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# Democracy and Its Discontents: the Years of Lead and the Burdens of History

Sohan Mewada  
smewada@conncoll.edu

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# Democracy and Its Discontents: the Years of Lead and the Burdens of History

By Sohan Mewada

A Senior Integrative Project for the Department of Government and International Relations and  
the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts

Advised by Professor Eric Fleury Ph.D

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### Addendum

I was born into a life that seemed to be a paradox. My father studied in Somerville, Massachusetts. His Master's degree is in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School at Tufts University. He is a staunch pragmatist and man who values education above all else. He immigrated to the United States from India to find opportunities to grow and start a family to give his children a better life than he had growing up. His descriptions of his youth living with my grandfather contained images of poverty, ethnic hatred, severe wealth inequality, and religious violence. The way my father described his past carried the sentiments of escape from problems he thought he would not find in America, and for that, he felt relief. With this came an imperative to never go back in the hopes of finding better opportunities elsewhere.

My mother is an artist. She illustrated comic books in Pune, Maharashtra. Writers from the city would provide her with engaging stories and plotlines, and she would exercise her creativity by painting the pages. In addition, she is a talented singer, dancer, painter, and cook. Her most salient identity, however, is that of a Hindu. She and the rest of her family have practiced for years on end. She is the definition of what it means to be devout to faith, and it is an admirable trait, something that I could never do. What perplexes me is how a person such as my father, a stark rationalist and atheist, decided to marry a devout Hindu. The beliefs that both these people carried were so different that I would not consider for a moment that they would be partners and let alone have three children. Yet, that is precisely what happened—an absurd and contradictory moment in time from my perspective, a paradox.

Growing up, I felt constantly caught between two extremes. On the one hand, I had a father who would denounce faith and its contents, seeing no value in spirituality, and often equated it with superstition. On the other hand, I had a mother who tried to indoctrinate me into

what seemed to operate as a cult of sorts, based on the non-error correcting and un-reasoning dynamics paired with claims about the nature of reality that seemed to come out of a comic book.<sup>1</sup> According to my father, my mother was suffering from an acute case of delusion. On the opposite end, my mother took a stance of pity, for she thought my father would never understand the feelings of rapture my mother claimed to experience.

I did not have it in me to subscribe to either ideology because it felt dishonest to do so, and worse, to subscribe to one and not the other would leave either my mother or father bitter. Intentions no longer mattered to choices made because a failure to concede signified a personal insult to a particular belief. They drove each other to the periphery. Denying one extreme caused the other to hold their views with a tighter grasp. There was ultimately no path forward to find common ground and cohere around mutually understood points. I did not know it then, but this was my first encounter with extremism and failed discourse.

These experiences behaved as anchors throughout my upbringing, and the themes underlying them were only amplified through my travels in other countries: I'll cite a few of them below. My first experience in travel took me to India. I was about five years old at the time, so I did not remember much about the social issues, other than what I heard from my father in passing here and there. In 2008 my family moved to one of the wealthiest suburbs in Massachusetts, and in 2010 I returned with my family to India a second time. This time I was able to experience the many ironies that the continent had to offer a ten-year-old boy. India is where I first truly understood and internalized the meaning of material poverty, wealth inequality, and precarity. I have never witnessed a more significant disparity in material wealth and an

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<sup>1</sup> The Hindu religion is filled with many epics and narratives of battle and war among its various deities, the Mahabharata being the best example I can think of. Many Hindus believe that these stories act as carriers for certain moral lessons and should not be considered as non-fiction, but there are indeed several Hindus who will stand by the veracity of these stories.

innate imperative to value it. Conversely, I have never observed a greater willingness to help and care for one's own family and tribe.

In the fall of 2015, during my sophomore year of high school, I had the opportunity to travel to Europe for several weeks with members of our history department to experience the legacy of World War II and the Cold War. My first experience took me to Berlin, where I saw the consequences of conflict and war firsthand when I spoke with Syrian refugees, who were then trying to integrate into Germany. They provided first-hand accounts of matters such as the harm of collateral damage in times of war, or whether or not nations should prioritize the humanitarian needs of refugees over their national interests. Unfortunately, this occurred at a time when the answers to these topics were not only ambiguous but were weaponized as political ammunition by varying countries ad nauseam.

Poland and Prague were next on my itinerary. In Poland, I met with survivors of the Holocaust who traversed the lowest possible valleys on the landscapes of human experience and learned about the history of fascism and the genuine threat the Nazis presented to the international community. Europe's history of ethnic conflict seemed to be in the past. Still, the recent humanitarian crisis regarding refugees and their displacement was only a precursor for what appeared to be an inevitable clash of civilizations. I heard hints of these clashes in my time in Berlin with the Syrian refugees. That experience was probably the best outcome, even when people voiced differences of opinion. Still, I would experience the opposite end of that spectrum and the effect of violence firsthand in the next stop of my travels, in Prague, Czech Republic.

In Prague, I observed a mass demonstration against immigration and Islam from the far-right that devolved into violence, as protesters fought with Czech police and rogue out-of-control vehicles almost struck civilians. Their beliefs about refugees' alleged intentional

dilution of their home population fueled their dispassion for immigration and Islam, so much so that they flipped cars and even burned them. We left Prague the next day, and the extremes bounced around in my mind: conversation or violence.

2015 was a year of terror, violence, and fear. The year began with the infamous Charlie Hebdo attacks in France that took the lives of twelve people while injuring a number just a few below that. Next, a string of police shootings occurred in the U.S., which upset what seemed to be the entire nation, and America heard the outcry in 2015. Subsequently, the Black Lives Matter movement began to gain traction among the public. Next, multiple mass shootings occurred, such as the Charleston church shooting, the San Bernardino shooting, and even a shooting in a Planned Parenthood center. I believe these acted as a catalyst to identify homegrown terrorism rather than that bred abroad, the progress of which we are still patiently waiting to see. Finally, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) metastasized like a cancerous tumor in the Middle East. For a moment, it seemed malignant enough to evade extraction by those who fought against them. Again, I witnessed the power of belief and bad ideas and just how far people are willing to go to perpetuate them. It became clear to me that, when reduced to its fundamentals, the terrorism that I had witnessed almost the entire year was nothing more than a war of ideas and proved itself to be the antithesis of civil discourse.

2016 was the year of extremes and it seemed as if my previous encounters with extremism and polarization, both from my childhood and abroad, were taking root in my own country. With the rise of Trumpism on the far-right arrived a wave equal in ideological magnitude from the far-left attempting to cancel out the forecasted presidency's impact on our culture and our politics. Our culture seemed to bifurcate along with the opposing beliefs they held so much that, for a moment, it seemed impossible to coexist civilly. This trend continued



throughout my tenure as a high school student. When I first matriculated into Connecticut College in 2018, I came in equipped with my experiences and questions about the world as I knew it. Parsing through these was difficult because of the sheer volume of intricacies that inhabited the events of my childhood, as I described previously, and the experiences that shaped me as a result of traversing different cultures during pivotal moments in my adolescence and the world geopolitically.

I thought I could parse through these experiences by taking diverse classes with professors who perhaps carried answers to the rather foundational questions about the world lingering in my mind. What is inhibiting cooperation between humans? Why do nations, rational actors, and non-state actors behave the way they do towards one another? What can explain instances of poverty and wealth inequality around the world? Why do people and societies fail to talk about crucial human issues without killing each other? I searched for questions that had no answers, at least not in a traditional classroom setting. Two things became patently evident to me. First, the problems and questions that I felt compelled to explore are global and cross-cultural. Second, to explore these problems, I needed to travel and operate within these cultural settings to understand these same problems better. Studying international relations provided me with the most direct way to look at the challenges facing civilizations worldwide.

International relations encompasses a wide range of disciplines. The study of state behavior, political economy, war, ethnic conflict, culture, and ethics can all stand under this umbrella. I have studied all of these topics in one context or another, but my curiosity has more or less led me to focus on three: those relating to politics, conflict, and ethics. Much of what is wrong about our everyday society fits under the criteria of a political problem. Take, for example, the economy.

Contrary to its more quantitative framing, the economy is more than just a financial system that operates to produce and consume goods and services. It is an amalgamation of social, political, and cultural factors that influence the well-being of the populations that work within it. If we accept this description, we can analyze common problems with more breadth. For example, consider the problem of wealth inequality. I have seen the impact of the disproportionate distribution and concentration of wealth firsthand in my travels to India and just how morally and ethically draining it can be to observe the precarity of one's circumstance. To understand why cases like those in the slums of Mumbai have come to be, one must first identify the point of change that made those circumstances such. Professor Chhabria's teachings from her class on the globalization of urban poverty have been instrumental. For all the supposed preachings of free-market capitalism, the level of inequality observed worldwide is alarming and warrants further conversation on how governments and people can remedy systemic failures.

However, it seems that our system, for all its flaws, is correct about the need for societal innovation. The problems that I am observing are to do with material accumulation for the sake of material accumulation. I think most people, if not in practice but in principle, want a more fair and equal society. But we should not want to erase our capacity, and I would argue our necessity, to create and innovate. A recurring roadblock that I am experiencing is the incentive structure currently in place for this innovation and creation. Much of what involves creation and innovation occurs in the private sector; those who participate often reap the system's benefits and profit tremendously, but many also provide services and innovations that benefit our shared culture. Massive technology companies provide exciting and beneficial services to the world, yet inequality still looms in the background. To return to my main point, we *should* want creativity and innovation, but not at the expense of rampant inequality that may come from it. We need

better incentives than money and wealth to conjure the same level of technological and cultural innovation that we so want and need to propel humanity forward, but we cannot do this without leveling the playing field first. Even acknowledging the incentive structure of the economic systems we have in place implies a claim to make those systems better through collective actions and political organization.

My encounters with religion have been all but lukewarm. As noted in my upbringing, I have often been critical of dogmatism and its forms due to the cult-like devotion of various family members to religion. Across the many cultural experiences surrounding the realm of spirituality, the most formative ironically happened in the one place I tried to avoid: a cult. Cults often represent the phenomenon of in-group belonging to the extreme. The alleged veracity of a cult's convictions usually confirms the beliefs of its subscribers and draws them further into the tribe as opposed to those who view the group from the outside. My experience occupied my summer when I was sixteen and was spent at an old castle converted into an ashram in Gujarat, India. I attended guided meditations and group chanting, followed by spiritual guidance from a venerable guru who appeared to be loved unconditionally by those who frequently did not even know her first name. Where most arrived to find in-group belonging, I found freedom in its purest form. That is, the ability to be free from thought and identity. This feeling seemed to run contrary to the following that this group amassed, yet looking back now, I can observe similar dogmas and political tribalism at the epicenter of our most corrosive discourse surrounding problems in our common culture. To be free from ideology and dogma and our ability to resist our most tribalistic tendencies remain some of our most pressing challenges. They will define how we think and progress as human beings for the years to come.

Over the last few years, the world has seemed chaotic, and societies have become increasingly polarized. Outbursts of violence over the years, whether it be terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, insurrections in the United States, or even riots held in public squares in Prague protesting refugee integration, all indicate a failure to communicate our thoughts and ideas constructively. The last few years have brought a spike in hyperpartisanship, social unrest, racial tension, numerous bad-faith dialogues, and a growing reluctance to engage in meaningful conversations, with social media flexing its muscles in spreading misinformation. This destructive force of polarization has been particularly apparent during the most significant public health crisis in over a century. Polarization is a global issue, and the struggle to peacefully convince fellow human beings with conflicting beliefs is ongoing. Whether social division takes the form of ethnic conflict, extremist violence, or insurrections, the trend seems ubiquitous, and we only have our common tool of civil discourse to discuss and convince each other towards the center to work towards common solutions. So here lies what I see to be the most considerable ethical challenge of our time: our ability to talk to one another without resorting to violence. All we have between ameliorating our circumstances and the erosion of the civil society we value are a series of successful conversations. It is only through this discourse that we can identify the right questions to ask and eventually find new ways to cooperate on our shared problems to experience better lives and a better world.

### **Abstract**

Extremist narratives are diffuse, and mistrust of political institutions is ubiquitous in the United States. Extremist ideas espousing violent means to gain recognition and legitimacy are more common in mainstream culture. This is the United States now, but it is also Italy sixty years prior. This project uses various archival materials to explore the two decades from 1960 to 1980 defined by cycles of widespread extremism, social fracturing, and domestic terror known in Italian history as The Years of Lead. Applying this case to the United States' current circumstances, this project argues that a democracy with the prestige of the United States should not ignore its susceptibility to similar cycles of violent extremism. Understanding the historical similarities between spiraling nations is a necessary step in preventing the devolution of political institutions and cultural norms of liberal democracy.

### **Introduction: The Burdens of History**

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”  
– George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 1905

The theologian and philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr described democracy as finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems.<sup>2</sup> In a democracy, answers to common issues are neither infallible nor are the problems themselves even solvable. The story of democracy is one of managing competing ideologies to achieve a form of social equilibrium defined by its ability to sustain cooperation between competing ideals and its ability to endure the aftermath if it fails to do so. Cycles of collaboration and conflict mark the pages of history. They make us aware of the patterns and circumstances that give way to moments when these cyclical problems reach their zenith.

The United States is in the process of a cycle of tension and violent escalation that, if left unchecked, will prove itself corrosive to the norms and institutions that are crucial to the maintenance of civil democracy. This presents one of the most pressing concerns to United States national security. Consider “Anni di Piombo” or the Years of Lead in Italy from 1960-1980. Accounts of the Years of Lead often depict street violence and urban guerilla warfare. However, the problems of extremism, political violence, and terrorism experienced by Italy during the onset of the early 1960s signified more than just warring factions facing off against each other in alleyways and public squares. Precise structural circumstances within cultural, political, and economic settings helped cultivate an extremist ecosystem that induced the destructive cycle of tension driven by competing ideals of post-war statehood in Italy.

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<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. 1944.

As these extremist groups grew and resentment towards government institutions escalated, so did an asymmetric strategy of tension resulting in outbursts of terrorism and political violence. Over the last few years, the cultural and political environment in the U.S. has been particularly divisive and tribalistic. The United States seems to be in the midst of a pattern of fracturing driven by an increased presence of extremist narratives in mainstream culture. These narratives cause the division of groups into smaller and smaller in-groups guided by their tendencies to diverge on common problems due to ideological differences to an extreme degree.

The most important institutions that would buffer violence from entering everyday discourse are eroding in this process. This project compares two nations that seem to have fallen into cycles of extremism, institutional subversion, and political violence and show that these cycles are evident in two different national cases: Italy in the past and the United States now. The United States should understand that even a venerable democracy such as itself should not ignore its susceptibility to similar cycles of violence brought on by extremist ideas. Understanding the historical similarities between spiraling nations is a necessary step in preventing the devolution of political institutions and cultural norms of liberal democracy.

### **Cycles of Violence:**

The cycles of violence, extremism, and social fracturing are reaching new heights in the United States. In his book, *Extremism*, J.M. Berger defines extremism as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separate from the need for hostile action against an out-group.”<sup>3</sup> This competition gives rise to two things: first, the manifestation of identities on the left typically nucleating into more significant value-based movements advancing social and political change. Second, a subsequent reaction from groups on the far-right attempting to

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<sup>3</sup> J.M. Berger *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 44

respond to this perceived attack on right-wing conservative values. The escalation of violence as a rational choice presents cause for concern, and it is a problem endemic to extremism as an ideology.

The most recent forms of widespread extremism in the United States are the manifestation of an ongoing competition between contradictory identities, the blurring of mainstream and extreme ideas, and the erosion of institutions that would be in place to dampen the effects of these common and often cyclical social interactions. Concepts such as racism, bigotry, and more generally speaking, hatred, frequently occur under the conditions of general human interaction. Although unfortunate, this fracturing is often expected in everyday life. As Berger notes, these daily interactions are usually “situational and transitory,” meaning that it is common practice for identity groups to fight over resources or collide on their respective values.<sup>4</sup> This has been apparent throughout history, and there are social institutions in place to mitigate tribalistic tendencies within human interactions. Civil discourse is one of these institutions, and it is the best institution that we have to communicate our ideas in a constructive and non-violent way. Extremism itself warrants concern as it attempts *explicitly* to rationalize a precondition of conflict and violent means to justify its intended ends. It believes that the characteristics of the defined out-group are inherent, *inseparable* from its potential to harm the in-group.

Ideologically motivated violent extremism is ascendant in our democracy. We can point to many moments that constitute a general pattern of extremist narratives indicative of a recurring devolution of norms and institutions that would be in place to push against violent social conflict derived from extremist influences. The political setting provides the foundation for both right and left-wing extremist movements to establish their ideologies and craft mutual narratives. Yet paradoxically, this platform's subscription and activity render these extremist

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75



groups illegitimate actors within political institutions. If these groups do not have legitimacy, then they cannot legitimately conduct themselves within America's democratic institutions. Therefore, they must operate by a politics of other means and employ violence to advance their goals in a perceived distrustful political landscape. As a result, the United States is witnessing the diffusion of once illegitimate narratives into the mainstream discourse of ideas, blurring the lines between the extreme and mainstream, and changing the norms of legitimacy both politically and culturally.

Homegrown extremism, a scalable and emergent national security threat, is often overshadowed by international terrorism.<sup>5</sup> For years the definition of terrorism has emphasized international actors. For example, the September 11th attacks have become the primary example of the foreign extremist threat that has seemingly placed American democracy in its crosshairs. Many definitions certainly carry connotations that denote a bias towards the international extremist threat, and achieving a cohesive and all-encompassing definition of terrorism remains elusive.<sup>6</sup> Terrorism is a violent tactic used by those who subscribe to extremist ideologies. For the purpose of this project, I will define terrorism as the tactic of violence that an extremist in-group or person carries out to perpetuate a narrative that centers around the concept of the "us v. them," with the primary goal of this tactic being to rally and consolidate the in-group in their perceived struggle for survival against an out-group in which the use of violence is justified as an immediate necessity. The main problem is extremism as a repeated vehicle for violent ideology, its frequent manifestations in America's political, social, and cultural landscapes, and its impact on its most crucial institutions. Viewing terrorism as a consequence, or rather a derivative of an extremist ideology can help emphasize the problem and the urgency of addressing it.

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<sup>5</sup> "What we Investigate: Terrorism." *FBI. Terrorism—FBI*

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas J. Perry, "The Numerous Federal Legal Definitions of Terrorism: The Problem of too Many Grails," *Journal of Legislation* 30, no. 2 (2004): 249-274.

### **Norms, Institutions, and Political Violence:**

If our current political scene is examined, the ideational divide between today's Democrats and Republicans is more comprehensive than it was fifty years prior.<sup>7</sup> Recent polling data on partisan polarization in the United States in 2022 from the Pew Research Center illustrates the widening conceptual divide between The House of Representatives and the Senate. It shows that liberals and conservatives have become more ideologically cohesive, and both parties have deviated further away from the center fifty years prior. This means that liberals are now more liberal and conservatives are more conservative than ever.<sup>8</sup>

The polarization of partisan attitudes has persistently complicated America's ability to form a consensus on issues that impact large portions of the American population, whether it be the problem of abortion or the problem of what school curriculums should or should not teach children.<sup>9</sup> In a more noxious vein, there has been a concerning upward trend of extremist narratives infiltrating the ideological atmosphere of ordinary politics. Former President Donald J. Trump's rise to the presidency in 2016 illustrates the destabilizing and violent impact these narratives can have on democracy and its institutions. In her book, *Homegrown Hate*, Sara Kamali paints a picture of the beliefs in Evangelical America and white nationalist Christianity and their influence on America's political right.<sup>10</sup> Kamali fuses the adherents of the two groups into what she calls "White nationalist evangelicals." Their imperative to maintain America's ethnic homogeneity and create a white ethnostate seemingly pairs well with former President

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<sup>7</sup>Drew DeSilver, "The Polarization in Today's Congress Has Roots That Go Back Decades," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, April 22, 2022). [The polarization in today's Congress has roots that go back decades | Pew Research Center](#)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Hartig, "About Six-in-Ten Americans Say Abortion Should Be Legal in All or Most Cases," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 6, 2022). [About six-in-ten Americans say abortion should be legal in all or most cases](#)

<sup>10</sup> Kamali, Sara. *Homegrown Hate: Why White Nationalists and Militant Islamists Are Waging War Against the United States*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021.

Trump's anti-globalist and “America first” platform. A frequent narrative within extremist circles intertwined with the typical political phenomenon of nationalism and populism further blurs the distinctions between party lines and fringe movements.

Opposing extremist groups tend to diverge from each other in virtually every manner worth discussing. However, a common thread that runs through extremist circles is widespread distrust in the integrity of democratic institutions. This belief helps legitimize the use of political violence as a type of “politics by other means.”<sup>11</sup> American democracy can feel the effects of this normative degradation in the very institutions built to maintain that democracy. The last few years have brought a spike in hyperpartisanship, social unrest in the form of racial tension, a widening economic divide, and numerous bad-faith dialogues.

While this is happening, the media ecosystem is effectively and efficiently disseminating misinformation to large swaths of the general population and fueling mistrust in the media landscape and institutions such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) during the most significant public health crisis of over a century, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Polarization is eating away at America’s ability to cohere around a standard set of norms that assist us in managing the cycles of harsh attitudes and behaviors built into the hardware of any democracy. Therefore, it is damaging our ability to coexist together healthily and productively. Our social, cultural, and political institutions seem to be falling victim to extremist ideas and tribalism. Interactions across intertwined political, economic, and racial cleavages seem to be pitted against each other in a perpetual game of zero-sum competition. On January 6, 2021, the domestic terror threat unfolded in front of millions of American citizens. It was not an attack by an international actor but rather a violent group of homegrown extremists operating under a particular narrative of

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<sup>11</sup> Stover, William J., and Jeffrey M. Capaccio. “Sources of Italian Terrorism.” *Peace Research* 14, no. 1 (1982): 11–19. [Sources of Italian Terrorism](#).

imminent crisis that fueled a deliberate attempt to stop the transition of institutional power at the behest of the former President of the United States.

America's political and cultural environments have been in a crisis for quite some time, defined by factions diverging on common problems daily. Within the extreme-right is a network of groups that advance extremist conspiracy narratives where violence is endemic to their beliefs and, therefore, can help explain how they operate. These are groups such as white supremacists and anti-government supporters fueling distrust in political and social institutions through conspiracy thinking. The extreme-right often craft narratives that, although largely false, contain certain truths anchored in objective realities. These are groups that advance conspiracies, such as the "great replacement theory," pointing out the objective fact of demographic change signaling a relative drop in the white population, but pair it with the claim that this migration intends to dilute the ethnic homogeneity of white Europeans.<sup>12</sup> These kernels of truth consolidate the identities of extremist groups and give legitimacy to any claims that the institutional integrity of the state is compromised. Not all on the far-right operate entirely under conspiracy thinking. Those who are less radical subscribe to conspiracy and other extremist ideas yet do not necessarily act on them. Groups such as elements of Donald Trump supporters who carry populist and ultra-nationalist sentiments can subside in this subcategory.

The problem of extremism, in particular that of violent extremism and terrorism, primarily resides in far-right circles. Scholars have acknowledged this, dubbing the recent rise of terrorism on the far right as a new global "fifth-wave," attempting to add to the concept of "waves of terrorism" established by David C. Rappaport in 2004.<sup>13</sup> The increasing prevalence of right-wing extremism and its derivative of terrorism are transnational threats. Its presence is seen

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<sup>12</sup> "Great Replacement Theory," Counter Extremism Project, [Great Replacement Theory](#)

<sup>13</sup> Auger, Vincent A. "Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2020): 87–97. [Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?](#)

in nations throughout Europe and the United States, highlighting the problem's ubiquity in far-right spheres. It also emphasizes the asymmetry between the extremist groups on the right and those on the left.

Disparate groups on the left often affiliate with ideologies that carry broad anti-fascist sentiments, such as Antifa. Although less prevalent, the current political ecosystem has inspired a spike in left-wing extremist activity. Anarchist groups on the left present a perception of liberal dominance whose mobilization for rapid and radical political change attempts to nullify right-wing narratives and ideas. The far-right's perception of left-wing moral preeminence cements the existing narratives of crisis painted by the far-right. This perception further fuels the far-right's turn to extremism and social fracturing into smaller and smaller tribes operating in their own perceived spheres of moral legitimacy. Ultimately, the asymmetry presents an escalating dynamic that offers cause for concern and close observation.<sup>14</sup>

Tensions that ideological differences may generate are normal, healthy, and inevitable, given ideological diversity within a plural democracy. But those tensions can spiral and lose control when zero-sum extremist and tribal narratives infiltrate common discourse and sow mistrust in the most fundamental democratic institutions, eroding the norms surrounding the use of political violence. Cases such as Italy during the 1960s demonstrate this fact, and with this reality comes a massive human cost. In its fifteen or so year battle with domestic terrorism and homegrown extremism, Italy lost some twelve thousand lives from terrorist attacks and extremist violence.<sup>15</sup> This case also serves as a warning for what the United States *could* become if it maintains its current course. There have been glimpses of this already, whether it be social

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<sup>14</sup> "Anarchist: Left-Wing Violent Extremism in America". [Anarchist: Left-Wing Violent Extremism in America](#)

<sup>15</sup> Drake, Richard. "Italy in the 1960s: A Legacy of Terrorism and Liberation." *South Central Review* 16/17 (1999): 63.

protests calling for bottom-up institutional reform devolving into violent looting in the summer of 2020 to the hostile attempts to undermine the democratic process in early 2021.

In an age defined by polarization, extremist tendencies, and an emerging permissiveness of political violence, it is not sustainable for a democracy to suffer an ever-increasing human cost caused by these escalating tensions and the further dissemination of extremist crisis narratives. In common historical records, the United States can find similar patterns of violence and balkanization. By examining them, democracies such as the United States can strategize methods to break out of cycles of extremism and violence. Moreover, the United States can inform its current and future choices by studying historical instances of political and social unrest to experience better circumstances than it is currently. The Italian case serves as a warning to a spiraling nation, and it should understand the value of this case and learn from its lessons or see itself fall victim to its ignorance.

### **The Years of Lead: A Historical Framework**

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Italy had a hyperpolarized and violent political landscape. It was a period featuring frequent bombings, kidnappings, and widespread domestic terrorist violence, making it one of the most salient cases of political terrorism among western democracies. Over two decades, the Years of Lead featured thousands of terrorist attacks and amassed a death toll of over twelve thousand citizens. The far-left featured extremist groups such as Le Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades), I Nuclei Armati Proletari (Armed Proletarian Cells/NAP), and Prima Linea (First Line).<sup>16</sup> The Red Brigades were the most notorious armed group on the left during the Years of Lead. Their formal membership reached approximately five hundred people. This, however, did not include the unknown estimate of supporters who did not formally subscribe to the group but instead subscribed to their extremist ideology of violent socio-revolutionism.<sup>17</sup>

Violence towards the state was predicated on the belief that the Italian government was operating as a pawn in the larger scheme of globalization and the perceived oppression of the working class. Therefore, the main objective of left-wing extremist groups was to “strike against the heart of the State” or the state’s “organs.”<sup>18</sup> This belief fomented tremendous distrust in democratic institutions that would typically be avenues for the dissent of those who are discontent with their current circumstance. If we attempt to rationalize how extremist groups on the left sought to achieve their ends, then it needs to be understood that they held the state in extraordinarily low esteem. Once faith in these institutions eroded, violence was seen as the only other alternative to enact any meaningful systemic political change.

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<sup>16</sup> Pisano, Vittoriofranco S. *Contemporary Italian Terrorism: Analysis and Countermeasures*. Washington: Library of Congress, Law Library, 1979. p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Irrera, Daniela. “Learning from the Past: Case of the Red Brigades in Italy.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 6 (2014): 16–20.

<sup>18</sup> Pisano, p. 42.

Extremist groups tend to be defined by their deviation from groups or movements with more moderate sensibilities, even more from those on the opposite ideological and political spectrum. Nevertheless, extremist groups can find a point of mutual agreement in each group's sentiments toward the state apparatus, highlighting a political ecosystem that thrived on violent extremist ideas. This point is evident when the objectives of both the far-right and left in Italy are examined. Extremist groups on the Italian far-right consisted of: I Nuclei Armati Revoluzionari (NAR), Il Movimento Popolare Revoluzionari (Popular Revolutionary Movement), and Ordine Nuovo/Ordine Nero (New Order/Black Order). Unlike the far-left, the far-right operated under a neo-fascist ideology defined by its goals to foster chaos through the use of random violence and fear as a catalyst for the establishment of authoritarian rule.

Groups on the far-right found ideological roots in a neo-fascist ideology based in part on the legacy of Benito Mussolini and proponents of the Republic of Salo, the attempted fascist government following the collapse of the prior regime in 1943.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, their ideological motivations resided in a necessity to establish a state that had come and gone. Regarding their dispassion with the role of the state, the far-right and left concur. The combined force of these competing, and at times similar, dogmas proved to be a source of calamity for the Italian government and society.

The so-called “golden age” in Italy, beginning in 1950 until about 1973, represented a massive upward shift in the country’s economic and social status.<sup>20</sup> Before widespread industrialization and modernization, Italy was a very rural country that operated on a primarily agriculture-based economy and was mainly free from the spread of mass urbanization. Italy’s rural landscape changed rather rapidly due to many factors. First, Italy’s membership in the Axis

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<sup>19</sup> Gregor, A. James. *The Search for Neofascism : the Use and Abuse of Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Parole e violenza politica: gli anni Settanta nel Novecento italiano*. Italy: Carocci editore, 2013. p. 30.



powers meant that they would be feeling the vibrations of a lost world war, specifically in terms of its occupation by allied forces and its transition into a new global economic order. Second, the end of one war and the onset of an emerging struggle between soviet-style communism and Western capitalism placed Europe at the center of a growing war of ideas. Following the fall of its fascist government, Italy was the third-largest recipient of aid given via the Marshall Plan, an economic recovery program employed by the United States to inspire and incentivize the growth of liberal democracies throughout Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Italy's economic miracle transformed its agricultural economy into a highly industrialized one. The term "miracle" embodies what the Italian economy accomplished in its industrialization journey. The first few years of this era were defined by high growth rates consistently reaching six percent until 1963.<sup>22</sup> Vera Zamagni, a Professor of Economics at the University of Bologna, notes the role of industry in its contribution to growth in her book *The Economic History of Italy, 1860-1990*, stating, "Industry, new constructions, exports, and investment all grew at a rate of between nine and eleven percent a year, thus increasing the industrial character of the country's economic system, and opening it up further to exchange with other economies."<sup>23</sup> As the nation saw greater involvement in international markets, Italian firms and companies grew, and in turn, the standard of living of the Italian population rose dramatically.<sup>24</sup>

An increased emphasis on industrialization and the amelioration of living standards were all welcome additions to many in the nation. However, the political developments that followed these changes revolved around the social movements that formed because of the negative aspects of the government's capitalistic tendencies. Practices such as labor exploitation and the

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<sup>21</sup> Leffler, Melvyn P. "The United States and the Strategic Dimensions of the Marshall Plan." *Diplomatic History* 12, no. 3 (1988): 277–306. [The United States and the Strategic Dimensions of the Marshall Plan](#).

<sup>22</sup> Zamagni, Vera. *The Economic History of Italy, 1860-1990*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1993. p. 338.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Meade, Robert C. *The Red Brigades: the Story of Italian Terrorism*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. p. 1.

inadequacy of proper working conditions for laborers consolidated the grievances of the working class. Moreover, they led to the formation of radical Marxist-Leninist groups bent on creating a more egalitarian system than the democratic system at the time would allow.

In their nascent phase, the Red Brigades were formed based on these beliefs in the city of Reggio Emilia, located in the region called Emilia-Romagna, home to the city of Bologna. The partisan struggle was emboldened in Reggio during World War II, and it became a hotbed of anti-Mussolini resistance. The city experienced violent clashes between fascists and socio-communists fighting for their perceptions of Italian statehood. The impacts of this struggle stained the minds of those who grew up during that time. As Robert C. Meade Jr. notes in his account of Italian terrorism, “the future *brigatisti* grew up steeped in the traditions and myths that came out of that experience.”<sup>25</sup> Alberto Franceschini, an organizer and former leader in one of the rebel movements in Reggio Emilia referred to as the “Reggiani” as well as one of the commanding figures of the Red Brigades, reflects this idea well.<sup>26</sup>

The Reggiani believed they were the first step toward a completely socialist society. Franceschini was born in 1947 into a family with communist sentiments.<sup>27</sup> His father spent many years in prison due to his anti-fascist activities and was a member of the primary labor union in the Italian Communist Party (PCI).<sup>28</sup> By the time Franceschini entered his early adulthood, Italy’s political scene was experiencing the downside of its economic miracle. Populations in cities grew at an uncontrollable rate, increasing by as much as 5.5 million people between 1951-1966, and many industries consolidated around these cities, mainly Milan, Turin, and Genoa.<sup>29</sup> The state failed to adapt its plans to accommodate these rapid changes. Citizens felt

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<sup>25</sup> Meade, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Franceschini, Alberto (1987) Interview by Carmen Bertolazzi, ‘Vent’anni buttati’, *Panorama*, 1 march 1987, pp. 47-7.

<sup>27</sup> Meade, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

either exploited or left behind by a government defined by the juxtaposition of a rapid and degrading social situation with a naive optimism based on prior immediate economic achievement.

Franceschini, like many disgruntled youths at the time, was a student at the University of Bologna, but he never finished his studies as he was uninterested in obtaining a “bourgeois” degree.<sup>30</sup> Rather than invest his time finishing his degree, he thought it best to spend it with the Italian Communist Youth Federation (FGCI) and other left-wing organizations where adherents would roam the streets of Reggio Emilia and often violently accost right-wing fascist sympathizers.<sup>31</sup> By 1968, like many of the youth steeped in extremist narratives, Franceschini had concluded that democracy in Italy, and its quasi-democratic institutions, held little meaning or value in affecting the change that many like himself wanted to see on the path towards socialism.

In this regard, Franceschini’s conclusion departed from the formal politics that the PCI was involved in. According to Franceschini, PCI was just as guilty as the “Pseudo-democratic institutions” that he observed to be corrupt and ineffective at implementing meaningful progress.<sup>32</sup> The party *should* have been espousing the same revolutionary rhetoric they claimed to hold so close in their convictions, yet they did not. Franceschini says it best, stating:

The peaceful road to socialism truly existed, they [the PCI leaders] said. It was only necessary to accept the rules of the game and one day we would have won because we were the stronger and more determined. But if I had accepted this logic, I would have betrayed my grandfather and his ideals, together with my wish to live in a different world...many of my comrades at the youth federation thought as I did: we did not listen to those in the Party who advised us to remain calm because the moment for weapons had not yet arrived. It was necessary, they said, first to weaken the bourgeoisie with the parliamentary struggle and then to arm ourselves to conquer the victory. We considered

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

these the speeches of well-camouflaged opportunists or of ingenious dreamers who had understood nothing of the path that the Party was pursuing.<sup>33</sup>

In the eyes of extreme communists, working within the framework of democratic institutions was anathema to the prospects of a socialist state. In their eyes, if the party maintained its current course within the state's institutional structures, they would be unable to free themselves from an illusion of meaningful change. More radical ideas for change needed implementation if there was to be progress. Bound by their common distrust in democratic institutions in Italy and their coalescence around extreme beliefs, the Red Brigades were formed in 1970 by Franceschini, along with student activists Renato Curcio and Mara Cogol.<sup>34</sup>

As the consolidation of radical left attitudes was occurring, so were those of the Italian Neo-fascists. Franco Ferraresi, a professor of political sociology at the University of Turin, chronicles the reorganization and resurgence of Italian fascism in his book *Threats to Democracy*.<sup>35</sup> He distinguishes the resurgence into three distinct stages in progression. The total span covered is about forty years, with the first reorganization phase in 1946. The second phase consisted of the formation of "historic groups" and the commencement of the "strategy of tension."<sup>36</sup> The third phase consisted of "sponteinismo armato" (armed spontineity) and random, scattered terrorism to attack the state, which commenced what many Italians refer to as "il problemo dello Stato," or "the problem of the State."<sup>37</sup>

The fascist crowd consisted of various voices from diverse cleavages of Italian society. As Ferraresi notes, there were "monarchists and republicans, antibourgeois 'socializers' and procapitalist supporters of private ownership..."<sup>38</sup> These ideological differences manifested in

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<sup>33</sup> Franceschini, Alberto (1988) *Mara Renato e io – Storia dei fondatori delle BR* (Milan: Mandadori), p. 27

<sup>34</sup> Meade, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ferraresi, Franco. *Threats to Democracy: The Radical Right in Italy after the War* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Ferraresi, p. 21.

strategic approaches in the political arena. From 1945 to 1955, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) followed a parliamentary and institutionalized path of moderacy. Due to ideological differences, the more radical factions splintered from the center-right and evolved into groups that constituted the extreme right.

Violence was central to the operation of extremist groups on the far-left and right. There was no feasible way to hear their dissent, given their mutual lack of faith in their shared institutions. The common tendency of violence, combined with the belief that institutions were illegitimate, resulted in the devastating strategy of tension and “stragismo” (massacres) that engulfed the political and social environments for nearly two decades. In an attempt to subvert its nation's institutions, the strategy of tension featured bombings, kidnappings, and escalating violence.

Neo-fascist political violence peaked in the late 1960s and frequently involved explosives in public settings. In 1969 the extremist group New Order was held responsible for killing sixteen people and injuring over one hundred in the notorious public bombing of the Banca Nazionale dell’Agricoltura in Milan.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent explosions were scheduled in 1973 on a train from Turin to Rome, an MSI demonstration in Milan, and in 1974, a left-wing protest which killed six and injured over ninety people.<sup>40</sup> Violence escalated in the later 1970s and early 1980s as old neo-fascist groups recruited younger individuals and evolved in their approach to interacting with the state. In this final phase of armed spontaneity, the extremist groups on the right carried out high-intensity attacks on state institutions, left-wing movements, and any group that did not subscribe to their intended goals and ideology.

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<sup>39</sup> Pisano, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

The Red Brigades' "political-military operations" during the strategy of tension occurred in four phases. The first phase, from 1970 to 1972, took place mainly in the city of Milan and involved the dissemination of their revolutionary ideology and extremist narratives to the general public via pamphlets, journals, and magazines paired with sporadic acts of violence such as arson and terrorist attacks on MSI cells in Rome.<sup>41</sup> From 1972 to 1974, they concentrated their activities in what was known as the industrial triangle, consisting of three cities: Milan, Turin, and Genoa. Here they practiced the kidnappings of industry leaders such as Michele Mincuzzi, a product manager at the car manufacturer Alfa Romeo, as well as state politicians such as Mario Sossi, an Assistant Attorney General.<sup>42</sup> The third phase, from 1974 to 1976, was defined by a stark increase in violence towards the Christian Democrats, the center party in Italy's government, as well as other state institutions such as I Carabinieri, Italy's domestic police force.<sup>43</sup> Phase four was the bloodiest, taking place from 1976 to 1988. Most notably in this period was the kidnapping and execution of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro on May 9, 1978.<sup>44</sup>

After years of political violence and fifty-four days after the assassination of Aldo Moro, the Years of Lead came to a close. The Italian government managed to enforce the rule of law on extremist groups and even prosecuted many of them, although some of these verdicts did not favor the state. Meade notes in his conclusions on the case of Italian extremism and terrorism that freedom of thought and expression were particularly well maintained via institutions such as media and news, stating that "with all the difficulties of the situation, the right to speak and write freely was preserved astonishingly well during the decade and a half of political discontent and

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<sup>41</sup> Pisano, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

violence.”<sup>45</sup> He notes the prevalence of extremist journals and magazines, such as *Reggio 15*, and the ease by which extremist groups were able to collect and disseminate their thoughts to the mainstream masses.<sup>46</sup> The Italian case demonstrates the danger of extremist ideas, the narratives they generate, and the direct impact they can have on democratic institutions and the norms surrounding the use of violence within democratic societies.

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<sup>45</sup> Meade, p. 217; *Reggio 15*, 7 July 1968, in Fanti, op. Cit., p. 122. [Reggio 15 \(1966 - 1970\) - BDR01](#)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 218.

### **America's Extremist Moment**

America's battle with extremism is occurring right now, as extremist ideas and calls to violence are entering its mainstream culture. As the lines between what differentiates extremist views from those in mainstream culture becomes blurred, so too does the line between how people within the nation behave towards one another. America is living in a moment where it is tremendously easy to sow mistrust within its common institutions. Extremist conspiracies contain perceived realities riddled with inaccuracies and falsehoods. Yet, those who subscribe to them anchor their convictions in the instances of truth based on objective conditions embedded within these stories. These instances of fact seem to amplify the perceived integrity of a narrative and aid in its diffusion into mainstream culture.

It is a very complex landscape to navigate. Yet, concrete examples demonstrate this phenomenon in relation to larger historical trends such as globalization and the discontents of progress. Consider again, *Le Grand Replacement* (the great replacement).<sup>47</sup> This is a popular theory among white nationalist extremist groups on the far-right in the United States and Europe that has entered the mainstream culture in America. The theory explicitly claims that the white population is gradually experiencing replacement by non-white immigrants.<sup>48</sup> The implication of globalization and modernity entails a migration and immigration of ideas, products, and mainly, people. As the world becomes more interconnected, national identities may become less ingrained within ethnic definitions and favor civic forms based on shared values and ideas. Therefore, observing the dilution of ethnic majorities within certain countries that ingest large immigrant populations, such as the United States or Europe, is not out of the question.

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<sup>47</sup> "Great Replacement Theory," Counter Extremism Project, [Great Replacement Theory](#).

<sup>48</sup> "White Supremacy Groups in the United States," Counter Extremism Project, [White Supremacy Groups in the United States | Counter Extremism Project](#).



Narratives such as the great replacement are often subscribed to by far-right movements such as Identity Evropa and the League of the South.<sup>49</sup> These groups differ from objectively more hateful extremist groups on the right. For example, the National Socialist Movement (NSM) who espouse overtly racist, homophobic, and bigoted ideas as they attempt to emphasize “the distinctiveness—rather than the superiority—of the white identity.”<sup>50</sup> Groups such as Identity Evropa chanted “you will not replace us” at far-right rallies. They feared that the movement of immigrants and outsiders would destroy what they saw as a distinct white cultural identity. The pervasiveness of these groups has led to the transformation of the image of many extremist groups on the right. Consider the Neo-Nazi group NSM again. A group that preaches about racism, antisemitism, bigotry, and many other beliefs that are commonly considered odious by many in the general public, decided to remove the swastika from their imagery to be perceived as “more integrated and more mainstream” in late 2016.<sup>51</sup>

For the last six years, extremist narratives such as those espoused by NSM and Identity Evropa have entered our shared culture and have influenced the perceptions of large swaths of the public. When these extremist narratives and ideas pair with more acceptable mainstream movements such as populism and hypernationalism, we can observe a political, social, and cultural ecosystem that treats dangerous and deviant ideas as ordinary. This phenomenon characterizes much of the last few years, including the time before and during the presidency of Donald Trump. From the beginning of his campaign for the presidency in 2015, Trump has leveraged the discontents of a disgruntled and conservative base of supporters in the United States with the support of extremist ideas.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Serge F. Kovalski, Julie Turkewitz, Joseph Goldstein, and Dan Barry, “An Alt-Right Makeover Shrouds the Swastikas,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/10/us/alt-right-national-socialist-movement-white-supremacy.html>.

Crisis narratives in 2015 exacerbated the public's immense dissatisfaction with political elites and the establishment. At many times signaling threats to groups of people who subscribe to the narratives and conspiracies mentioned prior, and at times, hitting similar talking points that these groups espouse. For example, Sarah Kamali in *Homegrown Hate* writes about anti-globalism, a common conspiracy belief held by many anti-government extremists on the far-right. The details of this belief read as follows:

The federal government is comprised of a secret group of globalists seeking to institute a New World Order, a transnationalist socialist government that would impinge on the constitutional rights of Americans. The institutions of the federal government must be dismantled and discarded because this cabal of globalists are seeking to implement restrictive measures on freedoms and values, like gun control measures and civil rights.<sup>52</sup>

Kamali further cites the use of these narratives at universities in the United States from the likes of white nationalists such as the founder of the Patriot Front, Thomas Rousseau. The Patriot Front splintered from the organization called Vanguard America, which was present at the Unite the Right protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, during the summer of 2017.<sup>53</sup> Rousseau echoed similar sentiments from the passage above, highlighting the corrupt global political elite threatening democracy and the rights of American citizens.<sup>54</sup> Later in 2020, Trump would signal to once considered fringe beliefs to enter mainstream politics as a means to rally his base in a bid for a second term. This would lay the groundwork for mass mistrust in some of America's most important institutions, such as the media.

Freedom of thought, expression, and media are considered pillars of functioning democracies. Yet it seems that they risk contributing to the production of democracy's worst discontents: political violence, polarization, and extremist narratives. News and media are a

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<sup>52</sup> Kamali, Sara. *Homegrown Hate: Why White Nationalists and Militant Islamists Are Waging War Against the United States*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.

double-edged sword. On the one hand, journalism and the honest coverage of current events are powerful tools for cohering around everyday realities. But conversely, it is more complicated than ever before to maintain a free and open platform for exchanging ideas and information while simultaneously monitoring the spread of misinformation and harmful content. On this Kamali notes, “The Internet provides a platform for those seeking an outlet to justify their violence by providing a narrative of fear of, anxiety about, and anger toward the Other. The many social media sites also give the perpetrators of terrorism a global audience, enhancing their sense of power and belonging.”<sup>55</sup> The variety offered within a digital media ecosystem further exacerbates the dissemination of extremist narratives and perpetuates the mormacy of political violence as a legitimate tactic.

Extremist ideas within mainstream outlets portray institutions as an inviable option for change, for they may fail to produce the outcome needed for progress. Multiple baseless claims were issued by many in the Republican Party as well as mainstream media outlets such as Fox News of “dead voting,” purposefully discarding ballots and wide-scale voter fraud during the 2020 Presidential election.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the media coverage of protests turned violent in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020 signalled to many on the right an attack on their legitimacy and identity. Glenn L. Starks in the *Journal of Black Studies* describes this relationship using relative deprivation theory, stating that many groups on the far right, such as white nationalists, “wrongly perceive a loss of personal, professional, and political prestige as the US moves towards a culture of greater of equality and inclusiveness.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 230.

<sup>56</sup> Jim Rutenberg, Nick Corasaniti, and Alan Feuer, “Trump’s Fraud Claims Died in Court, but the Myth of Stolen Elections Lives On,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 26, 2020). [Trump’s Fraud Claims Died in Court, but the Myth of Stolen Elections Lives On - The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/26/us/politics/trump-fraud-claims-died-in-court-but-the-myth-of-stolen-elections-lives-on.html)

<sup>57</sup> Starks, Glenn Lee. “Explaining Antithetical Movements to the Black Lives Matter Movement Based on Relative Deprivation Theory.” *Journal of Black Studies* 53, no. 4 (May 2022): 346–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347211072874>.

There is no better example of institutional capture and the establishment of extreme norms within mainstream politics than the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. An active attempt to hinder the transition of power and undermine the democratic process initiated the erosion of the norm that is the peaceful transition of power from one president to another. Five people died and another hundred and fifty people were injured in the attempted insurrection.<sup>58</sup> The perpetrators of this siege were fueled by extremist narratives that illustrated a nation that was seemingly stolen from their grasp by the very institutions that are meant to democratically elect public officials: voting and the electoral process. The perception of these groups based on an ecosystem of extremist ideas was that institutions of dissent were destined to fail. For them, the only suitable alternative for action was violence and the capture of these institutions. On violence entering the mainstream in the United States, Rachel Kleinfeld notes:

What is occurring today does not resemble this recent past. Although incidents from the left are on the rise, political violence still comes overwhelmingly from the right, whether one looks at the Global Terrorism Database, FBI statistics, or other government or independent counts. Yet people committing far-right violence—particularly planned violence rather than spontaneous hate crimes—are older and more established than typical terrorists and violent criminals. They often hold jobs, are married, and have children. Those who attend church or belong to community groups are more likely to hold violent, conspiratorial beliefs. These are not isolated “lone wolves”; they are part of a broad community that echoes their ideas.<sup>59</sup>

Understanding the ecosystem of mainstream extremism cultivated within America’s media, politics, and culture is essential to understanding America’s extremist moment. Concurrently, understanding and this ecosystem’s ability to undermine the sensibilities of everyday citizens and democratic institutions is crucial to understanding current discontents within American democracy.

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<sup>58</sup> Cameron, Chris. “These Are the People Who Died in Connection with the Capitol Riot.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, January 5, 2022. [These Are the People Who Died in Connection With the Capitol Riot - The New York Times](#).

<sup>59</sup> Kleinfeld, Rachel. “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States.” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 160-176. doi:10.1353/jod.2021.0059.

### **Applications and Conclusions**

Nations worldwide experience the shocks of wide-scale globalization and modernity at different times. These shocks are present when examining the socio-political and economic ecosystem in which Alberto Franceschini grew up. The Red Brigades and their ethos were merely a manifestation of the environment that its members grew up in for years. This shared upbringing was further paired with an immense distrust in their own party for operating within a system they believed to be inherently flawed and therefore a key hindrance to progress. Similarly, with the rise of Neo-fascist groups, they believed they could consolidate an authoritarian regime by positioning the state in a condition of chaos and violence. The responses of certain political actors, such as Brigate Rosse and Ordine Nuovo, illuminate the ideas they carried surrounding their government.

Extremist views spread in Italian culture through periodicals and journals; the media. Free and open media is often considered the backbone of any functioning democracy, yet this institution can contribute significantly to an ecosystem of dangerous, harmful, and violent ideas. Extremists' plan to implement change through violence is a common thread that connects them. Similar sentiments and shared moments of institutional erosion and the spread of extremist ideas can be observed in the United States today, such as the pervasiveness of crisis narratives woven into the fabric of American culture and politics. These instances can serve as points of reference to apply the historical framework of the Italian case outlined previously.

The threat that extremism poses to the United States is its ability to manifest deep distrust in U.S. political institutions. What Italy demonstrates, and the value it can bring to the U.S. case, is the prevalence of that common thread of extremist ideas and their ability to subvert institutions necessary to a functioning democratic state. While left-wing extremism poses a far less severe

threat to the institutions of the United States, we can consider instances of institutional mistrust within anarchist movements in the United States as well. Anarchist left-wing extremism, often referred to as anarchist violent extremism (AVE) by the United States government, is an important strain of ideology to observe when assessing the domestic threat of violent extremism in the United States.<sup>60</sup> While these groups are not as prevalent as those on the far-right, the presence of their narratives has increased in the United States due to developments via partisanship and the widespread polarization of cultural and political landscapes. AVE narratives are typically defined by their call for “violent direct action” to instill disarray within institutions and systems, such as capitalism, the state as an entity, and ideological movements with opposing views.<sup>61</sup> Left-wing narratives of systemic corruption and the irredeemability of institutions often galvanize movements of systemic reform from the bottom up via social protests and activism. The far right is distinct from the left in this respect. Their solution to institutional problems typically calls for a dissolution of institutions from the top-down via destructive methods and violence, as was seen in extremist groups such as Ordine Nero in Italy.

The importance of examining this strategy of tension rests in the patterns of “accelerationism” that characterized the Years of Lead.<sup>62</sup> The primary purpose of the extremist movement's plan was violent escalation toward the state to exploit the political and ideological contradictions they observed within its institutions via their mutual narratives. Each group seemed to suffer from crises of identity and legitimacy. Ferraresi observes the presence of these crises as they manifested in Italy’s parliamentary system, citing “the paradox of illegitimate identity.”<sup>63</sup> Here is the paradox: if a group holds on to its identity, then any attempt at gaining

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<sup>60</sup> “Anarchist:Left-Wing Violent Extremism in America”. [Anarchist: Left-Wing Violent Extremism in America](#)

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jade Parker, “Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, February 4, 2020. [Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions – GNET](#).

<sup>63</sup> Ferraresi, p. 21.

legitimacy within the system will fail. Similarly, if a group wants to be recognized as legitimate within the system, then they must relinquish the factor of coherence that enables their identity group to remain intact. This paradox can help us understand the dynamics of the extremist groups in general when interacting with each other in relation to the state and its institutions, both in Italy and the United States today.

America's primary problem appears to be one of validation and legitimacy, specifically the validation and legitimacy of competing identities and perceived realities in America's political and social landscapes. As Francis Fukuyama states in his book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, there is nothing inherently problematic with the notion of identity or the politics that surround it. Instead, there is a problem when an individual or group's identity is understood to be incompatible with the survival of other identity-based groups.<sup>64</sup> The issue of extremism is derived from the interpretation of a perceived identity-based out-group threat against the identity-based in-group.

From the perspective of the far-right groups, and now much of the traditional and mainstream right-wing in the United States, the state's championing of specific values; multiculturalism, progressivism, and globalization, necessarily translates into a failure to recognize the traditional values perceived narratives that both the far-right and extremist groups on the right adhere to. Ultimately, this only strengthens the far-right's grip on survivalist narratives that are so central to the operation of extremist groups and pushes them to insert their descriptions into mainstream culture. It is a mutually amplifying process that attempts to spread narratives preaching institutional subversion while simultaneously legitimizing these narratives.

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<sup>64</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux). p. 115.

Although the current state of affairs in the United States is quite different from 1960s Italy, the United States cannot ignore the familiar cycles of violence and vitriol between political actors. In his book *Age of Anger*, the essayist Pankaj Mishra traces the resurgence of reactionary and right-wing political movements over the last decade.<sup>65</sup> Mishra identifies globalization as the defining moment encompassing the world in a commonly shared moment of dislocation and rapid change. The impact of globalization, modernization, and the discontents of progress are evident throughout the Italian case in the form of perceived political contradiction and mistrust. Sentiments of abandonment, dislocation, and anger illustrate the ideologies of Italian extremist groups and aid in their ability to consolidate their values against what they see as a corrupt and contradictory nation.

While circumstances in post-war Italy do not precisely match the current political and social landscape of the United States, we can consult similar moments present in the case to inform our current challenges facing the extremist threat in American democracy. Those being general cycles of political violence and attitudes towards democratic institutions from the extremist groups at the time and the impact of these ideas on the real world. The United States has yet to match Italy in scale and volume of attacks and casualties. Still, there is every reason to believe that the future of the United States *could* be worse if the country does not observe historical trends and stave off the diffusion of extremist narratives into mainstream culture.

The United States is undoubtedly in a worse position given the current age and nature of technology. On the one hand, commodification and modernization have crafted a diverse ecosystem of disruptive technologies. Yet, on the other hand, these technologies seem only to exacerbate the resentment and widespread dislocation that comes from modernity and globalization. Social media can now behave as a marketplace full of extremist ideas that are

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<sup>65</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017).



often masked with coded language to generate more sympathy for their beliefs and values from a general public audience.<sup>66</sup> The diffusion of extremist narratives to a large audience is now profoundly simple in democratic societies and further blends extremist ideas into America's mainstream culture.

Within the historical context and our current circumstances ultimately rests a call to strengthen the democratic institutions that have the best chance to buffer the acceleration of violent extremist narratives and sort out these ideas from mainstream culture. With extremist narratives increasing in prevalence, the definition of extreme is paradoxically pushing itself further. Even a so-called moderate stance tends to subscribe to the radical ideas in the current cultural and political narratives. America's extremist moment is right now. The United States must seek to prevent the blurring of the extreme from moderate sensibilities to avoid the patterns of violence and the extremist attitudes that are commonplace in both our culture and those demonstrated in cases such as Italy. Ideological pluralism is expected in a democracy, but the United States must actively work against the discontents that ideological diversity often produces. It must strive toward social equilibrium, as defined by its ability to sustain cooperation between competing ideals and its capacity to endure the aftermath when democracy fails to do so through strengthening the integrity of its political, social, and cultural institutions.

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<sup>66</sup> Williams, Heather J., Alexandra T. Evans, Jamie Ryan, Erik E. Mueller, and Bryce Downing, *The Online Extremist Ecosystem: Its Evolution and a Framework for Separating Extreme from Mainstream*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. p. 7. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1458-1.html>.