

Understanding Fascism: A Basic Breakdown and Frameworks To Help Navigate Authoritarianism by Dorian Wallace

Fascism is:

- Fear of others disguised as patriotism
- Hunger for power cloaked in order
- Crushing the weak in the name of strength
- Controlling truth to destroy dissent

Fascism:

- Adapts.
- Feeds on desperation.
- Always needs a scapegoat.

Fascism hides behind edgy humor, promises of safety, and expands when the masses don't take it seriously. That's why studying it matters. That's why antifascist work matters.

- Keep learning.
- Keep resisting.
- Keep each other safe.

I remember in 2015, when Donald Trump said, "When Mexico sends its people... they're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." I thought, "Wow. That was racist as fuck. You're saying the government of Mexico sends over drugs, crime, and specifically rapists? What an insane thing to say."

To put things in perspective, I grew up in conservative Ohio and identified as a "conservative" myself—though I was always open-minded when it came to meeting new people. By 2015, I was six years into my service with the Army National Guard. Over time, I began to realize I actually aligned with libertarian social values over traditional conservatism. That said, I was used to being around conservative-leaning folks and rarely, if ever, experienced major conflict in my relationships.

That changed after the first Republican debate in 2015. A relatively close friend said, "Trump's the only one making any sense," and something shifted. I couldn't believe we had just watched the same debate. To me, Trump came off like a con artist—loud, cruel, and full of it. He made ridiculous promises, like building a wall across the Mexican border, and blamed immigrants for everything. Even though I didn't have a deep grasp of politics or economics at the time, but I still felt that his comments were bullshit. I thought That wall would cost a fortune. Are immigrants really the problem? That doesn't line up with any immigrant I know from real life. I realized I needed to start paying closer attention to this reactionary movement. People I knew were falling for this nonsense.

In the months that followed, I watched people I knew—family members, fellow soldiers, hometown friends—begin to echo increasingly racist, reactionary, and conspiratorial beliefs. It felt like [Rhinoceros](#) or [Cabaret](#)—a slow drift toward fascism that suddenly accelerates. It was deeply unsettling to witness.

These moments pushed me to seriously studying fascism—not only its [politics and specific political movements](#), but its psychological, social, and cultural mechanics. I tracked far-right

leaders like [Richard Spencer](#) and [Nick Fuentes](#), joined anonymous online spaces like alt-right forums and Discord servers, and tried to understand how this ideology recruits and radicalizes. Nearly a decade later, the crisis has deepened. Trump, Musk, and a terrifying class of tech oligarchs—Andreessen, Zuckerberg, and Bezos—are consolidating power and hollowing out democratic institutions. America is experiencing fascism. We are here.

This article outlines helpful frameworks from various perspectives to help us understand fascism, how it spreads, and how to fight it.

What Is Fascism?

Fascism is not a collection of ideas, symbols, or dictators—it is a [social and political process](#) with identifiable patterns of behavior and power consolidation. It is an [authoritarian](#), [reactionary](#), and [chauvinist](#) movement that mobilizes mass support through propaganda, nationalism, and the scapegoating of marginalized groups. Though it often uses populist rhetoric to present itself as revolutionary, fascism ultimately serves the interests of the powerful. Its core function is to concentrate and preserve power in the hands of a dominant few.

Not all authoritarian regimes are fascist, but all fascist regimes are authoritarian—driven by chauvinism, reactionary politics, scapegoating, and a vision of total cultural and political control.

Historian and political scientist [Robert Paxton](#) describes fascism as a gradual process, beginning with the spread of reactionary rhetoric and scapegoating, gaining vocal support, and escalating into open repression and the radical exercise of power. He emphasizes that fascism is not dependent on a fixed doctrine but on a set of mobilizing forces enacted in stages.

Revolutionary theorist and political prisoner [George Jackson](#) argued that in the United States, fascism is expressed through state violence used to repress the poor and uphold capitalism. Systems of policing, incarceration, and surveillance are tools of fascist control used to protect capitalist interests by suppressing resistance among the oppressed.

From 1619 to 1964, [Black Americans were forced into systems of racialized authoritarian control](#)—chattel slavery, ethnonationalist terrorism, legalized sexual violence, and Jim Crow laws—many Black radical thinkers accurately identify as fascist. Many Black Americans, particularly those in poverty, continue to face state repression through unaccountable police violence, mass incarceration, and systemic economic exclusion.

Fascism is highly adaptable, taking different forms at different times and places, but its purpose is always the same: to enforce hierarchy and crush dissent. At its core is the belief in naturalized inequality—that some are destined to rule while others are meant to obey. This entitled sense of domination, masked as destiny or divine order, is social narcissism weaponized through the contemporary state structure.

The Five Stages of Fascism

Robert O. Paxton

Historian and scholar [Robert Paxton](#) argues that [fascism](#) is not a fixed ideology but a political process that evolves through identifiable stages. In this model, fascism develops through five key phases.

Fascism is a process, not a sudden event. It develops step by step—often with the cooperation of those who believe they can control or benefit from it.

Intellectual Exploration

- Reactionary and chauvinistic ideas circulate in intellectual, cultural, and political circles.
- These include anxieties about national decline, anti-immigrant sentiment, and attacks on democratic norms.

Example: Public figures begin directing outrage towards immigrants, feminists, or democracy itself for weakening the nation.

Rooting in Politics

- Fascist movements gain traction by mobilizing discontent, often with spectacle, propaganda, and cruelty.
- They attract a vocal base by presenting themselves as defenders of tradition, security, and order.

Examples: Paramilitary rallies, street violence, hate speech, and public intimidation.

Legitimation by Elites

- Fascists gain support or tolerance from established institutions—business leaders, political parties, and media outlets—who see them as useful tools.

Example: YouTube media figures align with fascist movements to suppress oppressed groups by spreading misinformation.

Seizure of Power

- Fascists enter government, often through legal means like elections, appointments, or alliances, and erode democratic systems from within.

Example: Winning elections, then undermining democratic institutions through emergency powers or legal declarations.

Exercise and Radicalization of Power

- Once in control, fascists escalate repression—attacking civil liberties, targeting marginalized groups, and deploying state violence.

Example: Criminalizing protests, mass firings, and normalization of deportations and imprisonments with no due process.

The Three Phases of Fascism — George L. Jackson

Revolutionary theorist and political prisoner [George L. Jackson](#) argues in *Blood in My Eye* that fascism is an [adaptive, evolving process embedded in U.S. capitalism](#). He identifies three distinct phases that demonstrate how fascism adapts to changing conditions, often appearing differently across racial, gender, and class lines.

Political prisoner George L. Jackson outlines how fascism in the U.S. evolves through three phases—rising as pseudo-revolutionary, violently repressing resistance once in power, and eventually securing control through co-optation and propaganda.

Phase 1: Out of Power

- Fascist movements position themselves as revolutionary and subversive, often adopting anti-capitalist, anti-socialist rhetoric to appeal to widespread discontent.
- They exploit societal unrest to gain support, presenting themselves as champions of change.

Example: White nationalist and other right-wing groups actively resisting Reconstruction and civil rights advancements.

Phase 2: In Power but Not Secure

- Once fascist elements ascend to power, they face instability and potential threats to their authority.
- The ruling class employs the state apparatus to suppress opposition, targeting vanguard parties, progressive movements, and marginalized communities, through overt repression, censorship, and the curtailment of civil liberties.

Example: The American prison system itself, as a mechanism of fascist control, is used to silence dissent and control the underclass.

Phase 3: In Power and Secure

- When fascist regimes have solidified their control, they may permit limited dissent to create an illusion of tolerance.
- The state's dominance is unchallenged, and any opposition is either co-opted or rendered ineffective.
- The regime maintains its power through propaganda, controlled opposition, and systemic indoctrination.

Example: The American state, having neutralized radical Black resistance, permits reformist voices who work within the system—advocating change through voting, policy tweaks, or integration into existing capitalist institutions.

Summary: In *Blood in My Eye*, George Jackson identifies fascism as a flexible and racialized process within U.S. capitalism, progressing from insurgent populism to violent repression and finally to stable domination that neutralizes revolutionary threats through tokenism and controlled opposition.

Ur-Fascism (Eternal Fascism) — Umberto Eco

Italian philosopher and novelist [Umberto Eco](#) wrote [Ur-Fascism](#) to describe how fascism can manifest in different societies. He lists common qualities that, while not always appearing together, form a dangerous constellation when many are present.

Fascism is a set of tendencies, not an ideology. If any of these traits appear in society, especially during times of fear or crisis, it is important to start paying attention for other tendencies.

- Cult of Tradition – Idealizing a mythic past while rejecting modernity.
- Rejection of Modernism – Hostility toward reason, critical thought, and science.
- Action for Action's Sake – Valuing violence or impulsive behavior over thoughtful deliberation.
- Disagreement is Treason – Branding critics as enemies of the nation.
- Fear of Difference – Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia.
- Frustrated Middle Class – Mobilizing downwardly mobile citizens against scapegoats.
- Obsession with Conspiracy – Belief in secret plots by elites or minorities.
- Enemies are Both Strong and Weak – Depicting marginalized groups as both powerless and dangerous.
- Pacifism is Weakness – Promoting aggression and war as virtues.
- Contempt for the Weak – Glorifying cruelty and domination.

- Machismo and Gun Obsession – Celebrating masculine aggression and weapons.
- Hero Worship – Devotion to a strongman or mythic savior figure.
- Selective Populism – Claiming to speak for the "real people," while excluding others.
- Newspeak – Reducing complex thought through simplistic, emotional language.

The Three-Way Fight Devin Zane Shaw

Philosopher and antifascist theorist [Devin Zane Shaw](#) developed the "[Three-Way Fight](#)" model, rejecting the idea that fascism is simply the opposite of liberal democracy.

This framework identifies three contending forces:

1. Neoliberal Capitalism / The State – Maintains the current exploitative status quo.
2. Fascist Authoritarianism / Reactionary Chauvinism – Seeks a "return" to patriarchal, nationalist, or ethnically "pure" pasts through violence.
3. Revolutionary Socialism / Autonomous Social Movements – Fights for liberation, equality, and solidarity beyond the state or corporate power.

Understanding Fascist Behaviors and Practices Mark Bray

Historian and activist [Mark Bray](#) emphasizes that fascism should be understood by its tactics and behaviors, not simply its ideology. His book *Antifa: The Antifascist Handbook* identifies fascist patterns of behavior and trends.

Fascism doesn't need philosophical consistency. It operates through fear, cruelty, and scapegoating to create instability to gain control.

- Ultranationalism – Promoting the supremacy of one nation, culture, or ethnic group.
- Ethno-Racial Supremacy – Advocating for a racial or ethnic hierarchy.
- Anti-Egalitarianism – Rejection of social justice, equality, or pluralism.
- Political Violence – Embracing violence as a political strategy.
- Anti-Democracy – Undermining democratic institutions and norms.
- Anti-Feminism and Anti-Leftism – Opposition to feminism, leftist movements, and liberation politics.
- Strongman Worship – Obsession with authoritarian leaders who promise to "restore order."

Palingenetic Ultranationalism Roger Griffin

Historian [Roger Griffin](#) argues that fascist movements construct a narrative.

- The nation has lost its greatness due to outsiders, degenerates, or enemies within—and it must be reborn through radical action, purification, or violence.
- Fascism is seductive because it presents a counterfeit type of hope—a promise of national rebirth that requires exclusion, repression, and authoritarian control.
 - [Palingenesis](#) – A myth of national rebirth after a period of perceived decline.
 - [Ultranationalism](#) – A belief in the inherent supremacy and purity of one's nation or culture.

Example: Slogans like "Make [Country] Great Again" invoke this idea of national renewal by cleansing supposed threats.

Colonialism Is Fascism Frantz Fanon & Aimé Césaire

Psychiatrist [Frantz Fanon](#) argued that colonialism is Fascism applied on a global scale. Colonization is a structure of domination where entire populations are subjected to systemic violence, psychological control, and cultural erasure. The colonial relationship is inherently

fascist because it requires a totalizing regime that justifies dehumanization and terror in the name of "civilization."

[Aimé Césaire](#), poet and politician, sharpened this critique in his seminal text [Discourse on Colonialism](#), asserting that what was condemned as Fascism under Hitler was actually colonialism brought back to the European continent. This insight demonstrates how fascist practices are not anomalies but core features of building and maintaining an empire.

Colonialism = Exported Fascism

Fascism = Imported Colonialism

- Fascism has always been a core tool of colonial empires, which has shaped global systems of control. It extends across nation-state boundaries into the very psychology of domination, meaning liberation is as much a psychological struggle as a political struggle.
- Colonized people are subjugated through physical violence, economic exploitation, forced dependency, and the destruction of languages, traditions, and histories.
- The colonizer's power is enforced through military occupation, legal apartheid, and racial myths that portray the colonized as less than human.
- Fascism, in this transnational sense, is not only a domestic phenomenon but imposed across borders, embedded in imperial logic, and deeply internalized by both oppressor and oppressed.
- **Examples:**
 - France in Algeria: Torture, mass killings, and systemic racism framed as "civilizing missions."
 - Britain in Kenya: The brutal Mau Mau suppression, concentration camps, and land dispossession.
 - The U.S. in Puerto Rico and the Philippines: Economic dependency, strategic militarization, suppression of self-determination, and racial hierarchies upheld through American exceptionalism.

Originally published on *Dorian's Mode* by Dorian Wallace.
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