2023).

43 See again Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

44 https://x.com/StephenM/status/2008035701804208224, January 4, 2026 (accessed March 19, 2026).

45 See, for example, The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, "The 1776 Report," Chair Larry P. Arnn, Vice Chair Carol Swain, and Executive Director Matthew Spalding (online: The National Archives, 2021).

46 According to an NBC News exit poll; see https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/-love-underdog-trump-zohran-mamdani-voters-are-center-unexpected-relat-rcna248388 (accessed March 19, 2026).

47 For a preview of some of the key arguments, see Michael Goodhart, "The Human Rights Project and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Rights," *De Ethica* 9, no. 1 (2025).

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