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## Towards a Generic Fascism: Right-Wing Totalitarian Aspects in the Universe of Warhammer 40,000

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CODY MCCLAIN BROWN

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb

### *Summary*

This paper explores the question of whether fascism is an epochal phenomenon or a generic set of characteristics by looking at the playable faction, the Imperium of Man, in the tabletop game and lore of the Warhammer 40k universe. It examines the fascist elements present in the Imperium's governance, societal structures, and leadership, drawing parallels with historical fascist regimes like Nazi Germany. Within the context of the debate in the literature on fascism, it raises the argument that though Warhammer 40k is a fabricated, fictional universe, the mobilizing passions of its martial ethos and the repressive logic of its ideology demonstrate how fascism can exist beyond the time and place of the interwar period and the Second World War. Ultimately through the exploration of the Imperium of Man, this paper shows fascism is more than an epochal phenomenon, and should be seen as a seductive epiphenomenon capable of returning as an emergent and powerful political force.

*Keywords:* Fascism, Science Fiction, Warhammer 40k, Gaming, Right-Wing Movements

### **Introduction**

Warhammer 40,000 or Warhammer 40k is a multifaceted science fiction universe set in a distant apocalyptic future in which spacefaring humans, alien races of orcs, giant insects, mechanical skeletons, and cybernetic humanoids exist in a constant state of interstellar war. Originally a tabletop game, Warhammer 40k has become increasingly popular with video games and more than 400 books, several of which have appeared on the *New York Times Bestseller List*. As of November 2023, the company that produces and owns Warhammer 40k, Games Workshop, had a market capitalization of over 3 billion dollars.

The game itself has also grown in popularity in recent years, and while many enjoy exploring and playing in the Warhammer 40k universe, the game has been linked to the alt-right (Doyle, 2020). Memes comparing Donald Trump to the universe's god-Emperor, racial slurs appearing on Warhammer 40k discord servers, an allegation of employees for Games Workshop making racist comments to a black player at an event, and a player wearing Nazi symbols to an event in Spain have all caused concern within the Warhammer 40k and wider gaming community (*ibid.*).

The attraction of right-wing or alt-right members to Warhammer 40k is not completely surprising. After all, Warhammer 40k is known as being the game and universe in which there are no "good guys" (O'Neill, 2021). Most of the humans in Warhammer 40k fight for the Imperium of Man in the service of the god-Emperor. Many players and fans see this fictional faction as one based on the real, earthly ideology of fascism. While Games Workshop has released statements explaining that the Imperium of Man "is not an aspirational state" (Gach, 2021), it is a place where heroes rise and fall, and heroic narratives told in the numerous Warhammer 40k media can move the audience to empathize or mentally endorse the saga's main characters and relate to the totalitarian, genocidal nature of the Imperium of Man.

Though Warhammer 40k has been explored as a board game (Baumgartner, 2015) and despite the assumptions that the Imperium of Man is fascist (Branwyn, 2023) there has not been an extensive study of its universe and its fascist elements. Moreover, when it comes to understanding fascism, there is a debate within the literature as to whether or not fascism is a generic phenomenon or a mere historical occurrence whose emergence is confined to the interwar period of the 1920s and 30s (Payne, 1980; Renton, 2020; Roberts, 2016). Scholars disagree on whether we should understand fascism through pure, ideal heuristic models or in a teleological, historical manner. In this paper, I offer that looking at the fictional world of Warhammer 40k may help in overcoming the limits of a purely historical understanding of fascism since fictionalized events cannot be seen as historically deterministic, while also aiding us in avoiding the rigid characteristic-listing of heuristic models.

With the growing popularity of the Warhammer 40k universe among the alt-right and the simultaneous rise of right-wing, fascist-like politics worldwide, the necessity of observing and understanding the possibilities for fascism to exist beyond the context of the interwar period and the Second World War is increasingly important. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the elements and parallels of fascism within the Imperium of Man in Warhammer 40k's literature and lore, exploring how the Imperium reflects the literature's understanding of fascism. This reflection can help us develop the concept of a generic fascism, one that, within this fictional universe, may serve as a seductive epiphenomenon and also as an emergent and enduring political force.

In the following sections I do this by first exploring theories of what fascism is and the problems with defining it. I look at the importance science fiction can have in aiding our understanding of politics, and then explore several works from Warhammer 40k, identifying the fascist elements in the Imperium of Man. Finally, I compare the pathologies and outcomes of the Imperium's fascist worldview to that of Nazi Germany.

### **Discerning and Defining Fascism**

The literature concerning fascism has long been divided between scholars who regard fascism as an epochal phenomenon, rooted in the specific time in context of the interwar and Second World War period (Renton, 2020; Mann, 2004; Roberts, 2016) and others who wish to regard fascism as a more generic force capable of emerging in the present or future (Eagleton, 1976; Payne, 1980; Paxton, 1998; Griffin, 2015). Still, even with their stated goals of regarding fascism as an enduring and generic phenomenon, it is difficult to expand our understanding of fascism to something beyond the regimes of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and the short-lived movements that were fascist-like elsewhere.

One of the many reasons for the difficulty in understanding fascism is the fact that in addition to the small selection of case studies available, “most of the political movements in interwar Europe commonly termed fascist did not in fact use that name for themselves” (Payne, 1980, p. 4). The problem with fascist labeling is especially evident when one looks at communist movements. Though there were variations among communist movements, they all called themselves communist, were linked to the Communist International, and based their ideology and actions on a core set of texts and principles, namely the writings of Karl Marx. In addition to avoid referring to themselves as fascists, fascist-like, right-wing movements of the past did not subscribe to a core ideology or philosophy since none existed. As Robert Paxton explains, fascism “bears a different relationship to thought than do the nineteenth-century ‘isms’. Unlike them, fascism does not rest on formal philosophical positions with claims to universal validity. There was no ‘Fascist Manifesto’, no founding fascist thinker” (1998, p. 4). There is no core philosophical work that all fascists refer to, making it harder to determine who or which organizations are fascist and which ones are not. Furthermore, this vagueness makes it difficult to understand fascism as a phenomenon outside of the time and place most agree it existed.

Despite these difficulties, the literature has sought to understand fascism beyond its teleological parameters, seeing it as more than a regime or a historical occurrence. Roger Griffin (2015) holds fascism as ultimately a national, militant mobilization inspired by a paligenetic myth, whereas Stanley Payne (1980) attempts to understand fascism through a basis of typological characteristics that political

movements may possess in order to be regarded as fascist. Seeming to sum up the previous conceptions of what defines fascism, Robert Paxton explains that fascism is “a system of political authority and social order intended to reinforce the unity, energy, and purity of communities in which liberal democracy stands accused of producing division and decline” (1998, p. 21).

While Paxton’s definition is helpful in granting us some clarity, it also sounds like he might be describing other authoritarian and totalitarian systems. Yet, there is a difference. Authoritarian states are also anti-democratic and anti-liberal in their actions, but still make claims to democracy or democratic norms. Whether it is holding rigged elections such as those in contemporary Russia (Barry and Schwartz, 2012) or Egypt (Davison and Tolba, 2018), or placing democracy in their name like that of the communist German Democratic Republic, non-fascist authoritarians appeal to the facade of democratic norms. Fascists, on the other hand, have an open contempt for democratic organizations and a democratic political system, regarding both as the cause for many of the problems fascism proclaims to solve.

Though fascism is anti-democratic, this does not mean it is closed to or beyond populist appeals. In fact, fascism is inherently populist. According to Terry Eagleton, “Fascism combines a highly militarist theory of putschism with a pervasive populism” (1976, p. 100). Fascism’s appeal to populism is one of the means through which its leaders can be openly anti-democratic, while also acquiring mass support. This brings us to another observed characteristic about fascism: it occurs in response to crises. The populist appeals are thus the simple promises made to the masses at the expense of some othered opponents who are identified and separated from the unified and purified community mentioned in Paxton’s above definition of fascism.

Where those in favor of seeing fascism as an emergent and enduring phenomenon diverge is the type of crisis or crises to which fascism responds. From the Marxist perspective, scholars such as Eagleton regard fascism’s rise as a result of “proletarian defeat”, and one of the central ingredients of fascism amid an economic and political crisis, coupled with the lack of “revolutionary leadership” (*ibid.*, p. 102). Similarly, Nicos Poulantzas regards the emergence of fascism as a result of “finance capital or big monopoly capital” (2019, p. 72) forming a hegemony within the state in times of crisis. In other words, the weakness of the radicalized working-class to lead society through the crisis creates a space for fascism to emerge and offer solutions for the crisis. Writing on the noted Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s view of fascism’s emergence, Walter Adamson explains how fascism extends beyond a single class: “Fascism is based on a cross-class appeal and cannot be explained merely in class terms; it is bound up with a profound decomposition of civil society and parliamentary government in Italy” (Adamson, 1980, p. 618).

While Eagleton and Gramsci may seem at odds with one another, they are actually in agreement. Italy’s fascist movement gained support from both the wealthy

industrialist-capitalist class and a reactionary working-class, a view that may be at odds with Poulantzas' (2019) understanding that the elite and state hegemony are primarily focused on excluding the working class rather than coopting their participation; however, the cross-class appeal is essential to understanding fascism. As Eagleton observes, the cooperation between the working class and capitalists was made possible due to the weakness of the revolutionary or rather the absence of a radicalized proletariat. This cooperation between the working class and the bourgeoisie gives fascism its distinctly anti-communist characteristic. While fascism professes the importance of a community, this community is not class-based, rather it is generally based around ideas of nationality.

The concept of the nation serving as the focal point for fascism highlights another category of crisis that the literature identifies as trigger to fascist reactions and mobilization. The dissolution of tradition in the wake of modernity and capitalism's advent has long been seen as cause for emergent "utopian schemes" (Griffin, 2015, p. 6). The upsets of modernity created a spiritual crisis for many parts of human society. Yet, Marxists and communists embraced this disruption with a forward-thinking vigor. As Griffin explains, "the present was now imagined as a moving disjuncture or caesura between a fixed past and a fluid, perpetually unfolding future. This new future was as yet unknowable but could be realized according to a human vision of progress coupled to a sufficient cultural, social, or political will to bring about change" (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Still, others reacted with less enthusiasm and more fear and anxiety for the unfolding future. They searched to reattach meaning to the present by turning to ideas and mythologies of the past. The narrative of the past harkened back to an imagined time when communities were more united and purer. Fascism emerged as a force focused on preserving aspects of the past to help weather the uncertain future. As Eagleton explains, fascism "offers itself as a traditional movement, restorative of the discipline, pride, piety and domestic values of the days when the nation was truly the nation" (1976, p. 102).

For the section of the literature that sees fascism as epochal, the crisis of modernity reached its peak during and immediately after the First World War (Mann, 2004). It was not merely the economic crisis of the interwar period; it was also the dismay and uncertainty of a collapsing way of life and social order. The multi-ethnic empires of the Habsburgs and Ottomans were gone, and while many welcomed the right to self-determination, this also raised questions over borders and which populations belonged where. At the same time, the old order of religiously sanctioned monarchs was finished in parts of Europe and the Middle East, while also weakened in other parts of the West. And finally, capitalism with its factories and market forces was moving people from one place to another, disrupting the social rhythm of the city and the countryside.

While these can be seen as specific events in an uncertain time, it is not hard to imagine similar upheavals arriving in the present or very near future as climate change and conflict displace populations, weaken established borders, and disrupt the cultural norms of various societies. Nor is it hard to imagine how Artificial Intelligence could radically disrupt the labor market. The emergence of fascism hinges on economic and social disruption, coupled with an expressly uncertain future, and the return to the unifying elements of a mythologized, simpler past. Many political movements have emerged in recent years that espouse a national renewal while embracing anti-democratic, anti-liberal views akin to what we have seen in fascism. The most prominent example being Donald Trump's MAGA movement. Therefore, it does not seem that hard to imagine a generic fascism given what we have observed so far in the literature.

To build upon this notion of a possible generic fascism, I want to explore the realm of speculative fiction, noting its capacity to extrapolate and illustrate real-world concepts. Science fiction, in particular, serves as an invaluable conduit for exploring societal and political ideologies, projecting possible futures based on our present challenges. This exploration extends to the amply imagined Warhammer 40k universe, a setting where societal upheaval, authoritarian regimes, and the quest for control are vividly portrayed, echoing the themes discussed in the literature concerning fascism. In focusing on the Imperium of Man within this fictional realm, I aim to draw connections to the mobilizing passions of fascism outlined by Paxton (1998). By studying the parallels between the historical understandings and the fictional representation of ideologies within the Warhammer 40k universe, I aim to uncover and comprehend the aspects of generic fascism as they manifest within speculative realities.

In the context of this paper, the application of Paxton's mobilizing passions proves valuable as a comparative tool between fascism and the Imperium of Man. This lens aids in aligning the fictional events within the Warhammer 40k universe with a conceptual framework that is relevant to both teleological and speculative models of fascism. The actual-world crises that gave rise to fascism during the interwar period find echoes in Warhammer 40k. In order to draw parallels between factual and fictional events, a structured framework is essential, enhancing our comprehension of the intersections between the two and their contribution to our understanding of fascism.

Stanley Payne's fascist typology (1980)<sup>1</sup> may also serve as contextualizing tool, the characteristics of observed, factual fascist movements could be compared

<sup>1</sup> Here I paraphrase Payne's typology (1980): Fascist Negations: anti-liberalism, anti-communism, anti-conservative; Ideology and Goals: a nationalist authoritarian state, an integrated cor-

to the characteristics of the Imperium of Man; however, I find the process-oriented aspect of Paxton's passions to be more insightful than the characteristics listed by Payne, though there is considerable overlap between the two. Finally, Paxton's seven passions of mobilization are developed within his broader five stages of fascism. Though these broader stages of fascism are elucidating in the conceptualization of a generic fascism, they are too steeped in specifics to be readily applicable to the speculative world of science fiction. Therefore, I focus on the mobilizing passions, outside of the context of Paxton's stages of fascism.

The seven mobilizing passions of fascism are: the primacy of the group, the group as victim, the dread of the group's weakening via decadence and cosmopolitanism, integration of the group through brotherhood, an enhanced sense of identity, the beauty of violence, and the authority of natural leaders (Paxton, 1998). Even though I am discussing a fictional universe, fascism and its mobilizing passions are all too real. Therefore I think it is worthwhile to briefly mention the relationship between politics and emotion as a real-world process in political behavior.

Studies of affective intelligence and emotions in politics (Neuman, 2007; Marcus, 2023) look at how neural processes depend on habitual responses, reward-seeking behavior, and norm compliance to operate in and manifest the emotions of enthusiasm, fear and anger. Understanding how these three emotions emerge from these neural processes, we can see how they relate to Paxton's mobilizing passions of fascism. The primacy of the group, integration through brotherhood, and an enhanced sense of identity, related to the authority of natural leaders can invoke enthusiasm, while also drawing on norm compliance and reward-seeking behavior since belonging to a group is more rewarding than going against the group. At the same time these group-related passions may serve as a reaction to a broader fear. The victimization of the group also relates to fear and to the violation of norms by external actors, which in turn can inspire anger. As George Marcus explains: "Anger focuses on the range from norm compliance to norm violation. Here, attention to the low-range reports on the ongoing actions of those distant, immediate, strangers and intimates, as to their evident norm compliance" (2023, p. 9). Namely, anger can focus on who violates or complies with a group's or individual's given set of norms. Anger can also embody the beauty and glorification of violence as retribution for norm violation and serve as a return to normative acceptance. By applying the research on affective intelligence to Paxton's mobilizing passions, we see how fascism's existence beyond an epochal experience is possible.

poratist economy, the goal of empire, a self-sacrificing creed; Style and Organization: an emphasis on symbols and choreography, mass mobilization with martial themes, positive views of violence, stress on masculinity, praise of youth, a charismatic, authoritarian leader.

## Political Science in Science Fiction

It might seem odd to turn to science fiction as a lens to examine and understand the reality of an enduring fascism, and yet science fiction and fantasy seem well positioned to reveal to us the pitfalls and limitations of our own world. As Peter Paik suggests, science fiction and fantasy “are capable of achieving profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life” (2010, p. 1). One only has to recall the opening scenes of Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* in which a scientist warns the world’s political leaders about an impending collapse of civilization only to be ignored, and actually punished, to see parallels in our world with the unheeded warnings Carl Sagan and other scientists made before the US Congress about the perils of climate change. Fictional works can also have a real influence on real-world politics. For example, Italy’s right-wing Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, has referred to the *The Lord of the Rings* as an inspiration for her politics, linking herself to a trend of the Italian far-right’s reading J.R.R. Tolkien’s work as an “anti-globalization fable, a hyper-conservative epic that advocates a full-blown war against the modern world in the name of traditional values” (Mackay, 2023). The scholarly literature has discussed issues of race, gender and Cold War policy in the Star Wars universe (Brode and Deyneka, 2012) and others have dealt with militarism in science fiction as a reflection of the US’s postwar society (Suvin in Hassler and Wilcox, 2008), to name a few.

When delving into the realm of fascism, fiction, particularly science fiction and fantasy, plays a thought-provoking role in exploring ideological landscapes. Consider, for instance, Jack London’s 1908 novel, *The Iron Heel*, which offers a prophetic glimpse into a predictive fascist movement. Within the narrative, the emergence of the Iron Heel symbolizes a reactionary force in response to the near victory of socialism in the United States. Similarly, Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* delves into the intriguing concept of American fascism as an alternate reality, envisaging a world where Germany and Japan emerge triumphant in World War II. Works such as Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* and George Orwell’s *1984* intricately examine fascist-like elements within speculative authoritarian and totalitarian societies. Moreover, integrating the science fiction universe of Warhammer 40k into this collection of literature that scrutinizes the politics of fascism and analogous regimes provides us a unique opportunity to delve deeper into the concept of generic fascism.

## Fascist Passions in the Imperium of Man

The Warhammer 40k universe is sprawling, both in the literal sense, as the game’s lore has around 400 books, several fandom wikis, numerous factions that players can control in the tabletop game, and in the fictional sense, as there are a seeming-



ly infinite number of planets contested by the Imperium of Man and various alien races. For the most part the game is set in the 41st century. At the beginning of each book the reader is met with the following text crawl, or something similar, outlining the grim and tumultuous setting in which the story or game takes place. The following is from the anthology of stories *Unholy* (Sterns *et al.*, 2023):

*For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat  
immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the  
Master of Mankind. By the might of His inexhaustible  
armies a million worlds stand against the dark*

*Yet, He is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the  
Imperium held in life by the marvels of the Dark Age of  
Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so  
that His may continue to burn.*

...

*There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim  
darkness of the far future,  
there is only war.*

Though the game and most of the books take place in the 41st century, the lore goes as far back as Earth's ancient history, but for the purposes of this paper I focus primarily on the books from the publisher Black Library. One notable series, the 52-part 'Horus Heresy', delves into the origins of the Warhammer 40k universe, dating back to the 31st century. Many in the Warhammer 40k fandom consider this an entry point to new players and fans, and therefore it is worth exploring further as it establishes much of the lore in the universe.

The first book in the series, *Horus Rising*, begins at a time of renewal for Earth, or Terra as it is called in the book, and human civilization. After the Dark Age of Technology and the Age of Strife, the Emperor of Mankind has conquered the Earth and the colonized planets of our solar system. For the past two hundred years he has embarked on an interstellar crusade to reunite the various human civilizations dispersed across the cosmos. Before the Dark Age of Technology, humankind had begun to spread out across the Milky Way; however, with the crises of Old Night, Earth had lost contact with these distant colonies and the human diaspora. The Emperor and his armies' mission is to reunite with their lost kin and bring these civilizations under the 'enlightened' control of Earth, with force if necessary. In order to understand how any of this corresponds with what we understand about fascism, we must look at the underlying impetus for the Emperor's actions and how the Emperor's crusade was a response to earlier crises and myth-inspired renewal.

First off, we learn that Earth's renewed, spacefaring human society is characterized by a martial ethos, comprised of vast human armies, propagandists called

iterators, and most importantly, genetically enhanced space marines, the Astartes. In the opening of the book, the Emperor's armies encounter a doppelgänger Emperor on an Earth-like planet with a human civilization. After the false Emperor's refusal to accept the Emperor of Mankind as the true Emperor, Earth's armies invade, murder the false Emperor, and occupy the planet.

The Earth Emperor's crusade is described as a quest to "find all the lost families of man, cast away so long ago" (Abnett, 2018, p. 362). And yet, it is not reuniting humankind alone that fuels the crusade, rather the Emperor wants to purify the lost families of religion, superstition, and the acceptance of anything or anyone who is not human. After encountering an evolved, alien-tolerating civilization of humans called the interex, one of the Astartes remarks:

The interex, for good reasons, I'm sure, have built a society that is too greatly at variance to the model of human culture that the Emperor has proclaimed. Unless they show a willingness to adapt, they must by necessity be regarded as enemies to our cause. (*ibid.*, pp. 386-387)

Similarly to the fate of the doppelgänger civilization, the interex are to be violently brought into compliance with the Emperor's vision for humanity. These examples illustrate how the Imperium of Man's beliefs reflect the same characteristics of fascism's renewal of the past. Just as fascism focuses on national renewal, the Warhammer 40k universe conceptualizes the entire human race as the 'nation'. Fascism demands the national renewal be purged of the assumed deviations that wrought division within the nation's society and culture, so does the Emperor seek to rejuvenate a purified version of humanity, one that resembles the imagined culture humankind once shared before the Dark Age of Technology.

The parallels to fascism are readily apparent in this brief overview of the Warhammer 40k universe. The martial and bellicose ethos of the Imperium of Man bears striking resemblance to Fascist Italy's own motto, *Creder, Obbedire, Combattere* (Believe, Obey, Fight). Just as Mark Mazower notes "the roots of Nazi conquest lay not in anti-Semitism or blind lust for conquest, but in the quest to unify Germans within a single state" (2009, p. 30), so too is the war in Warhammer 40k not merely about conquest, but an essential aspect of the Imperium of Man's mission to unite humanity under the Emperor's rule.

It is evident that the Imperium of Man operates under a fundamental principle shared by authoritarian regimes and, in particular, an essential characteristic of fascism – the placing of great emphasis on the leadership principle. This principle embodies a specific tendency towards an authoritative, charismatic, and personalized style of command (Payne, 1980, p. 7). Ian Kershaw further defines this as a "fixation on a charismatic, plebiscitary, legitimized leader" (cited in Renton, 2020,

p. 11). The significance of a charismatic leader in fascism is twofold. Firstly, the populist appeal of fascism necessitates the leader be popular with the masses. Secondly, as highlighted by Paxton, “being in accord with basic scriptures simply does not seem to matter to fascist leaders, who claim to incarnate the national destiny in their physical persons” (Paxton, 1998, p. 6). The lack of a core philosophical doctrine places the onus for fascism’s political momentum on the charisma of the movement’s leader.

This is vividly echoed in the Emperor of Mankind’s rule within the Imperium. Having risen from a warlord status, the Emperor did not ascend democratically, yet he commands adoration and is perceived as not only legitimate by many, but a few even see him as divinely sanctioned. His reign has fostered a clandestine cult of Emperor worship within his empire. The Imperium might propose a civilizing mission driven by reason, yet its underlying ethos thrives on passionate fervor, aligning closely with the seven mobilizing passions of fascism, as observed by Paxton (1998).

The first mobilizing passion identified by Paxton, “The primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual” (*ibid.*, p. 6), resonates strongly in the Imperium of Man’s doctrine, aligning with fascism’s paramount emphasis on the nation. Within this fictional universe, the Imperium instills a xenophobic and genocidal focus on the supremacy of humankind which all individuals should submit to. While they engage in combat against heretical humans, it is evident that neither the Astartes nor the Emperor take pleasure in such actions. This moral quandary is illustrated when the central character, Garviel Loken, expresses uncertainty regarding their assault on the heretical civilization led by the doppelgänger Emperor. He poses a critical question: “If we encounter a person, a society in this cosmos that disagrees with us, but is sound of itself, what right do we have to destroy it?” (Abnett, 2018, pp. 63-64). Loken’s doubts are dismissed by one of the Imperium’s elder propagandists, Sinderman, who explains their duty as vessels of the Emperor’s superior worldview is to force compliance, and overrules any heretical civilization’s rights. According to the Imperium’s ideology, while it is regrettable that other humans must be coerced into embracing the Emperor’s enlightenment, it is deemed necessary for the civilizing mission carried out by the Emperor’s armies and crucial for the purity and renewed unity of humankind.

When it comes to violence against non-humans, the Imperium’s warriors are devoid of any moral ambiguity. Warmaster Horus explains this in one passage: “‘So an alien war is a delight to me,’ the Warmaster continued still smiling. ‘A clear and simple foe. An opportunity to wage war without restraint, regret, or remorse’” (*ibid.*, p. 218). For the Imperium, the centrality of humanity and the Emperor’s pur-

ported truth for humanity takes precedence over all else. Alien species are perceived as mere obstacles hindering humankind's progress and prosperity or deemed potential threats to humanity's existence, all of which resonates with the first mobilizing passion identified by Paxton – the primacy of the group. The emphasis on humanity as the nation and the quest for its reunification aligns with fascism's paramount focus of national unity.

We see how the excuse to purge and murder humans that do not conform to the Emperor's worldview and alien races leads to Paxton's second mobilizing passion: "The belief that one's group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the group's enemies, internal as well as external" (Paxton, 1998, p. 6). The Imperium of Man views itself as the aggrieved party, suffering the consequences of encounters with alien entities, referred to as xenos, whose actions and existence are deemed malevolent. The past and tragic Dark Age of Technology emerged due to artificial intelligence, mutations granting psychic abilities to certain humans, and the manipulation of warp technology by xenos others. While these advancements allowed humans to traverse the stars, they also resulted in societal turmoil on Earth. From the Emperor's viewpoint in the 31st century, Earth's descent into chaos and conflict was primarily attributed to AI turning against humanity, confrontations with hostile alien species, and the misused powers of heretical humans with psychic abilities. Further on in the paper, I detail how this perception of psychic humans is used to justify their mass murder.

The Emperor's mission is not only to reunite humanity but also to rectify the perceived wrongs inflicted by non-humans and heretical humans. Grievances form a substantial part of the Emperor's quest, as he seeks to mend past wounds. The Emperor considers the stars humankind's "birthright" (Abnett, 2018, p. 15), one that was taken from Earth during the Dark Age of Technology. He vows to a young Horus: "Make no mistake, [...] they will be ours" (*ibid.*, p. 355). At the same time, rooted in this idea of humankind being denied its rightful control of space is the deeply held belief that entities fundamentally hostile to humanity exist within the cosmos. As one soldier explicates, "We know how brutal this cosmos is. How cruel. We must fight for a place in it. Name one species we have met that would not rejoice to see mankind vanish in a blink" (*ibid.*, p. 368). Another character encapsulates the importance of the Emperor and his armies in a conversation with Loken, stating:

He protects mankind, through the Legions, through the martial core, through the war machines of the Mechanicum. He understands the dangers. The inconsistencies. He uses you, and all the instruments like you, to protect us from harm. To protect our physical bodies from murder and damage, to protect our minds from madness, to protect our souls. (*ibid.*, p. 329)

Humanity's depiction as a victim in a hostile cosmos, besieged from all directions by menacing forces, justifies its goal of reclaiming the lost golden age taken from it by these 'other' entities, echoing fascism's mobilizing passion of victimhood.

These sentiments blend into Paxton's third understanding of fascist mobilization: "Dread of the group's decadence under the corrosive effect of individualistic and cosmopolitan liberalism" (1998, p. 6). While it is not openly expressed that decadent liberalism brought about the Dark Age of Technology in the Warhammer 40k literature, the Imperium of Man is seen to have an aversion to liberal ideas of tolerance. This is best seen in the contrasts drawn between the Imperium and the interex. The interex learn from other alien races, even those they were originally antagonistic towards. Their emissary tries to explain this to the soldiers from the Imperium when discussing a past conflict with an alien race. The war

taught us a great deal. It taught us about our place in the cosmos, and certain values of compassion, understanding and empathy... The war made us realize that our very humanity... was an obstacle to mature relations with other species. (Abnett, 2018, p. 364)

This tolerance and the idea of learning from the other is a strong juxtaposition to the Emperor and the Imperium's worldview. For the Imperium, tolerance is a weakness and accepting something foreign or alien is tantamount to heresy. We can assume the rejection of tolerance is linked to a fear or dread of its role in the crises of the past. After all, it was the opening up of humanity to artificial intelligence, technology and alien mutation that resulted in the Dark Age of Technology.

In the narratives centering on the space marines, the Astartes, we witness a vivid portrayal of Paxton's fourth and fifth mobilizing passions: "Closer integration of the community within a brotherhood (*fascio*) whose unity and purity are forged by common conviction, if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary" (1998, p. 6) and "An enhanced sense of identity and belonging, in which the grandeur of the group reinforces individual self-esteem" (*ibid.*). As Ragnar, a 'recruit', undergoes the transformation into a super soldier, he is inundated with a constant stream of knowledge about the universe: "An unending flow of knowledge etched into his memory, enriching his wisdom, and kindling a deep devotion to his Chapter, Russ, and the Emperor" (King, 2015, p. 195). Subsequently, during the induction into the Space Wolves brotherhood,

'You have now been deemed worthy to pledge yourself at the sacred Altar of Russ and to join the ranks of the Wolves. Step forward, kneel before the altar, and vow to serve this Chapter in every way, at all times, unto death and beyond, with your body, mind, and soul.' It marked the proudest moment of Ragnar's life as he did so. (*ibid.*, p. 204)

Instead of brewing resentment, the ‘recruitment’ into the Emperor’s service evokes a sense of privilege in the recruit, empowering him through membership and instilling in him the agency to sacrifice his life for the cause of the Imperium.

The next mobilizing passion, as Paxton articulates, embodies “The beauty of violence and of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success in a Darwinian struggle” (Paxton, 1998, p. 7). This aspect finds vivid portrayals throughout the Warhammer 40k universe. The power and valor of the space marines are often glorified in the context of their battles and annihilation of alien species. One poignant illustration of this reverence for power and violence is shown at the outset of *Horus Rising* when the Primarch Horus, the Warmaster, confronts and kills the false Emperor. Gavriel Loken’s narrative draws a telling portrait of the Warmaster:

The god was a true giant, as large again to any Astartes warriors as an Astartes was to a normal man. His armor was white gold, like the sunlight at dawn... robes of white cloth fluttered out behind the terrible haloed figure. Above the breastplate the face was bare, grimacing, perfect in every dimension and detail, suffused in radiance. So beautiful. So very beautiful. For a moment, the god stood there, unflinching, beset by the gale of force, but unmoving, facing it down. Then he raised the storm bolter [rifle] in his right hand and fired into the tumult. One shot. (Abnett, 2018, p. 43)

The Warmaster’s depiction in angelic and breathtaking terms as he prepares to execute the false Emperor is one example of the Imperium’s linking of beauty with violence. Though from the perspective of Lokan, the reader can imagine this is how most perceive Horus. Moreover, we see Horus’s calm amid the tumult raging around him as a sign of his strength of will to carry out the Emperor’s struggle in space’s life and death environs. This description clearly reflect fascism’s view of violence and will as forces both beautiful and virtuous.

The final mobilizing passion is the authority of natural leaders who incarnate the group’s destiny. In the Imperium of Man, the concept of natural leader is complicated in that the Imperium’s leaders, the Primarchs, are genetically engineered copies of the Emperor, and thus designed to be intrinsic, natural leaders. The hierarchy in the society is one that adores leadership, but also subscribes leadership qualities in a descending order starting with the Emperor, the Warmaster, the Primarchs, and the Astartes. The Astartes do have ranks and are rewarded for leadership and valor on the battlefield and in this way the Imperium rewards emergent leadership, but it is largely programmed to regard natural leadership as an engineered trait connected to the Emperor, and therefore a force that embodies humanity’s destiny.

Paxton’s authority of natural leaders is central to fascism, but one could argue the role of leaders goes beyond the mere appeal to authority and involves the relationship between leader and followers. As MacGregor Knox explains,

Charisma is a relationship between leader and followers that rests upon the followers' perceptions. The cultural context, the severity of the perceived crisis, and the institutional framework in which the leader must operate are of vital importance for the origins and persistence of the charismatic bond. But the leader must also possess personal qualities perceivable as 'extraordinary'. His 'mission' must answer whatever existential – or national – crisis torments his potential followers. (2012, p. 104)

In the Imperium of Man, the Emperor's rise on Earth, his mission to reunite and purify humankind after the Dark Age of Technology and the Age of Strife, are all central to his leadership. His power and authority come from the perception that he is humankind's savior. Moreover, his 'extraordinary' qualities are seen in his ability to use the psychic powers that allow humankind to traverse the cosmos without relying on the heretical use of the alien or AI technology that brought about the Dark Age of Technology.

Going off of what Knox observes about fascist leadership, it should not be surprising that the Emperor eventually comes to be seen as a god. The leader "must establish a balance between the direct personal connection with his following (or its carefully organized illusion, in the age of mass parties), on the one hand, and the otherworldliness or detachment proper to the charismatic figure, on the other" (*ibid.*). This detachment and otherworldliness morphs into a religious-like worship of the Emperor. Moreover, in the main setting of the Warhammer 40k universe, the Emperor likely relies on the god-like image because he has become so detached from his inner circle of Primarchs. At the beginning of the Horus Heresy, the Emperor ceases leading his armies personally, anoints Horus as the Warmaster, and withdraws to Earth. This sets into motion the crisis of leadership between some of the Primarchs and the Emperor. Essentially, the Emperor failed to maintain the balance of being distant and maintaining direct personal contact with his following. As Knox further notes, a fascist leader "must sustain the fanaticism and devotion of his immediate entourage through reciprocal trust and the frequent provision of favors" (*ibid.*). By withdrawing to Earth and no longer leading his armies personally, the Emperor weakened the circle of trust, ultimately leading to a new crisis, a civil war, and his eventual victory, but one that leaves him ensconced as both a corpse and a god on his throne as seen in the opening crawl of each book.

Using the mobilizing passions of fascism as a lens to explore analogous motivations and ideological orientations in the Imperium of Man has allowed us to observe the formation of a generic fascism, one that exists outside of history and in a speculative universe. Now I turn to comparing the type of society that exists under the reign of the Emperor of Mankind to Nazi Germany. Some similarities between the two are already apparent, such as the xenophobic and genocidal nature

of the Imperium's worldview, but I think it is worthwhile to explore the totalitarian aspects in further detail in order for us to attain a fuller picture of the brutality and repression under the Emperor and how it compares to real-world experiences. What I hope to show is how the pathologies and consequences of fascism in the Warhammer 40k universe are similar to the outcomes that emerged under the Nazis, thereby demonstrating how a fictional, speculative, generic fascism can generate structures and circumstances similar to the most notorious historic case of fascist rule.

### **The Imperium of Man, Warhammer's Nazi Germany**

In Warhammer 40k's present, the 41st century, the Imperium of Man has evolved into a grim, stagnant, totalitarian society. Fear abounds among the residents who not only fear the universe's alien races, the death and destruction wrought by constant warfare, but most of all, the dreaded inquisition. After the events of the Horus Heresy, the Imperium of Man transforms into a hybrid secular-cult that refers to practitioners of science as priests and worships the corpse Emperor as a god. Society is beset by mistrust, fueled by the pervasive power of the inquisition on the hunt for any hint of heresy. Ancient beliefs held by the human diaspora before their incorporation into the Imperium, alien culture, and criticism of the Emperor are all considered heretical. In order to maintain humanity's purity and unity, the Imperium's inquisitors are invested with extra-judicial powers of investigation and punishment. Their purpose and power are reminiscent of Nazi Germany's Secret State Police, better known as the Gestapo, who sought to enforce and preserve the ideological and racial purity of the Third Reich.

The Gestapo "was permitted to operate outside the law if necessary. As a political force, it served the Nazi regime rather than the established judicial process, and in order to function effectively it had to have free rein to arrest and imprison suspects without recourse to the norms of law, which were seen to be lagging behind the more immediate demands of the Nazi revolution" (Moorehouse, 2011, p. 222). Comparably, the inquisition has powers outside of the Imperium's legal structures. The inquisition serves to ensure the vision of the Emperor, and everyone, with the exception of the Emperor, is under suspicion.

It is well known that Hitler and the Nazis made an attempt to control information by banning books, investing an immense effort in propaganda, and forbidding citizens from accessing foreign media. All this was done in order to encourage the fascist passions discussed above, to induce acceptance of the regime's policies, especially its marginalization of Jews, Roma and other undesirables, and to ensure its security. In the Warhammer 40k universe we see an example of an even more extensive system of control in the short novel *The Oubliette*. During a conversation between the planet Ceocan's new governor and the high priestess about the



past Dark Age of Technology, we learn that education is a privilege of the elite and knowledge tightly governed with the priestess' comment, "Only those with a formal education know that much. The farmers and fishers are told only what we allow them to know" (Sterns *et al.*, 2023, p. 133). Later in the same scene the governor worries how much to reveal about her interest in the planet's xenos past, knowing that one wrong word could make the entire conversation heretical, and that the priestess could report her to the inquisition. The regulation of information to promote mobilization and maintain the ideological facade of its ultra-narrative is a pathological development of any fascist system. The purity of the community is linked to the restriction of information that may draw the myths of the nation and its past into question. It is no different in the fictional world of the Imperium of Man.

The breakdown of civic trust amid an encroaching surveillance state tasked with ensuring ideological purity and conformity to the system's hierarchical structures is a result of the fear and suspicion many hold of each other and possible links to the secret police. During the Third Reich citizens were quick to denounce their neighbors or associates for anti-regime activity. As a consequence of the ease with which a denouncement could draw the ire of the authorities, many opportunists used the Gestapo's extrajudicial powers and zeal for finding dissidents as a chance "to rid themselves of a business rival or an adulterous spouse" (Moorehouse, 2011, p. 227). We see parallels to the development of this insidious ambition and opportunism in *The Oubliette* when the governor, who is not beyond suspicion of the inquisition herself, seeks to frame an entire family of political rivals by murdering their matriarch and "planting a few heretical artifacts near her" (Sterns *et al.*, 2023, p. 151). The extrajudicial powers of the inquisition, just like those of the Gestapo, ensure that the murder will be investigated to a minimum, while the whole family will be dealt with via their guilt by association.

The Nazis created and instituted an architecture of surveillance and control for reasons beyond the desire to stay in power; a lot of the energy of the Third Reich's repressive apparatus was aimed at the ideological and racial goals of purifying German society and doing away with undesirables, namely Jews. Again, there exist parallels in the Imperium of Man. The Emperor's totalitarian levels of control are in response to the emergence of humans gifted with psychic powers, individuals who are considered heretical by nature and thus subhuman. Just as Jews were used as a scapegoat for Germany's defeat in the First World War, the Imperium's psychic humans are also blamed for the collapse of human civilization during the Dark Age of Technology, while similarly being seen as xenos-created mutations that destroyed the purity of humanity. The Emperor's crusade of purifying and reuniting humankind leaves little room for mutated humans with psychic powers.

At the same time, psychic powers, which the Emperor too possesses, are necessary for warp travel. It is the Emperor's psychic ability that allows humankind to traverse the stars and reconnect with its lost kin. The reason the Emperor is given the status of a god is to excuse or justify why his and only his psychic powers are not heretical. The regime needs psychics to feed the psychic power of the Emperor, while also using them as weapons in their wars with the universe's alien races. Psychics are thus both essential and anathema to the Imperium of Man.

The parallels to Nazi Germany extend beyond the Imperium's prejudice towards psychics when we consider how the Nazis exploited 'useful' Jews before murdering them. The entire camp system and infrastructure of railcars carrying millions to either be pressed into the service of the state or exterminated is eerily similar to what the Imperium has created in Warhammer 40k. In the book *Witchburner* (2022) we learn that once one is determined as having psychic abilities, they are forced onto a massive, perilous transport referred to as a 'Black Ship'. Once on board, those deemed at having specific qualities or strong powers are placed under the power of the Scholastia Psykana, while the others are taken to Earth where their psychic power and life are sacrificed for the energy of the Emperor, who requires a thousand souls a day.

The Scholastia Psykana organization has thousands of institutions where psychics are brutalized and eventually trained and programmed to be in the service of the Imperium's armies. The institutes are controlled by black-clad guards who wear armor impervious to psychic attacks. They may beat and even kill inmates with no consequence, unless they kill a psychic with a promising skillset. Those who fail to prove valuable after some time at the institute are placed back on a Black Ship and fed to the Emperor. The Imperium has created a system in which it disposes of undesirables, but not before trying to exploit them. The selection on a Black Ship as one is going to the Scholastia Psykana or to imminent death calls to mind the scenes at the Nazi's death camps as undesirables disembarked from the trains and entered into a selection process. There, victims were either deemed healthy enough to be part of the regime's system of slave labor and experimentation, or they were selected for immediate death in the gas chambers.

Returning to our discussion of epochal fascism and generic fascism, some might dismiss the traits I have observed in the Imperium of Man as symptoms of totalitarianism more than an apt comparison to fascism. Most notably the Black Ship infrastructure and the Black Ships themselves are reminiscent of the Soviet Union's gulag system and its 'Black Marias', which were used to round up suspects during Joseph Stalin's Terror. In Germany, similar vehicles were called Green Minna. While the similarities between the Imperium of Man and the USSR are notable, the comparison to Nazi Germany is better served. For one, the discrimination against

the psychics is more similar to Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler's racial policies, rather than the generalized, quota-based repression found in the Soviet Union. As Stephen Kotkin points out, "Hitler went after the Jews (less than 1 percent of the population), Communists, and Social Democrats, but in the USSR Stalin savaged his own loyal elites across the board" though "the greater number of victims were ordinary Soviet citizens" (2018, p. 307). Though repression was still widespread in Nazi Germany, it was more targeted than in the Soviet Union. The focus on eradicating a racial or ethnic group of people was particular to the Nazis. The gulag system was brutal and could mean certain death, yet the prisons were not death camps like those of Auschwitz or Treblinka. In a directive sent to a governor in the East it was explained that when it came to liquidating Jews, "Economic considerations should fundamentally remain unconsidered in the settlement of the problem" (cited in Mazower, 2009, p. 376). The priority for the Nazi policy was the eradication of Jews, exploiting their labor was secondary. In the Imperium of Man, the priority is the extermination of psychics in order to purify humankind and supply the Emperor with his needs. The use of psychics by the Scholastia Psykana is secondary. This is seen in the fact that their death in an institute is not considered a problem, and even when psychics are employed by the military, they are under constant suspicion and guard with the clear understanding that they can be liquidated for any perceived infraction. From this perspective the Imperium's system, while similar to other systems of totalitarian control, best resembles that of Nazi Germany.

One difference between Nazi Germany and the Imperium of Man is noted when it comes to gender roles. While Nazism and other forms of fascism placed an emphasis on traditional gender roles between men and women, the Imperium of Man does not. For example, the Adepta Sororitas, or the Sisters of Battle, serve as the armed forces of the Imperium's church. Moreover, non-military roles, such as propagandists, are not regulated to certain genders. While the Imperium of Man's quest is to reestablish the Emperor's rule over the human diaspora, and return humanity to its once glorious past, this imagined return is more about purifying humanity from xenos influence rather than appealing to familial tradition.

The fascist characteristics of the Imperium of Man have led to the same pathological levels of repression as those found in many totalitarian systems, but most notably Nazi Germany. The quest for racial and ideological purity results in an architecture of surveillance and repression, civic decay, and an infrastructure dedicated to the exploitation and eradication of undesirables. By exploring the characteristics of the Imperium of Man in the speculative universe of Warhammer 40k, I have demonstrated the relevance of a generic fascism. We see that in a world beset by crises caused by emergent technology, a charismatic leader devoted to the cause of group unity and mythologized purity, a system similar to fascism and that of

Nazi Germany is possible. At a time when climate change and artificial intelligence threaten to disrupt social norms and economic stability, the necessity of observing and understanding the possibilities for fascism to exist beyond the context of the interwar period and the Second World War is increasingly important.

## Discussion

What should we make of Warhammer 40k and the Imperium of Man? To what extent is it problematic? Do players who choose to control the Imperium of Mankind necessarily endorse its fascist worldview? Or do they understand how the Emperor's rigid ideology has made life a misery for humanity? The lore of Warhammer 40k makes no attempt to hide the miseries of life within the Imperium. For example, in the opening words of the *The Vorbis Conspiracy* readers are informed that "To be a citizen in this grim place is to know privation and fear, where most can only eke out an existence, their efforts bent to feeding an endless war in the void they know nothing about" (Reid *et al.*, 2022, p. i). The Imperium is depicted as a never-ending dystopia, and therefore should serve as a warning against fascism rather than a celebration of it.

Most players and followers of Warhammer 40k probably enjoy its universe because of its dystopian elements without endorsing the worldview that created the dystopia. At the same time, there is ample room to misinterpret the Imperium's cautionary, dystopian vision. In the Warhammer 40k universe the Imperium is genocidal and vile, but most of the other factions, the orcs, mechanical skeletons, or the servants of the malevolent Gods of Chaos are worse. For example, in *The Oubliette* the forbidden knowledge of the planet's past is an ancient pact that the planet's aristocratic elites made to sacrifice humans to trans-dimensional entities that feed on human misery and relish in murder and death. These entities kill the rulers' enemies in exchange for human sacrifices. In this sense the lengths the Imperium's inquisition goes to in restricting access to information and punishing all whom they suspect of xenos heresy appears justified. The alien threat to humanity is real, and therefore, one could view the sacrifice humanity has made to suffer in misery as it fights the many battles of this existential threat as a noble forfeiture of freedom and prosperity. The fascist elements of the Imperium, while brutal, are given a legitimacy with the narrative lore of Warhammer 40k, and could conceivably serve as a space to attract players and fans who themselves are attracted to fascist themes and thinking.

That said, I do not think we should blame Warhammer 40k for the rise in far-right politics or consider its universe a threat to democracy. The onus of a possible resurgence of fascism falls on the actual far-right parties and the inept policies aimed at solving the numerous crises facing the world. However, I would recom-

mend that the Warhammer 40k community and Games Workshop emphasize the cautionary aspect of what the Imperium of Man stands for and how it is certainly not the best answer to the crises humanity faces in the universe's far distant future.

## Conclusion

The Imperium of Man in Warhammer 40k vividly illustrates facets of fascism, reflecting elements akin to historical fascist regimes as discussed in the literature. At the same time, the fact that this fascism exists in a speculative world reveals the relevance of fascism as a political phenomenon that endures beyond the epoch of the interwar period and the Second World War. The Imperium of Man highlights the dangers of unchecked power, repression, and a quest for racial and ideological purity. While the Imperium's portrayal may attract some due to its dystopian dysfunction, it primarily serves as a warning against totalitarianism. The lessons from the fascist aspects of the Warhammer 40k universe can be seen as extending beyond the bounds of its speculative universe, demonstrating the persistent relevance of fascism as a cautionary narrative that transcends historical epochs, exposing the perilous consequences of ideologies that respond to crises via populism, passion, and the idealized myths of a purer past.

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**Cody McClain Brown**, senior lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. *E-mail*: cody.brown-mcclain@fpzg.hr