The Use of History and the Protests of the 2020 U.S. Election Year

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In the summer of 2020, as the Black Lives Matter protests grew to historic proportions, the movement initiated important and often heated debates about racism and police violence as well as historical narratives. After the presidential election, supporters of President Donald Trump protested the results and organized rallies that culminated in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Considering these events, I examine the ways that history was evoked and used in protest and political narratives during the presidential election year. As the political use of history relates to a particular set of ideals, hopes, and fears, the article analyzes specifically moral, ideological, and political dimensions of how history was used in various protest narratives. By understanding protest as a form of news that provides a narrative of what is happening, the debate over history was not merely about historical facts but about historical narratives in relation to present struggles and developments. These narratives served various ideological and functional purposes, including views of history as inspiration, myth, and precedent, that were connected to fundamental disagreements about BLM protests as well as today's culture wars, in which the key difference was between structural critiques and deflecting against them. In the case of Donald Trump and the far right's role in the Capitol insurrection, fascism was a central historical analogy that functioned as a narrative to warn about threats to democracy and as a source of contestation of where political action should be concentrated.

Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by many dramatic and contentious developments described by the news media and political commentary as "historic." The Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations were among such key events. Sparked by the police killing of George Floyd, protests and civil rights uprisings against police violence and racism were a key issue that unfolded throughout the election year. According to estimates, the protests led by the Movement for Black Lives were the largest in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Chalasani 2020). Conversely, after Joe Biden won the presidential election, supporters of President Trump took to the streets in protest against the results. Trump supporters promoted false claims that the election was fraudulent and used the slogan "Stop the Steal" to contest the election results, and the pro-Trump protests finally culminated in the now-infamous storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Holt et al. 2021).

Actions and their consequences are both shaped by past experiences and future expectations (Koselleck 1985). The actions and aims of the BLM protests and pro-Trump protests, as different as they were, both opened debates about history in connection to hopes and fears about the present and the future. Notably, the news media and political commentators used history and employed historical analogies in protest narratives and in regard to political developments during the election year, and these served different functions. To frame the discussion, some evoked themes like the "Weimarization of America" or a "new era of McCarthyism" (Sibarium 2020; Beinart 2020), while others used historically salient threats—from the specter of (cultural) Marxism and communism to anarchy and violence in the streets unleashed by forces like Antifa and the Black Lives Matter movement (Friedman 2020; McKay 2020). Moreover, the conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2020, 21–41) of QAnon or the ideas of a new civil war promoted by the Boogaloo movement—both seen by officials as threats to domestic security—complicated the political landscape (Johnson 2020). The struggle to find a historical precedent was most evident in the Capitol attack, in which a combination of conspiracism, preparation for political violence, and ideological idiosyncrasies was on full display. In addition to understanding various strongly held political and cultural aims here, it is also necessary to recognize the different functions of and debates over history.

The political use of history relates to a particular set of ideals, hopes, and fears that are interpreted in relation to political ideologies, values, and identities. In a climate of deep political

divisions and polarization (Campbell 2018), the use of and the debate over history can also be seen as an expression of contemporary divisions. In this article, I examine the use of history and historical analogies vis-à-vis protest and political narratives during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. The article's analytical framework is twofold. First, the analysis draws from Geoffrey Cubitt's (2007) and Wendy Brown's (2001) ideas about history and the use of history. As Cubitt points out, memory, justice, and historical truth are interconnected concepts and "have again been repeatedly brought to the surface of public discourse," which then also impacts the social functions of historians (Cubitt 2007, 56).

The tension between historical accuracy and justice, however, is most visible in current historical debates in which political actors emphasize utilitarian functions to history. I also draw from Brown's (2001, 3–17) explication of the contemporary disintegration of historical narratives. By identifying different moral, ideological, and political functions, the article analyzes how history was used in the debates over protests. Secondly, I follow Daniel Q. Gillion's conceptualization of protest as a form of news, which is to say that protests provide information about the issues and topics they are protesting. Additionally, protests convey passions and emotions as well as provide a narrative "about what is happening in society" (Gillion 2020, 11–12). These relate to the definition of a movement "as a sustained campaign of claim-making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 11). Taken together, contentious politics links protest narratives with debates over history and how history is used to advance arguments about the current moment. I do not mean to extend the focus to historiography per se but rather to highlight the role of and debates over history in the news media and expert commentary by academics, especially historians.

Using examples from the news media, blogs, and other news outlets, I have chosen sources that contain expert commentary from academics and historians or that emphasize a typical political/ideological perspective—be it a conservative, liberal, or leftist narrative—to analyze different claims, functions, and lenses of protest and historical narratives. My focus here is not on the wider societal influence, as measuring influence is complicated and efforts to quantify influence can fail to account for the different roles of influence. For example, think tanks often aim to influence politicians and policy directly, whereas the news media and academics who discuss their areas of expertise to wider audiences occupy a different public role. Instead, I have attempted to situate the author and commentary within a broader narrative and/or contentious

politics advanced by social and political movements. These are divergent, contrasting, and often antagonistic cases, and it is not my intention to treat, for example, BLM protests and the Capitol attack as equivalents. When the question turns to the debates and narratives of protests, and contestations over history, it is important to understand how one side sees their political opponent and vice versa. Due to this divergent nature of cases, the analytic focus of the article highlights different aspects: in the case of BLM protests, supporters or sympathetic voices highlighted the long roots of structural inequality along with emancipatory strategies, whereas conservative critiques claimed that BLM was "erasing history," thereby connecting the movement with the old bogeyman of "cultural Marxism" and the new specter of "cancel culture." Specific cases analyzed here also include the role of monuments and statues in relation to BLM protests and debates over history sparked by the *New York Times* 1619 Project, which sought to reframe U.S. history with a focus on slavery, and the 1776 Commission, which sought to promote patriotic education. In the case of pro-Trump protests and the Capitol insurrection, I examine the different ways in which the term "Weimar America" and analogies of fascism were used in relation to arguments about the present. The article is structured so that I first examine specific uses of history in relation to BLM protests and then move to focus on pro-Trump protests and the aftermath of the Capitol riot.

Black Lives Matter Protests and Debates Over History

On May 25, 2020, the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a police officer—who held his knee on Floyd's neck for about 9 minutes until he died—became a catalyst for widespread protests. Like the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, George Floyd's death started a new phase for protests organized by a movement generally known as Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN) is one of many local and national groups that fall under the umbrella coalition Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) (Ransby 2018, 1–2; Hennessey and LeBlanc 2020). A defining aspect of the movement is the use of various forms of direct action. These range from street protests to uprisings that not only seek to achieve political reforms but fundamental change (Ransby 2018, 4). To that end, BLM/M4BL is intersectional, has an economic dimension in fighting racial inequality, understands racism in structural terms, and works to change the power structure (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 2020, 299–300).

As waves of protests swept the country from May 2020 onward, the events of the year 1968 became a common point of historical reference by the media. On the surface, there are many similarities between the two periods, from struggles to achieve racial equality to polarization over law and order and street demonstrations. At a deeper level, of course, the protests were much more complicated. Different viewpoints about the BLM actions were very much tied to the meaning of U.S. history. While prominent historians cautioned against finding direct comparisons between the 1960s and today's protests, the theme of racial injustice fits into a long pattern in the country's history, as Heather Ann Thompson noted in an interview with *Vox* (Matthews 2020). In another *Vox* interview (Illing 2020), Michael Kazin also emphasized the long historical roots and the underlying structural reasons for continued inequalities, arguing that any social movement that goes to the root causes of a problem in its demands is in fact "radical." Thus, reform programs like the New Deal in the 1930s and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. were seen at the time as radical in the eyes of the power structure (Illing 2020). In this view, there was both a continuation of racial inequality and a long history of movements fighting that inequality. Radicalism was contextualized within the moments of mass mobilizations in which movements took to the streets attempting to overcome structural injustices. For example, the program put forth by M4BL (2020) has sections devoted to ending the war on black people, economic justice, investment/divestment, community control, and political power, which at least in theory point to the ways in which the root causes of present conditions shape visions for the future.

In June 2020, *POLITICO Magazine* tried to contextualize the protest by giving voice to a group of respected historians along with a few ideologues and political analysts. The historian Peniel E. Joseph made the important point that protesters today are a much more diverse group, and this marked a difference from previous waves of mobilizations, including the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the diversity of backgrounds and ethnicities that took part in BLM demonstrations was an important factor not just in terms of the intensity and scale of the protests (Joseph 2020). The historian Clayborne Carson (2020) tried to clarify reactions to protests from a historical perspective by reminding that law-and-order politics has been successfully mobilized against widespread protests for racial equality for decades. From Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton, law-and-order rhetoric has been used to advance policies that have strengthened the police and increased mass incarceration. Another function of such rhetoric has been that it does not acknowledge differences between protest and lawlessness (Carson 2020).

Historian Nancy Isenberg (2020) has also argued that the language of President Trump to equate protesters with criminals was accompanied by imagery of rioting and street thugs.

From a non-academic and politically conservative perspective, Kay C. James (then the president of the Heritage Foundation) condemned violence as a tool for change while hoping that the tragic death of George Floyd would lead to a better and safer country. James approached the protests through a more moralistic and individualistic/ideological lens. By claiming that conservative principles of individual liberty and freedom are the best tools for uplifting people from poverty to a state of flourishing, James (2020) saw the moment as an opportunity to live up to American ideals. The historians that viewed the nature and function of the BLM protests in a historical context tended to emphasize radicalism in positive terms as going to the root causes of problems, which inevitably leads to reaction on the part of the state. These are firmly tied to the social functions of historians (Cubitt 2007, 56). James instead viewed radicalism in negative terms as being related to violence, finding faults not in the system as such but in individuals. Think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, of course, have ideological functions within the conservative movement to influence policy, and these are contrary to the kinds of structural critiques advanced by the above-mentioned historians and movements like BLM.

As an understanding of root causes involves considering both current political problems and historical reasons for existing inequalities, however, implementation is not so easy in practice. The present is always open-ended, and social movements can point toward possible paths during moments of deep contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Just as structural reasons set the limits of social change, structural critique is necessary for advancing any change, as is demonstrated in arguments by historians and movement activists. The historians have used radicalism as an analytical tool and as a concrete precedent, however inapplicable past problems may be for actual solutions in the present.

Ideological and political differences were even more evident in the critique of statues that are emblematic of white supremacy and colonialism. Monuments and symbols of the Confederacy on public property became a site of contention during the Trump presidency. Statues were also an important target in the ensuing BLM protests. For example, in Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate President Jefferson Davis's statue was toppled by protesters in June 2020. This critique concerns not only questions of the Confederacy and the history of white supremacy but also the origins of settler colonialism and the violent dispossession of Indigenous people (Hixson 2013, 1–22).

Statues of Christopher Columbus were vandalized in various places from Boston and Virginia to Miami as BLM protests intertwined with Native American activism in connection to settler colonialism and genocide (*BBC News* 2020).

Roger Hartley's (2021) timely analysis on the problems of Confederate statues observes the link between monuments and distortion of history. Hartley argues that statues are neither silent nor "harmless"; instead, Confederate statues have played a role in the maintenance of white supremacy in different periods and contribute to contemporary structural racism (Hartley 2021, 182–83). The reassessment of Confederate legacy led to some significant changes. In Mississippi, in a bill that was passed in June 2020, the legislature decided to remove the design of the Confederate flag from its state flag and to create a new one (Della Cava 2020). The powerful symbolism of statues obviously raised questions over what kind of values they represented and how people view those values today. As a source of contestation, statues are firmly connected to the current culture wars. Claims for and against controversial statues have also expanded into and escalated the polarized public discussion about so-called "woke culture" and "cancel culture." Here, it is useful to offer two contrasting viewpoints that connect the protests and "cancel culture" to the role of history in U.S. culture wars.

In a commentary for *RealClearPolitics*, David Closson (2020), a research fellow at the Family Research Council, claimed that it is historical illiteracy that fuels "cancel culture." He argues that the vandalization of non-Confederate statues represents a "dystopian plotline." To him, this is historical illiteracy and the latest manifestation of "cancel culture," because it seeks to impose current standards on the past (Closson 2020). In a time of social change, conservative thought, too, can become historicist, insofar as it has political and social use in the present. What is more, as a media narrative, this view of "cancel culture" also functions to deflect attention away from protest claims about structural inequalities.

As often is the case in such debates, moralism plays a role and, as Wendy Brown has argued, it also functions as a form of anti-politics. By this she means the tendencies of moralism and moralizing to "fall from morality" as "an impoverished substitute for, or reaction to, the evisceration of a sustaining moral vision" (Brown 2001, 23). Especially in the domain of cultural politics or identity politics, Brown argues, this kind of moralism as a substitute of moral politics—be it from the left, center, or the right—runs the risk of leading to fixed positions and essentialism and, ultimately, one becoming a reactionary (Brown 2001, 21, 28, 41).

A historical perspective on the statue debate was offered by anthropologist Sarah Kurnick (2020), who noted that the contemporary defacement of statues mirrors a millennia-old tradition. If contemporary protests fit into a longer tradition of fighting to overcome social inequalities in the U.S., the battle over monuments and what they represent in a given time has even deeper roots. As Kurnick points out, the tradition goes back to the third millennium BCE at least, and images of authority have been defaced by marginalized people in an attempt to question authority ever since. She argues that the ways in which history is presented has always been contentious and tied to political issues in the present. So, when Donald Trump argued in June 2020 against "violent mobs," he saw them as arbiters of "what can be celebrated in public spaces," claiming "a deep ignorance of history" in the selection of targets by the protesters (Kurnick 2020). Especially in protest narratives that concern political claim-making, the protesters themselves took a stand on the present situation, emphasizing the long history of racial inequality. Contested statues are symbols of that long tradition, and the emphasis is on both symbolic and real change in the present (Kurnick 2020). The fact that arguments about social change in the present are made by way of tradition indicates the advantages of having concrete precedents. Thus, the search for and use of favorable traditions and precedents for political purposes is appealing even for those dedicated to change. This again relates to deeper issues about history and values in connection to protest passions and narratives of "what is happening in society" (Gillion 2020, 11–12).

The Use of History and Culture War Politics

The weaponization of historical narratives in the culture wars intensified when President Trump sought to advance "patriotic education" by appointing the 1776 Commission in September 2020. The purpose of the Commission was to promote patriotic education by writing a report on the principles of the founding of the United States. It was a reaction to the debate sparked by the *New York Times*' 1619 Project about the legacy of slavery. At the same time, the BLM protests were an implicit target of the 1776 Commission, which relied on a particular set of conservative viewpoints of founding ideals and U.S. history. The Commission was led by Larry Arnn of the conservative Hillsdale College and consisted of an 18-member panel. At the core of its contention were identity politics and the 1619 Project, as well as issues of race and slavery, which, according to Trump, only divide and lead to unpatriotic education, with the result that students "hate their own country" (Gaudiano 2020). To counter these tendencies, the Commission sought to promote the principles of the founding documents of the United States toward the desired outcome of national unity and

shared identity. The report, which was published two days before President Trump's term ended, claimed that the historical facts of the country's founding functioned as "cautions against unrealistic hopes and checks against pressing partisan claims or utopian agendas too hard or too far" (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 1).

These "partisan claims and utopian agenda" obviously referred to the claims of the 1619 Project and the agenda of Black Lives Matter. The Commission's hostility toward progressive movements was even more evident in that the report linked slavery, fascism, communism, progressivism, racism, and identity politics as historical or current challenges to America's principles (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 10–16). As an antidote, the report offered "the glory of our history" as something around which to unite. In the Commission's view, the U.S. is "the most glorious and just country in all of human history" and it is time to renew commitments to the principles articulated in the Declaration and Constitution (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 20). Such a view of history is fairly typical of nationalist movements of all kinds, in which history is less a matter of critical study or understanding and more a source of pride, inspiration, and ideology to serve nationalist ends. As Eric Hobsbawm (1997, 25–26) has noted, when historians correctly and factually dismantle certain national myths, they usually evoke the scorn of politicians rather than their gratitude, not to mention the reaction of ideologues dedicated to the politics of nationalism.

The Commission thus used its own form of national identity politics to critique another form of identity politics, reflected in its aversion to relativism and historicism as well as historical narratives of emancipatory struggles. Indeed, the 1619 Project, launched in August 2019 and led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, played an important role in the ways that the legacy of slavery and ongoing racial inequalities are present in media and public discourse. Some of the claims that the project made also received heavy criticism, ranging from conservatives to socialists to several historians. Then again, many agreed with its claims about the role of racism being embedded in the nation's DNA, that slavery was an engine behind capitalism and the creation of wealth, and that concessions were made to appease slaveholders at a time when political institutions were created, which resulted in undemocratic elements (Mintz 2020). Here the debate turned to questions that are as much about liberal attachment to the narratives of progress as they are about historical accuracy. Liberal critics like the historian Sean Wilentz objected to the pessimism of the 1619 Project, namely, if overcoming racism was even possible if it was in the country's DNA.

Another concern was the legitimacy of liberal democracy. Often this legitimacy is tied to key narratives and presuppositions like progress (Brown 2001, 13–15), which were challenged by the project. Of course, there is a long line of thinkers who have argued that emancipatory politics should not be confused with the idea of progress. And conversely, deep attachment to narratives of progress has been and remains to be a source of political hope (Brown 2001, 13–15).

Perhaps the most controversial claim was that the protection of slavery was among the central reasons behind the decision to declare independence from Britain. In response, Wilentz began to circulate a letter objecting to the project and Hannah-Jones's work especially. Four historians signed the letter, while many others, while in agreement on some points made by both Wilentz and the project, decided not to sign the letter or embrace all of Hannah-Jones's arguments. Many critics did, however, support Wilentz's objection to Hannah-Jones's claim about the origins of the American War of Independence in relation to slavery. From the perspective of the present, as relevant as historiographical debates about historical accuracy are, the project brought to the surface the tension between American ideals and lived realities. Different viewpoints were highlighted by answers to such questions as whether it is possible to fulfill the ideals of freedom and how equality should be achieved. For example, there was a vigorous debate about whether African Americans, as Hannah-Jones claimed, have largely been fighting struggles for freedom alone. Wilentz objected to this, taking issue with what he viewed as attempts to undermine objectivity, by noting that there was a risk that ideologues might highjack narratives of U.S. history (Serwer 2019).

Overall, the debate became even more timely in light of the 2020 BLM protests. Peniel Joseph's comment about the diversity of today's protesters suggests change in that a greater number of white people are willing to join black and other emancipatory struggles than in the past (Joseph 2020). Moreover, the fact that there is real and lively historical debate on the matter is a sign of thinking about current political problems in terms of historically oppressed and marginalized groups. The point was poignantly made by the *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie, whose writing has placed emphasis on the agency of oppressed groups and rebellions in the emancipatory struggles from slavery to civil rights to contemporary protests. The historical pattern found in the argument is that marginalized groups, rebels, and radicals are not only important forces in U.S. history but key actors in actualizing the ideals of democracy and liberty (Bouie 2020a; 2020b). To some, however, this undermines the role of powerful elites in the national

story. Indeed, the opposition to arguments made by Bouie and others was not so much based on historical accuracy as on the role of agency—that is, whether collective action or politicians, or the "great men," are the significant historical agents.

Even before the 1776 Commission, conservative reactions against the 1619 Project were fierce, focusing mostly on Nikole Hannah-Jones's introductory essay. Although it is sometimes not easy to separate ideology and objectivity, the reaction seemed to be more about fears that the project focused on the wrong aspects of U.S. history than about what some critics claimed was inaccurate history. In this respect, conservatives sought to highlight the "dangerous" motives behind the project. For example, the project and its authors were accused of preaching cultural Marxism, conspiracy theory, evangelicalism, or political propaganda, among many other things (Wu 2019; Sand 2020; Wheeler 2021; Guelzo 2019).

Such reactions can follow from the disintegration of political and cultural narratives. If the past is less reducible to a singular narrative or single set of meanings, on one hand, the breakdown of historiography gives rise to new political possibilities, and on the other, history becomes less deterministic and the future more uncertain (Brown 2001, 5). Conservatives seemed to fear that protests or what they could achieve would unravel the country. Historically salient enemies provided another way to frame the debate in terms of culture wars. In particular, "cultural Marxism"—which has a long history (Jamin 2018), of course—has been revived time and time again to undermine different groups or views while claiming a status of victimhood for one's own social group or political affiliation. Recently, this has especially been the case with more far-right and white nationalist organizing efforts, like the alt-right movement (Mirrlees 2018). However, there are connections that link the use of the cultural Marxism trope to a broader right-wing strategy. As Jason Wilson (2015) points out, it was the conservative William S. Lind who articulated a strategy through which cultural conservatism became central for Republicans. By emphasizing a culture-centered form of conservative politics and identifying new social enemies, the trope of cultural Marxism provided a powerful narrative and a set of enemies, from Hollywood and academia to journalists and activists (Wilson 2015). This cultural lens is deeply emotional and connected to broader struggles of control, as well as fears of the influence and power of the other side (Thomson 2010, 24–26; Gamson 1995, 86–87).

This conflict over values most clearly demonstrated the political dimension of history in a way that was tied to the BLM protests and, crucially, questions of national identity. The 1776 Commission's

ideas about the American Revolution, the Declaration, and the Constitution suggests that U.S. history has a singular narrative rooted in natural rights and that it is necessary for Americans to believe in an unifying and ennobling view of U.S. history, regardless if it is true or not (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021). This attempt to portray a singular narrative excludes the voices of those that have been historically oppressed and marginalized—and everything that challenges that narrative is viewed as "dangerous" or "unpatriotic." At the same time, this represents a fragile view of the country, suggesting that even factual histories of oppression undermine people's belief in ideals and values. Here Wendy Brown's argument about the difference between moralism and moral vision is relevant (Brown 2001, 3–17, 23). As such, the report uses history as a justification for rejecting Black Lives Matter and views history as a tool of political socialization by reducing historical education to buttress mythologies. Also, this view of history offers to conservatives a source of authority. By framing some of the ugly aspects of national history as unpatriotic, the Commission thus saw history, in national terms, as a reservoir of inspiration and, in educational terms, as a guide to be good citizens. Thus, the antipathy of conservatives toward unpatriotic tendencies in historical narratives became enmeshed with protest narratives about racial inequality, and the cultural lens functioned to confirm what conservative claims and fears of cultural Marxism and "cancel culture" had already established in their minds.

Protests conveyed passions specifically related to the disintegration of historical narratives (Brown 2001) and national myths. In this way, the debate over history that intensified during protest periods has been deeply connected to contemporary political battles, revealing different ideological views about the past, present, and future and about different relationships to history (Koselleck 1985; Cubitt 2007). For one thing, in the use of history, there was a clear difference between structural and individual lenses to find meaning in the BLM protests. Structural critiques of white supremacy by many historians linked root causes and historical injustices with present distributions of economic and political power. By contrast, conservative media commentary often sought to frame the battles over BLM protest demands and historical debates in cultural terms, functioning as deflection in a similar way as "cancel culture" discourse. In addition, the debate revealed contentions around questions of who the historical agents of progress were and what the meaning of such emancipatory struggles might be. Though most movements—regardless of politics—use history as inspiration by evoking past struggles, the difference is whether history is viewed as purely serving ideological purposes or as critically understood and studied.

The Far Right, Trump, and the "Weimarization of America" Analogy

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 360 counter-protests opposing BLM—of which 12% turned violent—were recorded between May 24 and August 22, 2020, in different parts of the country. In particular, the far-right group Proud Boys had a notable presence at various counter-protests against BLM as well as at pro-Trump demonstrations. During the first presidential election debate in September, President Trump was asked to condemn white supremacy and groups like the Proud Boys. Instead, Trump told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by" (ACLED 2020; SPLC). The groups and ideologies that can generally be described as far right are far from unified. The Proud Boys, who describe themselves as "western chauvinists," generally tend to be supportive of Donald Trump (Vitolo-Haddad 2019). White nationalist and racist groups, on the other hand, largely abandoned their hopes for the President to advance what they see as white America, despite seeing Trump as a vehicle to mainstream the alt-right in 2016. This has led to the adoption of an accelerationist strategy by some far-right groups. Within the white power movement, accelerationism has a specific meaning—that is, waging an apocalyptic race war (Miller and IP Staff 2020). The strategy is not exactly new, as the label "accelerationism" can be seen as reformulation of the older strategy of leaderless resistance (Belew 2018, 104–6). The aim is to accelerate social tensions and chaos and to wage war against the system to achieve revolutionary ends. Aspects of this can be found in calls for a second civil war (Miller and IP Staff 2020), although such an idea has not just been raised by the rise of advocates on the far right.

An article in *Salon* claims, for example, that the second civil war is in fact already here (Johnston 2021), while HistoryNet (Zakrzewski n.d.) asks: "A Second U.S. Civil War: Inevitable or Impossible?" In a proliferation of questions by the news media about the possibility of another civil war, some historians, too, have similarly been asked: "Are We Headed for Another Civil War?" (BU Today Staff, 2019). And in a similar line of framing, an article published in *Foreign Policy* pondered if the U.S. may be entering its own "years of lead," a reference to a violent period of political terrorism in Italy from the late 1960s to the 1980s (Yablon 2020). This article explores historical precedents for the current situation, in which the potential for increased levels of political violence has been perpetuated especially by the far right. While President Trump's many incendiary statements had implications for political violence, in this analogy the role and actions of extremists on the right occupy the primary focus.

In the context of the 2020 protests, some far-right groups, like those pursuing accelerationism, were anti-government to the core and did not rely on instructions from above to pursue their aim of escalating tensions. Groups like the Proud Boys and pro-Trump militia groups, by contrast, were more ambivalent in their view of the Trump administration and the police. But for the most part, these have been organizationally separate phenomena (Cineas 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020, 4–6). The "years of lead" and Civil War analogies merely identify a symptom of a crisis.

In these situations of high political and social tensions, violence comprised part of a much broader problem. In this case, a prominent media narrative has involved an analogy of "Weimar America"—referring to the Weimar Republic, which existed for a short period from the end of World War I to the collapse of democracy and the rise of Nazi Germany—and its implication that Trump may be, if not a fascist, at least a proto-fascist with fascistic tendencies (Sibarium 2020; Bessner and Greenberg 2016). As an analogy, "Weimar America" evokes a sense of crisis and appeals to the urgency to actively respond to the threat. One of the most explicit and notable warnings of similarities between Trump's America and fascism were made by the historian Timothy Snyder (2018) and the philosopher Jason Stanley (2020). According to Snyder and Stanley, the failure of Americans to resist Trump could be detrimental because his tactics and rhetoric bear close resemblance to fascism. The views of Snyder and Stanley were embraced by many liberals and leftists. While the focus of Snyder and Stanley tends to be more on the cultural and ideological side of Trump, as opposed to his actions, it seeks to highlight threats to democracy and the weakening of institutions (Snyder 2018; Stanley 2020). However, others have criticized this analogy by contrasting Trump's views and actions against classic features of fascism, like the elevation of war or explicit opposition to political institutions and politics, which they argue Trump lacks (Bessner and Greenberg 2016). The political relevance of the fascism debate for the left, as argued by Daniel Bessner and Ben Burgis, is twofold. First, if the threat of fascism is genuine, this would require a revival of the anti-fascist Popular Front strategy of the 1930s, which in turn tends to deemphasize the actual political program of the left. Second, they argue that curtailing civil liberties in response to the threat of political violence would ultimately be weaponized against the left (Bessner and Burgis 2021).

A more complex argument against the fascism analogy was made by Dylan Riley, who analyzed and contrasted the fascist era with the contemporary situation in terms of four dimensions. One key difference, he argues, is the role of civil society and political parties. Italy and Germany of the

1920s and 1930s were both countries facing a revolutionary threat from the left and had civil societies with high levels of political mobilization. U.S. society today, by contrast, is highly atomized, and civil society has been almost completely hollowed out. For Riley (2018), the comparison of Trumpism with fascism is a bad analogy, functioning more as a morality tale than a useful approach to the current crisis.

What is implicit in the Weimar analogy is that Trump is somehow an alien or anomalous force in U.S. politics. Yet, as Alberto Toscano (2020) points out, there is an older intellectual and political tradition that identifies fascism in the U.S. within a historical continuum of colonial dispossession and slavery. The analysis of "racial fascism" emerged from black radical thinkers of the 1930s, such as George Padmore, and was further developed by the likes of Aimé Césaire. Similar analysis was later carried out by the Black Panther Party, whose relentless critique of policing and the carceral state as symptoms of U.S. fascism is directly linked to contemporary protest narratives of police violence and the problems of incarceration (Toscano 2020).

Since Trump's first presidential campaign in 2016, analogies to European fascism have dominated the debate (Colasacco 2018). During the turmoil of 2020, such claims and comparisons only escalated. Protests against police brutality and racism, coupled with the Trump administration's response and far-right counter-protests, were a big part of why the analogy seemed more prescient in media narratives. Moreover, Trump employed a strategy in which he sowed seeds of distrust about the integrity of the election so that he could claim victory no matter what the result. Although Joe Biden was eventually declared the winner, an increasing number of Trump supporters did not accept the outcome. Accordingly, many pro-Trump protests were organized in battleground states to "Stop the Steal." This slogan became a powerful pro-Trump protest narrative around which Republican voters as well as far-right groups and conspiracy theorists organized. Tensions kept growing, and with a large and angry base supporting him, it was no surprise that Trump kept promoting the narrative that the election was fraudulent and that he was the real winner. This all culminated in the mass rally in Washington on January 6, 2021 (Holt et al. 2021).

The events of January 6 took the nation by surprise, drawing an immediate wave of condemnation, speculation, and reckoning about the meaning of Trumpism and threats to democracy. What actually happened on the Capitol that day has been covered extensively. Immediately, the news media offered differing opinions about whether it was a riot, an

insurrection, or an attempted coup. Indeed, the January 6th Select Committee investigation is still ongoing. According to some earlier reports, groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers came prepared for violence, having planned at least some kind of action, and led the storming of the building that ultimately overwhelmed the police. This ultimately led to the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history (NPR Staff 2022; Treisman 2021). Different views about the aims of the protesters in Washington, D.C. on January 6 also relate to deeper questions about the current political situation, especially in relation to threats to U.S. democracy (Bessner and Frost 2021).

In the following days, the storming of the Capitol was hotly debated. Different expert historians have commented on the meaning of Trumpism in relation to fascism. For example, writing for the *New Statesman*, historian of the Third Reich Richard J. Evans (2021) argued that Trump is not a fascist, but he also emphasized existing and real dangers to democracy. Evans noted that Trump's nationalism, encouragement of white supremacists, and incitements to violence are related to fascism and that drawing parallels between Trump and fascist leaders is tempting. In addition to Evans, other historians and specialists of fascism, like Roger Griffin and Stanley Payne, have also argued against this comparison, since the conditions and forces driving fascism in the 1920s and 1930s were different than today's problems. Evans has pointed out that the central aim of fascism to conquer territory is not part of Trump's America First foreign policy. And while another feature—encouraging the use of violence against opponents—was systematically employed by fascist regimes to disastrous ends, Trump's use of a rhetoric of violence and encouragements of violence against political opponents has been unsystematic (Evans 2021).

These debates aside, this line of argument returns to the protest narrative used in relation to the Capitol attack on January 6, namely, that Trump's brand of politics in the Republican Party is at a crossroads. While events like the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in 1923 were only the beginning of the Third Reich, Trump's advanced age does not support a comparable future in the United States. For Evans (2021), it is less important to fight demons of the past, like fascism and Nazism, than to focus on present dangers, which he identifies as disinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as the blurring of fact and falsehood. If one examines the actions of Trump and the ways that he employed political power—and potentially still could—the central point is that the "fascist question" may not be the right one to ask at this moment.

From another perspective, the historian Robert Paxton (2021) wrote an opinion piece for *Newsweek*, noting that the incitement of violence by Trump to overturn the election removed

objections to label him a fascist and crossed a red line. Paxton, too, laid out surface-level similarities between fascist leaders and Trump but also underlined important ways in which Trumpism and historical forms of fascism differ. Paxton makes the point that while the support for the demonstrators that breached the Capitol has been diminishing in U.S. society since that event, this does not mean that domestic institutions are safe from further attacks. However, initial views about January 6th can quickly change. Thus, Paxton's (2021) claim is that inciting violence was the final straw and it made Trump qualify as a fascist. Even though the unsuccessful attempt has been widely condemned and institutional safeguards have so far prevailed, there are other contemporary forces at play that may threaten institutions.

Indeed, in a highly polarized political landscape, qualifiers are necessary. The central argument in the historical "Weimar America" analogy is the threat to democracy, but there are different views about what the central threat actually is. While some have focused on the cultural side of language and ideology, others have highlighted Trump's actions in connection to the analogy of him as a fascist. Even as culture war narratives tend to deflect attention from protest claims, the fascist analogy, Evans (2021) argues, deflects attention away from other more prescient threats to democracy. In a similar manner as many historians analyzed Black Lives Matter protests through a structural lens, experts in fascism identify some level of threat to democratic institutions but differ on how severe the threat is and how strong the institutions are.

Finally, the political implications of the fascism analogy can be further linked to different conceptions of history. The MAGA slogan itself indicates a conservative view of a return to the past, to the good old days which never really existed but must be imagined for contemporary political purposes. A mythical view of the past alone does not make Trump or the MAGA movement fascist. Indeed, the variations of liberal and left-wing commentary were often more about the usefulness of the analogy itself in confronting the present crisis. On the most basic level, the more radical left critiques (such as the one advanced by Riley) are grounded in a materialist conception of history in opposition to more idealist views (of the likes of Stanley). In the final analysis, however, the stakes of the debate can be better summarized with how Trump is situated in relation to U.S. history. If one views Trump as a unique threat to the continuum of democracy or an anomalous political phenomenon in U.S. history, this implies a different set of priorities than approaching Trump within the tradition of historical "racial fascism."

Conclusion

Since the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing BLM protests in 2020, various narratives have framed the discussion explored here. The use of history was part of these, signaling the ideological divisions and different lenses through which people viewed BLM. The BLM protests were often compared to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. There were different narrative claims about the nature of the protests as well as, more broadly, the history of slavery and racism in the U.S. Many historians focused on structural claims and the striving to overcome inequalities and racism, and they highlighted collective action and the role of marginalized groups, rebels, and radicals as historical agents, whereas more conservative voices used moral and cultural lenses to deemphasize protest demands to support the role of great men and the nationalist narrative of history. In particular, the 1619 project, which predated the BLM protests, became relevant to protest narratives and served to link them to wider battles over history. Conservative critics of BLM often reduced the past to its political and social use in the present, either in the form of patriotic history or to deflect attention away from structural critiques, to bring the battle into the highly emotional arena of the culture wars. In different ways, the search for precedents from the past was relevant to all actors involved as some kind of inspiration, regardless of their applicability in the moment.

At the same time, the attempt to draw parallels between fascism and Trumpism has been a prominent historical analogy about contemporary institutional erosion. One narrative was to highlight a potential threat—namely, that Trumpism is akin to fascism and works to undermine U.S. democracy and its institutions, as put forth by scholars like Timothy Snyder and Jason Stanley. The central claim in such analogies usually assumes that drastic countermeasures are needed before it is too late. However, from another perspective, though different from the culture war deflection, the danger of the fascism analogy is that it draws attention to past enemies and away from existing threats to democracy. What is interesting from this viewpoint is the similar lens of analysis but different conclusions by Evans and Paxton following the Capitol riot regarding whether Trump is a fascist or not. Indeed, qualifiers and distinctions are necessary to understand the political and social realities. On one hand, a comparison between Trump and the forms of fascism of the past provides a powerful narrative to warn about inherent threats to democracy at the moment (even if its accuracy has been contested). On the other hand, the relationship between European fascism of the past and Trumpism was also challenged on different fronts.

While some saw it as a bad analogy, others highlighted a tradition of homegrown fascism and linked Trump in continuum of U.S. history, both of which implied different priorities for political action. Indeed, while nearly all saw threats to democracy, differences arose as to what the priority is and what should be done. The relevant point is that the debate over history has not merely been about historical facts but also reveals significantly different ways to think about the present and the future in terms of the past.

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