

Economics from the Top Down

new ideas in economics and the social sciences

The Deep Roots of Fascist Thought

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To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle.

— [George Orwell](#)

For decades, the word ‘fascist’ existed solely as a hyperbole — a term meant to insult rather than describe. But lately, politics have grown so hyperbolic that the label looks increasingly sincere. For example, when a powerful man advocates far-right politics and brazenly performs Nazi salutes in front of a cheering crowd, it seems like we have a word for that.

What was it again? Ah yes ... *fascist*.

Of course, fascism is easy to see when it happens elsewhere. But when it grows under your nose within your own culture, even the most blatant signs can seem obscure. So what we need, then, is a hard-nosed way to measure the spread of fascist ideology — a method that is calmly quantitative, immune to both apologetics and hyperbole. In my mind, the best option is to study patterns in written language.

Backing up a bit, all ideologies have words that they emphasize, corresponding to concepts that they deem important. Now, we can get a qualitative sense for these words by reading a corpus of ideological text. But if we want to *quantify* an ideology, a better approach is to count words. When we do so, we can objectively identify the ‘jargon’ of an ideology — the words that it uses frequently and (crucially) *overuses* relative to mainstream writing. And once we’ve got this jargon, we can return to written language at large and track the changing frequency of our ideological jargon. The goal is to use word frequency to measure the spread (or collapse) of the ideology in question.

In this essay, I'll use word frequency to track the spread of fascist ideology. The journey starts with a trip to 1930s Europe, where we'll encounter the works of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler (translated into English). The rantings of these two villains will serve as our corpus of fascist text. From this text, we'll extract the 'jargon' of fascism — the words that Mussolini and Hitler use frequently and *overuse* relative to mainstream English. With this jargon, we'll then track the popularity of fascist thinking in written language.

Because I'm an anglophone, I'll start with English writing. Running the numbers, I find that in English books, fascist jargon has been on the rise since the 1980s. Now this trend is admittedly alarming. But I'm going to resist the urge to focus myopically on the present. And that's because the best way to understand today's neo-fascism is by studying the deep past.

Here, then, is my key finding. Although 'fascism' was ostensibly born in the early 20th century, the linguistic data tells a different story about fascism's origin. Looking at five European languages (English, German, Italian, Spanish, and French), I find that the high point of fascist jargon came several centuries *before* Hitler and Mussolini were born. In short, what we call 'fascism' may be best treated as a repackaging and rebranding of a set of dark ideas that have longed plagued humanity. So when fascists look into the future, they're really peering into the long-dead past.

Hitler and Mussolini speak

If we want to study an ideology, the first step is to pin it down. With modern fascism, this task is surprisingly difficult, largely because the label, when self ascribed, is deeply taboo. Sure, pundits may espouse fascist ideas; but almost no one will openly brand themselves a 'fascist'. Hence, modern fascism is an ideology that denies its own existence.

Of course, fascism has not always been self-denying. In the heyday of 1930s Europe, far-right politicians wore their fascist stripes with pride. And none more so than Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. For his part, Mussolini invented the concept of 'fascism' as we now know it. (His ruling party was called the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*.) And Hitler ... well, he needs no introduction.

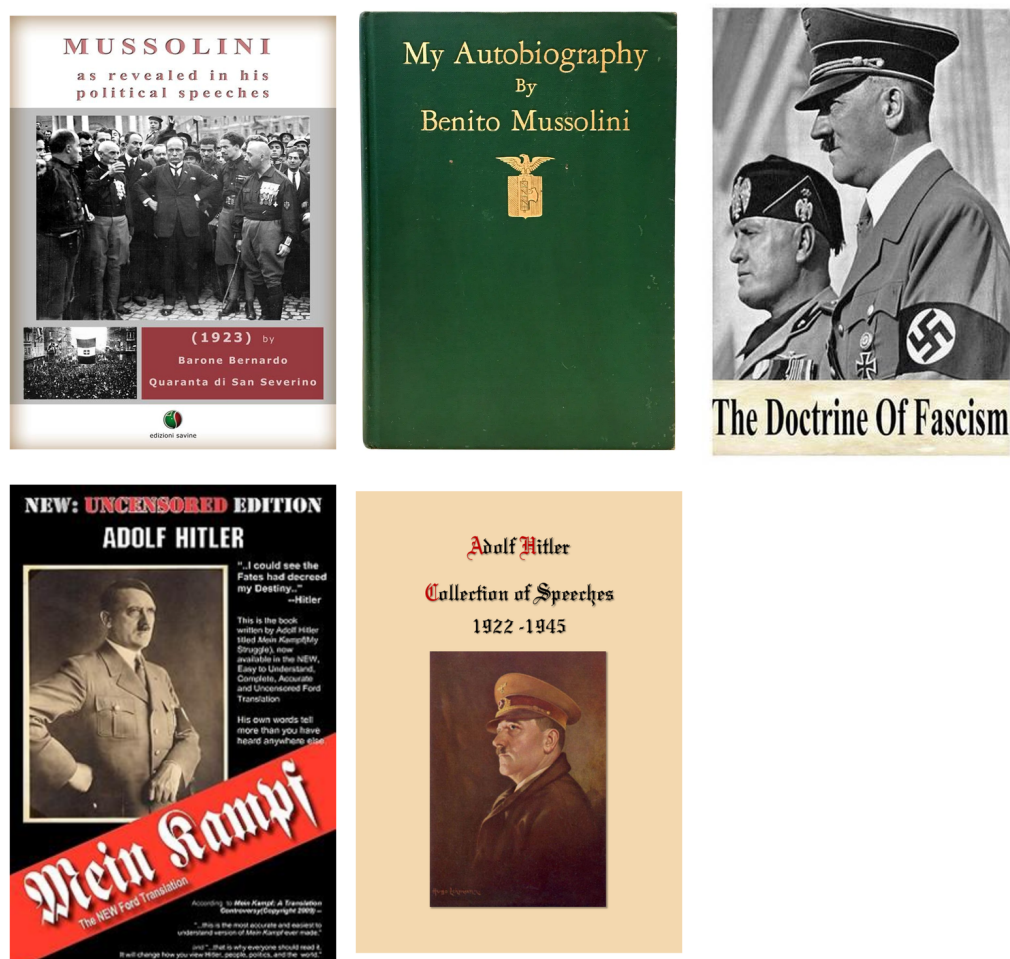


Figure 1: A corpus of fascist thought

Hitler and Mussolini left behind a large collection of fascist rantings — much of it in the form of transcribed speeches. I’ve used the texts shown here as my corpus of fascist thought.

[Sources and methods](#)

My point is that if we want to pin down the features of fascist ideology, the best place to start is with the rantings of Hitler and Mussolini. While both politicians were ostensibly men of ‘action’, they left behind a surprisingly large corpus of thought — much of it in the form of transcribed speeches.

Figure 1 illustrates my sample of Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist rantings. It includes the classics — Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini’s *My Autobiography*. It also includes Mussolini’s declaration of fascist ideology, expounded in *The Doctrine of Fascism*. And most importantly, the corpus includes a large body of each man’s oratory. The resulting sample contains 420,000 words of unambiguously fascist thought.

The jargon of fascism

After downloading the rantings of Hitler and Mussolini, I took a brief look at the content. And I have to say, I was struck by the familiarity of their words. Remove some of the more vulgar slurs, and I suspect that both men would be well-received on today's Fox News. Of course, many analysts have drawn parallels between modern far-right politics and the thinking of 1930s fascists. But the problem with such qualitative parallels is that they can be easily dismissed as 'opinion'.

My goal here is to do something that is more objective and hence, more difficult to dismiss. So instead of me reading Hitler and Mussolini, I'm going to let my computer do the job. Or more specifically, I'm going to let my computer count words. Into the computer goes Hitler and Mussolini's rantings. And out comes a table of word frequency.

Next, I'm going to place this fascist word frequency in the context of mainstream writing of the same era (as captured by the Google English corpus). The goal is to isolate the ideas that define fascist thought. For example, Mussolini and Hitler use the word 'and' quite often. But since 'and' is a common English word, its use tells us nothing about fascism. The same is not true of other words like 'extermination' and 'annihilation'. These terms are used frequently in Hitler and Mussolini's screeds. And more importantly, they are *overused* relative to mainstream English. In short, these frequent, overused words represent 'fascist jargon' — they are the ideas that define Hitler and Mussolini's politics.

Jumping to the results, from Hitler and Mussolini's rantings, I've used word frequency to identify 1000 words that can be considered 'fascist jargon'. Figure 2 shows a sample of these terms.

Looking at this cloud of fascist jargon, we see many words concerned with *violence* ('annihilation', 'bloodshed', 'conquer', 'extermination', 'fighting'). There's also a large helping of emotion-laden *judgement* ('betrayed', 'cowardice', 'enemies', 'hatred', 'humiliation', 'slander', 'treason'). And to cap things off, we find a dose of *religious* prose ('almighty', 'blessings', 'eternally', 'providence').

I highlight these themes mostly as a sanity check. An algorithm for identifying fascist jargon ought to return words that *feel* like fascism. And, well, it does.



Figure 2: A sample of Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist jargon

Pictured here are a sample of words used by Hitler and Mussolini which meet two criteria: (1) Hitler and Mussolini use these words frequently; and (2) Hitler and Mussolini *overused* these words relative to the background of mid-20th-century English, as captured by the Google Books corpus. [Sources and methods](#)

The rise of fascist thought in modern English writing

With our list of fascist jargon in hand, we’re ready to measure the currents of fascist thought in English writing. Our window will be the frequency of fascist jargon in the Google Books corpus.

Given today’s political climate, we expect that fascist thought will be on the rise. The main question is how far back the climb extends. In my mind, looking a decade or so back seems like a reasonable place to start, since that’s when the seeds of Trumpism started to emerge. Case in point, in 2010, Noam Chomsky sat down with Chris Hedges to [discuss](#) the state of US politics. At the time, Chomsky noted that the mood of the country was “frightening”, with many Americans harboring what he called “self-destructive fantasies”.

In hindsight, the delusions of 2010 seem rather quaint. So was it then that neo-fascism first took root? Turning to our linguistic data, the answer is *no*. The seeds of today’s neo-fascism were planted decades earlier, in the 1980s. Figure 3 shows the trend.

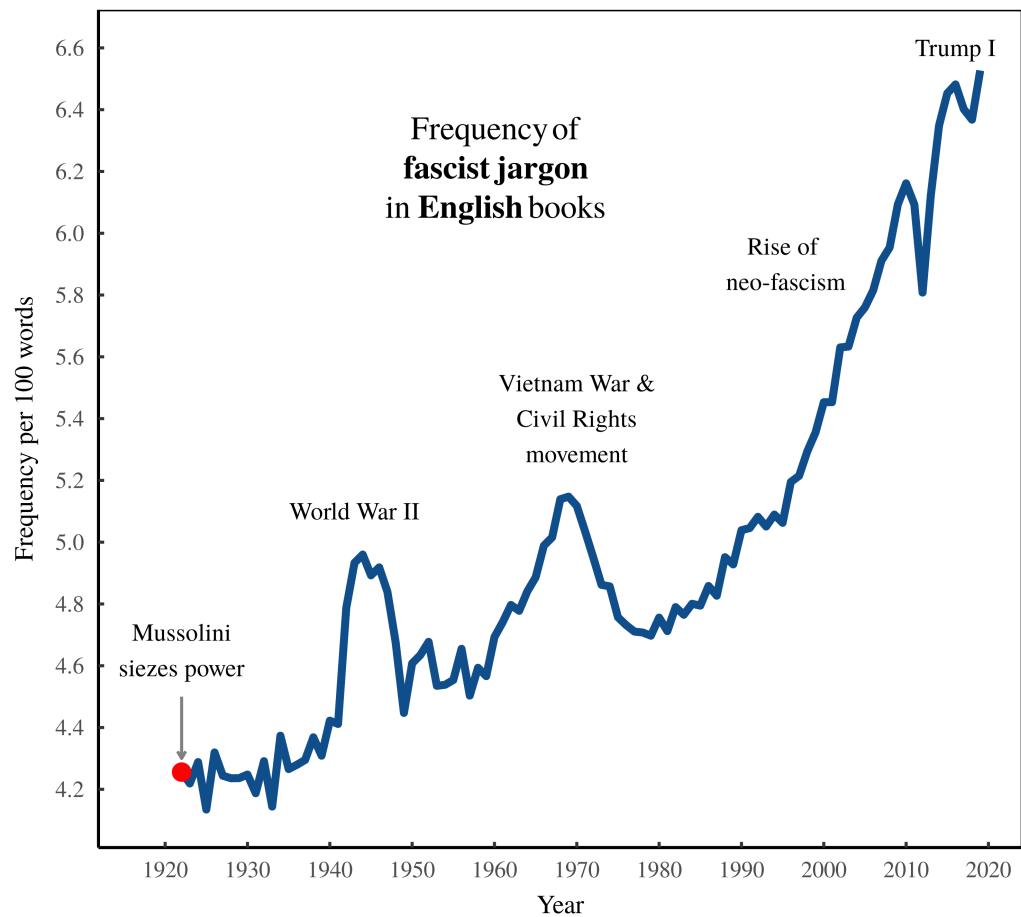


Figure 3: The rise of neo-fascism in modern English books
This chart plots the frequency of fascist jargon in English books. The rise of modern neo-fascism seems to have begun in the 1980s. [Sources and methods](#)

Backing up a bit, the story in Figure 3 begins in 1922, the year that Mussolini seized power and gave ‘fascism’ its modern meaning. Of course, in the anglophone world, there was no widespread fascist movement at the time, and so no immediate spike in fascist jargon. That would change with the onset of World War II, which saw a bump in fascist thought. Another bump came during the late 1960s, when the US was engulfed in the Vietnam War abroad and the Civil Rights movement at home.

Now, when we turn to other languages, we’ll find that periods of war typically come with a spike in fascist jargon. And that’s understandable, since a large portion of these terms refer to violence. (Violent times breed violent talk.) So what’s more informative is to see fascist jargon rise during times of peace.

On that front, the 1980s were an era of peace — a period when the Cold War was winding down and capitalism was about to reign supreme. In short, it was a moment when ‘fascism’ was bottom of mind. And yet there, in our linguistic data, the pattern is unmistakable. It was in the 1980s that the seeds of anglophone neo-fascism were planted. Why?

Well, in hindsight, the fall of the Soviet Union left capitalism alone — free to be plagued by its own excesses. What would follow was a period of free-market cravenness which made the rich richer and left the poor to fend for themselves. Unsurprisingly, amidst the humiliation of this class war, dark ideas brewed. But for years, folks in the mainstream didn’t listen. Even when Trump won the presidency, elites dismissed it as an accident — a brief departure from the norm. It was not. Trump, it seems, is riding a wide wave of fascist discontent. We ignore it at our own peril.

The deeper roots of fascist thought

I want to turn now from the myopia of the present to the expanse of long-term history. Perhaps a good place to start is with Martin Luther King Jr., who remarked that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”.¹

If King’s observation is true, it implies a darker corollary, which is that the arc of the moral *past* bends towards *injustice*. In other words, if we pick an idea that today we find sordid or tyrannical, we should discover that this idea becomes *more popular* as we look deeper into human history.

Now before we discuss whether this claim is true, we should perhaps reflect on the common roots of injustice, which I think are fairly simple. They stem from the belief in *innate inequality*. Pick any horrific act, and you will find it easier to perform if you declare the victim a lesser human. Likewise, if you view the victim as your equal, the same act feels appalling. So it is the belief

¹To be clear, Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t invent this moral-universe phrase so much as he [popularized it](#). The sentiment seems to have been created by Theodore Parker, a 19th-century Unitarian minister.

in human inequality which motivates injustice. And it is this shared belief in inequality which unifies the various forms of far-right politics. (This is Corey Robin's thesis, explored in his book *The Reactionary Mind*.)²

Back to fascism. In light of Martin Luther King's corollary, the apparent roots of fascism seem odd. Why would fascism — an ideology which is widely regarded as one of the most vile in human history — emerge in the 20th century, during a period that was otherwise marked by striking moral progress and unprecedented material prosperity?

Well, one possibility is that the conditions of post-WWI Europe were just right for the invention of a new form of moral monstrosity. But another possibility is that when Mussolini and Hitler expounded their doctrine of fascism, they were simply repackaging and rebranding dark ideas from the past.

Now we should preface this latter possibility by noting that ideological repackaging happens all the time. For example, today we say that medieval Europeans lived under a system of 'feudalism'. But this word was *coined* by historians after the fact to describe a historical social structure. As such, Europe was at its most 'feudal' long before the word 'feudalism' had any meaning.

Might the same be true of 'fascism'?

Returning to our linguistic data, the answer appears to be yes. Figure 4 shows the evidence. Here, the red dot marks the moment in 1922 when Mussolini seized power and gave 'fascism' its modern meaning. Oddly, this birth of 'fascism' came when fascist jargon was at a low point in English writing. And as we turn back the historical clock, we find a steady *rise* in fascist ideas. In fact, anglophone writing seems to have been at its most 'fascist' more than two centuries before the word 'fascism' had any meaning.

Looking ahead, the rest of this essay will explore the apparent paradox that fascist thinking was most rampant long before 'fascism' was thought to exist. I'll demonstrate first, that this pattern is robust — it is found in English, German, Italian, Spanish, and French writing. Second, I'll argue that 'fascism before fascism' is not a paradox. Instead, what we call 'fascism' is best treated as a repackaging of dark ideas that were ubiquitous in human history, but that

²If far-right politics are unified by a belief in innate inequality, a corollary is that the various sects of reactionary politics arise from concern for different dimensions of inequality. Inequality by ethnicity leads to racism. Inequality between regions leads to nationalism. Inequality between classes leads to aristocracy and slavery. Inequality between sexes leads to patriarchy. And so on.

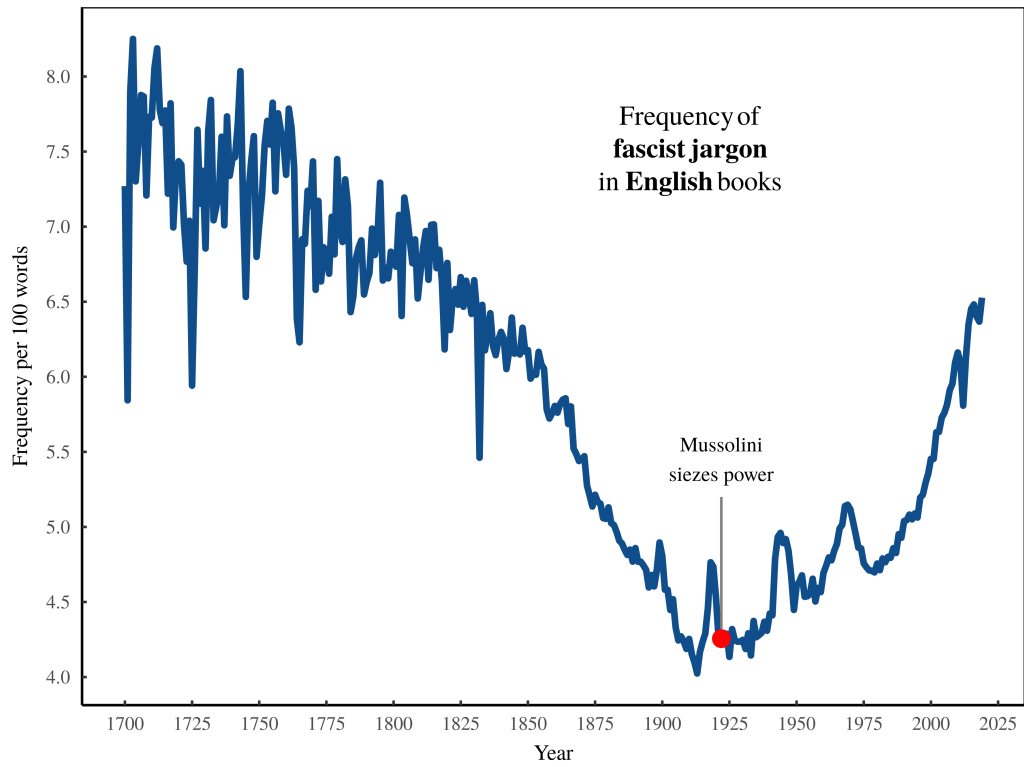


Figure 4: The deep roots of fascist thought in English writing

When we trace Mussolini and Hitler’s fascist jargon back in time, we find that ‘fascism’ seems to be overwhelmingly an ideology of the past. The frequency of fascist jargon was highest in 18th-century English writing and then declined continuously until the early 20th century. [Sources and methods](#)

were steadily killed off by the spread of the Enlightenment. Or put another way, rising neo-fascism is shocking precisely because many of us thought these dark ideas were extinct.

Fascist thought in German writing

It’s at this point that a monoglot like me realizes that the world does not begin and end with the English language. As such, let’s turn to the story told by other linguistic traditions.

When it comes to understanding fascism, German writing seems like a good place to start. Indeed, Hitler and his band of Nazi thugs were *the* villains of the 20th century — they’re the people most deeply associated with evil,

and the group that is inevitably evoked by the word ‘fascist’. That said, the linguistic evidence suggests that the historical trauma of Nazi rule is probably much larger than the Nazi’s ideological impact on German society.

I’ll get to this evidence in a moment. But first, let’s reflect on how a group can wield power that far surpasses its ideological support. The answer, of course, is with *violence*. If I hold a gun to your head, you will do anything I say (regardless of whether you want to). Likewise, a well-armed militia can wield immense power over an otherwise hostile population. Violence, then, is a key form of power. But it is not the only form, nor is it even the most potent.

When it comes to wielding power, *ideas* are far more durable than violence. Whereas violence rests on fear (which vanishes the moment weapons change hands), ideas breed enduring consent and lasting obedience. It’s for this reason that all rulers use ideology to make their power seem ‘legitimate’. But here is the catch: rulers do not control the ideology to which they appeal.

For example, Donald Trump would surely love to declare himself a divine king. But if he did, most Americans would think he was insane. And that’s because the [doctrine of divine right](#) is today a fringe ideology believed by almost no one. But long ago, the opposite was true. When Europe was in the throws of medieval tyranny, religion dominated everyone’s worldview. And so when kings declared their divine right to rule, it was not a farce. It was an apparent statement of truth. Such is the power of ideology.

Back to Hitler. By declaring himself the supreme leader of the German population — a man whose every word was law, and who was himself above the law — Hitler was essentially evoking (by a different name) the divine right of kings. And yet he was doing it at a time when the belief in medieval theocracy had long been dying. As such, Hitler must have accomplished one of two things. Either he hoodwinked a large number of Germans into believing medieval mythology; or he ruled by convincing a relatively small band of followers to reign terror on the German population.

Turning to German writing, it seems that the latter scenario is best supported by the linguistic evidence. [Figure 5](#) makes the case. What I’ve done here is take my sample of English fascist jargon and translated the individual words into German. Then I’ve tracked the frequency of these words over four centuries of German publishing. The results are unambiguous. In German books,

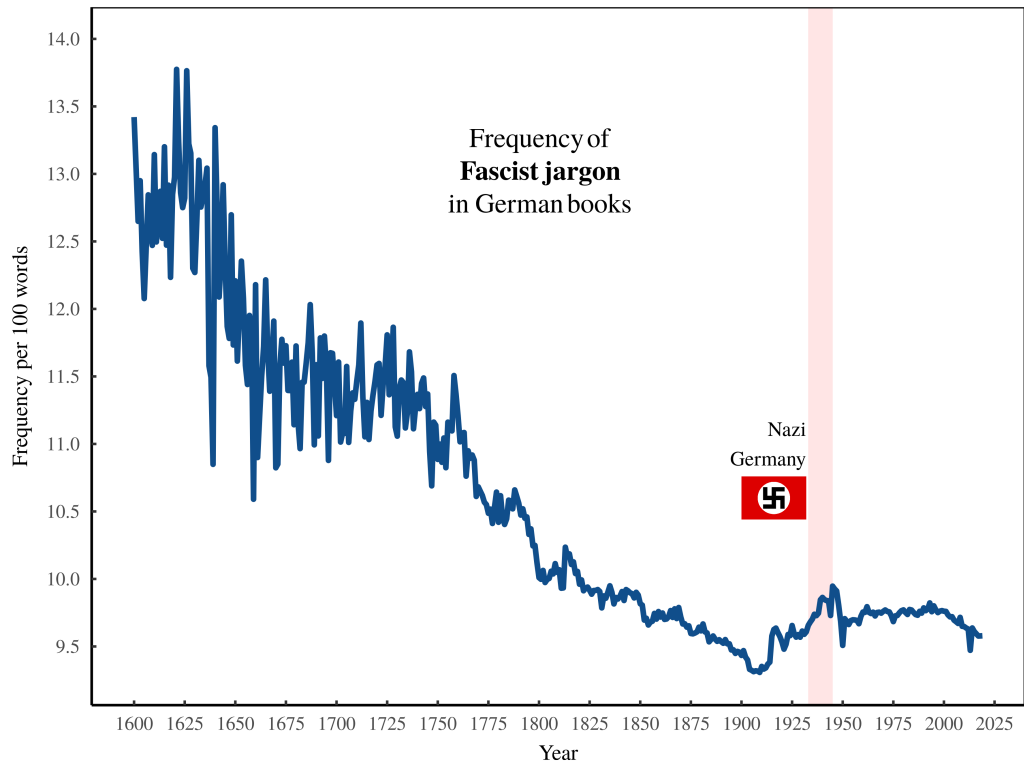


Figure 5: The frequency of fascist jargon in German books

When we measure the frequency of fascist jargon in German books, we find that it was most prominent in the 1600s, and declined continuously until the 20th century. In this long-term context, the slight uptick of fascist sentiment during the Nazi era reads like a historical footnote. [Sources and methods](#)

the high point of fascist thought came in the 1600s, three centuries before Hitler seized power. Rather than revolutionize German ideology, the linguistic evidence suggests that Hitler’s fascist reign was a forgettable footnote.

Now obviously, Hitler’s apparent lack of ideological influence seems at odds with the devastation he induced. But in hindsight, this contradiction may be an artifact of how history is typically written.³

³It’s worth noting that Hitler’s apparent lack of ideological influence could be an artifact of the Google Books data. For example, Google might have excluded a bunch of Nazi literature from its corpus.

It’s also worth noting that the Google books data gives equal weight to all books. In other words, when counting word frequency, Google doesn’t account for a book’s sales. Now for his part, Hitler published only one book (*Mein Kampf*), but it was admittedly quite popular. So if Google accounted for book sales, we might see a larger spike in fascist rhetoric during Hitler’s rule.

For the most part, historians study *actions*, obviously because events are what get written down. To the extent that ideas are the topic of study, historians focus mostly on the thoughts attributed to important people. Thus, we know which battles Hitler won. And we probably know what Hitler thought about these battles. But when it comes to statistical statements about the thoughts of the average German soldier, historians are mostly mute. As such, standard history probably overstates the importance of great men and understates the importance of large-scale ideological currents.

Outside of the linguistic evidence, there are several signs that Hitler's brand of fascism was fairly unpopular. An obvious tell was that his regime was almost comically violent. If fascism was so popular, why did Hitler need secret police? Why did he need to execute political opponents? Why did he need to burn antithetical books? Why did he need to outlaw opposition parties? Why did he need to imprison large swaths of the population? The answer is that these displays of force are a sign that Hitler's ideas were never dominant, and that he ruled mostly through terror.

That said, there is one place where Hitler probably did wield supreme ideological power: *within the Nazi party*. Commenting on Hitler's leadership style, Hannah Arendt [observes](#) that he was a master of what we would today call 'human resources'. It was a trait that Hitler shared with Joseph Stalin. In the early stages of their careers, Arendt argues that both men devoted themselves "almost entirely to questions of personnel". After repeated purges, the result was a rigid party hierarchy in which "hardly any man of importance remained who did not owe his position to [Hitler or Stalin]."

This ability to hold sway over a tight group of armed men is likely a trait shared by all conquerors. And that's probably why these men have such an outsized effect on world history. When wielded effectively, the military cudgel is a terrifying force. That said, the real test of military power comes when the battle is over and the task of long-term governance rears its head. It's here that conquerors reveal their ideological weakness.

And that brings me to the second major sign that German fascism was unpopular. Once Hitler was deposed, Germany reverted effortlessly to liberal democracy (although not in Soviet occupied areas). Sure, the Allies [prose-](#)

That said, there's good reason to *not* account for book sales when measuring the spread of an ideology. That's because in intellectual terms, reading is cheap and prone to fads, while writing is expensive and reveals more durable thoughts. So if we want a window into ingrained ideology, the best option is to sample book publications and ignore books sales.

cuted a few dozen high-ranking Nazis. But if fascism had been the dominant German ideology, suppressing it would likely have required mass incarceration (ironically of the kind used by the Nazis themselves).⁴

If Nazism had been truly widespread, post-war history would have looked remarkably different. Instead of implementing the [Marshall Plan](#) to rebuild Europe, the Allies would have been busy fighting a counter-insurgency, much like the US faced in Afghanistan. And any hint of troop withdrawal would have caused the Allied puppet regime to collapse, also like in Afghanistan. Indeed, modern Afghanistan is the poster child for true ideological dominance (of the Islamic variety). It's a place where foreign powers can win military battles, but cannot make the population amenable to Western rule.

Since post-war Germany had none of these features, it suggests that most Germans were happy to see fascism vanquished. Viewed in this light, together with the linguistic evidence, perhaps the best way to characterize Hitler's reign is that he was an occupier of a foreign land. For a fleeting moment, he managed to impose a 17th-century ideology on a 20th-century population.

Fascist thought in Italian writing

Let's turn now to the currents of fascist thought in Italian books. To start, we should acknowledge that the term 'fascism' [comes from Italy](#). In the late 19th century, the word 'fasci' was used to describe male groups in Sicilian politics. Two decades later, Benito Mussolini adopted the term 'fascismo' to characterize his budding far-right movement. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, Italian fascism is remembered largely as the embarrassing second fiddle to the Nazi war machine. After Mussolini joined Hitler's war in 1940, the Italian front soon devolved into [civil war](#). By 1943, Mussolini had been

⁴It's worth remembering that the Nazi party sat on the fringes of German politics until shortly before it seized power. For example, in the [election of 1928](#), the Nazis received less than 3% of the popular vote. It was only after the world plunged into the Great Depression and the German government went through a series of crises that Hitler managed to seize power. And even then, in the [last free election in 1933](#), the Nazis received only 44% of the popular vote. Of course, once in power, Hitler cemented his grip by maintaining a perpetual state of crisis, which culminated in world war. And war, in turn, has a well-known rallying effect that unites people around even the most unpopular leader. In short, had the circumstances been slightly different, Hitler might have remained a fringe ideologue unknown to history.

deposed and installed as a Nazi puppet in Northern Italy. Mussolini's demise came in April 1945 when he was captured by communist partisans and summarily executed.

Although inept at waging war, the Italian fascists were not entirely inferior to their Nazi counterparts. Unlike the Nazis, who were proudly anti-intellectual, the Italian fascists were quite concerned with the ideological foundations of their movement. As such, one wonders if Italian fascism might have outlasted Nazism had Mussolini avoided Hitler's war.

At any rate, it's instructive to see how the Italian fascists described their ideology. To some extent, the fascist party was forward looking. For example, in *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini declared that the coming period would be a "century of authority, a century tending to the 'right'". However, Mussolini's (unattributed) collaborator — the philosopher [Giovanni Gentile](#) — had elsewhere been more backward looking. In his 1925 essay *The Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*, Gentile described fascism as a "recent yet ancient movement of the Italian spirit".

By evoking the deep past, Gentile aptly captured the nature of fascist thought. Although Italian fascism was ostensibly a 20th century movement, its rhetoric was most popular long before Mussolini was born. [Figure 6](#) paints the picture. What I've done here is take Hitler and Mussolini's English fascist jargon and translated the individual words into Italian. Then I've tracked the frequency of these words in Italian books. The results reiterate the backward nature of fascist thought. Ironically, if Mussolini was seeking a 'fascist century', he should have looked not to the future, but to the long-gone past.

As in German writing (in which Hitler's influence was remarkably muted), Italian writing shows only a slight uptick in fascist jargon during Mussolini's reign. The message is that despite the devastation imposed by European fascists, it seems that their ideology was never particularly popular. Or as Steven Pinker [puts it](#), "the totalitarian governments of the 20th century did not emerge from democratic welfare states sliding down a slippery slope, but were imposed by fanatical ideologues and gangs of thugs."

Now to the present. Worryingly, the linguistic evidence suggests that fascist thought is more popular today than during Mussolini's time. And yet there has been no sign of fascist revolution. Although we shouldn't be smug, we can plausibly conclude that the success of 1930s fascism had more to do with post-WWI circumstances than with the dominance of fascist ideas.

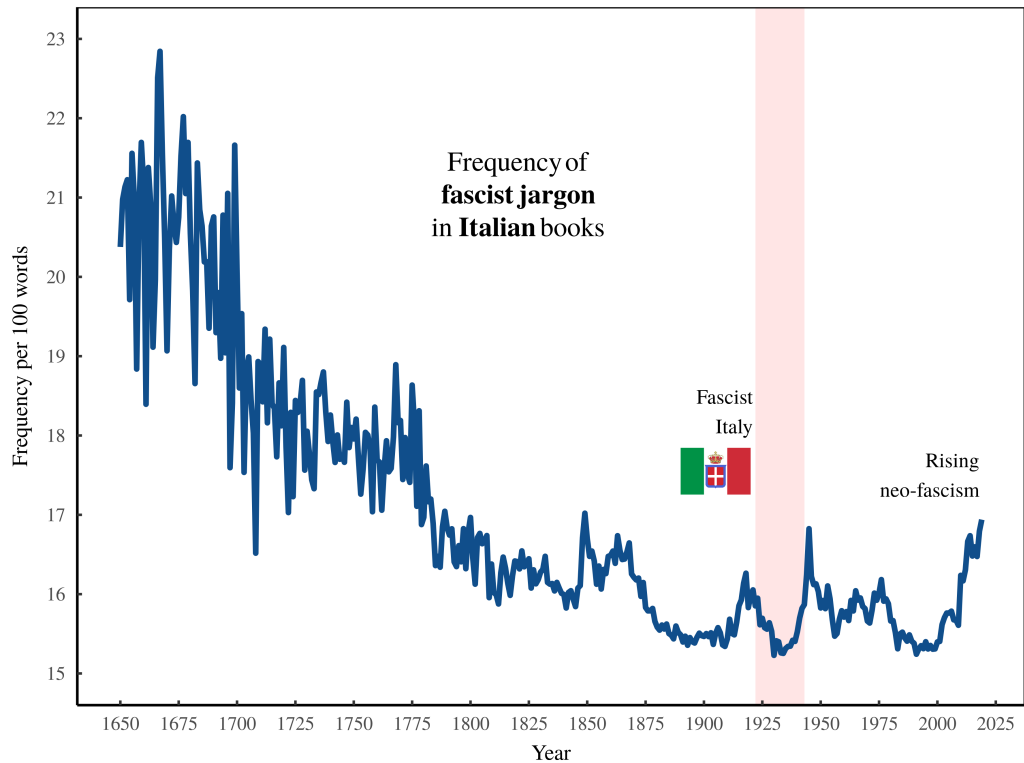


Figure 6: The frequency of fascist jargon in Italian books

When we trace the frequency of fascist jargon in Italian books, we find that it was at a high point in the 17th century, and declined continuously thereafter until the early 20th century. Amidst this long-term decline, the slight uptick of fascist jargon during Mussolini’s rule feels less like a revolution and more like a hiccup historical. [Sources and methods](#)

Fascist thought in Spanish writing

Let’s turn now to the Spanish-speaking world, where we meet a constellation of would-be fascist despots.

The most famous is probably the Spanish dictator [Francisco Franco](#), who was a contemporary of Hitler and Mussolini. After seizing power in 1936, Franco initially ruled Spain as a hard-line fascist. However, his approach softened over time. Unlike his hot-headed compatriots in Germany and Italy, Franco stayed neutral in World War II, a fact that allowed him to rule long after Hitler and Mussolini were dead. In the end, Franco’s brand of fascism wasn’t killed in battle; it simply faded into irrelevance. When Franco died in 1975, Spain transitioned to liberal democracy with little fanfare.

Elsewhere in the Hispanic world, other far-right dictators were flexing their muscles. In Chile, [Augusto Pinochet](#) seized power in 1973 and ruled until 1990. In Argentina, [Jorge Rafael Videla](#) ruled from 1976 to 1981. In Guatemala, [Efraín Ríos Montt](#) ruled from 1982 to 1983. And in Panama, [Manuel Noriega](#) ruled from 1983 to 1989.

In short, the Spanish-speaking world has had no shortage of far-right tyrants. And yet, when we turn to the linguistic data, we find no evidence that these rulers had any lasting influence over the popularity of fascist thought. Figure 7 tells the story.

When we translate Hitler and Mussolini's fascist jargon into Spanish, we find that these words were most common in the 17th century. And from the mid 18th century onward, fascist jargon began a continuous decline. So in Spanish writing, the lesson is the same as in German and Italian. To the extent that 20th century fascists gained power, it was likely because of their command over military forces rather than their ideological dominance.

Looking at the Spanish linguistic trends, perhaps the most instructive lesson comes from the distant past. In German and Italian writing, fascist jargon started to drop in the 1600s. But in Spanish writing, fascist jargon remained stubbornly high until the 1750s. Why?

I think there's an obvious culprit. But to see it, we should back up a bit. To understand the long-term decline of fascist thought, we need to think about the ideas that *oppose* fascism. As commonly framed, fascism represents the far right of the political spectrum. So it makes sense to cast fascism's opponent as the far left. But the problem with this framing (which some leftists would prefer to ignore) is that historically, the far left has had its share of ghoulish dictators. For example, communists like Stalin and Mao arguably [killed more people](#) (largely through policy-induced famine) than either Hitler or Mussolini. Given this left-right convergence of tyranny, perhaps we should rethink the political spectrum on which fascism sits.

A better starting point, I believe, is to look at ideas that today are so dominant that they are viewed as 'apolitical'. Take something as simple as how we define 'the truth'. In the modern world, we discern the truth by appealing to *reason* and *evidence*. And until recently, this thinking was so dominant that to many people, it seemed like there was no alternative. But of course, there *is* an alternative — one which has plagued humanity for much of our history. Until several centuries ago, most humans defined truth in terms of

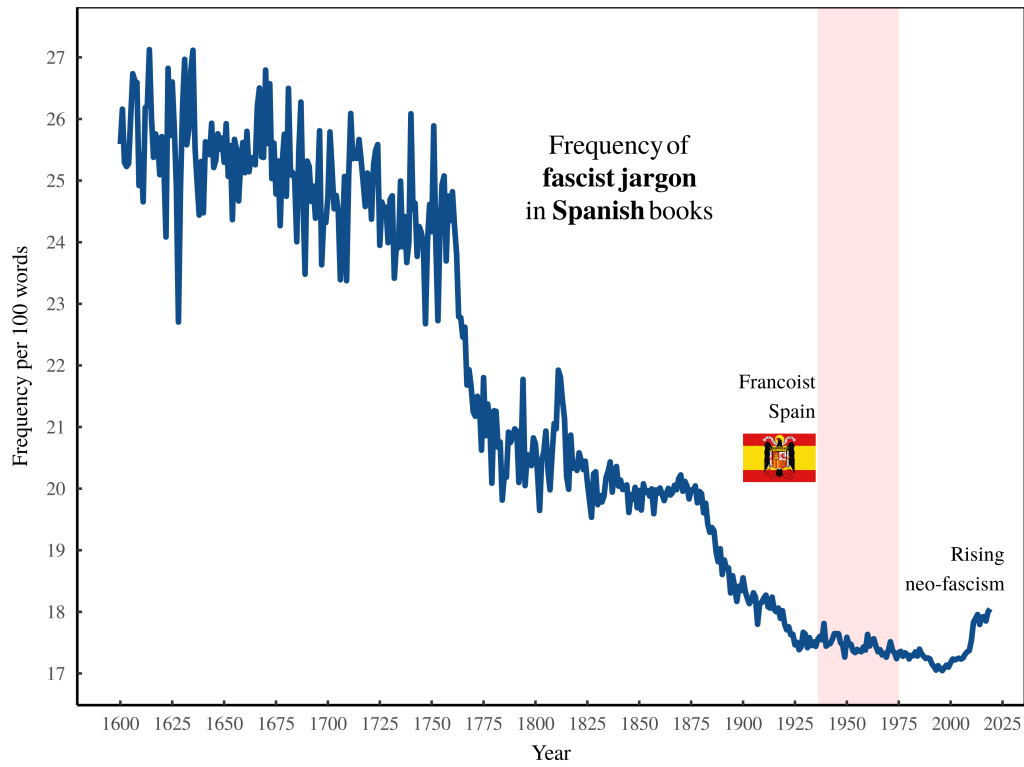


Figure 7: The frequency of fascist jargon in Spanish books

As in English, German and Italian writing, the frequency of fascist jargon in Spanish books was at a high point in the 17th century, and declined thereafter. But unlike in German and Italian, Spanish writing bears no hint of the fascist regimes of the 20th century. There is, however, intriguing evidence that the decline of fascist thought came later to Spain than in other areas of Western Europe, perhaps because of the lasting grip of the Spanish Inquisition.

[Sources and methods](#)

blind faith in scripture and the belief in authoritarian decree. What god (and his earthly spokesmen) said was true. And it was true because god said it. End of story.⁵

It’s against this theocratic backdrop that we should understand the historical decline in fascist rhetoric. Think of ‘fascism’ as a slightly secularized repackaging of medieval theocracy. Its opposite, then, is not communism or

⁵Commenting on the sociological role of evidence-driven truth, Bertrand Russel [argues](#) that it’s an antidote to the intoxicant of power:

The concept of “truth” as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness — the intoxication of power ...

socialism. No, the opposite of fascist thought is the ideology of the *Enlightenment* — the belief that reason and evidence should be applied to all areas of human behavior.

It's this belief in reason and evidence that neo-fascists like Donald Trump have successfully hijacked. When Trump burst on the scene, the dominant norm was that political debate should play out at the level of facts and reasoned arguments. So if a politician had a ghoulish policy, the expectation was that they'd at least try to find evidence for why the policy was good. Accustomed to this norm, the mainstream media found it impossible to admit that Trump had a different playbook — one which consisted entirely of lies and appeals to authority. A decade ago, we called this approach 'post-truth politics'. Today, it looks increasingly like 'fascism'. And if these ideas were to become entrenched, they'd likely transform into old-fashioned 'theocracy'.⁶

And that brings me back to Spanish writing. Although most of medieval Europe lived under the throws of theocracy, in Spain the regime was particularly severe. Starting in 1478, Spanish authorities embarked on a centuries-long campaign to suppress and punish 'heretical' thought. Because of this *inquisition*, the ideas of the Enlightenment came to Spain belatedly. Whereas Enlightenment philosophy began flourishing elsewhere in the mid 1600s, it didn't come to Spain until the mid 1700s. In short, my guess is that we can blame the Spanish Inquisition for delaying the Spanish arrival of Enlightenment ideals, and hence, prolonging the dominance of fascist thought in Spanish writing.

Fascist thought in French writing

Turning to the frequency of fascist jargon in French writing, we find a story that's now familiar. The arc of French history is one of long-term decline in fascist thought. Figure 8 paints the picture.

In many ways, the francophone story of fascism mirrors what we found in English. From 1700 to 1900, fascist thought declined continuously. In the 20th century, fascist jargon jumped during both world wars, as well as during the unrest of the late 1960s. And from 1980 onward, we see a rising tide of

⁶Science fiction often imagines a future in which technological progress continues, but governance degrades into grinding fascism. In my view, this vision is incoherent, since continued technological progress rests on the foundations of science and reason. If these foundations decay, technology will slowly turn into dust. Hence, over the long term, entrenched fascism will come with technological collapse.

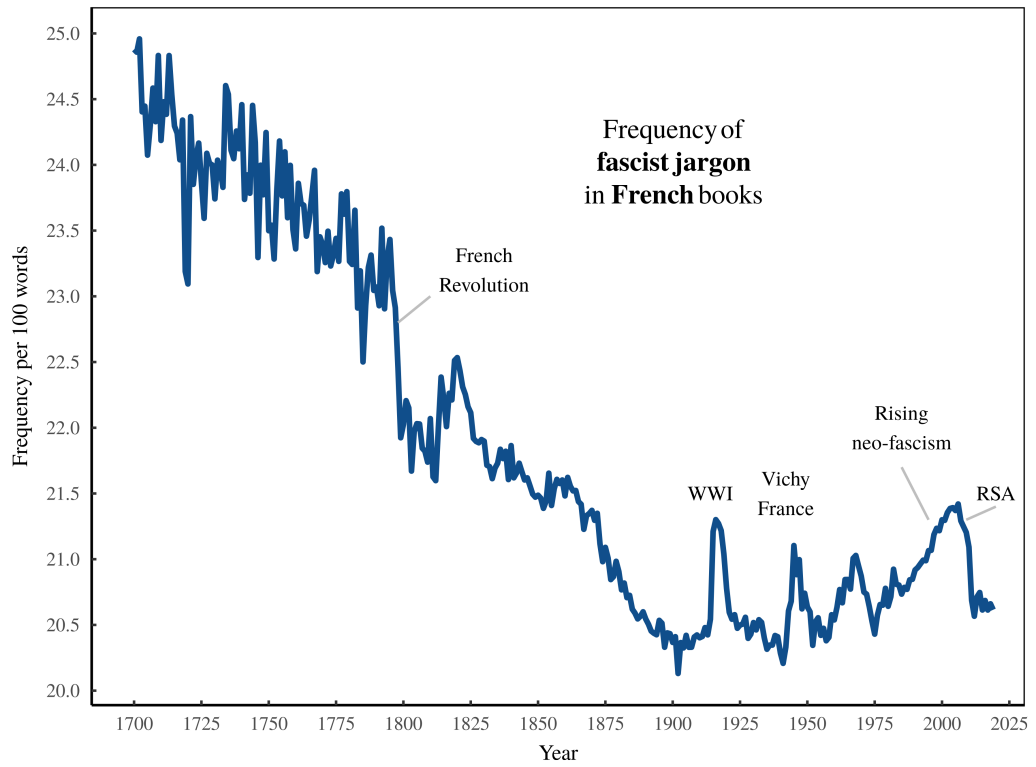


Figure 8: The frequency of fascist jargon in French books

French fascist jargon declined continuously throughout the 18th and 19th century, with a particularly large drop towards the end of the French Revolution. Like in English writing, French neo-fascist ideas rose after 1980. But unlike in the anglophone world, French neo-fascism peaked in 2008 and then collapsed. The timing of this decline coincides with the introduction of the RSA, a form of universal minimum income. [Sources and methods](#)

neo-fascism. But that’s where the similarities end. Unlike in the anglophone world (where neo-fascism kept rising), French neo-fascism peaked in 2008, and then declined. Why?

Before I attempt to answer this question, I’ll pause for a brief philosophical aside. As I see it, there are two broad ways to think about ideology. The first approach is to treat ideology as a kind of platonic form — a set of beliefs that exist independently from the material world. And the second approach is to treat ideology as an outcome of material reality.

Now in a strict scientific sense, the latter claim is the sole truth. Whether written in a book, stored in a hard drive, or imagined by a brain, all ideas have material origins. That said, the strict material view tells us almost nothing

about the birth of ideas, largely because consciousness is not understood.⁷ So in that sense, it's a useful metaphor to treat ideas as immaterial forms that are plucked from the aether, seemingly at random.

However, as we zoom out to larger patterns of thought, it becomes clear that our ideologies are intertwined with our material lives. For example, scientific breakthroughs rely on advances in technology, which in turn, come from the fruits of previous scientific inquiry. It is this feedback loop that is responsible for modern material wealth.

Now for scientists, the thrill of rational, evidence-driven thinking is its own reward. But for most other people, the scientific worldview is *instrumental* — it's useful only to the extent that it improves their lives. So if people's lives get worse, they look elsewhere for their ideology. It's here, as I see it, that neo-fascism enters the picture.

Starting in the 1980s, a large portion of anglophone speakers saw their lives get worse. Now the reasons for this wrong turn are not mysterious. For the last four decades, anglophone countries have succumbed to a sort of free-market hysteria which saw social safety nets dismantled and corporate cravenness encouraged. Predictably, this experiment made the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

For their part, heterodox political economists have understood this distributional picture, and advocated a rational, evidence-driven solution. To make people's lives better, reverse the experiment with rampant inequality. Unfortunately, this enlightened approach remains confined largely to the halls of academia. In the mainstream, darker ideas have flourished.

From our linguistic data, we know that this darkness is an old disease. And that makes sense. If you're going to abandon a rational, evidence-driven worldview, there's only one place to look: *the past*. There, you'll find a world dominated by righteous dogma and triumphant superstitions — a place where ignorance serves as a sedative from the insults of daily life.

Now here's the question: once people succumb to backwards-looking dogma, how do we get them out? Well, we can try appealing to high-minded thought. But a better approach, in my mind, is to simply *demonstrate* the usefulness of rational thinking. Prove to cynics that entrenched social problems can be solved through deliberate democratic policies.

⁷For example, what brain patterns caused Newton to invent calculus? What biochemistry led Darwin to his theory of natural selection? The answer is that we have no idea.

It's here that the French example is informative.

When the 2008 financial crisis hit, France parted ways with its anglophone neighbors. Instead of doubling down on neoliberal policies, the French government embarked on a series of reforms. In 2008, France [altered](#) its constitution, largely in ways that limited presidential power. (Americans, take note.) In 2009, the government introduced and later passed a series of new [financial regulations](#). And perhaps most importantly, 2009 saw the French government create the [Revenu de Solidarité Active](#) (RSA) — a form of universal minimum income.⁸

Interestingly, it was around this time that fascist jargon started to decline in French books. I doubt it's a coincidence. When you remove the humiliation of newfound poverty, you remove the breeding grounds for backwards ideas. And I should mention that this sort of fascist-fighting policy is dirt cheap. For example, in 2024, about 1.8 million French households [received the RSA](#), at a cost of less than 0.5% of French GDP.⁹

Even cheaper (*free* for the government, in fact) is the policy of maintaining a dignified minimum wage. Indeed, this is the sort of big-tent progressive policy that has widespread support across the political spectrum. It is the sort of policy that is so obviously good that the *failure* to implement it breeds cynicism and the search for darker ideas. And it is exactly the sort of policy that France has maintained and the US has abandoned.

Figure 9 paints the picture. In France, the minimum wage has kept pace with rising income per capita, ensuring that low wage workers maintain their dignity. But in the US, the federal minimum wage has declined into oblivion, signalling to the working poor that they're no longer part of the American project of shared prosperity.

The inability to maintain a dignified minimum wage is the sort of failure of rational policy making that breeds dark feelings of humiliation and resentment. Noam Chomsky [gave voice](#) to these feelings in 2010, when he summarized the bewildered callers on American talk radio:

⁸The RSA works as follows. If a French citizen's income falls below that of the annual minimum wage, they are entitled to income from the RSA. And thereafter, the less the citizen earns, the more RSA money they receive, up to a predefined maximum.

⁹In 2024, the RSA cost 11.7 billion Euros. In that year, French GDP was about 2.9 trillion Euros, according to data from [FRED](#).

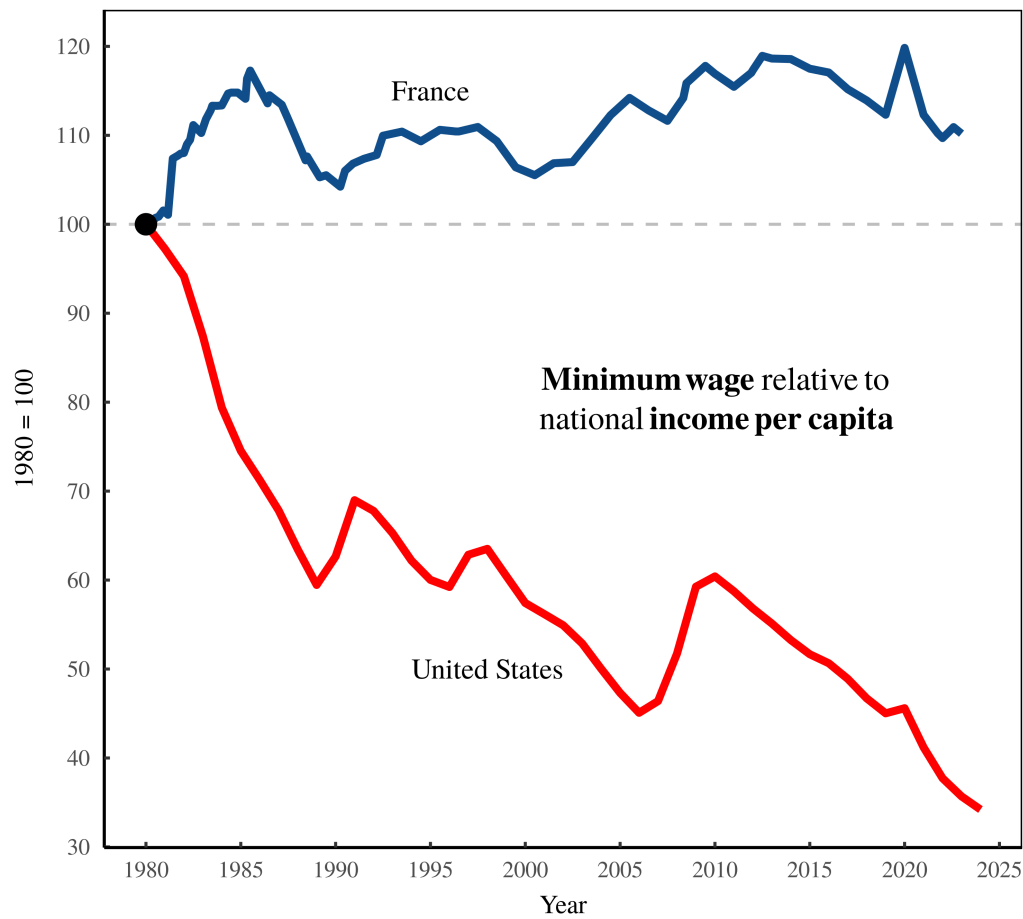


Figure 9: The relative value of the minimum wage in the US and France
Looking at France and the United States, this chart compares the minimum wage to each country's average income (GDP per capita). Values are indexed to 100 in 1980. In France, the minimum wage has kept up with rising income, while in the US, it has slid into oblivion.
[Sources and methods](#)

What is happening to me? I have done all the right things. I am a God-fearing Christian. I work hard for my family. I have a gun. I believe in the values of the country and my life is collapsing.

The obvious solution to this angst is to *solve people's problems*. And of course, that is exactly what strongmen like Donald Trump promise to do. But it's *also* what progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders promise. It just happens that one of these men is selling snake oil, while the other is promoting rational, evidence-driven policy.

Can we blame the public for not knowing which is which? Maybe. But as the French example illustrates, it seems to be *action*, not rhetoric, that ultimately matters. So until anglophone politicians manage to get some progressive policy wins, the fascist blast from the past may continue to surge.

Dis-enlightenment now

Gazing at the totality of our linguistic evidence, one thing seems clear: fascism is overwhelmingly an ideology of the past. It is a modern label for a collection of dark ideas that have long plagued humanity.

Now to my knowledge, this linguistic evidence is genuinely new. However, many observers have noticed the backwards-looking nature of far-right politics. For example, here is David Rothkopf [commenting](#) on the Trump regime's archaic vision:

... the direction they want to go is somewhere between the pre-Revolutionary America of the 1750s and the pre-Civil War America of the 1850s. Let the white men rule. Let the aristocrats rule. Let's have a king. Let's forget science and the enlightenment ever happened.

And here is Bertrand Russel [summarizing](#), in 1946, the views of proto-fascist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche:

Nietzsche's doctrine might be stated more simply and honestly in the one sentence: "I wish I had lived in the Athens of Pericles or the Florence of the Medici."

Thinking about this rear vision, the truth is that until recently, human civilization was a sordid affair, marked by widespread tyranny and entrenched religious dogma. So it's unsurprising that dark ideologies tend to be backwards looking, and that backwards-looking ideologies tend to be rather dark. But what's puzzling is why modern anglophones — some of the wealthiest humans to ever walk the Earth — should find archaic dogmas appealing.

I think the answer has to be that for many people, ideology is an instrument, not a goal. People believe in the ideals of humanism and the Enlightenment to the extent that this ideology delivers real benefits. And for several centuries, it *did* deliver the goods, obviously because rationality and evidence are a great

way to solve problems.¹⁰ But lately, many anglophones have been losing faith in science, reason, and evidence, turning instead to darker ideas from the past.

For their part, scientists have noticed. For example, in 2018, linguist Steven Pinker felt compelled to devote a [whole book](#) to defending the ideals of the Enlightenment. It's an enjoyable tome, filled with erudite philosophy and a plethora of evidence. But it's also fundamentally condescending — a prime example of elite deafness. Pinker bends over backwards to demonstrate that today, life is good — that people have no reason to be angry. But wouldn't the enlightened approach be to assume that folks *do* have a reason for turning to dark ideas ... that for many people, life is *not* good?

Here, Pinker's dismissal of inequality is an ironic example of dis-enlightenment among anglophone elites. Only in the lofty seclusion of the ivory tower could you pretend that the unfolding descent into oligarchy is unrelated to the rising tide of fascist rage. To say that nothing is wrong borders on satire. Neo-fascism is here, it is real, and it is terrifying. In other words, something has gone horribly wrong in anglophone society. Perhaps we should admit that so we can start looking for solutions.

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¹⁰The scientist in me is tempted to say that rationality and evidence are the *only* way to solve problems, but that's actually not true. When guided by cultural evolution, faith and superstition can blindly solve problems ... if given enough time and sufficient variation/competition between groups. By virtue of their death, the worst superstitions will be weeded out, leaving behind those that are less bad. But obviously, this brute-force evolutionary approach is slow, and of no consolation to the groups that select the 'wrong' ideology.

Foreign influence?

Looking at the post-1980 explosion of fascist jargon in English writing, one response might be to blame foreigners for the problem. After all, English is now the de facto global language. So maybe the corpus of English writing is being flooded with books written by fascist outsiders?

Unfortunately, there's no evidence that the rise of neo-fascism is being driven by 'foreign thought'. We can see this fact by turning to Google's narrower samples of 'American' and 'British' English, which are presumably restricted to books published in each respective country. Both datasets show essentially the same U-shaped pattern; the frequency of fascist jargon falls until 1900, and rises after 1980. See Figures [10](#) and [11](#).

There are, however, some important differences between the two linguistic samples — differences which make historical sense. In British English, fascist jargon had a more pronounced spike during World War II, surely because Britain was under direct German fire, and its very existence at risk. Conversely, the US saw an uptick in fascist jargon during late 1960s, surely due to the Vietnam War and conflict over civil rights. But in Britain (which did not participate in the Vietnam War, and had no civil rights movement), there was no similar uptick.

In short, while fascists love a good scapegoat, there's no scapegoating anglo-phone fascism. It appears to be entirely homegrown.

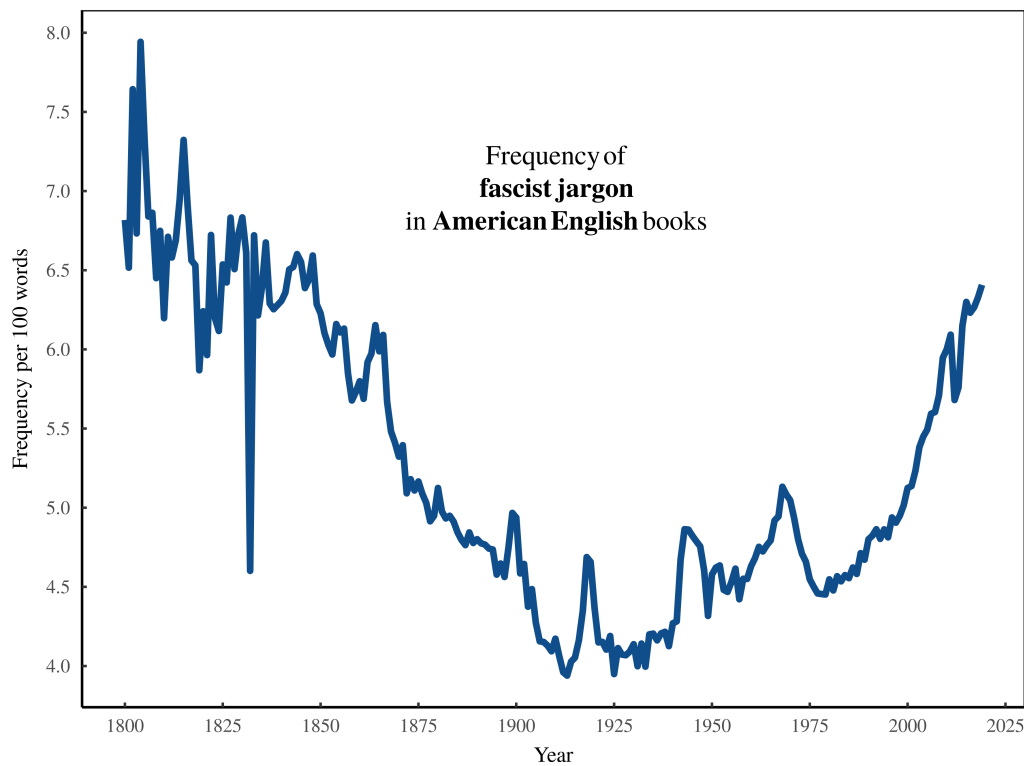


Figure 10: The frequency of fascist jargon in American English books
This chart tracks the frequency of Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist jargon in Google’s corpus of American English. [Sources and methods](#)

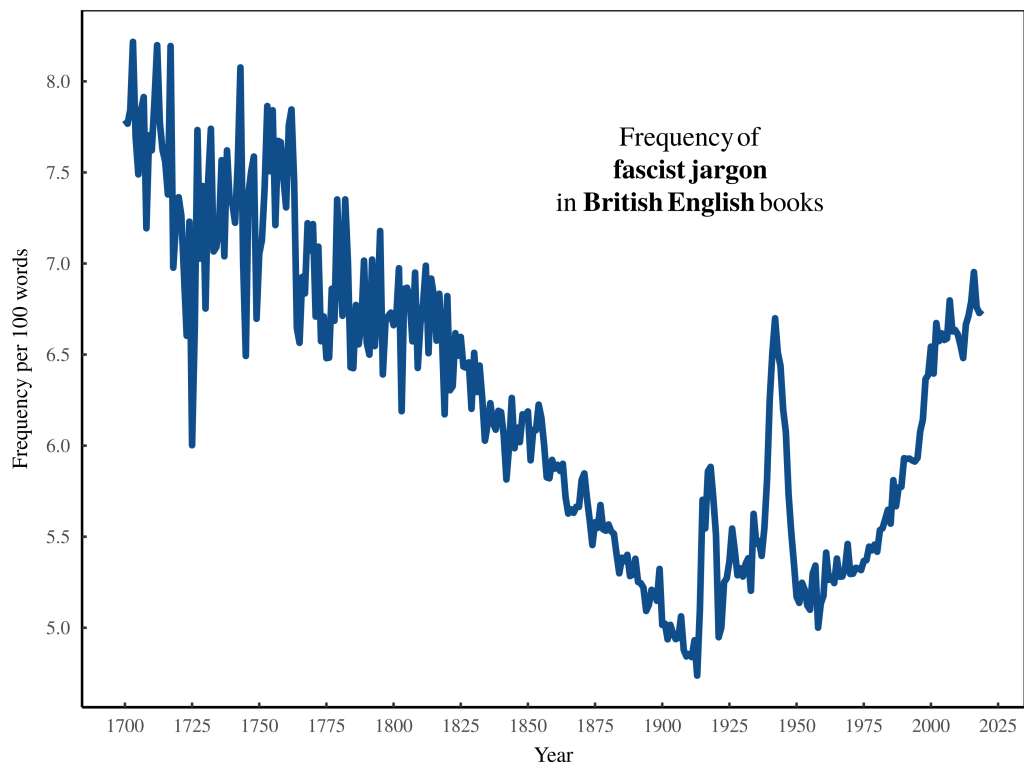


Figure 11: The frequency of fascist jargon in British English books
This chart tracks the frequency of Hitler and Mussolini’s fascist jargon in Google’s corpus of British English. [Sources and methods](#)

Sources and methods

The fascist corpus

My corpus of fascist thought is composed of the following texts recording the rantings of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini:

- Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Ford Translation)
- [Adolf Hitler Collection Of Speeches 1922-1945](#)
- [Mussolini as revealed in his political speeches, November 1914 – August 1923](#) (I use speeches from June 1921 onward, the period when Mussolini billed himself as a fascist.)
- [Mussolini's My Autobiography](#)
- Mussolini's 'The Doctrine of fascism' (historians attributed much of the essay to Giovanni Gentile)

Note: in all texts, I remove frontmatter and backmatter to isolate the words of Hitler and Mussolini.

The Google Books corpus

Data for linguistic word frequency comes from the [Google Books 2020 ngram corpus](#). Bulk data is available here:

- [English 1-grams](#)
- [French 1-grams](#)
- [German 1-grams](#)
- [Italian 1-grams](#)
- [Spanish 1-grams](#)

A note to fellow data wranglers: the format of this ngram data is a bit unwieldy to work with. I wrote a post about my journey [here](#). It includes some helpful coding tools.

To make the ngram data usable, we must restrict the corpus to a predefined set of words. To do that, I use the following word lists:

- [English word list](#) (notes about the construction of this list [here](#))
- [French word list](#)
- [German word list](#)
- [Italian word list](#)

- [Spanish word list](#)

Figure 12 shows the number of words in my cleaned linguistic sample. Of particular interest is the catastrophic decline in German writing during the Nazi era. (Note: Google also has datasets for Russian and Chinese books, but the sample size is quite small.)

Identifying fascist jargon

In several previous papers, I've developed a method for classifying the words found in a corpus of text. The method was born in '[Deconstructing Econos-peak](#)', which analyzed the language in economics textbooks. After a few weeks of mucking with the linguistic data, it occurred to me that you could place words into a quadrant system using two criteria:

1. the word's frequency in the corpus, plotted on the horizontal axis;
2. the word's corpus frequency measured *relative* to its frequency in Google books, plotted on the vertical axis

Applying this method to Hitler and Mussolini's words gives the pattern found in Figure 13. To identify 'jargon', we pick a threshold on the horizontal axis that is roughly in the middle of the word frequency data (as in the geometric mean). Here — and in previous work — I've used the threshold of 50 words per million. 'Jargon' consists of words that are above this frequency *and* also overused relative to the Google Books data. (Note: to keep timelines consistent, the vertical axis uses average Google word frequency measured over the years that Hitler and Mussolini were in power — 1922 to 1945.) Finally, from this top-right quadrant of words, I select the 1000 words which are most overused relative to the Google Books data. These words are 'fascist jargon', shown in red.

In a follow-up paper, '[Have We Passed Peak Capitalism?](#)', I developed the idea that this method for identifying 'jargon' could be used to track the currents of ideology. To do that, we take our sample of jargon and return to the Google Books corpus where we measure how the jargon frequency changes over time. In each year, jargon frequency is given by:

$$J = \sum_{i=1}^{1000} f_i$$

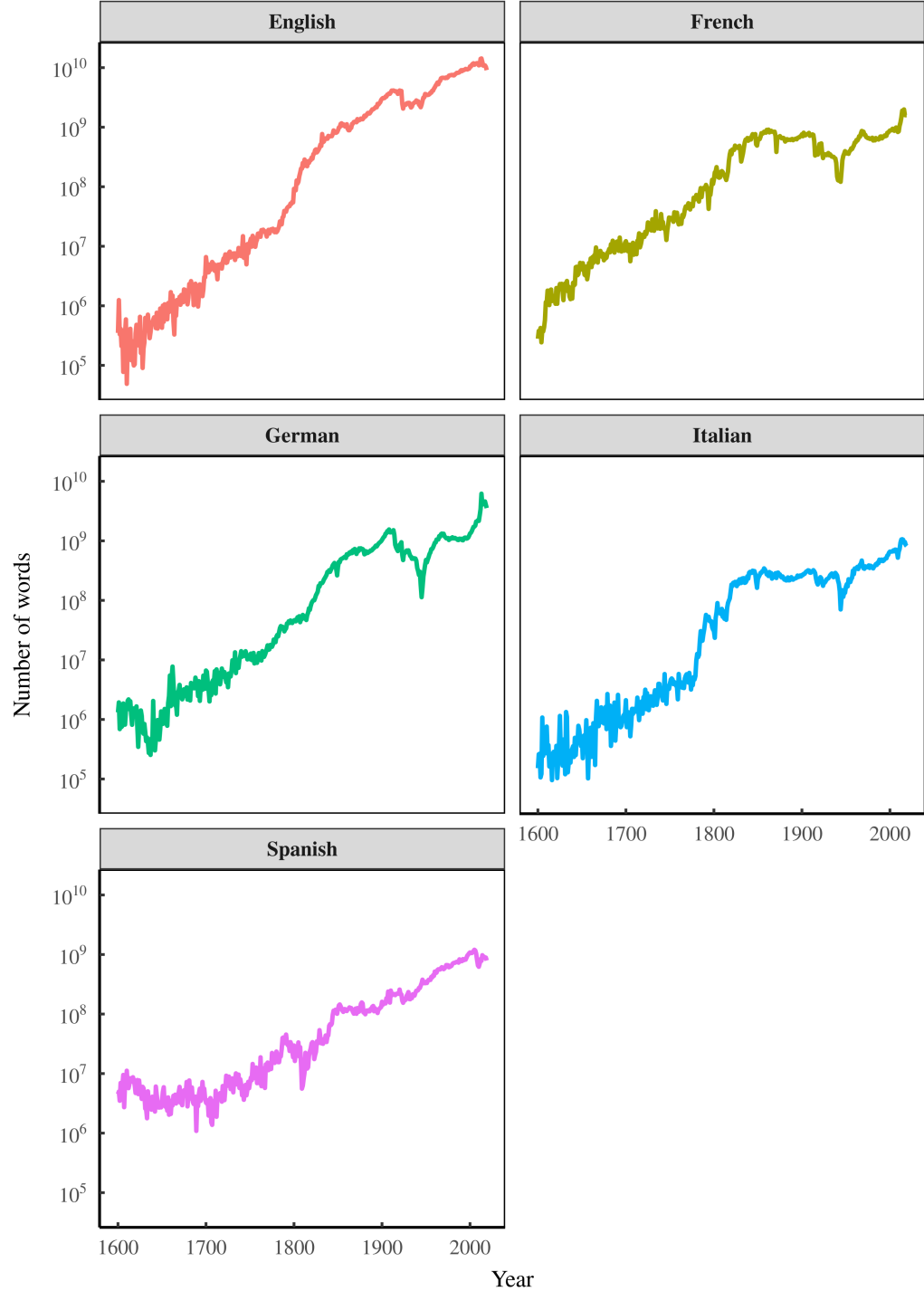


Figure 12: The Google Books corpus

Each panel shows the number of words (by language and year) in my cleaned sample of Google 1-gram data. Note that the vertical axis uses a log scale.

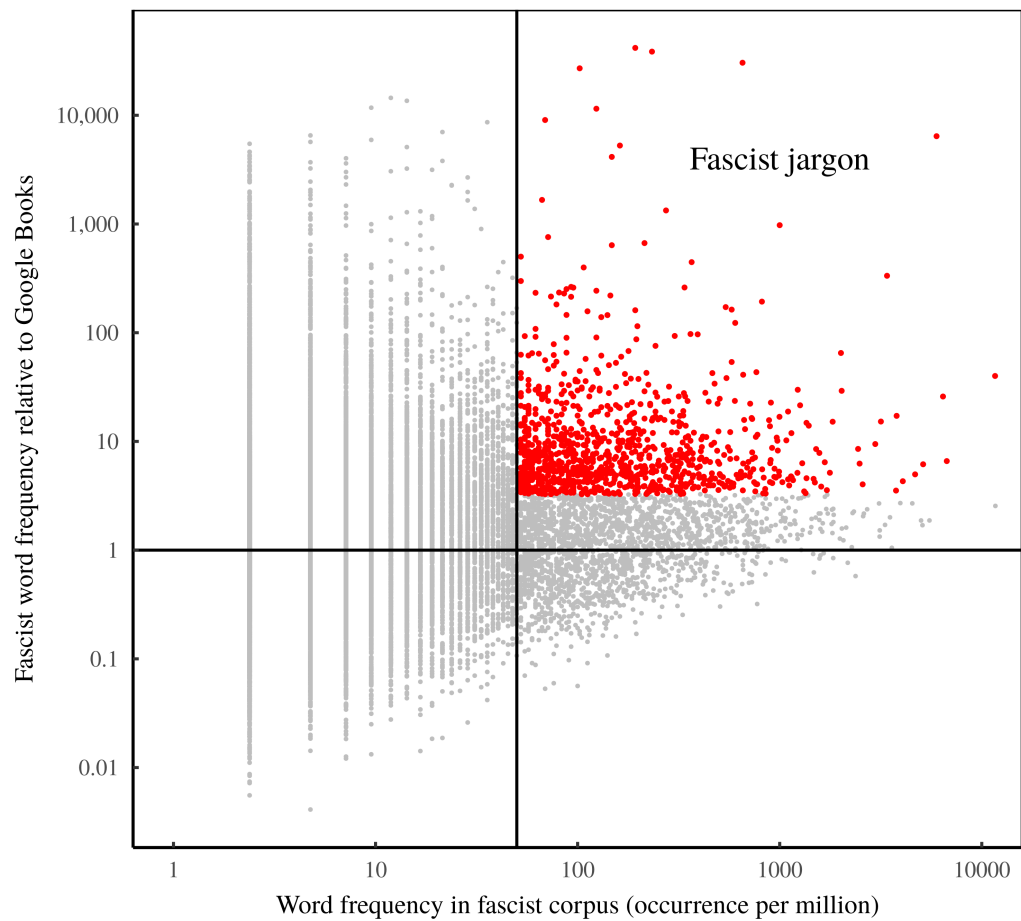


Figure 13: Identifying fascist jargon

This chart plots the words found in my corpus of fascist text. Each point represents a word. The horizontal axis plots the word’s frequency in the fascist corpus. The vertical axis plots the word’s frequency relative to that found in the Google Books corpus, averaged over the years 1922 to 1945, when Mussolini and Hitler were in power. (Note that both axes use log scales.) Red points indicate words that I classify as ‘fascist jargon’. These words meet two criteria (1) in the fascist corpus, their frequency is more than 50 words per million; (2) they are overused relative to the Google Books corpus. From this quadrant of words, I selected the 1000 most overused words.

Here, f_i is the frequency of the i th jargon word in the Google corpus. Total jargon frequency, J , is simply the sum of frequencies across all 1000 jargon words.

Translating fascist jargon

Being a monoglot, my starting point was to identify fascist jargon in English. (Yes, I'm aware that Mussolini and Hitler wrote/spoke in Italian and German, respectively. So by studying their English work, we're relying on the faithfulness of their translators.) Next, I used Google Translator (via the python [deep-translator](#) package) to translate individual words into German, Italian, Spanish, and French.

In cases where the translation resulted in multiple words (for example 'bloodshed' translates to the French phrase 'effusion de sang'), I split the phrase into individual words and then removed words with less than four letters. The consequence of this operation is that the number of fascist jargon words varies slightly across languages. (This slight variation isn't a problem, so long as we resist the urge to directly compare fascist word frequency between languages.)

You can download my multilingual sample of fascist jargon here: https://sciencedesk.economicsfromthetopdown.com/data/2025/fascism/jargon_translate.csv

Minimum wage

Relative minimum wage data in Figure 9 is calculated by dividing the minimum wage by GDP per capita. Data sources are as follows:

- France minimum wage: Insee data for [Interprofessional minimum wage \(Smic\)](#)
- France GDP: FRED series [NGDPSAXDCFRQ](#)
- France population: World Bank series [SP.POP.TOTL](#)
- US minimum wage: FRED series [FEDMINNFRWG](#)
- US GDP per capita: FRED series [A939RC0Q052SBEA](#)

Further reading

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