

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 271

“The Roots of Fascism”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Irrationalism also depends on the cult of action for action’s sake. Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation. Therefore culture is suspect insofar as it is identified with critical attitudes. Distrust of the intellectual world has always been a symptom of Ur-Fascism, from [Hermann] Goering’s alleged statement (“When I hear talk of culture I reach for my gun”) to the frequent use of such expressions as “degenerate intellectuals,” “eggheads,” “effete snobs,” “universities are a nest of reds.” The official Fascist intellectuals were mainly engaged in attacking modern culture and the liberal intelligentsia for having betrayed traditional values. . . .

Umberto Eco, in his 1995 essay, “Ur-fascism.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 271. The Roots of Fascism.

This is a topic I have been looking forward to with a mix of anticipation and unease since I began this podcast, 270 episodes ago.

You can’t survey the history of the twentieth century without taking on the topic of fascism. Fascism is the twentieth century’s distinctive contribution to political philosophy; it was also the driving force behind some of the most important historical events of the twentieth century. You cannot understand the twentieth century until you understand fascism.

In the early episodes of this podcast, I talked at some length about conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, the three great political ideologies of the 19th century. Conservatism and liberalism were already in business early in the 19th century, with socialism coming into being in the latter half of that century. If you could go back in time to the dawn of the twentieth century, you could talk to people about liberalism and conservatism and socialism and most any educated person would understand what you were talking about. If you tried to describe fascism, however, even if

you avoided using its name, which had not yet been coined, you'd get nothing but a blank stare. In the year 1901, fascism was little more than a gleam in its father's eye. You and I might be able to spot signs of it if we look hard enough, but it had not yet gained general notice among the people of the time.

In our time, most everyone who had any personal experience of mid-twentieth-century fascism has passed away. The closest you can get to personal experience with fascism is someone like me. I'm a member of the generation that grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. We spent our childhoods listening to the testimony of our parents, our teachers, and the other adults around us of what life was like in a world that included fascism.

It must also be said that after 1945, there was a deliberate, concerted effort by anti-fascists of all political persuasions in many countries to impress the horrors of fascism upon their children—people like me. Their goal was to uproot every last trace of fascism and salt the earth that was left so that no one of our generation or of the generations that followed us would ever again be seduced by fascism.

For that was how they viewed fascism. The question of how fascism had been able to lead so many people to support such horrific acts of war, violence, and cruelty had become an intellectual obsession in the world I grew up in. Most people of that time seemed to think that fascism was the political equivalent of heroin: something that felt good at first, that made you feel strong and powerful, capable and important, but once you got that first rush, you'd want it again and again, even though it would take ever-stronger doses to give you that same wonderful feeling, but you'd accept them gladly, until you were hooked beyond the possibility of escape and it took you down the path to your own destruction.

It was basically a campaign to discredit fascism for all time, and it was mostly successful. Today, we live in the world that campaign built, and I'll point out two facts about it. First of all, this campaign is the reason why, especially among people of my generation, fascism is our go-to, all-purpose political insult. It is the nastiest word in our vocabulary, our f-bomb, as it were, and we drop it when we encounter a political view we deeply despise. Or when we're really, really angry. Take your pick.

An unfortunate consequence for the generations that followed us is that the word fascism has lost much of its meaning, other than as an all-purpose putdown; a term that means little more than "something bad."

Second, because the word fascism has become so deeply discredited, hardly any fascist since 1945 has been willing to own up to it. Happily, fascism seldom reared its ugly head in the second half of the twentieth century, but it's coming back into fashion now that the people who knew best how to recognize it have left this world. But in either case, then or now, we can't count on the fascists identifying themselves, since they know as well as we do how negative are the connotations that go with that label.

So we need some kind of yardstick, some kind of field guide that will help us to identify fascists in the wild. The obvious way to do that is to draw up some kind of definition of fascism, but that is a deceptively easy-sounding project that is in fact horrendously difficult. Arguments over how to define fascism have been raging ever since fascism first appeared.

There are four reasons why fascism is so hard to define. The first is its relative youth. Conservative and liberal political thought have been going on since the 18th century. Conservatism and liberalism were born in an age when, generally speaking, only a small fraction of the population had the right to vote, even in countries we usually label “democracies.” Conservatives and liberals were mostly upper-class men who devised and sharpened their political philosophies by debating them back and forth in gentlemen’s clubs or in parliaments. When they thought they had it right, they published their ideas in books. So if you want to know what conservatives believe, you read David Hume or Edmund Burke. If you want to know what liberals believe, you read Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill.

Socialism came along later, in the latter half of the 19th century. I devoted episode 18 to the early history of socialism. Socialism came from outside the halls of government and the gathering places of the upper classes; it was formulated within the ranks of those critical of both conservatives and liberals and the political and economic systems they imposed on society. These ranks included a number of journalists, writers, and academics, who published their own ideas. So if you want to know what socialists believe, you read Bakunin and Proudhon. You read the works of members of the Fabian Society. Most of all, you read Karl Marx.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, you could have filled a whole library with books written to lay out and explicate the principles and preferred policies of conservatives, liberals, and socialists. But fascists...? Nothing. They’ve barely gotten started.

Second, there is no canon of fascist thought. There is no Karl Marx of fascism, not even an Edmund Burke or a James Madison. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, a number of theoreticians of fascism did appear. They wrote books and articles attempting to explain fascism, but fascists have an annoying tendency to change their minds about a lot of things. Fascism is also inherently anti-intellectual. Political leaders of these other ideologies tend to see their role as applying the principles laid out in those books to the messy real world of public policy. Fascist political leaders, by contrast, defy the intellectuals; they make policy decisions pragmatically, one might even say instinctively, and leave it to the intellectuals to work out what it all meant afterward.

The closest thing we have to a Karl Marx of fascism is probably Benito Mussolini. Mussolini was a journalist and essayist before he was a fascist, and he did write books and articles and gave speeches, in which he laid out his thoughts on what fascism was all about. But even Mussolini’s works are problematic. He became prime minister of Italy at the age of 39 and held that position for more than twenty years. A lot of people change their minds about many things over a twenty-

year period of their lives, and Benito Mussolini was no exception. Mussolini's thoughts in 1922 are not much of a guide to his decisions in 1940. For that matter, don't forget that Mussolini began his political life as a socialist, so yeah, he changed his mind a lot over the course of his life.

Third, fascism is distinct from these other ideologies in that it is the only one that is not evangelical, if I can put it that way. Conservative, liberal, and socialist governments and political leaders generally work to export their governing ideologies to other countries. They dream of a whole world governed by the principles they think right. As part of this process, they disseminate explanations of their favored ideology and arguments for why it is the superior choice.

Fascism, by contrast, sees its own country as having a unique destiny and builds its ideology around fulfilling that destiny. Therefore it follows that fascists have little interest in planting fascist governments in other countries. Even in the 1940s, when Nazi Germany was occupying other countries that had their own domestic Nazi parties, such as the Netherlands and Norway, the German occupation did not hand over control of those nations to the local Nazis. They may have given them some honors and paid them some lip service, but real control was more likely to be delegated to more conventional right-wing leaders.

Finally, you have to keep in mind that fascists are—how shall I put this?—not always entirely honest about what they believe or what they are up to when they hold political power. Socialists, liberals, conservatives—most everything you need to know about them is printed right on the tin, so to speak, if “on the tin” means that library of books I was describing a few minutes ago, while fascists not only disdain the intellectuals, they are indifferent, or even hostile, to the notion that the general public should be kept informed of what they are doing and why. Implicit in fascism is the idea that the masses of ordinary people are neither interested in nor capable of understanding what their leaders are up to. Fascist intellectuals devote most of their energy to critiquing their opposition, rather than defending their own movement.

So where does that leave us? How can we even discuss fascism, if we don't have a workable definition or even an agreed-upon reference point for what fascism is? I submit to you that the solution is to look not at fascist ideology, not at the words, but at fascist acts, fascist deeds. In saying this, I am not saying anything the fascists would themselves disagree with. Fascist leaders often spoke—and speak—of the superiority of deeds to words and express impatience with the niceties of democratic debate. Let's just do it, they say.

What image comes to mind, when you hear the word fascism? One might be large numbers of soldiers in identical uniforms, marching—or goose-stepping—down a city street, perhaps the capital of their country. Or the capital of an enemy, now defeated in war.

Another might be of mobs in the streets, blackshirts or brownshirts, disrupting a meeting or rally of an opposing political group, beating its members. This opposing political group is almost certainly on the political left.

Most likely though, you picture a political leader standing on a banner-draped balcony, haranguing a mob in the street below. A man. It's always a man. This man delivers his speech in a style emotional and demonstrative, his voice rising and falling, his arms flailing in exaggerated gestures and salutes. In different circumstances, he might seem a comical figure, but there is nothing remotely funny about either the rage or the devotion he is whipping up in his followers.

In this last image, you might be tempted to focus on the leader as the key to understanding fascism. I submit to you that is misleading. A charismatic leader seems to be a necessary ingredient in a fascist movement, but I invite you to focus on the movement. The people in the street below. In fact, all three images I just presented to you have that feature in common: a large number of ordinary people doing extraordinary things, displaying an intensity of emotion and engagement that you seldom see in other political movements.

To put it more simply, an essential fact of fascism is that it is a radical mass movement.

[music: Sousa, "Bullets and Bayonets"]

Shortly before his death in 1895, Friedrich Engels published a collection of Marx's writings, and in its preface he celebrated the rising numbers of the Social Democratic Party in Germany and looked forward to the day when socialism would overwhelm its enemies democratically:

"If this goes on, [Socialists] shall at the close of the century win over the greater part of the middle social layers, petty bourgeoisie as well as small peasants, and we shall come to be the decisive power in the land, before which all other powers must bow whether they like it or not. To keep going this growth without interruption until it swamps the ruling governmental system, that is our main task..."

"The irony of history turns everything upside down. We, the 'revolutionists,' the 'upsetters,' we thrive much better with legal than with illegal means in forcing an overthrow. The parties of order, as they call themselves, perish because of the legal conditions set up by themselves. With Odilon Barrot they cry out in despair: *la légalité nous tue*—legality is our death—while we with this same legality acquire swelling muscles and red cheeks and look the picture of health. And if we are not insane enough to favor them by letting them drive us into street battles, nothing will in the end be left to them but themselves to break through the legality that is so fatal to them."

In other words, what Engels is saying is that opening up the right to vote to more and more people—okay, to be more accurate, I should say, more and more men—inevitably means that socialists will draw ever increasing numbers at the ballot box until socialists rule the nation and institute socialism. Socialists were once seen as the party of revolution, the party that would use violence to overthrow the existing order, but the trend toward universal suffrage would inevitably empower socialists and socialism through the existing legal order, according to Engels. He still envisioned some period of violence before socialism's triumph, but he predicts it will be the capitalists and the other enemies of socialism that will resort to lawlessness and

violence, because the peaceful, constitutional order now favors socialism. Indeed, he delights in the irony that socialists are becoming constitutionalists, while the powers that be are destined to become reactionary revolutionaries.

Engels did not live long enough to see his prediction proved spectacularly wrong, but it's instructive to zoom in closely on this historical moment and ask why. It's because as the working classes were gradually being allowed to vote, Engels and his colleagues saw socialism as the only ideology that would appeal to these new voters, because socialism was the only political movement that had the interests of the working class at the center of its agenda. By definition.

What Engels and the others did not foresee was the development of an anti-socialist ideology that could successfully compete with socialism for working-class votes. An anti-socialist ideology that was also anti-egalitarian, traditionalist, and nationalist, but its base of support would lie not among the upper or middle classes, like the conservatives or the liberals. No, this ideology would compete head-to-head with socialism for the support of the working class.

And it would be called fascism.

When socialists had no political power, when they were no more than a collection of idealistic writers and thinkers, it was easy enough for them to critique the capitalism of their time and prophesy that it would inevitably be replaced by something better. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were already arguing among themselves over whether the transition to socialism could be effected peacefully and democratically, or whether it would of necessity be violent—because the landlords and the capitalists would never surrender their privileges peacefully, you understand.

Of course, if you want to know how to get to your destination, it might help if you knew what your destination was. Socialism, yes. A more just and equitable political and economic order, yes. But what would that look like and how would it work, exactly?

We encountered this problem in the period following the October Revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks had no plan for how they were going to run the Russian state or the Russian economy. They didn't think they needed one, because they thought the rest of the world would soon follow them into the new era of socialism, and once that happened, their working-class brothers and sisters in England or Germany would come to Russia and share freely the secrets of an advanced economy and show them how to construct the socialist utopia.

I can't help but think of the Underpants Gnomes in the American animated TV series *South Park*. For those of you who don't know, the Underpants Gnomes go around collecting underpants for profit but none among them can explain how you get from collecting underpants to profit. Similarly, turn-of-the-century socialists had step one, which was overthrow capitalism, which would lead to step three, the socialist utopia, but no one could articulate step two.

There's a saying in politics that it's easier to throw darts than it is to catch them. When the socialists were nothing more than a gang of cranky outsiders, it was easy to critique the existing social and economic order. Socialists had the luxury of comparing the existing world, with all its faults and failures, full of flawed human leaders, to the imaginary socialist utopia, where everything is just, no one goes hungry, and the system works just fine, because of course it does. Imaginary worlds beat real ones every time.

It is equally true that imaginary political leaders beat real ones every time. It's a sad but inevitable fact of life in a democratic political system that all elected leaders disappoint. That's because no elected official perfectly reflects the views of any given voter who supported them. It's easier to overlook the ways in which a political candidate's views don't exactly match your own in the heat of an election campaign. But after they win and take office, they will surely make at least a few decisions that reflect different priorities from yours, the voter who helped elect them. I speak from experience here.

So, and inevitably, once socialists began getting themselves elected, and especially once they became part of governments and took on real world responsibilities, their decisions led to disappointment. And the historical moment in which this becomes crystal clear is the Great War. I'll just remind you of the events I covered in episode 132. The Socialist International had already had a conference scheduled for August 1914 in Vienna. As the July Crisis unfolded that year, socialist leaders from around Europe met in Brussels to discuss the socialist response. The meeting included prominent socialists we've already met in the podcast, such as Scotland's Keir Hardie, Austria's Friedrich Adler, Germany's Rosa Luxemburg and Hugo Haase, and France's Jean Jaurès.

Jaurès in particular is an interesting figure. A socialist pacifist internationalist through and through, Jaurès had opposed France's alliance with Russia and its entente with Britain on the grounds that they pushed France toward confrontation with Germany. In the Chamber of Deputies, he had voted against expanding conscription in France and opposed President Poincaré's anti-German policies. At the July meeting in Brussels, Jaurès put his arm around the German Hugo Haase and spoke passionately about the need for socialists to oppose the looming war.

Socialists did not control the government in France or Germany or anywhere else at the time, but they held significant numbers of seats in many European parliaments. There was talk of socialists coming together across national borders to prevent the war. There was talk of a general strike to stop the war.

But in the end, it was no more than talk. Most significantly, Jaurès, the true believer, returned to Paris to work against the war in the Chamber of Deputies, but was soon shot to death by the aptly named Raoul Villain, a 29-year-old right-wing student. There was no real socialist movement to prevent the war. In France, the socialist parties joined the *union sacrée*, the government of all

parties that led France during the war. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, chose to support the war effort in the Reichstag.

Rosa Luxemburg, who was present at that Brussels meeting, would eventually break from the SPD and found the KPD, the Communist Party of Germany. She was murdered by the *Freikorps* during the January 1919 Communist uprising, episode 210. Hugo Haase also broke from the SPD during the war and became the first leader of the Independent SPD. Haase was murdered later in 1919 by a mentally ill right-wing Austrian named Johann Voss. Haase was about to expose collaboration between the German government and the Freikorps at the time he was killed, raising suspicions that the Freikorps might have been behind this killing as well.

As for Jaurès's assassin, Raoul Villain, he was prosecuted for the murder after the war, but although there was no actual doubt as to his guilt, the jury voted to acquit. Per French legal procedure, Jaurès's widow was actually billed for the court costs in the case.

I don't know about you, but I'm seeing a pattern here. All three of these prominent pacifist socialists were murdered by right-wing nationalists who were incensed by their socialism and pacifism, even though their socialism and pacifism had no discernible effect on the war effort. Nonetheless, the assassins saw their words as treason. None of the killers was convicted of a crime, though Voss was committed to a mental institution.

I'd also point out that all these killers came from humble backgrounds. The *Freikorps* were war veterans. Voss was a leather worker. Villain was a student who grew up in an ordinary family. I submit to you that we're already seeing here an early, rising form of fascism. We've got a right-wing nationalist movement that sees the socialist left as not merely political opponents but enemies of the nation, people whose treason is so obvious and so dangerous that it excuses the right from participating in anything like a legal process and justifies ordinary citizens performing extra-judicial executions.

In the Jaurès case, the murder took place before the war, but whatever you make of Villain, you have to account for the fact that by 1919, after the war ended in an Allied victory, in France, a nation that was part of the winning alliance, there were still enough other ordinary French citizens who agreed that Villain's act was justified to acquit him.

As for the other cases, the German cases, remember that the *Freikorps* were veterans of the war. Ask yourself what it must have felt like, to be a veteran of that war. Perhaps you were a socialist yourself, before the war. You believed in these people. You thought they actually represented a different political order, one that would run your country in a wholly new way. But when the war came and you were called up to fight, the socialists fell in line right behind the bourgeois parties. They never so much as lifted a finger to help keep you safely home.

So what do you do? What becomes of your own political orientation? One possibility is that you might move farther left. Give up on those namby-pamby socialists and go full Communist, like

Rosa Luxemburg. When the going got tough, the socialists caved, but the Communists have already demonstrated they don't give in to anybody or anything, ever.

Or maybe you go the other direction, toward fascism. Toward a sort of national socialism. Remember that phrase? National socialism is a sort-of-socialist analysis that substitutes nationality for class. You aren't oppressed because you are a worker. You're oppressed because you're a German. Or an Italian. And it's other nationalities that are keeping you down, not other classes.

There were plenty of German veterans who went Communist, but the fascist analysis really took hold in Germany. It's easy to understand why. Most Germans believed that Germany was winning the war right up until those chaotic final weeks when the Central Powers collapsed. This was especially true within the German military. We talked about how the Army put on programs to explain to soldiers that everything was fine, and encouraged them to write home and tell their families how it was all going swimmingly. Well, it wasn't, and people on the home front were getting increasingly sick of the war, and civilian politicians in Germany and Austria were beginning to respond to that.

But the German Army under Hindenburg and Ludendorff laid the groundwork for postwar fascism among military veterans by telling them this, and by insisting right up to the end, and in fact well after the end, that the war was going well and was winnable, but the war effort was sabotaged by weakness back home. By socialists and other anti-German elements—you *know* which ones I mean—who stabbed the German Army in the back. Hence the *Freikorps*, hence the murders of people like Rosa Luxemburg.

The situation was a little different in Russia. In Russia, the socialists had no real power and kept the faith, as it were, by opposing the war effort. It wasn't until after the February Revolution and the installation of the Provisional Government that the disillusionment set in. Russian soldiers, poorly equipped and badly led, had no illusions about how the war was going. They just wanted to quit and go home. But the Provisional Government, which was officially socialist by July, accepted Allied aid and agreed to stay in the war. No one hated that decision more than the soldiers themselves, many of whom abandoned the Provisional Government in favor of the Bolsheviks, who scoffed at the other socialist parties and vowed that they alone would deliver the peace so many Russians craved. And so they did. But since Russian soldiers had no illusions about Russia winning the war, there they felt no sense of betrayal when the Bolsheviks sued for peace.

Italy offers a third case. Here the socialists also stuck to their anti-war principles, but Italy stayed in the war and won it. Or was part of the winning alliance, at least. But when Italy's victory was "mutilated," as the proto-fascists put it, it was easy to blame the socialists, who had opposed and undermined the war effort all along.

So the roots of fascism lie in disappointment with what we might call “democratic socialism,” by which I mean socialism that seeks to use the democratic, constitutional process to elect a socialist majority that would then abolish capitalism and replace it with a more just and equitable order. This sense of disappointment leads large numbers of working-class people to fascism. It also leads them to Communism, an extreme form of socialism that rejects electoral solutions in favor of direct, violent action. You might think of Communism as a strain of socialism that embraces a fascist methods in the service of socialist goals.

In the story of the Russian Revolution, it’s hard to discern any faction you could identify as fascist or proto-fascist, although one could imagine that some elements among the Whites during the Civil War might have developed into something resembling fascism had the Whites prevailed. The Russian Revolution is a straight-up story of impatience with a government of untrustworthy socialist constitutionalists leading the disaffected to support a more aggressive strain of socialist, people who swore they would get that omelet made no matter how many eggs they had to break to do it. I refer of course to the Bolsheviks.

The situation in Germany and Italy was more complex, but important to consider, since these are the only two historical examples—so far—of nations that not only developed a fascist political movement, but saw that movement take full control of the state. In both cases, the short version is that post-war disillusionment led to increased support for both fascists and Communists, and then to a bitter competition between the two, in which the fascists ultimately prevailed.

If these are the roots of fascism, then the soil in which it takes root is a large number of unhappy, disaffected working class people, especially war veterans. Millions of Germans and Italians who went off to war came home bitter, believing that they had been let down by the very society they had fought to defend, and fascism was the result.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Kathy for her kind donation, and thank you to Andrew for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kathy and Andrew help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me news week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our examination of fascism. We've looked at its roots, now let's consider the fascist worldview. The Vision of Fascism, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. If I'm going to put out an episode titled "The Roots of Fascism," maybe I should dig a little deeper into the pre-history of fascism. Fascism as it was known in its heyday of the 1930s and 1940s clearly developed in the bitter aftermath of the Great War. But the seeds had already been planted by then. Had there not been a Great War, something like fascism would have sprouted anyway.

So where, then, do we see the first hints of what is to come? I've been relying on the excellent book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, by Robert Paxton to help organize my thinking for these episodes. Paxton notes that various countries, including France, Austria, and Russia have been cited as the birthplace of fascism. Please note that no one ever names Italy or Germany as the first.

In Austria, you had Karl Lueger, the controversial mayor of Vienna from 1897-1910, whom we met in episode 50. Lueger promoted socialist-style public services in Vienna, while also peppering his politics with considerable anti-Semitism.

If you think of fascism in terms of a working-class backlash against the disappointing performance of socialists, you might want to start with the first socialist to hold a cabinet position in a European democracy. That would be Alexandre Millerand, who joined the government of prime minister Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau in 1899. His decision to take the post of minister of commerce was itself controversial among socialists, many of whom believed it was a betrayal of the movement for a socialist leader to join a bourgeois government. I talked about this back in episode 18.

If you remember episode 18 and 8, you'll recall that the government of Waldeck-Rousseau was deliberately created as a broad-based coalition to deal with the Dreyfus Affair. This was the government that pardoned Dreyfus after his second conviction. There's a lot about the Dreyfus Affair itself that presents a whiff of fascism, which I talked about at the time. The combination of anti-Semitism with a ruthless patriotism that believed in upholding the Army at any cost, even at the cost of patriotically lying, patriotically forging evidence, and patriotically imprisoning innocent people for the crime of pointing out that the Army was wrong.

But even before the Dreyfus Affair, back in 1889, you had General Boulanger, also known as General Revanche for his strident insistence on the return of Alsace and Lorraine. I mentioned him in episode 7, when he made an attempt to overthrow the Third Republic. A key source of support for Boulanger was disgruntled French veterans of the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. (You remember all this stuff from the early days of the podcast? Good times. It makes me want to revive the Kaiser Wilhelm Award.)

Anyway, Boulanger's coup attempt, driven by right-wing populist nationalism, especially that of unhappy veterans, also has the flavor of fascism to it, don't you think? Maybe those who identify France as the cradle of fascism have a point.

But before any of my fellow Americans get too smug about this, I'll note that Paxton makes the provocative case that the earliest political movement that could plausibly be labeled fascist or perhaps proto-fascist originated right here in my home country. I refer to the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in the aftermath of the American Civil War. The Klan had their uniforms and white hoods, the acceptance of violence against their political opponents as necessary and proper, and of course an ethnic nationalism that was deeply hostile to African Americans, and sometimes other ethnic groups. And notably, it was another movement that drew its strength from disgruntled war veterans—in this case, veterans of the Confederate Army.

But we shouldn't be too surprised to find the first stirrings of fascism in these two countries, the United States and France. As I pointed out to you all the way back in episode 18, in the late 19th century, the only large democracies that granted universal male suffrage were those same two countries, the United States and France. Because fascism is an ideology based on a mass movement, so we should naturally expect to find its first stirrings in the first countries to grant broad rights of political participation.

The most uncomfortable truth about fascism is that it emerges from democracy.

[music: Closing Theme]