(New) Fascism

Contagion, Community, Myth

Nidesh Lawtoo

Michigan State University Press

East Lansing

Copyright © 2019 by Nidesh Lawtoo

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements
of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Michigan State University Press
East Lansing, Michigan 48823-5245

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 716181: HOM). The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in this book.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Lawtoo, Nidesh, author.
Title: (New) fascism : contagion, community, myth / Nidesh Lawtoo.
Description: East Lansing, Mich. : Michigan State University Press, 2019.
| Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018050616| ISBN 9781611863291 (pbk. : alk. paper)
| ISBN 9781609176082 (pdf) | ISBN 9781628953718 (epub) | ISBN 9781628963724 (kindle)
Subjects: LCSH: Fascism—Philosophy.
Classification: LCC JC481 .L39 2019 | DDC 320.53/3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018050616

Cover and book design by Erin Kirk New
Composition by Charlie Sharp, Sharp Des!gns, East Lansing, Michigan
Cover art © Ali Mazraie Shadi. All rights reserved.

Michigan State University Press is a member of the Green Press Initiative and is committed to developing and encouraging ecologically responsible publishing practices. For more information about the Green Press Initiative and the use of recycled paper in book publishing, please visit *www.greenpressinitiative.org*.

Visit Michigan State University Press at *www.msupress.org*

Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and to point our finger at any of its new instances—every day, in every part of the world.

UMBERTO ECO, "UR-FASCISM"

Contents

Foreword, *by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen* ix
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xxvii
Introduction xxix

CHAPTER 1. Crowd Psychology Redux 1
CHAPTER 2. The Mimetic Community 53
CHAPTER 3. The Power of Myth Reloaded 129
CODA. Fascism Now and Then: William Connolly and Nidesh Lawtoo in Conversation 179

Notes 243
Bibliography 279

Foreword

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen

Readers beware: this is not your usual academic book. It is a very forceful, thought-provoking, and timely intervention in a political context dominated by the rise of new forms of fascism, notably in the United States, but also elsewhere in the world.

Nidesh Lawtoo does not shy away from the term "fascism," but he doesn't use it lightly. Rather, he shows how our usual "enlightened" political categories and reflexes prevent us from recognizing fascism in the first place. For this political philosophy rooted in the subject of *Aufklärung*, Lawtoo substitutes another, much less optimistic theoretical tradition, that of mimesis.

For this longstanding tradition that goes all the way back to Plato's *Republic*, what we Moderns call the "subject" or

the "ego" is originally a copy, a shadow of other people. Far from being autonomous and "rational animals," we are essentially social beings whose thoughts, but also behavior, character, affects, and desires are shaped mimetically—an age-old intuition that finds support, Lawtoo claims, in the recent discovery of "mirror neurons" that trigger the reflex imitation of other people's gestures and expressions. The immediate implication of all this, as Plato well understood, is that we are fundamentally malleable, suggestible, and that this mimetic modeling is "beyond good and evil": it can be used to shape rational and ethical citizens, but it can also degenerate into irrational psychic contagion and mass hysteria—that is, into what late nineteenth-century theorists called "crowd psychology."

Lawtoo expertly retraces the theories of the major proponents of the mimetic theory from Plato to Girard through Nietzsche, Tarde, Le Bon, Freud, Bataille, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy, and he shows how, taken together, they allow us to diagnose and understand the current fascist "pathology" much better than the usual liberal or progressive discourse. Lawtoo's will not be the first book to cry "fascism" à propos

Trump (Madeleine Albright and Timothy Snyder come to mind), but it is the first to provide a theory that is equal to the task of explaining how and why a neo-fascist clown managed to get elected president of a democracy such as the United States of America.

Lawtoo's account is both incredibly enlightening and incredibly sobering as it forces us to face the mimetic beast in all of us, the old and new "Man of the Crowds." The passages in which Lawtoo illustrates the mimetic theory with the current political situation in the United States are always right on target, and I only wish there were more of them, as they are so telling and provide the public with a key to what is happening here and now.

Readers beware: Ye who enter, abandon all illusions. . . .

Preface

Given the Nietzschean inspiration of the diagnostic that follows, I might as well begin this short genealogy of (new) fascism with a personal confession. I first started thinking about the power of authoritarian leaders to cast a spell on the crowd when I was based in the United States, working on a doctoral thesis that explored the haunting power of mimesis in European modernism.

Fascism, I should say immediately, was not a topic I was initially planning to address—and for obvious biographical reasons. Born in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland in the 1970s, a thirty-minute drive from the Italian border, I had soon picked up from the tonality of adult voices and from the affective reactions that ensued, that the accusation "*fascista!*" was not to be taken lightly. It was rarely mimicked

among us children on the courtyard of our school, but when it was used—as a fight would escalate, for instance, or as a bully would boss us around—it inevitably triggered an automatic reflex in the accused to set up a maximum distance from whatever reality this obscure accusation may have designated in the past—in a country that, despite the proximity, we felt, was not *our* country anyway.

Childhood impressions can be lasting. Three decades later, completing a PhD in another country far from home, I still had no particular desire to study a political phenomenon that didn't seem likely to return in any democratic country any time soon, and that concerned something that had happened long ago, far away—over that border. If the word itself still conveyed the pathos we had sensed in childhood, now intensified by a deeper knowledge of the horrors that had actually taken place, the political reality felt more distant than ever, both in time and space. True, George W. Bush had just won the 2000 presidential election against Al Gore, in a hotly contested nomination, but I was in the United States of America after all, "the land of the free," and if the political, economic, and cultural climate was far from stable,

there appeared to be no immediate danger looming on the horizon.

But was this appearance real? As I progressively familiarized myself with the affective and infective register fascist leaders had once employed to galvanize crowds in the past, relying on rhetorical techniques that included authoritarian affirmation, repetition of nationalist slogans, use of images rather than thoughts, clear-cut division between good and evil, chosen and not chosen people, us and them, among other disquieting hierarchical distinctions, I felt somewhat uneasy and began to wonder: could these old phantoms return, perhaps under new masks?

Meanwhile, the topic of behavioral imitation (or *mimesis*), which had mediated the affective relation between fascist leaders and the suggestible crowds in the 1920s and 1930s, was becoming interesting for scholarly reasons as well. It seemed to render manifest symptoms that were otherwise latent in the modernist literary and philosophical texts I was reading, but immediately emerged as I placed the texts within a broader historical and theoretical context—irrational symptoms like affective contagion and automatic reflexes,

hypnotic spells and hysterical dispossessions, violent actions and mirroring, unconscious reactions.

I thus began to wonder about the relation between the unconscious and crowd behavior, which seemed to play such a key role in the emergence of fascist movements. In my home fields, literary theory and philosophy, psychoanalysis still provided the dominant frame to solve what Sigmund Freud, a few years before the rise of fascism, had famously called "the riddle" of group formation, and I explored that well-traveled route. At the same time, a minor pre-Freudian tradition among modernist "philosophical physicians" I was progressively uncovering urged me to ask a different question: namely, could it be that embodied forms of automatic imitation, or mimicry, perhaps more than dreams, provided, if not a *via regia*, at least a backdoor to an unconscious that was not only personal but also collective, not solely psychological but also physio-psychological, not based on a repressive hypothesis but on a mimetic hypothesis?

I did not have any clear answers at the time, but a change of perspective was already underway. Hence, what had started as an inquiry into the psychic life of the ego

progressively morphed into a diagnostic of mimetic crowds that had the power to turn the ego into a copy, shadow, or, to echo Nietzsche's diagnostic phrase, a "phantom of the ego."[1]

This move, I later realized, was not original. It was in line with a long-standing tradition in Western thought that goes all the way back to the origins of mimetic theory, in Plato's *Republic*. This tradition stresses that mimesis and the "phantoms" (*phantasmata*) it generates are as much visual as they are affective, insofar as these phantoms do not remain confined within the walls of representation at the bottom of a mythic cave. Rather, as Plato was the first to fear, they also cast a spell on viewers, shaping the *ethos* of a subject, of a people, and, eventually, of a city or a state. Plato, of course, advocates for the imitation of good, rational, and ideal models, but he was also the first to realize that mimesis cuts both ways, urging future philosophical physicians not to forget the irrational power of affective contamination. Whether he would have appreciated the irony that the *Republic* was one of the texts Mussolini kept on his desk during the last days of fascism, I cannot say—for an undeniable anti-democratic bent in his thought is balanced by an equally undeniable

opposition to crowd behavior—but it surely proved his pharmacological point.

And yet, I also realized that these phantoms had a psychological and sociological dimension that would have to wait for the modern period in order to be fully brought to light. Particularly interesting was an emerging discipline located at the juncture between psychology and sociology devoted to the study of crowd behavior—that is, crowd psychology, a discipline concerned with diagnosing the contagious, mimetic, and unconscious power of authoritarian leaders over the crowd along lines that seemed relevant for both past-oriented scholarly reasons and present-oriented political reasons.

Via this genealogical link between ancient accounts of mimesis and modern diagnostics of crowds, the phantom was beginning to take form, while its hypnotic power over the present was being felt as well. This genealogy, as I intimated, had Nietzsche as a main medium, a philologist trained in classics who was concerned with the pathologies generated by crowd behavior in the modern period. His diagnostic of *The Case of Wagner* (1888) in particular provided

the paradigmatic case study that framed the whole project, insofar as he considers Wagner a "case" that is not only personal and psychological but also collective and political. Why? Because his former model occupies the place of what Nietzsche calls, contra Wagner, a "leader" (*Führer*) who has the power to "hypnotize" the "masses" (*Massen*).

But strikingly similar evaluations appeared on the side of literature, or, to use a more ancient term, myth as well: in Joseph Conrad's account of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as a "leader" who, while "hollow at the core," "electrified large meetings" "on the popular side," for instance; or in D. H. Lawrence's dramatization of European aristocratic leaders in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) who reenacted mythic and sacrificial rituals that cast a "spell" on the "crowd" in New Mexico; or, closer to Western horrors, in Georges Bataille's attention to the "Psychological Structure of Fascism" (1933/34) centered on "leaders" (*meneurs*) that generate hypnotic movements of "attraction and repulsion" in modern societies, monocephalic societies that, he controversially argued, should be rendered *acéphale*—that is, deprived of a head or leader.[2]

Such modernist accounts, I argued in the company of key contemporary figures in mimetic theory such as René Girard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, foresaw the rise of fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s, and called attention to the dangerous role played by mimetic affects in triggering fascist and Nazi politics in the past century. I had thus been hooked on mimetic theory for scholarly reasons that explained a disconcerting political phenomenon, a contagious phenomenon that did not fit within dominant accounts of the subject of *Aufklärung* (the Enlightenment).

And yet—and here comes the confession—in the wake of 9/11, of the political lies, the crusades, the media simulations, and the real invasions that ensued, I could not help but notice the power, if not of fascist governments or regimes as such, at least of the *mimetic pathos* traditionally mobilized by fascist leaders who relied on authoritarian affirmation, aggressive nationalism, scapegoating mechanisms, and spectacular lies among other rhetorical techniques to cast a hypnotic spell on the crowd. This spell, amplified by the aptly named "mass media," did not put our critical faculties entirely to sleep, and

a significant segment of the population resisted it. And yet, while still far removed, the phantom of fascism seemed to cast a looming shadow on one of the major democracies in the West at the dawn of the present century—a suspicion aggravated by the increasing popularity of far-right, neo-fascist movements in Europe as well.

I was often traveling back and forth over the Atlantic, and I could see that this was a shared concern. Having spent two years doing research in France, I could hear from friends they were still shocked that the far-right leader of the National Front, Jean-Marie Le Pen, a Holocaust denier, had come in second in the first round of France's 2002 presidential elections. The revival of nationalist movements on the far right was also taking place in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and England, among other countries whose democracies were put to the test by the increasing number of refugees in need of asylum supplemented by growing austerity measures.

Closer to home, Italy, under the spell of Silvio Berlusconi—whose slogan, *Forza Italia!*, capitalized on a national sport to generate enthusiasm in the crowd—was already "ahead" of the game. If only because it provided a striking

example of the power of mass media to turn politics itself into a game. The game had, of course, real effects. Italy's economic crisis, its generalized institutional corruption, and the so-called brain drain that ensued were but some of the symptoms my Italian friends complained about. It was also a confirmation of Umberto Eco's warning that "behind a regime and its ideology there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives." These mimetic drives had led Eco to ask what appeared as an untimely question in 1995: "Is there still another ghost stalking Europe (not to speak of other parts of the world)?"[3] What I know is that even my former school friends in Switzerland, who, by then, had their own children on the school's courtyard, no longer felt completely immune in my home "neutral" country either—despite the border.

This brief autobiographical sketch helps perhaps to partially explain why the realization that a phantom haunts the contemporary political scene already in-*formed* (gave form to) the readings of philosophical and literary texts that animated what then became *The Phantom of the Ego* (2013).

It left diagnostics behind of what I called fascist "patho(-)logies," understood both as a form of pathological affective contagion (or pathology) and as a critical *logos* on mimetic *pathos* (or patho-logy) central to the psychology of fascism, a mimetic psychology that, I was convinced by then, haunted the contemporary political scene as well.

And yet, by the time the book appeared, this double-faced diagnostic seemed somewhat out of joint with the general political climate of the times, for the electoral pendulum had finally swung, at least in the United States. And as the first African American president gifted with a double cultural identity was elected, and then reelected, everything seemed possible again: for, "yes," we enthusiastically chanted—"we can!" . . . Or at least we could, until another phantom took office and decided to "make America great again."

Many of us have been wondering since: how could a liberating dream turn into a political nightmare? Mimetic theory, I should say at the outset, does not have the only key to solve this riddle. Still, it provides a specific diagnostic of the affective, hypnotic, and contagious power (or *pathos*) fascist leaders have used in the past to cast a spell on the

masses, a mimetic spell which, we are beginning to realize, can always be reloaded in the present and future, my country or your country.

From these prefatory remarks, it should be clear that my approach to fascism will be necessarily partial and selective; it takes the increasingly influential, yet still little understood phenomenon of imitation (or mimesis) as an Ariadne's thread to orient ourselves in the labyrinth of (new) fascist movements. As the subtitle specifies, it traces the genealogy of three related mimetic concepts that were once central to the spread of fascist pathos—contagion, community, and myth—and are now proving central to the rise of new fascism as well.

While different doors could have been selected to access the affective and infective sources of fascist will to power, these three had a double advantage: on one side, they allowed me to inscribe this diagnostic in a chain of influential thinkers of mimesis—from Plato to Nietzsche, Bataille to Girard—who are attentive to the irrational, violent, and unconscious power of imitative behavior that is currently at play on the political scene; on the other, related, side

these concepts open up new interdisciplinary connections for mimetic theory by drawing on recent developments in disciplines as diverse as continental philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, political theory, as well as the neurosciences—all disciplines that testify to the urgency to rethink the ancient problem of mimesis in light of current political crises.

If this little book contributes to bringing back to the theoretical scene a protean and quite influential concept that has been marginalized in theoretical debates still informed by the linguistic turn in the 1970s and 1980s, was once considered central to the rise of fascist leaders in the 1920s and 1930s, and is all too visibly center stage today, it will have accomplished its goal.

The essays that compose the book were written under time pressure in order to confront the threat of rising candidates on the far right in presidential elections that were still ongoing, both in Europe and the United States, when I started writing. I first presented chapter 2 at a conference on community at the University of Bern at the beginning of November 2016, a week before the results of the U.S.

presidential election were announced. I would not say that I predicted the results, but I regret I did not have to modify the argument. Chapter 3 was presented at a French conference at Trinity College, Dublin, in May 2017, a few weeks before Marine Le Pen—who, like her father, came in second in the first round—failed to be elected as France's president. We were relieved, but we also sensed that the power of nationalist, racist, and fascist myths continues to cast a shadow on Europe, the West, and beyond. The conversation with political theorist William Connolly in the Coda took place in Weimar, Germany, one month later, not far from a now peaceful square where Hitler assembled massive crowds. Chapter 1 on crowd behavior was added in the fall of 2017 when I belatedly realized that this geographical trajectory could be assembled in a little book that would supplement a mimetic perspective to the growing number of dissenting voices. Whether it can serve as an antidote contra the (re)election of pathological phantoms that are destined to vanish soon, yet will always threaten to return under different masks, only the future will tell.

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the long tradition of mimetic theorists on which it stands and the generous support of the European Research Council, which is currently funding the *Homo Mimeticus* (HOM) project, of which *(New) Fascism* is part. Given the genealogical method I inherit, I happily show my gratitude by acknowledging my debts to this mimetic tradition, quoting from its main advocates, while furthering their lines of thought. The reader will find their names—too numerous to mention here—in the pages that follow.

There are other names I would like to mention at the outset, for they are part of a vibrant intellectual community I feel privileged to belong to. I warmly thank Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Bill Connolly, Jane Bennett, and Adriana Cavarero

for numerous transatlantic conversations that left traces in this book; Ortwin de Graef, Roland Breeur, Julia Jansen, Tom Toremans, Sascha Bru, the MDRN team, my HOM team members, Niki Hadikoesoemo and Daniel Villegas Vélez, and all the participants of the *Homo Mimeticus* Seminar for joining forces to forge new interdisciplinary/mimetic connections at KU Leuven, Belgium; Hannes Opelz, for inviting me to Trinity College to speak about the "power of myth" *à partir de* Lacoue-Labarthe; and Jean-Luc Nancy for sharing his thoughts with the HOM team in a memorable workshop on *Le mythe nazi*—in a communal sprit of *partage*.

Last but not least, my deepest gratitude goes to my editor at MSU Press, Bill Johnsen, for welcoming this book in the Breakthroughs in Mimetic Theory series, and to my partner, Michi Lawtoo, for giving me the original idea to write it in the first place—provided, she added, that I "keep it short."

At least I tried.

Introduction

> It is thus that the maddest and most interesting ages of history always emerge, when the "actors," *all* kinds of actors, become the real masters.
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

What times allow actors to play the role that previously belonged to masters? And wherein lies these actors' power to turn what would normally be considered madness into interesting, but also dangerous ages? These questions are not new. Since classical antiquity actors have been defined as protean figures endowed with a power to cast a spell on all kinds of theaters, including political theaters, thereby blurring the line between appearance and reality, fiction and truth, playing a role and being that role. And yet, it is only

relatively recently that Nietzsche's prophetic diagnostic has become quite literally true, and "*all* kinds of actors"[1] have turned into political masters that haunt, phantom-like, the contemporary world. Hence the renewed urgency of his untimely call for new unmasking operations to grasp the power of mimetic pathos.

This actor qua master cannot be framed within a stable, rational identity that tells us, once and for all, what its essential character is, should be, or is likely to become. And yet, precisely for this reason, this figure with an identity that is not singular but plural has attracted the interest of protean thinkers who have themselves mastered a few mimetic tricks. My hypothesis in what follows is that a Nietzschean strand in mimetic theory that is affectively implicated in the forms of theatrical mastery it denounces can paradoxically help us, if not to univocally define, at least to begin unmasking contemporary actors who impersonate fictional roles of authority on all kinds of political stages, casting a real shadow on the contemporary world.

The Shadow of Fascism

History does not repeat itself, but sometimes it is said to rhyme; and when it rhymes, the echoes can potentially generate re-productions of horrors we thought we had long left behind. Perhaps not fascism "itself," then, but the *shadow* of fascism has recently manifested itself on the contemporary political scene.

Arguably, its most spectacular manifestation appeared in the United States as Donald J. Trump, an entertainer of a reality television show acting as a billionaire businessman, won, against all expectations, the 2016 presidential election and turned his TV show into a political reality. His victory, it must be emphasized, came *without* the support of the popular vote and does not accurately reflect the political views of the majority of the U.S. population—far from it.

Still, it signaled a certain failure of democratic institutions that favor the election of figures who can self-fund their campaigns. It also illustrated the success of an aggressively nationalist, racist, and violent rhetoric that, if dramatically enacted by an actor trained in the sphere of fiction, could

easily turn the political itself into a fiction. Donald Trump, in fact, effectively exploited the political stage, amplified by the mass media to generate mass enthusiasm in physical crowds and virtual publics. Paradoxically, this show was particularly effective in casting a spell on the white working-class section of the population. That is, a disenfranchised, suffering population that could be tricked into a mimetic relation with the very fictional model of oppression responsible for their real disenfranchisement.

The paradoxical logic of mimetic pathos (or patho-logy), as we shall see, does not rest on a rational discourse (or *logos*) that conforms to the norms of waking consciousness. Rather, it triggers mirroring affects with far-reaching, infective (or pathological) effects that are channeled via what I call the mimetic unconscious. This unconscious is mimetic in the sense that it leads people—most visibly when assembled in a crowd or a public, but not only—to involuntarily mimic, feel, and reproduce the affects of the leader qua model. This also means that the mimetic unconscious does not require interpretations of personal dreams to become manifest. Instead, it calls for careful diagnostics of real, intersubjective

relations central to social and political behavior; mimicry, emotional contagion, hypnosis, vulnerability to suggestion, lowering of rational faculties, subordination of thought to drives (especially sexual and violent drives), and a general inability to discern between truth and lies are some of its most visible manifestations.[2]

While these mimetic symptoms are most visibly at play on the North American political scene, I hasten to add that this mimetic danger cannot be confined to the United States alone. Quite the contrary. Consider the rise of far-right movements in Europe that reload fascist ideals of national purity, most visibly in France (The National Front), the Netherlands (Party for Freedom), Germany (Alternative for Deutschland), Italy (The League), to name a few; the far-right anti-immigration policies in the UK (Brexit); not to speak of non-Western oligarchies (most visibly North Korea and Russia) that are caught in relations of both mirroring complicity and escalating reciprocity with the current U.S. administration, and, as historian Timothy Snyder has recently shown, are currently paving the way for "the road to unfreedom."[3]

This road away from freedom that the West is currently taking is a powerful reminder that, in a globalized, mediatized, and hyperconnected world, new forms of (fascist) political pathologies do not stop at national borders—let alone walls. Instead, in the age of the Internet, they spread contagiously, via a proliferation of new, transnational media and the cyberwars they trigger. These hypermimetic wars dissolve not only the very conception of clearly defined borders, but also the ontological distinction between self and others, originals and copies, truths and lies, virtual attacks and real attacks.

Still, the recent case of Trump in the United States provides an interesting case study to diagnose the political power of mimesis as it circulates from the masses to the leader and back, generating collective movements that will outlive their leaders and need to be studied, for at least two reasons. First, because this case reveals that even a country that served as a bastion of democracy contra the external threat of fascism in the past century can potentially capitulate to uncannily similar temptations in the present century. Rather than projecting the threat of fascism outside, beyond national

borders, we are thus encouraged to reflect on its threat from the inside—for *no country is immune from fascist contagion*. A blind belief in immunity can actually prevent the population from seeing that an infection has already taken place.

And second, the case of the United States qualifies as "interesting" in the Nietzschean sense because, not for the first time, a democratic process has turned an actor trained to captivate an audience in a fictional world into a political leader with power over the real world. Unsurprisingly, what I call the "apprentice president," to evoke the popular reality-television show Trump hosted (*The Apprentice*) before being elected, turned out to be quite trained in playing the role of a fictional president. In particular, he used the same mimetic skills—amplified by new media that, in the digital age, make the power of fascism more insidious, ramified, and pervasive—to cast a hypnotic spell on voters in the real world, blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, but also reality and fiction, truth and lies, conscious actions and unconscious reactions.

Rather than dismissing the mimetic power of actors as fictional, we are thus encouraged to consider that fictions do

not remain within the boundary of realistic representations. Rather, they affect and infect—via forms of mimetic contagion that operate on the unconscious register of passions, or pathos—the psychic lives of spectators who are both attracted and repelled by mimetic pathologies in need of new diagnostic operations.

Fascism, Old and New

For these and other reasons, we are confronted with an exemplary case study to diagnose the mimetic techniques of "populist" leaders that a growing number of dissident voices in political theory have started to designate as "neofascist," "aspirational fascist," or "new fascist" leaders.[4]

If we have become accustomed to relegating fascist politics to an unfortunate chapter of European history, or if the term fascist may seem overtly alarmist to talk about what could be considered a simple manifestation of "populism," Umberto Eco's penetrating account of the key characteristics of what he calls "Ur-Fascism" or "Eternal Fascism" should

give us pause for thought. As Eco puts it, recurring features of that protean phenomenon that is fascism include, among other symptoms, "a cult of tradition," "irrationalism," "fear of difference," "appeal to a frustrated middle class," "action for action's sake," "machismo," and a type of "impoverished vocabulary," or Newspeak, that, he warns us as early as 1995, can be mediated by a new type of "Internet populism" that has the power to turn the voice of the people into a "theatrical fiction."[5] Prescient in theoretical insights very few could foresee at the twilight of the twentieth century, the effectiveness of Internet fictions is now put into political practice for all to see at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

More recently, new dissenting voices have given historical and theoretical confirmations of Eco's premonition that the phantom of fascism may return to haunt the twenty-first century. Timothy Snyder's historical reminder in *On Tyranny* (2017) is worth bearing in mind. As he puts it, "There is little reason to think that we are ethically superior to the European of the 1930s and 1940s, or for that matter less vulnerable to the kind of ideas that Hitler successfully promulgated and realized."[6] This is an uncomfortable truth that is essential

to take to heart. It is the first step to recognize a mimetic phenomenon that tends to be automatically projected outside of one's national borders, yet generally begins in a period of crisis by infiltrating a disenfranchised population from the inside—most often by triggering irrational fears of the outside.[7]

(New) fascism, then, is not a fully new phenomenon. Hence the parentheses. They signal a form of phenomenological suspension, or bracketing, that leaves open whether we are indeed confronted with the actual return of fascist leaders or, as I suggested, of their *shadow* instead (at least for the moment), which does not mean that the horrors that could ensue should be taken lightly. Quite the contrary. And should we indeed be confronted with leaders who shadow classical definitions of past fascist, totalitarian, or authoritarian "personalities"[8] whose defining characteristic, as Hannah Arendt was quick to point out, is an "extraordinary adaptability,"[9] we still must wonder about the new media that allow for this adaptation to take place, for these media are indeed *new*. This also means that the newness of (new) fascism might be tied less to the message of recent

leaders with authoritarian inclinations than to the media used to disseminate them. Either way, on both sides of the medium/message divide, mimesis continues to play a key role on the political scene.

Since what I call, for lack of a more original term, "(new) fascism" rests on mimetic mechanisms I first uncovered by diagnosing the affective will to power of "old" fascist leaders in the 1920s and '30s, genealogical lenses will make us see that the distinction between "old" and "new" fascism will not be stable and watertight, and for at least two reasons. First, as historians have repeatedly pointed out, fascism is far from being the unitary phenomenon the singular term suggests, assumes different forms in different countries, and escapes essentialist definitions of what fascism was, is, or aims to become. And second, because what I group under the rubric of "(new) fascism" is a heterogeneous, transnational phenomenon that is currently emerging as I write, manifests itself differently in different countries plagued by specific national problems (economic crises, income inequality, immigration crises, racism, etc.), and generates unpredictable twists and turns on a daily basis

with the intention of triggering chaos while progressively undermining democratic principles.

For these two related reasons, I refrain from fictionally adopting an omniscient perspective that would set up a clear-cut opposition between "old" and "new" fascism under the false assumption that they would designate stable, unitary, and clearly differentiated phenomena one could isolate and compare from a safe theoretical distance.

And yet, this does not mean that a comparative approach between old and new forms of fascist pathos is out of place. Precisely because of its indeterminacy, I consider it essential to step back to the fascism of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s to come to grips with new fascist pathologies that are currently emerging. We can in fact learn a good deal from the specific methods fascist leaders used to inject irrational affects (*pathoi*) in crowds in the past, and from the mimetic discourses (*logoi*) these leaders rely on, in order to diagnose both old and new fascist pathologies that are spreading contagiously in the present.[10]

For this second, comparative operation a more fluid, perspectival, genealogical, or as I also call it, patho-*logical*

method is in order. If patho-logy looks back to fascist theories and practices of the past, its goal is not to find stable origins, laws, or definitions that would frame a protean phenomenon whose primary characteristic is that it defies singular identifications. Rather, its goal is to uncover genealogical continuities and discontinuities relevant to account for specific forms of mimetic communication that are currently playing a leading role in the reemergence of new fascist phantoms that cast a shadow on the present and future.

I adopt a genealogical method for a series of reasons that will become progressively clear, but one should be mentioned at the outset. Never has Nietzsche's opening line of *The Genealogy of Morals* rung truer than today: "We remain unknown to ourselves" (*Wir sind uns unbekannt*).[11] For Nietzsche, this state of non-knowledge, which includes the "seekers of knowledge," becomes particularly visible when "everyone is furthest from himself," a psychic state of dispossession he often designated as the "herd-instinct."[12] This mimetic, all too mimetic instinct makes subjects who are assembled in a crowd (but not only those) vulnerable to tyrannical figures who, Nietzsche continues, have the power

of "hypnotizing the whole nervous system and intellect by means of . . . fixed ideas"[13]—including, as we shall see, fascist ideas. Hence the urgency of diagnosing both old and new fascist forms of hypnotic will to power that operated on the psychic life of crowds and publics in the past by adopting interdisciplinary lenses constitutive of a genealogical, perspectival approach that casts light on the present.[14]

To be sure, the means of hypnotic dissemination have changed; yet our mimetic vulnerability to hypnosis remains the same—or rather, is radically intensified. While (new) fascism continues to cast a spell on the crowd via mimetic techniques that are well-known in the sphere of authoritarian politics, but are still little studied in critical theory, it also amplifies its contagious effects by affecting virtual publics in ways that are not only mimetic but, rather, hypermimetic. Since the continuities and discontinuities between fascist and (new) fascist modes of contagious communication, as I diagnose them, rest on the continuities and discontinuities between mimesis and hypermimesis, let me briefly clarify these terms.[15]

Broadly speaking, mimetic behavior is a human tendency

that has been known since Plato and Aristotle that defines *Homo sapiens* as the most imitative species. Humans are, in fact, thoroughly mimetic, not only in the sense that we create aesthetic representations of reality (though we do that too), but in the more fundamental psychological, sociological, and political sense that we mimic the behavior of others—a tendency that, since the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, first in monkeys and then in humans as well, has been receiving growing confirmations from the neurosciences and is currently contributing to a better understanding of a thoroughly mimetic species I call *Homo mimeticus*.

Mimetic theory balances positivist accounts of the subject that stress the role imitation plays in understanding others as it teaches us that mimesis cuts both ways and can be put to rational and irrational uses. Fascist leaders certainly exploited the mimetic irrationality of crowds to come to power. In this context, the mimetic language of contagion, spells, and hypnotic influences to account for crowd behavior remains particularly important. It should not be too quickly dismissed as a remnant of the "old" fascism, for it continues to be at play in new fascism as well. As Timothy

Snyder also noticed, thinking of Donald Trump, but with the rise of far-right movements in Europe on his radar as well, a "fascist oligarchy" is endowed with a disconcerting power to induce what he calls a state of "collective trance" that generates a "hypnosis" we have "slowly fallen into."[16] Hypnosis and trance, but also spells and contagion, influences and memes: these are some of the terms that recent scholars of fascism are currently using to define the power of new fictional leaders.

Consequently, a mimetic perspective is needed to cast further light on the shadow of fascism. In fact, hypnosis, just like trance, is a mimetic, unconscious phenomenon that operates below the register of consciousness—yet, as a Nietzschean current in mimetic theory was quick to notice, generates mirroring effects that require a sense of "psychological discrimination" in order to become fully visible. This book aims to provide such a psychological supplement. It assumes that recognizing the mimetic power of old and new fascist influences is the first step to break the spell and regain control over rational consciousness on which democratic principles depend.

True, the fascist ideas themselves might not be entirely the same, and they will inevitably trigger different political horrors, but the basic mechanisms with which they are disseminated continue to rely on mimetic principles. This is also what political theorist William Connolly compellingly suggests in *Aspirational Fascism* (2017) as he argues, with the case of Donald Trump under his lens, that "it is important not to downplay the ubiquitous role of affective contagion in cultural life or even to reduce affective contagion to a force that only unruly masses succumb to through mediation of an authoritarian leader."[17] Connolly and I fully agree that much more attention needs to be given to forms of "mimetic communication" in the rise of aspirational fascist leaders who appeal to contagious, violent, and heterogeneous affects to cast a spell on the population. In what follows, then, I situate mimetic theory in a dialogical relation with such recent historical and political accounts of fascism in order to foreground the specific role mimesis plays in the rising shadow of (new) fascist leaders who are center stage in contemporary media.

And here is where the logic of mimesis progressively turns

into what I call hypermimesis. To identify the newness of (new) fascism, a change of perspective is in order. What is new, in fact, might not primarily reside in the ideological content of leaders' programs, which is far from being original. As they aspire to occupy authoritarian positions of power, they echo well-known hypernationalist, racist, homophobic, authoritarian, and aggressively militarist messages that are, in themselves, not new—though these chilling messages remain the most visible symptoms that allow us to identify the reappearance of fascist tendencies on the political scene we should not simply dismiss as populist. Construction of walls, promotion of racism, homophobia, mimicry of fascist dictators, collusion with fascist oligarchs, dissemination of fear, increase of inequalities, dismantling of public services, religious bans, threats of nuclear escalation, institution of camps, imprisonment of children, etc.—these are all fascist symptoms that are not new; they certainly work against the population, undermine basic human rights, and cast a dark shadow on freedom and democracy more generally.

What is new in fascism might be less on the side of the *message* and more on the side of leaders' use of the *media*,

including new social media that not only disseminate political fictions but turn politics itself into a fiction. To be sure, (new) fascist leaders continue to rely on the same rhetorical techniques to arouse crowds and spread their messages. But more importantly, in the digital age, in addition to traditional sources of news, like newspapers, radio, and television, leaders with authoritarian tendencies can now rely on new Internet-based social media like Facebook and Twitter, which expose the population to an incessant flow of simulated information that does not even attempt to represent reality, lets go of referential facts, and operates as a mode of entertainment characteristic of hypermimetic fictions.

Hypermimesis, then, continues to rest on the psychic laws of imitations, but pushes them to extremes, blurring ontological distinctions between fiction and reality, copy and origins, truth and lies. And yet, this does not mean that these digital fictions are deprived of effects on real life, which are at least double: on the one hand, in the hands of authoritarian leaders, new media threaten to dissolve the ontological distinction between truth and lies, appearance

and reality, on which the traditional laws of mimesis rest, generating hyperreal shadows without any referent that absorb the real in the alternative sphere of the virtual; on the other, related hand, these shadows retroact on spectators and users who, under the spell of an incessant politics of entertainment that reinforces already held beliefs, suspend disbelief and subordinate the difficult search for truth (or *logos*) to the facile enjoyment of affect (or *pathos*) generating hypermimetic pathologies that spread contagiously from the virtual to the real world and back—in an endless spiral that turns shadows into realities, and the ego into a shadow or phantom of the ego.

This process of hypermimetic dispossession plays a double role in the rise of (new) fascist leaders. Once fictional phantoms have taken possession of the ego, on the one hand, and shadows are mistaken for reality, on the other, subjects are no longer driven by rational consciousness but by the mimetic unconscious instead. This also means that a hypermimetic subject who is exposed to daily "breaking news" (true or fake) via mass media (old and new) that are specifically designed (by humans or algorithms) to reinforce

and radicalize an already entrenched ideological position, *is not primarily concerned with the question of truth* (logos)*, but with the generation of affect* (pathos) *instead*. What ensues are collective pathologies that catch the new media consumer in a widening spiral of virtual simulations that are not simply hyperreal and disconnected from reality; on the contrary, they have the hypermimetic power to bring (new) fascist phantoms into real life. Hence the need to step back to mimetic principles central to the rise of fascism in the past, in order to subsequently shed light on the hypermimetic principles at play in (new) fascism in the present and future.

In sum, my primary goal is not to give an account of contemporary (new) fascist leaders and the movements they generate on the basis of their politics, ideology, or *Weltanschauung* alone—for fascist ideology is notoriously variable, adaptable, and positions that might not initially appear to traditionally belong to fascism—such as climate-change denial for instance—could, with the benefit of hindsight, turn out to be responsible for the most horrific global consequences of (new) fascism. Nor is it to freeze a protean and moving phenomenon without a proper identity in a

stable essence or definition that would explain, once and for all, what fascism "is"—for the most informed studies on fascism caution scholars not to "portray as 'frozen statuary' something that is better understood as a process."[18] Since one is not born a fascist but, under certain conditions of economic, social, and political crisis, can potentially become one, we need to understand this process of *fascist becoming* in the first place.

My hypothesis in what follows is that mimesis (from *mimos*, actor), understood not as simple visual representation but in all its affective, dramatic, and virtual manifestations, plays a key role in mediating the contagious, unconscious, and (hyper)mimetic affects that feed the emergence of (new) fascist leaders.

Brief Genealogies of Fascism

As is often pointed out, the term "fascism" comes from the Italian *fascio* (bundle, sheaf), a term that originally had a positive valence, for in the Italy of the 1920s it was used to signal

"the solidarity of committed militants."[19] After Mussolini founded the so-called Fasci di Combattimento in Milan in 1919, he adopted the symbol of the *fasces*, the Roman axe bound in rods, to signal a recuperation of a Roman imperial legacy endowed with sovereign power of life and death over its subjects.

The term was thus not original, but was based on the imitation of the ancients. As Mussolini put it in *La dottrina del fascismo* (written with the fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile in 1932): "No doctrine can claim an absolute originality [*originalità assoluta*]. It is bound, if only historically, to the doctrines that once were and to the doctrines that will be."[20] There is thus a mimetic element internal to fascism that inevitably establishes a movement of repetition and difference between old and new elements of the *fascio*. While I agree with Kevin Passmore's historical claim that we can turn to fascism to "understand the past,"[21] I would also add that the main focus of a genealogical perspective is to return to the fascisms of the past in order to understand the emergence of new fascisms in the present.

Historically, it is worth remembering that the term

"fascism" had already been used by Sicilian peasants in the 1890s who had imbued the term with a "popular radicalism."[22] The term, and what it stood for, thus appealed to opposed constituencies; it was on the side of both the working people and a liberal elite, revolutionary and monarchic, conservative and progressive, nationalist and transnational, antimodern and premodern. In short, fascism can mean one thing and its very opposite, making a unitary, stable, and definitive definition of what fascism really means a contradiction in terms. Hence the importance of considering fascism as a process of becoming in constant transformation rather than as a fixed ideological essence.

Genealogically, it is equally worth stressing that the term "fascism" is, in itself, not without ambivalences, generating a contradictory dynamic that reaches into the present. Italian speakers would already have recognized that the axe of fascism cuts both ways, for it has both a positive and a negative side: namely, that *fascio* indicates unity since it serves as a *simbolo d'unità*, as Gentile put it; at the same time, it also implies the dissolution of individual differences into a unified bundle, or mass—a mimetic dissolution visually rendered

in the Italian dictum *fare di tutta l'erba un fascio*, literally, to turn all the grass into a bundle. The implication being that if you're assembled in a *fascio*, it is no longer possible to identify the individual blades of grass, but also to discern the grass from the weed. In our language, in a *fascio* the ego has turned into a shadow or phantom of other egos.

Political unity and strength comes at the price of individual differentiation and freedom. As Mussolini continues in *La dottrina del fascismo* (1932), speaking of the twentieth century in terms that are not deprived of prophetic insights and should serve as a warning for the twenty-first century: "One can think that this is the century of authority, a century 'on the right,' a fascist century [*il secolo dell'autorità, un secolo di 'destra,' un secolo fascista*]."[23] And he adds: "If the 19th century was the century of the individual [*secolo dell'individuo*] . . . we are free to believe that this is the 'collective' century' [*secolo 'collettivo'*]."[24] Replacement of individual difference by collective sameness: this is, in a nutshell, the driving *telos* of fascism.

Interestingly, the transformation of differences into sameness is also one of the defining characteristics of

mimesis. That is, a behavioral mimesis endowed with the power to fuse individual egos in a unitary movement, contagious community, or enthusiastic crowd generating an organic, undifferentiated, violent, and potentially warlike collective that comes awfully close to what René Girard calls a "mimetic crisis" or "loss of differences." Could it be, then, that the twenty-first century could potentially become a fascist century because it is already a mimetic or, better, hypermimetic century? This is a genealogical hypothesis we will explore in what follows.

Mimesis, then, understood both as imitation of past models and as imitation of other people that model themselves on authoritarian leaders, seems inscribed in the very semantic register of fascism. And yet, this does not mean that the mimetic principles fascist leaders trigger can be reduced to what Giovanni Gentile calls a "realistic doctrine" (*dottrina realistica*), which can easily be identified from a distance.

To delimit the territory and specify the diagnostic, what follows zeroes in on three distinct but related mimetic manifestations of pathos that cannot be dissociated from

new leader figures who threaten to turn individual egos into a *fascio* of egos. Despite the obvious connections between elements of the bundle, I divide them in three separate chapters that offer different genealogical perspectives on fascist mimesis from the angle of contagion, community, and myth.

Contagion, Community, Myth

Chapter 1, "Crowd Psychology Redux," argues that if fascist leaders came to power thanks to the "democratic" support of massive crowds that were moved by affect more than by reason, then it is essential to understand the affective logic, or patho-*logy*, that triggers mimetic *pathos* in the first place. To that end, it establishes a genealogical connection between two fields of investigation that, with few exceptions—the most prominent being Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen—have tended to remain divided in the past, but that would benefit from being joined in the present and future: namely, crowd psychology and mimetic theory.

Crowd psychology is a discipline that emerged in the

last decades of the nineteenth century specifically to study the mimetic and contagious behavior of crowds, and is linked to founding texts like Gustave Le Bon's *The Age of the Crowd* (1895) and Gabriel Tarde's *The Laws of Imitation* (1890), among others. Mimetic theory is a field of inquiry that emerged in the 1960s and is commonly associated with the work of René Girard; but its genealogy is much more ancient, goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, traverses the history of Western thought, and increasingly includes a heterogeneous number of figures and disciplines (philosophy, literary theory, anthropology, political theory, the neurosciences, among others) that are attentive to mimetic, and thus contagious, forms of human behavior that, in their real and virtual manifestations, are currently returning to the forefront of the theoretical and political scene.

Given the shared concerns between these two approaches, the few references to crowd psychology in mimetic theory are just as surprising as the lack of references to Girard in crowd psychology. In fact, both disciplines share a common concern with what is arguably the defining characteristic of *both* mimesis *and* fascism: that is, its contagious, affective

dimension that blurs the boundary dividing not only truth from lies (the domain of philosophers), but also self from others (the domain of all humans).

Considering the recent success of leaders who effectively relied on mimetic contagion and hypnotic spells to come to power, there are thus ample reasons for strengthening the connection between these two exemplary disciplinary perspectives. This is especially true since, as I have noted, mimetic communication now operates not only via the medium of the mimetic crowd, or via print media, but also via new social media that radically amplify the hypnotic power of such leaders who can penetrate the way we think and feel via virtual, algorithmically based, yet not less contaminating technologies that have performative hypermimetic effects on real life.

The connection between crowd psychology and mimetic theory emerges naturally from the overlaps already internal to these traditions. If crowd psychology relies on the psychological notion of hypnotic "suggestion" to account for what Le Bon called the "contagious" dimension of affects to spread mimetically among a political crowd, Girard will

implicitly recuperate this tradition by stressing the role of "mimesis" in the "contagious" propagation of violence in a ritual "community." The terms and contexts are different, yet they can easily be bridged if we realize that politics continues to rely on rituals, just as much as hypnosis continues to generate mirroring effects.

At the individual level, the link between mimesis and hypnosis has been noticed before. In a conversation with Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian considered "hypnosis as an exceptional concentrate of all the potentialities of mimesis."[25] And yet, once again, with the notable exception of Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, the political implications of hypnotic/mimetic suggestion have not been at the forefront of mimetic theory so far. Donald Trump's television show, *The Apprentice*, provides us with a case study to join the insights of mimetic theory and crowd psychology. It also urges us to further mimetic theory by diagnosing how a reality *show* (fiction) paved the way for public identifications with an oppressive leader now at play in the sphere of *reality* shows as well (politics).

Chapter 2 takes a genealogical step back to the concept

of community that is entangled with fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s in order to account for the emergence of the (new) fascist movements today. It does so by focusing on a heterogeneous thinker who has been celebrated as a precursor of a linguistic conception of the subject in the past century, but who can be productively aligned with mimetic theory in the present century: namely, Georges Bataille.

Like Girard after him, Bataille, in fact, develops a theory of the sacred that has violence and sacrifice at its starting point on the basis of anthropological hypotheses he shares with Girard. He also supplements mimetic theory by adding an explicitly political dimension to his diagnostic of what he calls "contagious," "affective" and "violent" modes of "sovereign communication" that introduce mimetic continuities between fascist leaders and their subjects.

Bataille is a strong theoretical ally to further new connections in mimetic theory. If he is now at the center of poststructuralist debates on community that are inoperative and *opposed to* fascism, mimetic theory reminds us that he developed a reflection on communal crowds that were operative and *attracted by* fascism. Heterogeneous fascist

leaders like Hitler and Mussolini, he notices, rely not only on the power of hypnosis to cast a spell on the crowd, but also on accursed subject matters like sacrificial violence, sexual obscenity, and abject bodily matters that are paradoxically attractive due to their repulsive nature.

That such obscene matters are now the topic of daily news should urge us to take their power on the mimetic unconscious seriously. They trigger bodily reactions that might have been repressed in the past century yet are now fully manifest in the present century. They haunt a virtually dependent century that not only represents what Bataille calls our accursed share (*part maudite*) from a distance, but also disseminates its transgressive affective practices in the social and political world generating real pathologies. While the disciplinary focus in this chapter is different, my methodological assumption remains the same, or rather, double: my wager is that different disciplinary traditions like poststructuralism and mimetic theory that are usually split in competing and rivalrous camps should join forces to counter the fascist pathologies that are currently infecting our communities.

This balancing genealogical operation is a reminder that community, like the mimetic forms of "communication" that unite it, is a double-edged concept that can be put to both liberating and fascist uses. It also looks back to Bataille's account of fascist leaders who were "totally other" and generated movements of "attraction and repulsion" in past mimetic crowds in order to look ahead to the polarizing double effects new fascist leaders generate among contemporary, hypermimetic publics.

If chapters 1 and 2 focus on underdiscussed precursors of mimetic theory such as Le Bon, Tarde, and Bataille, chapter 3, "The Power of Myth Reloaded," leaps ahead to consider a dissident advocate of mimetic theory: the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Commonly associated with Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida due to their work in common, it has not been sufficiently stressed that Lacoue-Labarthe was no less attentive to Girard in his career-long effort to "think or rethink *mimesis*."[26]

Unlike many of his generation, Lacoue-Labarthe took Girard's mimetic hypothesis seriously. While his most direct engagement with Girard appeared in "Typography," a silent,

at times agonistic, but nonetheless thought-provoking conversation between the two authors traverses their entire oeuvres and will have to be traced in detail at some point. My genealogy here is confined to the problematic at hand. I thus focus on Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's account of "The Nazi Myth" (1991), a seminal essay on the ontological and psychological foundations of fascism and Nazism. The two philosophers further the Platonic insight that an understanding of myth cannot be dissociated from the problematic of mimesis in general and affective contagion in particular.

Reframing Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's account of the "Nazi myth" as a "mimetic instrument" in light of a broader tradition in mimetic theory is important for at least two reasons: first, the chapter provides a genealogical perspective that calls attention to the role of "collective mass emotions" in the formation of fascist myths that are currently being reenacted and reproduced; and second, it reveals how fascist leader figures (old and new) mobilize the dramatic skills of the actor along lines that are at least double, for they rely on the interplay of mimetic representations (Apollonian

mimesis) and bodily impersonations (Dionysian mimesis) to make an impression on the crowd and public.

If, in the past, the tendency has been to restrict fascist forms of will to power to European leaders and the horrors they triggered, this genealogy calls attention to the interplay of visual and affective mimesis that is currently being disseminated via new media, threatening to escalate violence to what Girard, echoing Clausewitz, calls "extremes." Bringing this diagnostic to bear on the present, the last section returns to "the apprentice" with which we started in light of two conceptions of mimesis that are simultaneously at play in contemporary political fictions: if the creation of "alternative facts" have the power to generate appearances that dissolve the very notion of truth in yet another post (i.e., post-truth), they also induce an intoxicating state of mind that puts the critical faculties to sleep as it invites people to live in alternative fictional worlds—while phantom leaders take possession of the real world.

The book ends with a conversation around "Fascism, Now and Then" with political theorist William Connolly. Since the diagnostic that follows is directly entangled in

the circumstances in which our paths crossed, both in the United States and in Europe, I would like to briefly relate them, in order to begin.

The Politics of Friendship

I had the privilege of meeting William (Bill) Connolly during a research stay that brought me back to the United States in 2013, when Barack Obama was still president. Having obtained a grant from Switzerland to pursue my research abroad, I chose Johns Hopkins University as a host institution for obvious and rather unoriginal genealogical reasons. René Girard, Jacques Derrida, and, more discretely, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe had in fact left behind a strong legacy in mimetic theory, especially at the Humanities Center, where, at the invitation of Paola Marrati and Hent de Vries, I could pursue my research on mimesis.

But mimesis, I soon realized, was being discussed in other disciplines as well, in related departments like Anthropology and Political Science, for instance, albeit under different

conceptual masks. I became aware of this synergy as Jane Bennett invited me to join a reading group over the summer of 2015. I immediately said yes, and it was in this informal group—Bataille would have called it an "elective community"—that I first met Bill Connolly.[27] We soon found a common interest in the work of Nietzsche, which, from different perspectives, led to shared concerns with a minor tradition of thought attentive to affect, contagion, mirror neurons, and the relation between literature and political theory, environmental studies and the neurosciences, all topics that we discussed in the reading group, graduate seminars, and numerous informal conversations.

The subjects of discussion were heterogeneous in nature, but as the 2016 presidential campaign started to pick up speed, we found ourselves increasingly preoccupied with Donald Trump's affective and infective rhetorical strategies. Coming at the problematic of the actor from different perspectives, we both sensed the mimetic and contagious power at play in this authoritarian type and took it seriously at a time in which his candidacy seemed mostly a subject for comedy.

My sense was that Connolly, whose engagement with a pluralist political tradition spans over forty years, was ideally placed to expose Donald Trump's affective strategies; and he did so in several incisive posts in a blog titled *The Contemporary Condition*.[28] At the time, I felt less confident in publicly expressing my political views. As a visitor with a precarious appointment, I chose the less courageous option of lying low. Still, within the safe confines of academia, I organized a conference titled "Poetics and Politics" in February 2016 that addressed the current becoming fictional of the political.[29]

Meanwhile, the eerie echoes of the rhetorical strategies I had analyzed in *The Phantom of the Ego* (2013), especially with respect to the mimetic communication between fascist leaders and crowds, kept amplifying in the theater of contemporary politics.

In a sense, I felt, once again, that this was not directly *my* problem. I was not a U.S. citizen, I was not in a position to vote anyway, and as Trump was gaining in popularity, my time at Johns Hopkins (and in the United States, for that matter) was speedily coming to an end. I was busy packing. Gunshots were intensifying in the neighborhood in Western

Baltimore where we lived. And both my spouse and I were ready to find another school for our kids, a decision strengthened by what the authorities of the public school our son attended called "an accident": a four-year-old child in my son's parallel class was killed that winter. The circumstances of his death doubled the shock. He had found a shotgun in his house. It was loaded. His dad, it later turned out, was a policeman. So yes, we were ready to move.

And yet, as I left Johns Hopkins in the summer of 2016, just in time to escape Trump's victory, in order to return to Europe (somewhat accidentally landing in Germany—academic lives are complicated), I felt that this was indeed still *my* problem, after all. In the sense that the problematic of affective *mimesis* continued to be central to the rise of (new) fascist movements that were not confined to one nation but had the disconcerting potential to cross national borders.

It felt important to join forces from a distance—first of all, out of sympathy and solidarity with my U.S. friends, colleagues, and students, but also because new fascist leaders had been gaining power in Europe as well. On his side, Connolly went on to teach a graduate seminar titled

"What Was/Is Fascism" in the spring of 2017; on my side, I obtained a research grant from the European Research Council to continue my work on imitative behavior with a project titled "*Homo Mimeticus*."[30] Still we maintained regular contact. Our thoughts moved back and forth in the weeks preceding the 2016 elections; we shared work in progress, found occasions to meet, and planned possibilities for collaboration. Fascist politics, in short, had fortified a politics of friendship.[31]

This conversation carried out in Weimar, Germany, in the summer of 2017 traces some of our shared concerns on issues as diverse as the rhetoric of fascism, mimetic contagion, political satire, the power of myth, and the dangers of new or aspirational fascism in the age of the Anthropocene. Needless to say, it is not meant as a conclusion but as a starting point for future theoretical reflections and, above all, political resistance.