Introduction: Fascist and Antifascist Histories in Stages and Ages

Although what follows is a history of antifascism, the inspiration for writing it was a classic essay on the history of fascism. That essay was written at the end of the twentieth century by the much-venerated scholar Robert O. Paxton, based on a paper that he had given at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris in 1994. Paxton's essay, titled "The Five Stages of Fascism," appeared in print in the *Journal of Modern History* in 1998. Since then, it has been reprinted elsewhere and was also the basis for Paxton's 2004 book-length study, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, which has become a classic in its own right in the historiography of fascism. "The Five Stages of Fascism" has been broadly celebrated and widely cited, though the essay's greater impact is not of the sort that can be measured neatly by citational statistics but rather is of the sort that needs to be inferred from reading through the historiography with an eye toward its shifts and pivots. Evidence of the essay's historiographical impact, some of it obvious and some of it subtle, is imprinted onto a good portion of the scholarly literature produced since the publication of "The Five Stages of Fascism." It is there in the structures of argumentation, in the authorial vocabularies, in the givens of logic and points of reference, and in the methodological strategies that came to typify much of the literature. Paxton's emphasis on political practice; his phenomenological insistence on studying fascism "in motion"; his particularly disciplined, yet distinctly idiosyncratic, method of comparison; his embrace of explicit functionalism in defining fascism; his imaginative and open-ended articulation of what he calls fascism's "mobilizing passions" – all of these very Paxtonian wonts and techniques have soaked their way into the field well beyond the specific points in the texts where his work is cited.

What I offer in this work is an act of critical homage. Both the homage and the critique are sincere, and both are purposeful. Paxton's is a wonderful essay to think with, and, as with a good many great works, the thinking it invites eventually lends itself to considerable opposition.

In this case, the opposition hinges on those "stages" in Paxton's title. As I'll explain, Paxton's move to break the history of fascism into stages of development relates, for him, to one of his essay's two "principal methodological proposals" for studying fascism.[1] The crux of Paxton's decision to conceptualize distinct "stages of fascism" is that doing so

[1] Robert O. Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 1 (Mar. 1998), 21.

helps him pivot to a specific set of procedures he uses for conducting comparative history. And for Paxton comparative history is the key to a more sophisticated and historically richer understanding of fascism as a whole.

The work you're reading, however, is not an attempt to understand fascism in the whole, but rather antifascism in the whole. At least, that is so in the most immediate, or most obvious, sense of the work's aims. Ultimately, though, my intent is to draw together the two histories so as to suggest that each is exceptionally revealing of the other: Fundamental to the study of fascism's history is the study of antifascism's; fundamental to the study of antifascism's history is the study of fascism's. From such a line of argument, it might quickly follow that one of the more urgent reasons to study antifascism is that doing so draws out into plain view certain qualities of fascism, including qualities generally obscured from the eye of the scholar who studies fascism head-on. One of the main propositions that prompted me to write this work is my contention that these qualities of fascism – the ones that appear at the fore when one approaches fascist history *through* antifascist history – are the very ones most in need of recognition and confrontation in today's world.

Though Paxton has paid very little attention to antifascist politics in his studies of fascism, my argument stressing the historical entanglement of the two is, all the same, indebted to one of his main methodological arguments, an argument he presents in "The Five Stages of Fascism" in the form of a plea to scholars and students of fascism to study their subject "contextually." Paxton makes this plea to study fascism contextually after charging that previous scholars of fascism had failed to do so. The charge relates to Paxton's broader critique of fascism's historiography as it stood at the twentieth century's end: In his essay, he faults scholars of fascism for two widespread "errors of approach," to use his phrase. Based on what Paxton has to say about these errors, though, it would be more to the point to think of them as errors of conception, or even preconception, rather than as ones of approach per se. This is so because the two errors take place, in Paxton's telling, in the offending scholars' very starting premises, prior to any authorial act of textual argumentation, prior to any actual analytical movement – that is, prior to any *approach* – toward their texts' subjects. The errors have already happened, rather, in that nebulous zone of assumption and intuition from whence scholars might begin to piece together and launch their explicit arguments. The two errors are (1) the conception (or preconception) of fascism as if it were static

and (2) the conception (or preconception) of fascism in isolation from its surroundings (or even as if it were an aberration *from* its surroundings, essentially atypical, or anomalous, inconsistent with the larger political order, even freakish).[2] Against the first error, the (pre)conception of stasis, Paxton proposes his framework of "stages," to which I'll come; against the second, the (pre)conception of isolation, he proposes a heavy dose of context.

Concerning context: For Paxton, to study fascism in isolation is to miss something elemental to its formation and potency. The crucial point, he stresses, is that any instantiation of fascism "is ensnared in a web of reciprocal influences with allies or rivals in its country's civil society." Consider two elements of this claim. First: Paxton's idea of context – his "web of reciprocal influences" – concerns fascists' interaction with their surroundings rather than the surroundings themselves. The "reciprocal" is key. By "context," Paxton isn't after the more vernacular meaning of the word – those surroundings themselves, or the background, environment, or setting. And he isn't after the typical Marxist implication – structure, or material base. (Paxton's explanation of and for fascism is always radically political; he treats the Marxist historiography of fascism with polite skepticism; he challenges it by emphasizing fascism's cross-class appeal and by generally minimizing capital's role; speaking more generally, one could say that in method, interpretative perspective, and scholarly temperament Paxton personifies liberal historiography.) Rather, Paxton's meaning of "context" is more etymological: he means "context" to signify the work of weaving something together, as if the making of fascism were the making of a textile (con- + texere). Then, the second point: The web of reciprocal influences that Paxton is stressing with his plea to study fascism contextually – so as to see the weaving together of the thing – is of a very particular sort. Aside from the one reference to "rivals" that I quoted earlier, Paxton unpacks his notion of studying fascism contextually by focusing solely on acts of conscious collaboration among fascists and their enablers – generally speaking, the "conservative elites" who have "opened the gates" of power to fascists.[3] In *The Anatomy of Fascism*, where Paxton has more room to explain, he details what for him are the two classic examples of conservative complicity with fascism: The invitation to govern that the Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III extended to Benito Mussolini

[2] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 9–10.
[3] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 10, 18.

and the similar accommodation that the German chancellor Franz von Papen afforded to Adolf Hitler.[4] As classic examples, these work well. What's more striking, and more consequential to Paxton's argument, though, is that he uses the discussion of conservatives' complicity as his analytical frame bounding his view of fascism's context. That is: studying fascism contextually, in Paxton's analysis, exclusively means studying the collaboration of fascists and conservatives. The collaboration encompasses the context.

But it's not much of a stretch to extend Paxton's basic insight – concerning the value of studying fascism contextually – well beyond where he takes this insight himself, in practice. Surely fascism's foes have shaped its history as well, no? To assume otherwise, or to leave the question of influence as Paxton leaves it, circumscribed by instances of explicit alliance and conscious collaboration, is to interpret influence as a rather straightforward, almost arithmetic condition of precalculated intentionality. (Paxton's intentionalist rendering of fascism's making is a good example of the ways his analysis fits so squarely within liberal historiography: Free agents compacting consciously to advance shared, albeit limited, interests and aims, their ideas given new form and their thinking given new shape by the exchange.) We choose our allies; we choose our influences. A denser reading of context – as a much more gnarled web of causative forces and dialectical influences, its tangles messier, intractable and inscrutable, with many of even the greatest influences strictly unchosen and absorbed only half- or entirely unconsciously – would prod its reader to embed fascism within a much trickier, eerier, more chaotic, and uncannier political domain, one marked by ideological strife, anxiety and confusion, force, fear, and illusion. Such a reading of context works well enough not only for making sense of fascism but also as a general rule for making sense of all the modern world's politics. Liberalism, say, is surely shaped by the conservatism with which it contends; anticommunism is surely shaped by the communism which it condemns. That said, though, well beyond any such general rule, the point applies with special force to fascism.

This is so for two primary reasons.

First and foremost: Fascism stands out among modernity's major ideological forms – the "great 'isms,'" Paxton calls them – for its practitioners' dramatic, meaning-making performances of violence and for their

[4] Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 96–101.

intense sacralization of violence.[5] To be sure, practitioners of modernity's other leading isms have deployed violence instrumentally (as have fascists). But – unlike the others – fascists have also put faith in violence as a sublime and transcendent metaphysical experience, a flight into expanded consciousness both transformative and revelatory in nature. Fascists have leaped into the enactment of violence as if to make of it an escape from morality into a volatile freedom beyond, as if to make of it a surrender to brute force's mercurial and ungovernable powers. (In this way, violence has served fascists as a rite through which to shed the very liberal consciousness of intentionality, rationality, and free agency that Paxton draws upon for his notion of context as freely chosen collaboration.) In short, fascism is made, most emphatically, not in its consensual acts of tactical alliance and transactional collaboration with conservatives but rather in the singular acts of violence that its adherents visit upon their foes and victims.[6]

The second reason is closely related to this valorization of violence, and it constitutes another of fascism's core values: hatred. That is, fascism also stands out among modernity's great isms for its practitioners' uninhibited, truth-corroding effusions of hatred and for the radical trust that they have put in hatred to unlock entire realms of arcane counter-truths and forms of power hidden away from normal political life. To be sure, practitioners of modernity's other great isms have acted on hatred and have disseminated it in myriad forms. But – unlike those others – fascists have also taken hatred itself as a code. This is so in a double sense. For fascists, hatred has worked as a code in that it has imposed on them an assortment of expectations and principles of conduct – it's *been* their code – and, more to my point, hatred also has worked as a code for fascists in that it has functioned for them as a sort of cryptographical key, letting them encode and decode their experiences according to a distinctly fascist script. Regarding the encoding: Among each other, fascists have worked out and drawn on specific and elaborate discourses of hatred to the point that they could be said to be speaking in code. A skillfully turned expression of hatred affirms fascist belonging and tightens its bonds. To express with dexterity any of the well-established fascist hatreds verifies one's exclusive belonging, it verifies one's fascism, like the adroit execution of a secret handshake. This is because it takes dedication to iron out the particularities woven through

[5] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 4.
[6] On fascism and violence, see Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 73–81.

fascism's language of hatred, it takes dedication to speak the language fluently – to learn the code. Regarding the decoding: Out in the world, fascists rely on hatred to function as a sort of algorithm for deciphering the complex or otherwise confounding. An elaborately calculated hatred can descramble social life's information overload into a simple fascist plaintext. Again, for those who possess the code, it both encrypts and decrypts.

In sum, regarding the larger point of putting fascism in its proper context, beyond Paxton's frame of intentional collaboration: Whatever relation the theoretical friend–enemy distinction may have to fascist history, it is fascism's relationship to its enemies, and not to its friends, that has been the decisive, and the distinctive, force setting fascism apart.

Yet, set fascism apart as it may, this dynamic all the same obviously has implications for antifascism's history. Think of antifascism as critical context to the text of fascism; think of fascism as critical context to the text of antifascism. It's true that antifascism has meant, to those who have practiced it, more than the act of opposing fascism, but it's also true that the act of opposing fascism has been antifascists' main work – often to the point of obsession. More than most isms, antifascism has taken shape and been given content by the imperatives of its ongoing struggle against its primary adversary. Again, fundamental to the study of fascism's history is the study of antifascism's; fundamental to the study of antifascism's history is the study of fascism's. In the body of this essay, I sketch an outline of antifascism's history that might lend itself to a reworking of fascism's history, a reworking more attentive to the question of what fascism has looked like, throughout its history, to its most direct enemies (and most searching critics), throughout their history.

Those comments should suffice for introducing Paxton's idea of context. The plea to study fascism contextually, though, is not Paxton's main methodological proposal. His main methodological proposal relates to his use of stages to structure fascism's history. Tellingly, his proposal isn't a brief arguing for the use of stages in the study of fascism but, rather, a brief arguing for what he calls the "discrimination among stages." That is, Paxton begins the act of explicit argumentation at a point of logic already beyond any working out of his notion that fascism has, as he comments in passing, its own "cycle" of "successive stages." Because he bypasses the task of positing his notion in the form of a scholarly claim in need of justification, it remains throughout the text always a presupposition. Yet all the same it serves as the base for the two-part argument that Paxton does build: The argument that discriminating among stages is useful

for comparison and that this is fortuitous because "comparison works revealingly with fascisms."[7]

Quoting a fellow historian, Paxton writes that "comparison is 'a way of thinking more than a method.'"[8] In Paxton's case, this is true. Elevated to a way of thinking, though, comparison comes at a considerable cost. This is in sharp contrast to comparison as a historical method: Historians typically rely on the method of comparison to draw out particulars about each of the subjects being compared and to prompt insights based on those particulars. For historians, acts of comparison are generally well worth the effort. But comparison as a way of thinking, to my mind, cramps the thinker's historical imagination in ways well worth fighting against and vanquishing. Paxton's model of "the five stages of fascism" is a case in point.

Consider one of the more telling aspects of Paxton's discussion of stages: that he depicts them as if they were object conditions, not as, say, heuristic metaphors he's leaning on to work through a larger idea. This aspect of his writing is related to his bypassing of the task of claim-making for his notion of stages. It's in the process of skipping that task that he implicitly poses the stages as objectively real. In his argument, the way this unfolds is that Paxton (a) argues for the value of comparisons; (b) qualifies that "one must compare what is comparable"; then (c) skips directly to the claim that, because one must compare what is comparable, "we must distinguish the different stages of fascism in time."[9] The asserted argument, the plea to distinguish, serves to smuggle past the reader's eye, and into the reader's mind, the notion that there really are such things as "stages of fascism." The asserted issue at hand is already the question of distinguishing among these stages that he has neglected to verify for the reader.

Regarding the work of distinguishing, Paxton notes that historians have long differentiated "between movements and regimes" and adds, "I believe we can usefully distinguish more stages than that." He explains, "I propose to isolate five of them." These five stages are (1) the "initial creation" of fascist movements; (2) their "rooting as parties"; (3) their acquisition of state power; (4) their exercise of state power; (5) "radicalization or entropy." This model for studying fascism, in short, is an outline of Paxton's interpretation of the historical trajectories taken by Mussolini-era Italian

[7] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 10, 21, 22.
[8] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 10.
[9] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 11.

Fascism and Hitler-era German Nazism. Paxton sees these two trajectories as parallel until the final stage, in which, Paxton assesses, Fascist Italy degraded into entropy, whereas "Nazi Germany alone experienced full radicalization."[10] For Paxton, then, it is axiomatic that Mussolini-era Italian Fascism and Hitler-era German Nazism were fascist – fascist movements, then fascist states. And it is axiomatic that they revealed fascism in its true and ideal form. Thus, for Paxton's model of comparison, they are the fixed points of reference, the constants against which all others are to be compared.

And so the logic of the model is a mix of idealism and empiricism. Paxton has an ideal of fascism in his head – and it is the empirical example enacted, in sum, by Mussolini's Italian Fascism and Hitler's German Nazism. The use of the "stagist" model, for Paxton, is to compare against these two prime examples any number of other instantiations of (potential) fascism. Through comparison of this sort, he seeks to "identify the principal factors in the varying success of specific cases, and even to isolate the constants." Paxton thinks in terms of specific and entirely separate historical instantiations of fascism. He sees these as radically self-contained and distinct – stressing the discrete and instantial character of his "specific cases," he refers to them as "fascisms," plural and separate. Thus, he writes of "early fascisms," "European fascisms," "first fascisms," "the first European fascisms," and the like.[11] Using his stagist model, Paxton asks what might account for the success or failure of a fascist movement to "root" itself as a mass party and thus develop to the second stage. He then proceeds similarly through the rest of the stages. According to Paxton's analysis, fascisms either successfully develop further or fail to through a sequence of check points – they either succeed in developing or they fail to develop. What does a successfully rooted fascist party do? It successfully acquires state power or it fails to do so. What does a fascism that has successfully acquired state power do? It either successfully exercises state power or fails to do so. What does a fascism that has successfully exercised state power do? It either radicalizes or degrades into entropy. The structure is rigid, even polemically reductivist.

It's worth asking, why would this be so? Paxton's historical model fits squarely within a broad mode of thought that became ascendant across the social sciences just as he received his academic training. This mode of thought became known as "modernization theory." More than a theory,

[10] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 11, 20.
[11] Paxton, "Five Stages of Fascism," 3, 10, 11, 12.

really, modernization functioned for Paxton's cohort of social scientists as a deep-seated, even reflexive ideology – more a general set of preconceptions or presuppositions than a conscious integration of claims, aims, and theories.[12] The engine of modernization theorizing was in the study of economics, but its logic became insinuated into every discipline of the social sciences. Its classic enunciation was that of Walt Rostow, the economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, in his 1960 book *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Paxton received his Ph.D. in 1963 from Harvard, hardly more than a mile up the road from MIT). Rostow posited that "all societies" lie "within one of five categories." They "develop" from one stage to the next (or fail to do so). All societies begin in the stage of "the traditional society." They then "develop" (or fail to do so) all the way to history's endpoint, stage five, "the age of high mass-consumption," exemplified by the United States since World War Two. As such, Rostow combined idealism and empiricism; he conceptualized societies as radically self-contained and distinct units; having conceptualized societies thus, he then categorized them into five stages; he did so by acts of comparison; for his acts of comparison, he relied on a prime example (the United States), his ideal drawn from history, against which to compare all others; his model's structure is rigid, even polemically reductivist.[13]

The developmentalist social thought that underpinned modernization theory also underpins Paxton's model of stages. The most striking – and, to my mind, most consequential – attribute of this developmentalist thought is its peculiar caging of time and space. Like Rostow's, Paxton's model seals each national society from its larger contemporary world, and it sets

[12] Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[13] W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 4–16. Walt Rostow understood himself, with his reductivism, to be countering a stage-based model of historical change formulated by Karl Marx. However, the historian and political theorist Gary Wilder argues that such a stadial (or "stagist," to borrow from Wilder's vocabulary) understanding of Marx's idea of history is mistaken. Wilder writes that "readers often interpret" Marx's references to past modes of production "as evidence of a stagist view of history. But I understand them, at least in Marx's late work, as attempts to identify a standpoint on the basis of which to claim that things really could be otherwise." For Wilder, readers often forget that Marx accentuated contradictions in historical forms of production; Marx did so, Wilder argues, to find emancipatory resources embedded within the contradictions. "Marx neither locates human emancipation in past social formations nor projects it to the end of a fixed set of developmental stages through which all societies must pass." Gary Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 167, 169.