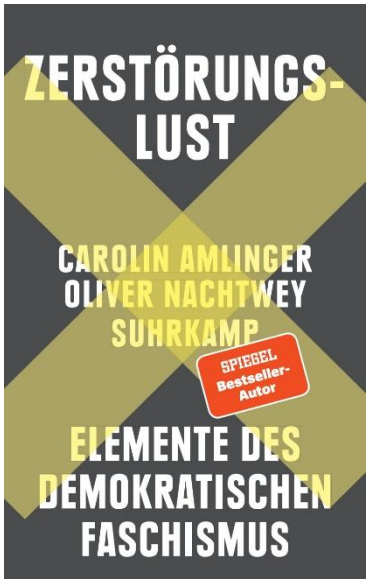

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Destructive Desires

Elements of Democratic Fascism

(Original German title: Zerstörungslust

Elemente des demokratischen Faschismus)

453 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 13 October 2025

Introduction

> "We will not stand where the flame of the torch has not opened the way for us, where the *flamethrower* has not accomplished the great purification through [annihilation]. He who denies the whole cannot draw fruit from the parts… Since we are the true, real, and irreconcilable enemies of the [bourgeois] we enjoy his degradation" *Ernst Jünger, 'Nationalismus' und Nationalismus* (1929).

In autumn 2024, Kevin Roberts, president of the American Heritage Foundation and main architect of the radical "Project 2025" plan for a large-scale restructuring of the United States, published a programme of action, as if by way of confession. Its title: *Dawn's Early Light: Burning Down Washington to Save America*. The original (English-edition) cover featured a motif which left little room for misunderstandings: a matchstick. Even before it was published, the book's subtitle was softened to *Taking Back Washington*, and the match was removed from the cover. Yet the basic thrust of the book remained unequivocal. Indeed, Roberts articulated it

quite openly: the institutions of liberal democracy, in his view, not only require reform, but are morally rotten on the inside.

> "Decadent and rootless, these institutions serve only as shelter for our corrupt elite. […] For America to flourish again, they don't need to be reformed; *they need to be burned*."[i]

In his foreword to the book, J.D. Vance (at that time still Vice President-elect) praised Roberts's thinking as a valuable weapon for the struggles ahead. Surely these phrases were meant to provoke, but they do convey an authentic yearning for destruction, too: only if the liberal order of the present is overthrown will the traditional, essentially good and correct order of the past have a future. This destructive desire is by no means only nihilistic, but indeed creative, seeking to use old stones to build a new structure that will last for eternity. It constitutes the essence of democratic fascism.

Democracy and destructiveness

Democracy is currently undergoing one of its most severe crises since the end of World War II.[ii] Even the most optimistic advocates of a liberal market economy are concerned about the union of capitalism and democracy.[iii] As recently as the early 1990s, the outlook had been very different: the end of the Southern European and Latin American military dictatorships in the 1970s and '80s was followed by the seachange in Eastern Europe in 1989. Liberal democracy, it seemed for a brief moment, was about to triumph across the globe. It had not yet won everywhere, but it surely represented the future.

Today, there is no more talk about such a global victory march. All over the world, illiberal democracies are taking shape, i.e. states that officially hold free elections but are simultaneously dismantling liberal essentials such as the separation of powers, an independent

judiciary and a free press. Democracy seems to have lost its future.[iv] At the start of 2024, the *Financial Times* asked whether it could even survive another twelve months.[v] As early as 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen had made it into the run-off vote in the French presidential election; his National Front, now renamed as the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*), has since grown to become the country's second-strongest political force. In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) emerged as the strongest party from the most recent general elections, despite its countless public scandals. Currently, far-right parties are part of the government in seven EU countries.[vi] Viktor Orbán is turning Hungary into an illiberal democracy, while in Italy "post-fascist" prime minister Georgia Meloni has headed the government since 2022. In the Netherlands, far-right politician Geert Wilders came out on top in the parliamentary elections in 2023. In June 2025, erstwhile football hooligan Karol Nawrocki, pushing a nationalist agenda, was elected President of Poland. In Argentina, right-wing libertarian Javier Milei has been governing the country by decree and circumventing parliament. Donald Trump, too, has relied on executive orders since the beginning of his second term, thereby undermining the authority of Congress. In Germany, government coalitions that include far-right forces can no longer be ruled out either (albeit, at least for the time being, only, at the state level): in Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg, the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) is the strongest or second-strongest political force today.

We are currently in the midst of a political cycle marked by a shift to the right, whereby national conservatives, liberal authoritarians and anarcho-capitalists are joining forces to attack liberal instutitions. Indeed, the current rise of the far right is unprecedented since the 1930s. Today's autocrats are seizing power not through violence or bloody coup d'etats but by winning democratic elections. The parties of the democratic centre are helplessly trying to fight the far right by appropriating the same talking points. Yet, this is anything but successful. On the contrary: they are in fact legitimising the authoritarians and their fascist fantasies. Many citizens in Western societies have come to loathe liberalism, or, to be more precise: liberal democracy.

They have developed authoritarian mentalities and are open to fascist fantasies – either out of indifference or as an act of resistance against the dismantling of traditional social hierarchies.

To classical authoritarians, the nation is the locus of their imagined community.[vii] Their aim is to establish (or, rather, to restore) national greatness. In an (only seemingly) unlikely alliance, they are joining up with libertarian authoritarians. Libertarians reject government rules and interventions but are by all means open to the concept of the nation – as long as it does not entail liberal democracy. The common denominator is their shared destructive desires, a kind of affective negation of inclusive liberalism. Building on democratic nihilism, the aim is to scrap liberal democracy in the name of a possessive individualism. The corresponding affective strutures become immune to solidarity and project problems onto migrants or social minorities. Such destructiveness is the fast lane of a multi-lane highway of radicalisation. People with a destructive mindset are open to fascist fantasies, even if they do not necessarily dream of the establishment of a fascist regime.

This scope of destructiveness, however, is not universal, as it occurs within the confines of a radical identification with capitalist hierarchies. The rejection of change turns into the affirmation of a status quo ante – in the form of an aggressive nostalgia for a society in which everything was supposedly "still in order". While liberalism sees itself as a theory of change, within which the structures of capitalist property are to remain stable, destructiveness takes the side of capitalist hierarchies and, in particular, opposes any normative embedding of capitalism. It is a rebellion against the adjustments and restrictions that accompany modernisation, and which climate change itself demands. Rather than adjusting to new circumstances, a new target for destruction is chosen: the dams holding back the deluge. "No vision inspires the destructive character. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed", Walter Benjamin wrote in 1931. But this only applies so far.[viii] The far right makes no effort to conceal its fascist fantasies; rather, it gleefully voices them in public. Fantasies of

coups d'état or radical action are no longer mere figments of the imagination, as is evidenced by the plans for an upscaling of the US migration police ICE and of deportation camps.

With the biological passing of the last eyewitnesses to the horrors of 1933–1945, there is a real threat of fascism returning.[ix] The so-called "antifascist consensus" – which united successive generations in German society in the conviction that Nazism must never be allowed to return in any shape or form – is up for renegotiation. After all, 'it wasn't all *that* bad', some say; and this time 'it surely won't get *as* bad', say others. But the awareness that it can happen again is growing.

This is the subject of this book. We are not claiming that fascism will inevitably return as a political regime centred on violence. Rather, we wish to zoom in on the fact that it already exists as a fascist fantasy *within* democracy, and that this is finding both support and supporters.

Right-wing populists are setting themselves up as the true representatives of the people, as opposed to a corrupt political caste. As they do so, their arguments are dominating the public and political debate. The protest landscape as a whole has also changed: although demonstrations have been linked to specific causes more recently, they nevertheless reflect a widespread alienation from the institutions of liberal democracy. In Germany, the rallies of so-called *Querdenker* ("lateral thinkers") brought together disparate groups united by their violent fantasies. Although the subversive plans of the *Reichsbürger* (similar to the "sovereign citizen" movement in the US and UK) may appear bizarre, they were actively pursued, with real dedication. Likewise, in Germany in 2024, during the demonstrations staged by farmers, soon joined by tradespeople and lorry drivers, the far right's fantasies of overthrowing the government resonated among protesters.

Political violence is on the rise, too – be it the shots fired at Black Lives Matter activists and the attack on the Capitol in the US, the racist riots in the UK, or threats against local politicians in Germany's rural backwaters. "The curious aspect of our times is that we seem to be imploding when nothing would precipitate this degree of crisis", historian Jeremy Varon said

in summer 2024. According to Varon, there was a "mood of intense foreboding" even before the shots were fired at Donald Trump during an election rally.[x]

Democratic fascism

Even conservative observers consider a Trump dictatorship a likely scenario. Not all autocrats are fascists, but some, like Trump, are certainly on their way there. What are the particular features defining what we call present-day *democratic fascism*, and, in particular, how does it take shape? These questions are the subject of this book.

In contrast to historical fascism, which openly fought against the democratic system, democratic fascism is deeply embedded within democracy and conceives of itself as a force for its renewal. At the same time, it undermines the foundations of democracy, since its own driving force is the desire for destruction. With its hedonistic cruelty and its frivolous playing with violence, democratic fascism goes beyond right-wing populism. The new fascism is not a single or united movement but rather spans a broad, hybrid range of elements, integrating restorative imaginaries of the past and futuristic visions for the future alike. Historical fascism offered "plausible solutions to modern social problems", as Michael Mann noted.[xi] Something quite similar may be said of present-day fascism, considering, for example, plans for the (mass) deportation of migrants to reduce wage competition. We speak of fascist fantasies not because they are somehow misleading or illusionary, but because of their creative and productive nature. Not only do they convey a particular alternative truth, but such fantasies and the truths they assert eventually become actual political objectives. The idea of mass remigration at first sounded like a grim dream, but it has made its way into right-wing politics as a very concrete scenario. Correspondingly, rather than presenting a survey of neo-fascist projects, this book embarks on a search for the reasons why they are resonating so widely. After all, in contrast to

the 1930s, there is no mass unemployment, or at least there was none at the time the far right started gaining increasing support in the countries concerned. On the contrary, employment has rarely been higher, and several industries are suffering from shortages of skilled labour. When we consider criteria such as living comfort, available healthcare services or equality policies (such as equal opportunities policies and gender equality politics), life in Western democracies is generally better than it was a hundred years ago. The reasons commonly drawn on to explain the rise of far-right extremism include globalisation, increased inequality, migration and the culture war around inclusive gender policies. All these factors are undeniably at play, here; but the perspective we adopt in this book is significantly broader.

Liberal societies are no longer a driver of comprehensive progress (see Chapter 1). We are currently witnessing a polycrisis that includes climate change, wars, pandemics, inflation, global economic disruptions, as well as the changes related to digital technologies. The climate catastrophe in particular is a reminder of the ticking metabolic clock**.** Unbridled growth is hardly even possible today – nor is it really desirable. But this simultaneously eliminates the mechanism through which conflicts have been resolved in the more recent past: that is to say, the development of new resources and their distribution. In parallel to the end of growth, the perception of time in modern societies is changing: a more progressive world no longer seems possible (let alone an entirely different one). In this present that lacks any future, the past returns with particular vigour.

In more recent years, life expectancy in the US and the UK has ceased to follow its linear upward trend (irrespective of Covid-19), even dropping intermittently. Over the past four decades, the gap between income and wealth has constantly widened.[xii] Social and democratic rights and institutions designed to rein in capitalism have been dismantled in many areas. Globalisation and new information technologies have decimated the industrial workforce, while austerity has deeply unsettled public service workers (and continues to do so). Members of the working and middle classes are facing a future full of existential challenges.

Vertical inequalities, however, are no longer articulated as class conflicts. Instead, horizontal conflicts between different identity groups now take centre stage. This is the setting from which right-wing actors draw the themes for their aggressive culture war, through which social advancements, equality, and justice are supposed to be scaled back in the name of freedom. Multiple wars, the rise of China, and rampant inflation are combining to trigger a middle-class panic over social decline (especially among the old middle classes). We are seeing a repeat of what Theodor Geiger already observed during the 1930s: "In the moment of the greatest agitation induced by crisis, people dive head first into the rebellious politics of irrationality".[xiii] Voters turn to the candidates who promise drastic authoritarian action, from Trump to AfD leader Alice Weidel.[xiv]

The crisis has written itself so deeply into emotional structures that even a return to a path of growth would not suffice to halt the rebellion against inclusive liberalism. Writer and military strategist Edward Luttwak predicted as early as 1994 that fascism would become the the next big political wave, seeing as neither the moderate right nor the left were able to offer any convincing solutions for the key problems of modern capitalist democracies. Instead, according to Luttwak, a political vacuum had formed that could be seized by an "improved" fascist party promising stability and individual economic security.[xv] Thirty years later, the new fascist projects have adopted precisely this guise. Liberalism, which conceives of itself as fascism's ultimate adversary, has not only failed to prevent its rise but has actually facilitated it. Liberalism suffers from the aforementioned lack of problem-solving capacity. Particularly its neoliberal variant has, paradoxically, led to an expansion of state control. The operating principle of this hypertrophic state is marked not by less but more bureaucracy, regulations and laws, all in a bid to cope with the complexity of modern societies (and to protect markets from democratic demands).

Liberalism is itself turning authoritarian from within. It demands, often in a moralising manner, that the modern individual conform to a correct lifestyle. The actual foundation of the

subjective feeling of being patronised is the symbolic power of the ability to define what counts as socially valuable, sayable and thinkable. The construction of the so-called "factual constraint" (German: *Sachzwang*) is probably the purest incarnation of authoritarian liberalism. Austerity, a form of strict budgetary discipline, is often presented in liberal societies as an absolute necessity to which there is no alternative. Yet this kind of politics has proven self-destructive in several ways: it has contributed to the demise of infrastructure, but it also reveals the bigotry of imposing "factual constraints".

Yet, these diagnoses of the pathologies afflicting liberal democracies are insufficient to explain the political malaise whereby fascist fantasies are being met not with dismay and rejection but with indifference and, increasingly, passionate support. The crisis of advanced capitalist societies is having an impact on the deep structures of affect, and engendering the destructive mentalities which arise from the notion of a "thwarting of life".[xvi] In his 1941 book, *Fear of Freedom*, the social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote that modern individuality was marked by a paradoxical basic structure: instead of being able to develop freely, individuals feel fundamentally blocked by external constraints and obstacles. The desire to realise one's dreams then turns into its opposite: that is, into the desire to destroy the world that seems so suffocating.

Fromm's considerations are still useful if we apply them to the destructive desires of the present: for a collective sense of being obstructed or blocked in life has spread (see Chapter 2). To many, the promises of late modern societies have proven hollow. This sentiment is generalised into an experience of "ubiquitous loss"[xvii] that spans different social positions and classes, albeit affecting people to a varying extent. What is essential are not so much the objective losses, but rather the perception of one's own relative decline, compared to the past, or to others.

The fact that many people have the impression that the future no longer holds any improvements changes the grammar of social conflicts. Today, the source of such strife is not primarily the question of a fair distribution of increasing (social) riches, but rather that of how

to distribute a limited or even decreasing amount of wealth. In this post-progress era, gains and losses are counted up in a zero-sum logic: gains for some must necessarily be losses for others. Distributional conflicts are becoming horizontal. Distinct processes are amalgamated and projectively conflated on the basis of falsely inferred correspondences. If infrastructure is crumbling this must be the fault of the left, and if a citizen's ascent through life is halted this must be blamed on the social rise of migrants. From this feeling of being blocked in life emerges a hyperindividualist perception of the world, in which advancement is only possible at the cost of others.

New alliances of destructive desires

Harbouring fascist fantasies and voting for far-right parties is usually connected to a "destructive personality". Sociologist Ferdinand Sutterlüty describes it as a variant of the authoritarian personality which feels "betrayed by a state" that favours other groups, granting them the privileges which are deemed worth fighting for.[xviii] At the same time, destructiveness also promises gratification. All obstacles can be removed in one symbolic gesture. Destructiveness is expressed in the propensity for violence. In a survey in April 2024, one in five Americans thought that the use of violence was necessary to bring the US back onto the "right" track.[xix]

Destructiveness is not a new phenomenon, for it has always been an element of the fascist mentality, and, indeed, in parts itself displayed a radical orientation toward the future. The *Manifesto of Futurism*, published by Italian writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, is a vitalistic, energetic document of early Italian fascism. Marinetti celebrates uncompromising modernisation, speed, violence, technology, industry, and war. The view is strictly directed forward: anyone looking sentimentally to the past is met with pure contempt.[xx] Today, his words

almost sound as if written for the present-day culture war, e.g. when he notes the following: "We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice."[xxi]

Destructiveness is an oft-neglected aspect in analyses of the far right. Most authors focus on root causes (such as social or geopolitical conflicts) or ideological considerations. The countless works following Theodor W. Adorno's studies on *The Authoritarian Personality* have mainly concentrated on authoritarian aggression and submission.[xxii]

The fact that destructiveness has once again become so significant a century after the first wave of fascism is above all the result of social change. Compared to the organised capitalism of the 1920s, late modern society is much more strongly regulated, juridified and normatively embedded. Numerous mechanisms to prevent discrimination, oppression, violence and male supremacy have been established, accompanied by a far stronger dependence on science, on the justice, education and healthcare systems, and on the labour market. Industrial society was dominated by a heteronomous social character, which adapted to organisations and contributed to the economy.[xxiii] The late modern individual, however, comes into conflict with institutions which they perceive as a force restricting their freedom. This is precisely what the vitalist, destructive rebellion opposes.[xxiv] Early Critical Theory considered authoritarian attitudes to be rooted in unchanging social personalities (or characters); yet we believe that emotional structures are in flux, historically.

In order to ascertain the spread of destructive attitudes, we conducted a survey in Germany with about 2,600 participants (see Chapter 3). Conceptually, this study draws on a comparatively recent strand of political-science research, which, focusing on the US case, has fleshed out a nihilistic mindset that scholars have termed the "need for chaos". According to this research, such a need is particularly present in people oriented towards status and dominance and who feel socially marginalised. Even though their investigations did not explicitly reference the

considerations advanced by Critical Theory, they did apply state-of-the-art procedures for measuring destructive attitudes. We have slightly modified these to suit our own research purposes. The good news: more than half of our respondents showed no inclination towards destructiveness. The less good news: some 12.5 per cent of the people in our sample turned out to be somewhat or even highly destructive. By and large, these people are young, most likely male, and tend towards the political right. Education and income levels had no reliably ascertainable influence.

Given our aim of learning in more detail about the motivations and biographies of the people drawn into a destructive drift, in addition to our survey we also conducted 41 problem-centered interviews. The participants were selected according to different methods and criteria: either because the survey indicated that they held highly destructive views, or because they responded to digital and/or in-person requests for contact by outing themselves as AfD supporters, or because they were active members of a right-wing libertarian organisation. Our sample comprised different occupational groups and people with varying biographies, with a majority holding a university degree. Only one-quarter were female, but the interviewed women were often highly destructive; in particular, they displayed a notable emotional harshness towards social minorities; many of our respondents had experienced severe reversals of fate in their lives or had been tested in other ways. They had only few social contacts but did not necessarily suffer from loneliness, instead preferring smaller-scale life and simplicity. In our conversations, we were able to identify three destructive types: the innovators (who seek to shake up liberal institutions in order to restore traditional hierarchies), the destroyers (who do not believe in renewal or innovation and regard the destruction of the system as an end in itself) and the libertarian authoritarians (who, out of ideological motivation, aspire to the abolition of the regulating state and aim to replace it with an authoritarian alternative). Still, as we shall see, the characterisation advanced by Walter Benjamin, according to which the destroyers do not have in mind any particular image of a desirable future, is not entirely accurate, or at least not

in all cases. Indeed, there are various ideals that they do wish to see materialise. Almost all the people we interviewed would not self-identify as fascists. However, the interviewees often harboured fascist fantasies of forced deportations, vengefully craved for punishment (Adorno, Authoritarian Personality, pp. 228 f.), or violence against social minorities, or hankered after a strong leader who would take drastic measures and restore order.

Democratic fascism is less organised and centralised than its interwar predecessor[xxv] (see Chapter 4). There are authoritarian prophets, but beyond the actual political agitation, this is a highly polymorphic tendency, a network of networks, a loose alliance of destruction. While it has an ethno-nationalist bedrock, at first glance at least the various converging milieus, currents and individuals seem to have nothing in common. They include ultra-libertarians, Evangelicals, crypto enthusiasts, Silicon Valley tycoons, neo-Catholics, classical authoritarians, nationalist conservatives, and so-called *Reichsbürger* ('Sovereign Citizens'). These groups are united in their wish to abolish key institutions of liberal democracy – although not all target the same ones. While the *Reichsbürger* mainly refuse to recognise institutions such as courts or other authorities that represent state sovereignty, right-wing liberals are particularly infuriated by the ones that regulate economic affairs, restrict economic power, curb social risks and provide a publicly funded infrastructure.

Democratic fascism entails a desire for a resolutely displayed toughness. New fascist projects aim for the renewal of masculinity, even though fascism has long since ceased to be an exclusive domain of "strong men" and has become that of "strong women", too. The underlying role models have changed, and no longer correspond to the soldier-like masculinity of the interwar years, which Ernst Jünger described as an expression of the "sons of war and civil war" seeking to develop whatever might be "left in us from nature, from elementality, from true savagery, from original *language*, from the capacity for true reproduction through blood and seed".[xxvi] Today, we are rather more looking at vindictive men who are prone to taking offence

and cannot cope with the push towards social equality. Although democratic fascism engenders strong leadership figures, they are cut from a different cloth. Women, too, have risen to the top of fascist movements through their toughness and discipline, such as Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen.

The renewed fascism is often marked by a gleeful, downright frivolous undermining of truth claims. Progressive ideals – freedom, equality, democracy etc. – are adopted, only to be disembowelled in an act of semantic appropriation of their meaning. The desire to create chaos also encompasses the realm of ideas. People of this persuasion self-identify as democratic, in order to legitimise authoritarian measures against political opponents in the name of democracy. Ideological coherence is secondary, as long as liberals can be undermined through references to progressive registers. Alternative facts and conspiracy theories serve the purpose of "deconstructing reality".[xxvii] In this sense, democratic fascism is marked by a *bivalence*, by ambiguous and equivocal speech acts and symbolic actions (see Chapter 4). What may sound innocuous to the general public contains a coded message for followers. Black humour may suggest an element of anti-liberalism, but, at the same time, the speaker can always claim that a harsh statement was never intended in this or that way. The new fascist projects relish in subversive performance, flippancy and exaggeration. Trump portrays himself in AI-generated images, for instance as the Pope, as a ripped Jedi with a light saber or, self-ironically, as a yellow character from *The Simpsons*. The iconography is entertaining, while undermining his own super-elevation as hero and leader. And yet, it is precisely in this cynical game that we find the appeal of destructive authoritarians.

The ambiguity creates a generalised atmosphere of threat, so that right-wing actors can depict themselves as a victim who – in the name of the nation, freedom, and so forth – *must* defend themselves. A state of emergency is insinuated in order to pave the way for discarding democratic rules. Moreover, in an atmosphere of emergency, cruelty towards migrants becomes an act of defending freedom.

At the same time, here we find an ideological flexibility that has marked fascism from the outset; after all, it is an ideology of action and a practice of dark emotionalisation. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who was thrown in jail by Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, and who died immediately after his release, was perfectly clear about the emotional appeal of fascism but puzzled by its ideological appeal:

> "Fascism has presented itself as the anti-party; has opened its gates to all applicants; has with its promise of impunity enabled a formless multitude to cover over the savage outpouring of passions, hatreds and desires with a varnish of vague and nebulous political ideals."[xxviii]

Still, it would be negligent to not take seriously the ideas circulating in the orbit of the new fascism. Whoever discards them as crazy, outlandish or unworldly, is underestimating their spiritual magnetism.

Destructive agitators often appeal to values such as patriotism, greatness and the willingness to sacrifice, and many staunch activists among their ranks are, in a way, idealists: for them, the nation is a sacred thing, which has been spoiled by diversity, democratic participation, and the "anything goes" creed of inclusive liberalism. The hard core of both historical and present-day fascism is made up of deeply indoctrinated militants with a downright religious fervour, added to which is a large number of people who are libidinously drawn into it. In contrast to the interwar period, the majority of this support base do not want to merge into an identitarian community but rather to practice a libertarian, propertied individualism drenched in nationalism.

In order to understand the social and political momentum of right-wing extremism, we must take seriously the ideational performance of fascism – meaning, what folks are saying.[xxix] British historian Roger Griffith therefore speaks of the need for "methodical empathy".[xxx] Methodical empathy means that we want to understand and lay bare the driving forces and the reason within the seemingly irrational. Having said that, to understand does not mean to

condone. On the contrary: our aim is to be able to analyse fascism – and, consequently, to fight it – more effectively.

This book is being written in the midst of a rise of new fascist political parties. The research on historical fascism commonly distinguishes between fascism as a movement and fascism in power. In our view, we are still in the first phase this time around. Of course, we are also interested in learning about the forms that the new fascism is taking, yet our primary focus is on an anamnesis and the origins of destructiveness. Why is this fascism also – and particularly – arising in established democracies, where most people enjoy wide-ranging freedoms? Why are they risking these freedoms? In order to get to the bottom of this, we shall fuse several complementary perspectives: apart from sociological and historical-materialist approaches, this also includes approaches from social psychology and affect theory. Our aim is to explain the rise of fascism as a consequence of social change; after all, we do not believe that it can all be reduced to the work of nationalist Pied Pipers.

Our investigation focuses on two important Western societies: the United States and Germany. Ever since Donald Trump's first term, a debate about American fascism has been ongoing in the US, while in Germany there is a far-right party lying in wait, which already emerged as the country's second-strongest political force in the most recent general election. Both countries are liberal democracies, yet they differ in many ways, such as in the social structure, the political system or the organisation of civil society. In historical-comparative sociology, this is referred to as a study along contrasting contexts. The history of democracy in the United States and of the US Constitution is closely related to slavery and segregation, whose effects can be felt to this day. During the 1930s and '40s, large-scale fascist movements existed in the US. And yet, at no point did they pose a serious threat to democracy. The Nazi dictatorship in Germany, by contrast, was only stopped by the Allies' combined military intervention. After World War II, West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG) was marked by an

enduring anti-fascist basic consensus, which is increasingly being called into question today. These differences aside, we believe that we can demonstrate that the mentality of destructiveness is a feature that both countries have in common and an element that helps explain fascism as a political phenomenon gaining momentum across many liberal democracies. For our analysis of the United States, we reviewed numerous published studies, whereas for the German context, we conducted our own comprehensive studies as outlined above.

Austro-Hungarian economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi, when considering the industrial societies of the 1930s, wrote that fascism was "an ever-given political possibility, an almost instantaneous emotional reaction".[xxxi] In the list of symptoms that herald the arrival of fascism in a country but appear prior to the existence of an openly fascist movement, Polanyi ennumerated several elements. These included a simmering collective affective economy expressed through esoteric ideas, racist aesthetics, "anticapitalist" demagoguery, or anti-systemic resentment. Our interest here pertains particularly to the interplay between socioeconomic and political changes, and emotional structures.

Although we do borrow considerably from Frankfurt School theories of authoritarianism, only to a limited extent do we draw on the individual-psychological perspective as advanced in the studies on *The Authoritarian Personality*. We regard destructiveness not as a character trait embedded in the personality, but rather as a dynamic in its own right. Adorno and his colleagues sought to understand a fundamental fascist potential in modern societies and based themselves particularly on Freud's drive theory. They also investigated the question of primary childhood socialisation, education styles in school and at home, the role of father and mother, and social authority figures more generally. We, too, extensively scrutinised the family backgrounds and biographies of destructive individuals. And yet, our main interest lies with the following sociological question: How can we explain that many people – albeit not the majority – have developed authoritarian attitudes, even though

they do not adopt authoritarian positions, and although they were raised much less strictly as children, although men no longer have to join the military, although both sexes have been exposed to modernised role models, and although they have grown up in increasingly liberal societies?

Despite the individual-psychological perspective applied in the studies on *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno assumed that fascism ultimately was not a psychological issue that might be dismissed as irrational.[xxxii] To him, the proclivity toward a fascist mentality does not arise from the personality but the social order itself.[xxxiii] Destructiveness, in this sense, represents a reaction to the "objective spirit"[xxxiv] of society in several aspects at once: it is a rebellious reaction to the disillusionment with modernity, and at the same time destructive individuals reflect social relations that have themselves turned destructive. In fact, several aspects related to the study presented here were already addressed, to a greater or lesser degree, in our study *Offended Freedom: On the Rise of Libertarian Authoritarianism*. In that book, we examined new forms of authoritarian aggression, based on interviews with the so-called *Querdenker* ('lateral thinkers') movement and with AfD voters who had previously championed progressive causes. Even then, we encountered elements of destructiveness, but the book's theme was entirely different: it focused on conflicts surrounding freedom, as the result of the paradoxes and contradictions in modern, highly individualised societies. When we began to occupy ourselves with the crisis of democracy and the danger of its authoritarian transformation, we in part noticed a continuation of the conflicts we had analysed in *Offended Freedom*. Back then, too, we found signs of the phenomenon of destructiveness: a radicalised negative freedom destroys everything in its path, and this itself justifies authoritarian measures. In 1950, Adorno wrote that "science" must "provide weapons against the potential threat of the fascist mentality".[xxxv] This book seeks to contribute to such an effort.

[i] Roberts, Kevin (2024), *Dawn's Early Light: Taking Back Washington to Save America*, New York: Broadside Books, p. 2.
[ii] Diamond, Larry (2015), "Facing up to the democratic recession", *Journal of Democracy* 1, pp. 141–155.
[iii] See Wolf, Martin (2024), *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London: Penguin.
[iv] White, Jonathan (2023), *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea*, London: Profile Books.
[v] Russel, Alex, "Can democracy survive 2024?", *Financial Times* (4 January 2024), p. 15.
[vi] Green, Ruth, "The year of elections: The rise of Europe's far right", in: *International Bar Association* (30 September 2024), available online at: {https://www.ibanet.org/The-year-of-elections-The-rise-of-Europes-far-right} (all URL last accessed: July 2025).
[vii] Anderson, Benedict (2006 [1983]), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
[viii] Benjamin, Walter (1979), "The Destructive Character" (1931), in: *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: NLB, pp. 157–159, here: p. 157.
[ix] For an international example, see Mason, Paul (2021), *How to Stop Fascism: History, Ideology, Resistance*, London: Allen Lane.
[x] Quoted in Chaffin, Joshua, "Polarised US politics poisoned with extreme rhetoric and acts of violence", in: *Financial Times* (16 July 2024), p. 3; available online at: {https://www.ft.com/content/e854cb4d-a824-4ded-98ae-a5f796447f0a}.
[xi] Mann, Michael (2012), *Fascists*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 2. This is not the only passage that reveals Mann's Weberian background, inquiring about motives, values and aims. He rejects the social-psychological aspects invoked in Critical Theory.
[xii] Savage, Mike (2021), *The Return of Inequality: Social Change and the Weight of the Past*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[xiii] Geiger, Theodor (1930), "Panik im Mittelstand", *Die Arbeit* 10, pp. U#-U#, p. 649 (transl. added).
[xiv] Fedor, Lauren / Xiao, Eva, "Donald Trump has 11-point polling lead over Joe Biden on handling of economy", *Financial Times* (11 February 2024), p. 1.
[xv] Luttwak, Edward, "Why fascism is the wave of the future", *London Review of Books* (7 April 1994), available online at: {https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v16/n07/edward-luttwak/why-fascism-is-thewave-of-the-future}.
[xvi] Fromm, Erich (1942), *Fear of Freedom*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 155.
[xvii] Jackson, Michelle / Grusky, David B. (2018), "A post-liberal theory of stratification", *British Journal of Sociology* 69/4, pp. 1096-1133, p. 1097.
[xviii] Sutterlüty, Ferdinand (2021), "Destruktivität des Rechtspopulismus", *Westend. Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 18/1, pp. 73–86, p. 73 (transl. added).
[xix] MaristPoll, "2024 Presidential Election" (3 April 2024), available online at: {https://maristpoll.marist.edu/polls/april-2024-presidential-election/}.
[xx] Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, (1960) [1909]), "The Futurist Manifesto", in: James Joll, *Three Intellectuals in Politics*, New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 179–184, here: p. 182.
[xxi] Ibid., p. 182.
[xxii] On this theme, see the 2018 Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, also available in English: Decker, Oliver (2022), 'Flight into Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism at the Centre of Society', in: Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess and Elmar Brähler (eds.), *The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism within German Society*: *Escape into Authoritarianism*, transl. by David West, London/New York: Routledge, pp. 1–37.
[xxiii] Dubiel, Helmut (2015), *Ungewißheit und Politik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 119–150.
[xxiv] See Rostalski, Frauke (2024), *Die vulnerable Gesellschaft*, Munich: C.H. Beck.
[xxv] Historical fascism, too, united distinct groups, but today this internal heterogeneity has taken on a new quality altogether.
[xxvi] Jünger, Ernst (2001), "'Nationalismus' und Nationalismus" (1929), in: id., *Politische Publizistik. 1919–1933*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp. 501–509, here: pp. 506–7. (English translation taken from: https://juengertranslationproject.substack.com/p/nationalism-and-nationalism-ernst)
[xxvii] Kumkar, Nils C. (2022), *Alternative Fakten. Zur Praxis der kommunikativen Erkenntnisverweigerung*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, p. 218 (transl. added).
[xxviii] Gramsci, Antonio (1978), *Selections from Political Writings (1921–1926)*, transl. and ed. by Quintin Hoare, London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 38–9.

[xxix] That said, one might not wish to go as far as Zeev Sternhell (*Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987 [1983]), who asserts that fascism bears a coherence just like other political theories.

[xxx] Griffin, Roger (1995), *Fascism*, New York: Wiley, chapter 3.

[xxxi] Polanyi, Karl (2001 [1944]), *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, p. 247.

[xxxii] See Adorno, Theodor W. (1982), 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', in: Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, pp. 118–37.

[xxxiii] Peter Gordon, one of the most important contemporary Adorno scholars, puts this somewhat more pointedly, asserting that the authoritarian personality represents not so much a personality in the strict sense of the word, but rather, a general feature of the social order; for more on this, see Gordon, Peter E. (2018),"The Authoritarian Personality revisited. Reading Adorno in the age of Trump", in: Wendy Brown et al. (eds.), *Authoritarianism. Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 45–84, p. 49.

[xxxiv] Adorno, Theodor W. et al. (1950), *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: Harper and Row, p 752.

[xxxv] Ibid., p. 748.