



# A Not So Foreign Affair

Fascism, Sexuality, and the Cultural Rhetoric  
of American Democracy

Andrea Slane





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Rhetoric of American Democracy**



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For Eva

For all the promises  
she holds and keeps



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## Introduction



The non-analysis of fascism . . . enables [it] to be used as a floating signifier, whose function is essentially that of denunciation. The procedures of every form of power are suspected of being fascist, just as the masses are in their desires.

—Michel Foucault, “Power and Strategies” (1980)<sup>1</sup>

“Democracy” is defined not by the positive content of this notion (its signified) but only by its positional-relationship identity—by its opposition, its differential relation to “non-democratic”—whereas the concrete content can vary to the extreme.—Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989)<sup>2</sup>

## Legacy

Outside the 1996 Democratic National Convention, a lone white man in a suit and tie staged a one-man antiabortion protest (fig. 1). Holding an American flag, he clutched a white baby doll to his chest and waved a black one over his head. As a father figure in a domestic tableau, the man likely wanted to be seen as protecting babies from their bad mothers, who, with the approval of the government, would kill them. The protester stood behind a placard that makes this extended wish clear, as the right side touts the antiabortion movement’s favorite slogan, “Abortion: America’s Holocaust.” On the left side is the primary Nazi-like agent of this “holocaust,” the “feminazi,” the word painted vertically along the tie she wears as part of a brown-shirt uniform along with a button from



Fig. 1 An antiabortion protester outside the Democratic National Convention, 1996. (Associated Press photo.)

the National Organization for Women (NOW) and a “Keep Abortion Legal” hat. Her broad smile echoes that of her painted Siamese twin, a skeleton in a Nazi ss uniform.

This performance, while not particularly successful as a marker of mass support, illuminates some of the specific contours of the ways in which “family values” rhetoric has been deployed by conservative political pundits over the last twenty-five years (i.e., since *Roe v. Wade*). That this rhetoric is so tangled up in images of Nazi Germany, however, calls for a somewhat longer history, one that goes back at least as far as World War II and the critiques of fascism that were formulated in the face of actual Nazis. The logic of the parallel between Nazi Germany and the United States surely draws in large part on a metaphor of the gigantic



Fig. 2. Genocide Awareness Project pamphlet, Center for Bio-ethical Reform.

human costs of the Holocaust, where state-mandated, scientifically-executed killing is equated with the state-sanctioned legality of elective abortion. This argument of course depends on the equation of the embryo or fetus with the adults and children exterminated in Nazi death camps—a widespread practice in the antiabortion movement. In the informational brochure describing its Genocide Awareness Project, for instance, the California-based Center for Bio-Ethical Reform graphically forges such a link by placing images of concentration camp victims, lynching victims, and segmented limbs from an aborted fetus side by side (fig. 2). But the equation of abortion rights with Nazi practices also draws on a much more complicated set of perceived continuities going back to wartime rhetoric not on Nazi racism per se but on Nazi reproductive politics, gender relations, sexuality, and family life.

Among the perceptions of Nazism that operate in socially conservative political rhetoric, the Nazis' overrationalization of reproduction takes center stage. In conservative anti-Nazi rhetoric, overrationalization leads to the replacement of the traditional family with state institutions, the scientific encouragement of sexual promiscuity, and the undermining of the morals of young people. Nazi Germany is cast as an aggressively secular state, which, in the logic of the Christian Right, means an abandonment of Christian morality to secular reason. Despite the regime's rigid gender divisions and the reduction of the role of women to motherhood, it is often gender inversion, exemplified by the uniformed feminazi in the protester's placard, that characterizes this image of fascism. "America's Holocaust" is thus a slogan that carries a much denser confluence of issues concerning sexual morality and social norms than is at first apparent.

Family values rhetoric as it is used in the United States today draws heavily on the historical association of the bourgeois nuclear family with liberal democracy, which has persisted since the eighteenth century. But the current conservative perception of an imaginary family struggling in an adversarial relationship with the state draws from both this ongoing, rhetorically constructed tradition and the more recent history of antifascist (and subsequently anticommunist) rhetoric, both liberal and conservative, from the mid-twentieth century on. It is through this combination that family values rhetoric in current conservative American political discourse is able to claim that the state has abandoned its core traditions and has become excessively powerful. Through the assertion of a narrowly defined notion of the family, which the state is meant to protect and be mirrored in, the state's protection of the rights of sexual beings in extrafamilial relationships (be it with regard to birth control, abortion, pornography, divorce, sex education, or gay and lesbian rights) is cast as threatening to the family and hence the democratic nation. While the state's comparatively liberal stance on these latter matters should logically make the equation of the American government with the Nazi regime patently absurd (since most of these liberal policies, including abortion, were *illegal* under the Nazis), the prominent anti-Nazi conventions of imaging Nazism that have persisted since the end of World War II effect a reversal of the Nazis' historical policies. As such, Nazism is a fascinating trope through which to examine the ongoing rhetorical contours of the process of defining democracy.

### Nationalism, Democracy, Fascism

The conservative uses of antifascist rhetoric deployed by antiabortion protesters reflect one prominent way in which images of Nazism continue to shape political debate in the present day. But accusations of Nazism, deployed as the ideal nemesis of both the American nation and democracy, can indeed issue from just about any political orientation. What this flexibility indicates is the definitional undecidability of both the terms at issue, *fascism* and *democracy*, which the epigraphs at the head of this introduction address. For if, as Žižek claims, democracy is primarily defined by what it is *not*, then in much of the Western world it is fascism (or totalitarianism more generally or Nazism more specifically) that has occupied the primary place of democracy's opposite. Yet, as Foucault asserts, *fascism*, too, has been variously defined—in large part, I would say, *because* it rhetorically occupies a negative space in relationship

to democracy. This book is a study of some of the ways in which images of fascism have served efforts to define democracy for a range of political visions. My primary interest, however, is with democracy, for it is the interpretations of fascism that issue from democratic debate that make it so variable a concept. Democracy is by nature more of a process than a fixed entity. Rhetorical deployments of fascism, then, reveal the cultural workings of the democratic process through the myriad and ongoing efforts by political actors to define democracy in a way that serves the speaker's political ends.

The longer history of democracy's development in relation to modern nationalism is clearly the greatest force propelling efforts to both understand fascism and cast it as the opposite of what democracy aims to be, for nationalism is the primary form of social and cultural integration out of which democracy originally could be forged. As Jürgen Habermas writes, the nation-state "laid foundations for cultural and ethnic homogeneity on the basis of which it then proved possible to push ahead with the democratization of government," to which he adds, "this was achieved at the cost of excluding ethnic minorities."<sup>3</sup> The exclusion of ethnic minorities indeed provided the national identity that bridged class and other status differences among "the people" that democracy addressed. Tensions between the universal language of individual rights upon which democratic citizenship stands and the limits placed on the political participation of not only ethnic minorities but women, immigrants, and those without property or education are, then, also subsumed under the common bond of nationhood.<sup>4</sup>

Fascism arises from within these historical tensions, privileging a highly restrictive, racially defined, national membership over the rights of individuals. Fascism is thus not democracy's *opposite* per se; it is instead a distortion of this larger nationalist logic, which exposes some of democracy's own deeper historical contradictions by taking them to extremes. The process of casting fascism as democracy's opposite often tries to deny these structural commonalities by either emphasizing those democratic ideals that are indeed dramatically opposed to fascism (i.e., democratic pluralism) or fabricating an opposition through the selective imaging of fascism. The persistent invocation of fascism as democracy's Other in post-World War II cultural rhetoric is symptomatic of these deeper tensions, part of an otherwise noble effort to assert that political agreement rather than ethnic homogeneity is the glue that holds a multi-cultural democratic society together. When this notion of political agreement becomes an effort to assert political and social homogeneity,

however, the definition of *democracy* is once again open to interpretation and conflict.

According to literary theorist Raymond Williams, *democracy*, while having its roots in Greek philosophy, was largely considered a negative term, in the sense of the “tyranny of the masses,” until the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the Enlightenment and ultimately the bourgeois revolutions, the concept of representative democracy emerged wherein the threat of this “tyranny” was tempered by the circumscription of eligibility for voting and office. The history of democratic political theory thus reveals anxiety about “the masses,” which were often figured as consisting of devalued groups (especially women and members of the working class, who were often imaged as sexually debauched and morally bankrupt).<sup>6</sup> Nazism, as a populist movement, reinvigorated some of these fears and their correlate rhetorical practices. In some anti-Nazi rhetoric, it was and is Nazi women (both fantastic and actual) and sexual “deviants” (homosexuals and sadomasochists) who are imaged as characterizing the fascist masses. In order to achieve such characterizations, the terms of the opposition between fascism and democracy have to be selectively interpreted. For instance, Nazi policies that severely limited the public role of women were seldom cited by mainstream critics during the war, suppressing the opportunity to assert the equality of women under a democratic system. Dominant wartime and postwar anti-Nazi rhetoric also often selectively ignored fascism’s overarching prudery, preferring instead to cast an image of sexual decadence that served the American national/democratic image of purity and moral rectitude. American racism, meanwhile, was typically not connected with Nazi racism.<sup>7</sup> Again, while fascism is rightly cast as ideal democracy’s Other, the history of democracy itself comes to the surface in these anxious images in ways that tend to try to preserve the internal hierarchies that have historically troubled democracy and the concept of the nation.

Postcolonial theorist Arjun Appadurai’s notion of an “ideoscape” asserts that contemporary political rhetoric is “composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consist of a concatenation of ideas, terms, and images, including ‘freedom,’ ‘welfare,’ ‘rights,’ ‘sovereignty,’ ‘representation,’ and the master-term ‘democracy.’” He sees colonialism as having “loosened the internal coherence that held these terms and images together,” with “a loosely structured synopticon of politics” left instead, with each term subject to variable definition.<sup>8</sup> While certainly more directly applicable to the contemporary variations

in the concept of “democracy” as it is manifested across the globe today, I would argue that American political rhetoric, too, is decidedly loose with regard to the above terms and images, a looseness, which can be read in the many ways, in which fascism continues to be brought to bear on the definition of *American democracy*.

Indeed most of anti-Nazi rhetoric in use since Germany’s defeat in 1945 has addressed *domestic* issues. Many of these domestic uses center on the assertion of a democratic ideal by encouraging pluralism—or hoping to mitigate it. Whether it be the Cold-War-era importation of World War II political psychology to explain poverty, racism, feminism, and homosexuality or contemporary rhetorical uses like those of the antiabortion protester in figure 1, fascism’s rhetorical function as that which is denied within democracy is further confirmed in this domestic return. In this sense, the rhetorical uses of images of fascism are perhaps informed by the more recent history of Western democracy, wherein pluralism of various sorts and a consonant weakening of traditional forms of national homogeneity inspire new forms of democratic definition. The fact that many of these domestic uses of antifascism focus on issues of family, gender, and especially sexuality then opens up a more specific question: why are these issues so central to the post–World War II definition of *democracy*?

### Why Sexuality?

In attempting to answer this question, again both long and recent rhetorical histories come into play. On the one hand, the concept of “sexuality” developed as a consequence of the formation of modern nations and might have been integral thereto, in that a focus on individual behaviors and bodies connected each citizen to the notion of the body politic. On the other hand, the late-twentieth-century political focus on sexuality has unique features that speak to more recent global and national political changes. Both these long and recent histories of national imagery rely on the homology between the individual citizen and the nation—a process that goes a long way toward explaining why sexuality might be such an emblematic terrain in the political imagination of contemporary nations.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha elaborates the process of homology by arguing that the imaginary construct of the nation parallels the illusory unified image of the self produced in Jacques Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage: for Bhabha, the nation is a “differentiating sign of Self,

distinct from the Other or the Outside,” where members identify themselves with the perceived collective qualities of the nation through the establishment of an “Other” (other nations, other cultures). As with the trajectory of these individuation processes for the child, however, the resulting divided self is inherently unstable because “The ambivalent identifications of love and hate occupy the same psychic space; and paranoid projections ‘outwards’ return to haunt and split the space from which they are made.”<sup>9</sup> The belief in stable images of nationhood is thus undermined by the need to continually re-create them so as to reinforce the boundary between the self and the Other, this nation and another.

This instability of the identification of the self with the nation and of both the nation and individual subjectivity is what makes sexuality central to the national imaginary on a number of levels. On the one hand, as cultural historian George Mosse has noted, the modern nation has been centrally defined by middle-class notions of respectability, making sexual conduct and imagery (including images of chastity) key to the concept of the liberal democratic nation.<sup>10</sup> But middle-class notions of respectability themselves, as Foucault has written, beg the questions “how, why, and in what forms was sexuality constituted as a moral domain?”<sup>11</sup> To answer these questions, Foucault asserts that ethics are conceived as operating not just through behavior but more fundamentally through “practices of the self.” Sexuality operates in this mode of ethics as a privileged arena of personal conduct, acting, as he writes elsewhere, as “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistance, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.”<sup>12</sup> The four “strategic unities” that Foucault names as specific mechanisms of knowledge and power in operation since the eighteenth century (the hysterization of women’s bodies, pedagogization of children’s sex, socialization of procreative behavior, and psychiatrization of perverse pleasure) can then be linked to Mosse’s notion of national respectability and Bhabha’s formulation of the national self. Indeed, if sexuality is a privileged arena for the exercise, articulation, and negotiation of power, then Mosse’s thesis connects Foucault’s observation to the formation of modern nations. Combined with Bhabha’s perspective, then, the instability of these “practices of the self/nation” is often expressed *through* sexuality.

Fredric Jameson similarly argues that along with the “mechanistic fragmentation” of subjectivity wrought by the development of capital-

ism “came a belief that what was released thereby was more primitive, feral tendencies in human conduct: namely a groundswell of anxiety-induced theorizing around sexuality and violence.”<sup>13</sup> Jameson links this with the designation of the family as constituting the private sphere against the nascent public sphere of bourgeois society whereby childhood and the family situation are elevated over other biographical experiences. This privileging of the family results in the isolation of the sexual from other forms of experience and makes it a marker of the separation of public and private spheres—a historical development that enables sexuality’s features to carry a wider symbolic meaning, including, I would say, characterizing the nation and the political system with which it is melded.

This brings me again to the ways in which fascism, and especially Nazism, has functioned as democracy’s troubled Other. In the most straightforward way, all that is split off from the national self is projected onto the Nazi Other, so that much antifascist rhetoric continues to align democracy with middle-class respectability and Nazism with decadence and perversion. As the split-off projection of the democratic national self, however, Nazism returns to characterize issues of domestic concern. Indeed Nazism, as an object of knowledge, cuts across most of the major strategic unities that Foucault names about the norms of procreative behavior (anti-Nazi responses to Nazi family policy and eugenics), the indoctrination of children (anti-Nazi outrage at state intervention into family domains), and especially the development of psychiatric theories of perversion (with a particular anti-Nazi focus on promiscuity, homosexuality, and sadomasochism). Together with the books, magazines, and movies that deploy these theories as narrative devices, popular and elite forms of invoking Nazism thus reflect the larger mechanisms whereby sexuality serves as a determinant of political viability in liberal democratic culture at the crossroads of knowledge, pleasure, and politics.

In order to determine the ways in which these practices instantiate more recent developments in the history of efforts to define *democracy*, we must return to the central place of sexuality as a domain over which the boundaries between the public and private spheres of liberal democracies are maintained. For, indeed, one of Nazism’s primary violations of liberal democratic principles attacked in anti-Nazi rhetoric is the violation of the private sphere—more so with Nazism than with any other form of fascism. Traditional liberalism, dating from early social contract theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, valorized the private

sphere and saw as “private” the realms of economics, family, and religion, which should, in a broad sense, be protected from interference by the state. But, according to the nineteenth-century political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville, democratic society nonetheless requires the social mores cultivated in the private sphere in order to secure the wider political culture of the nation. As “it is woman who shapes these mores,” de Tocqueville writes, “everything which has a bearing on the status of women, their habits, and their thoughts is, in my view, of great political importance.”<sup>14</sup> With this statement, de Tocqueville points to the paradox within liberal democracy that would eventually make Nazism a cause for sexual alarm. For while the private spheres of family and religion are ostensibly outside of the realm of public politics—in other words, *not* political—it is the private sphere that is thought to secure public political life.<sup>15</sup> Nazism’s intervention in the private sphere of family and religion, then, was thought to upset all levels of morality—a fear expressed in condensed form in the portrayal of Nazis as sexually amoral.

Leftists’ concerns about fascism’s violation of the private sphere at times bore a resemblance to liberal critiques by focusing on its destruction of social morality. Their emphasis, however, was primarily on fascism’s damaging impact on political subjectivity, and leftists paid less attention in general to defending, as many liberals and conservatives did, traditional sexual morality *per se*. Hannah Arendt, for instance, saw totalitarianism as differing from tyranny precisely in its insinuation into private life. Under tyranny, she wrote, “the whole sphere of private life with the capacities for experience, fabrication and thought are left intact,” while under totalitarianism “the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man’s capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action.”<sup>16</sup> Arendt’s concern about fascism’s violation of the private sphere is thus primarily alarmed by the ways in which political agency would be adulterated, preventing the sorts of public debate that the traditional bourgeois public sphere offered. Members of the Frankfurt School voiced similar critiques, noting that mass events and the presence of political symbols in everyday life (the primary images of Nazism) concretely changed and corrupted the experience of political participation. In their view, fascism marked a radical departure from the experience of the bourgeois public sphere (which revolved principally around debate and reason) and instead ritualized political life (i.e., what Walter Benjamin refers to as the “aestheticization of politics”). This shift toward ritual was thought to further waylay the crises in the liberal

capitalist social order by channeling resentments and uneasiness into national forms.

Those leftists who embraced Freudian psychoanalysis as a means of understanding fascism, however, again tended to describe the fascist subject in terms of sexual perversion. The fascist subject's rational political agency, as noted above, had been adulterated by fascism's incursion into private life, resulting in an ego structure plagued by the form if not the actual practice of sadomasochism, narcissism, and homosexuality. Thus, while leftist critiques of fascism tended to be less literal in their equation of sexual immorality with fascism, they developed psychosexual models for understanding political subjectivity that bemoaned the loss of the public sphere by joining conservatives and liberals in focusing acute political attention on the private sphere, namely, family and sexuality, and by deploying the discourse of sexuality to meet political ends.

This focus on the problem of fascism's role in private life, approached from different political perspectives, is thus the primary means whereby Nazism becomes democracy's favorite Other and then returns as central to late-twentieth-century discussions of the political role of private life in democratic society. The enduring usefulness of Nazism as a rhetorical figure in the democratic imagination can perhaps be linked to an acceleration of the "privatization" of democratic citizenship in the United States. Cultural critic Lauren Berlant marks the characteristics of this privatized citizenship as centrally including a penchant for sentimentality on a national level, especially what she calls the "non-political political" of family values rhetoric in political discourse. Berlant sees this acceleration as a product of there being no public sphere proper but instead a public scene occupied by "a cluster of demonic and idealized images and narratives about sex and citizenship which obsess the official national public sphere."<sup>17</sup>

The difference between the liberal public sphere and what Berlant calls the official national public sphere helps clarify the diverse functions that the figure of fascism serves today. According to Habermas, the historical public sphere, located between civil society and the state, was the arena wherein critical public discussion of matters of general interest occurred. This public sphere developed in tandem with the capitalist market economy, which produced the middle class as the democratic power base. But the contradiction between the universality of the "rights of men" and the exclusionary realities of representative democracy occasioned, along with the further development of capitalism, the expansion

of the public body. Consequently, the state and society became intertwined in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading to the end of the liberal public sphere.<sup>18</sup> Under this line of thinking, fascism, as described in leftist critiques, is the ultimate example of an entirely vanished liberal public sphere.

I would argue, however, that the notion of a declining liberal public sphere in the United States is less about the expansion of the public body than about the expansion of the private one. As Hannah Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the liberal division between private and public “had nothing to do with the justified separation between the personal and public spheres, but was rather the psychological reflection of the nineteenth century struggle between bourgeois and citizen, between the man who judged and used all public institutions by the yardstick of his private interests and the responsible citizen who was concerned with public affairs as the affairs of all.”<sup>19</sup> Enlightenment thought originally held that public values were superior to private values of home and hearth and stressed the role of “enlightened self-interest” in transforming private interests into civic responsibility. In this logic, women were to be guardians of morality not only within their homes but in society at large by taming male lust and reproducing morally responsible future citizens. For their part, men were to be guardians of women and children both at home and in the larger public sphere. But, as historian Stephanie Coontz writes, “As enlightened self-interest gradually gave way to immediate self-interest in the economy and polity, the nuclear family was made the sole repository for standards of decency, duty, and altruism. In this role . . . private family relations became less a preparation ground or supporting structure for civic responsibility than a *substitute* for such responsibility.”<sup>20</sup> The decline of the liberal public sphere thus reflects a privileging of middle-class private interests over communal public affairs. Consequently, when Berlant talks about an acceleration of the “privatization of citizenship” brought about by the economic and social policies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush in the 1980s, she draws their foregrounding of private economic issues together with the elevation of private life to a public discourse—again, what she calls the “non-political political.”

This shift is not only due to private economic interests being foregrounded over public ones, however. Berlant notes elsewhere that, although many scholars see the traditional categories of public and private as archaic formations, the continuing attraction to this division exists in part because it organizes and justifies other forms of social division

(male and female, work and family, friend and lover, hetero and homo, and “unmarked” personhood versus racial, ethnic, and class-marked identities). Berlant writes, “This chain of disassociations provides one way of conceiving why so many institutions not usually associated with feeling can be read as institutions of intimacy.” In other words, privatized citizenship is also characterized by understanding public institutions in private, “intimate” terms, a rhetorical practice that I find reflected in the uses of anti-Nazi rhetoric that center on family and sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

Berlant’s assessment of the current climate comprises the more recent history of the centrality of sexuality and family to current political rhetoric. Much of what Berlant marks as the “pseudopolitical citizenship rhetoric of U.S. political culture” indeed employs antifascist rhetoric to produce a “political” effect. If, however, as Berlant says, “Citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process—continually produced out of political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who counts as ‘the people’ and how social membership is measured and valued,” then, as my study of the uses of images of Nazism shows, there are a variety of ways in which this “private” realm currently constitutes a “public” sphere of sorts.<sup>22</sup>

This study of fascism, sexuality, and the cultural rhetoric of democracy indeed supports Berlant’s assessment of the character of the post–World War II public sphere, where democracy is very centrally understood in terms of personal dramas (both domestic and psychological) and is particularly preoccupied with matters of sexuality. This does not mean, however, that the process by which democratic citizenship is defined has reached an impasse. Instead, the centrality of sexuality to political discourse has necessitated a rethinking of the terms *public* and *private* in ways that continue to intervene and participate in democracy’s inherently unstable, and hence ongoing, project.

### Cultural Rhetoric

In examining how it is that democracy is understood through personal dramas and is preoccupied with sexuality, I have chosen to focus on anti-Nazi images of fascism that circulate in primarily American democratic political culture and have privileged film texts to do so. The choice is determined by my conviction that film is uniquely positioned in the mid–twentieth century as a medium that hopes to both educate and entertain and pretends to larger cultural relevance. I thus examine a

variety of texts alongside films, all of which interpret and present Nazism for democratic ends: academic scholarship, government reports, journalistic reportage and essays, and other kinds of fictional narratives in literature, stage performances, or video. Sometimes these texts are examined as “cotexts” to the films with which each chapter is engaged, illustrating a discursive resonance between the fictional projects of the films themselves and the larger cultural milieu in which they circulate. Often, I further analyze texts peripheral to the films’ production and distribution in order to bridge these discursive domains, examining scripts, letters, and publicity materials, for instance, which reveal the ways the people involved in the making and marketing of a film saw their product engaging in precisely this sort of dialogue with the larger culture.

With this eclectic method, I hope to establish the cultural intertextuality through which different sorts of public arenas (whether popular or elite) mine the private sphere for political significance. The “images” or figures upon which I focus are visual (or visualized) depictions of Nazism as well as the narratives spun around them. I argue that “images of Nazism” form a significant part of the image vocabulary—the democratic imagination—through which an array of political issues (both foreign and domestic) are articulated and understood, especially the political connection between public and private life. I have tried to ensure that my focus on anti-Nazi images takes account of the material effects of discourse (not simply relegating them to phantasmatic or tangential matters), as I understand this process of image making and sustaining as in itself constituting a significant aspect of political life.

Similar methodologies have been taken up by historians, who have linked individual and collective subjectivities to textual representations and who understand historical documents in literary terms; in other words, there is a mutually constitutive loop between lived experience and textual representations in part due to the unavoidability of narrative and image in all representations, even those that claim only to document.<sup>23</sup> My use of the term *cultural rhetoric* in the subtitle of this book hopes to acknowledge the nature of this loop, where, as Aristotle says, there is an essence of things and then a rhetoric used to deploy an interpretation of this essence into an argument. I take *rhetoric* as being able to account for both this sort of conscious argumentative use of the available image vocabulary for a variety of ends as well as identifying the dominance of certain types of uses that reveal naturalized structures within political culture. As rhetoric, images of Nazism can be deployed

in the service of an array of political arguments, but there are also conventions in these images that tend toward dominant, often socially conservative definitions of political legitimacy.

Bhabha articulates a theory of how the nation rhetorically manages its split between an idealized self and a demonized Other that helps to anchor these dual functions of cultural rhetoric. The national imaginary, in Bhabha's view, enacts a double narrative movement in an effort to stabilize itself: a nationalist "pedagogy" (teaching "the people" to be the types of national subjects desired) and a nationalist "performative" (addressing the people as already embodying national subjectivity). He writes: "The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*."<sup>24</sup> The pedagogical aspects of "writing the nation" correspond more closely to conscious rhetorical efforts, while the performative aspects tend to consist of the unexamined and hence naturalized assumptions or rhetorical conventions. The splitting process that Bhabha describes is revealed in the anti-Nazi uses of Nazi imagery: on the one hand Nazism is cast as the Other to democracy—in "pedagogical" terms, teaching what democratic subjects cannot do or be—while the return of these images as mitigators of domestic differences (e.g., efforts by conservatives to name pro-choice feminists as Nazis) signals a "performative" aspect of national narrative that attempts to project a homogeneous "people." Homogeneity is not ultimately sustainable in contemporary national culture. And so the flexibility of uses to which antifascism has been rhetorically put (feminists can and have accused Christian conservatives of Nazism as well) makes the figure of anti-Nazism a useful one through which to examine the processes through which the definition of American nationhood has been spoken through the concepts of democracy—and especially how it is that this debate has taken the family and sexuality as its primary ground.

The different sorts of texts that I examine contribute to different aspects of democracy as a discourse. Popular editorial journalism is often broad in its claims, simplifying and exaggerating its interpretation of current events in order to distinguish the writer's opinions or instigate

debate. This is often the case with wartime anti-Nazi journalism, which tended toward hyperbole (to be distinguished from fully warranted reports of Nazi atrocities) and also existed in a textual environment of conflicting interpretations. Academic scholarship, while often also building on similar interpretations, instead mobilizes elaborate scholarly apparatuses to lend authority to interpretations, which, when they rhyme with the dominant political beliefs of their moment, can then influence the opinions of politicians and ultimately government policies. This creates a loop between an official government position (e.g., on the psychological foundations of the minds of political dissidents) and the proliferation of (often government-funded) research, further substantiating these claims. Popular films, the privileged texts of this study, then, give the interpretations of fascism available in political culture a fictional narrative form, often complicating the journalistic and academic variants of interpretation in the interests of either telling an interesting story or conforming to various generic conventions.

Film theorist Noël Carroll suggests that Aristotelian rhetoric might be a useful way to approach film, as he writes that “While narrative films are not arguments per se, they are rhetorical in that they are structured to lead the audience to fill in certain ideas about human conduct in the process of rendering the story intelligible.”<sup>25</sup> This use of *rhetoric* is akin to the notion of ideology elaborated by A. J. Greimas, as it functions through the logically controlled unfolding of possibilities within a given narrative structure.<sup>26</sup> I would add, however, that this approach is useful not only with literary or filmic texts but with academic and journalistic texts as well. This expansion also applies to film scholar Dana Polan’s approach, for he says that close analysis of film narratives should examine “not what narrative accomplishes but what work it engages in (representations, containment, transformation) to achieve its aura of accomplishment.”<sup>27</sup> A “cultural rhetoric,” then, admits to the broader narrative tendencies that would make the “accomplishment” of narrative coherence possible in a range of texts, but the concept also permits the image vocabularies and narrative conventions of which various texts avail themselves to be quite variously employed.

The historical specificity of each of these texts helps to position the argument it makes with respect to the larger political climate wherein the definition of democracy transpired and continues to transpire. This is, then, the main benefit of having the various texts I examine—journalistic, academic, and filmic—speak to one another in my analysis, since it

is my conviction that they spoke to one another when they were first produced and that the shelf life of the image vocabularies and narrative conventions they employ is long.

### The Organization of the Book

While the process of defining democracy is dynamic and the production of political discourse creative, the history of anti-Nazi rhetoric has produced certain well-defined rhetorical devices that continue to serve American political culture today, albeit in new ways. The book therefore is divided into three parts, each of which examines one major rhetorical practice as it developed during the conflict with fascism in World War II, evolved in the decades after the war, and continues to be employed in American political culture. These rhetorical practices produce the sexual opposition of Nazism to democracy (part one), give form to the importation of theories of Nazism to explain domestic politics in a democratic society (part two), and serve as available tropes for a wide range of uses within democratic political culture (part three). The centrality of sexuality to the “cultural rhetoric of democracy,” in its multiple forms, is thus revealed in the myriad uses to which Nazism was put during most of the twentieth century.

In part one, “The Democratic Family,” I examine the conventions of what I call nationalist melodrama, a genre that uses the narrative conventions of melodrama to narrate threats to the nation. Unlike the others, this part begins by staging a comparison between the Nazis’ uses of melodrama during the war and American uses of it as an anti-Nazi rhetoric. The point of this comparison is twofold: first, to illustrate the ways in which nationalist melodrama narrates foreign threats as threats to the family, regardless of the political system being defended; and, second, to more sharply characterize the American variant of the genre, which subsequently passed into the image vocabulary of the American political imagination. Broadly speaking, Nazi and Hollywood wartime melodramas were engaged in nationalist projects, though, to be sure, they differed substantially as to the nature of the enemy and the function of the family in the political culture each system asserted. In Veit Harlan’s *Die Goldene Stadt* (1942), my primary example of fascist melodrama, the complications of both internal and external threats to the German family lead to the elevation of race and gender to national myths of the German *Volk*, or “people,” whereas in Edward Dmytryk’s

*Hitler's Children* (1942), my primary example of the democratic melodrama, these complications instead channel broad political issues into the protection of the private sphere.

The American variant of wartime nationalist melodrama typically defined the private sphere in highly normative terms, using the narrative conventions of melodrama to align conservative sexual morals with democracy while casting fascism as antithetical to traditional family life. This social conservatism reflects the ideological mechanism within liberal democracy, which banishes contradiction from the public-political to the private (ostensibly “nonpolitical”) realm, all the while making “private” matters of love, family, and sexuality central grounds for a political difference from fascism. This rhetorical function continues to characterize the uses of anti-Nazi rhetoric by social conservatives in contemporary American political debate. The final chapter of part one examines the rhetorical practices of three conservative videotapes, one made to argue against a national health plan, another to oppose gay rights, and a third to criticize federal law enforcement agencies. All three invoke the imagery and narrative conventions of anti-Nazi nationalist melodrama to characterize their “liberal” political opposition.

In part two, “The Democratic Psyche,” I consider another prominent kind of national narrative project, the definition, creation, and nurturing of the central democratic citizen through the diagnosis and treatment of American fascists and other political dissidents. Following directly from the wartime theories of the Nazi mind that served the strategic needs of the armed forces, American psychologists and sociologists imported their conclusions to address domestic issues throughout the Cold War period. The inner workings of the family continue to be the key to this project, as psychoanalytic theory dominated wartime and Cold War American psychology. I argue that the ascendancy of psychoanalytic political and social psychology produced a new genre of national narrative, the American version of national psychobiography. In the three chapters of this section, my focus is on psychological case histories dealing with the struggles of politically wayward “patients” to achieve proper democratic political subjectivity, that is, an independent ego, social confidence, an ability to accept difference, and often conformity to gender, sexual, and class norms. In the first two chapters, I take Alfred Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946) and Hubert Cornfield’s *Pressure Point* (1962) as central examples, illustrating the ways in which wartime and Cold War variants of national psychobiography work to address a broad array of

domestic issues over time. Again, the last chapter focuses on contemporary examples, for, like nationalist melodrama, national psychobiography continues to serve the project of defining American democracy, as it does democracy in other countries with European-dominant populations. Unlike my chapter on contemporary uses of nationalist melodrama, however, which focuses on right-wing uses of fascism as a political trope, this one looks at non-Nazi depictions of actual neo-Nazis, especially skinheads, in order to argue that present-day Nazis also serve a significant rhetorical function in democratic political culture: to both define the limits of political legitimacy and model a reparative therapy for Western democracy's traditional dominant subject, the white heterosexual male.

In part three, "Democratic Sex," I aim to build on the delineations of normative "democratic" sexuality embedded earlier by examining the iconography of "Nazi" sexuality, especially the figure of the sexy Nazi woman. For, along with documentary images of mass rallies from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and the horrible images of concentration camp victims that became widely available after the war, a common visual shorthand for fascism is fictional images of "Nazi" sexual decadence, a fetishized iconography of uniforms and perverse sexual display. By focusing on the iconography surrounding Marlene Dietrich's star persona, I assert that the sexy "Nazi" woman came to serve as a dense marker of political ambiguity. Dietrich's role as Lola Lola in the German production *The Blue Angel* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) became an icon of fascism in the course of the war years, substituting the spectacle of female performance for the spectacle of Nazi power, her song for the oratory of Hitler. The complexity of the Lola Lola figure as both dangerous and desirable—and portrayed exquisitely by Dietrich as an icon of illicit sexuality/fascism while she is herself an ardent antifascist—is illustrated in her first screen role as an explicitly Nazi femme fatale in Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948). Thus, even as the icon was being forged in the 1940s, the Dietrich/Lola Lola icon could be put to a variety of political uses: as an emblem of the allure of fascism and as a misunderstood, sexually open champion of democracy. The last chapter of part three follows the ongoing uses of this icon and the association of fascism with illicit sexuality more broadly up to the end of the century. Unlike the previous two contemporary chapters, in which I mostly remark on the socially conservative uses to which the genres explored previously have been put, this last chapter considers

how the figure of Nazi sexuality has served a widely varying array of rhetorical functions, both conservative and progressive, in contemporary efforts to define democracy through sexuality.

The evils of the Nazi regime—its murder of millions of people on religious, ethnic, political, and sexual grounds—certainly makes fascism a powerful trope in the democratic imagination. Invocations of fascism are consequently able to mobilize strong sentiments, both political and personal. Indeed, the crux of my argument is that one of fascism's less straightforward rhetorical functions in democratic political culture has been to articulate the relationship between the private and public and personal and political realms. While fascism should continue to be cast as that which democracy strives against, this book takes as its object these more ambiguous strains of antifascist rhetoric as they have influenced and continue to influence democratic political culture today. My aim is by no means to diminish the power of antifascism but rather to illuminate how the conflicting conceptions of what democracy is and should be are expressed in these anti-Nazi invocations of fascism. As such, I hope to provide a usable history that can help us understand the changing contours of the mutual project called democracy as we continue to strive to fulfill the concept's high expectations.



**The Democratic  
Family**



# 1

## Nazi Nationalist Melodrama: Science, Myth, and Paternal Authority in *Die Goldene Stadt*



Private and Public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an “in-between” temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history.—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994)<sup>1</sup>

Like ordinary melodramas, nationalist melodrama is characterized by plots in which the nuclear family is threatened by an external force, the life or chastity of an innocent is endangered, or the family is potentially destroyed from within by the bad behavior of its members. Unlike other melodramas, however, nationalist melodrama explicitly codes these plots in political terms: in which threats to the family are threats to the nation, the life and chastity of innocents represent the nation’s future and ideals, and internal dissonance must be quelled in the name of national unity. The close relationship between the psychological and the social, the public and the private, which Bhabha names in the epigraph, is nowhere more clearly narrated than in nationalist melodrama. Nationalist melodrama is thus a primary narrative form through which the “image of the world of history” is produced in national cultures.<sup>2</sup>

The unusual cover of a clever anti-Nazi pamphlet entitled “Unbelievable” plays on the tradition of nationalist melodrama in its appropri-



Fig. 3. Cover of “Unbelievable,” an anti-Nazi pamphlet (1940). (UCLA, Department of Special Collections.)

tion of the conventions of pulp magazines: a prominent image of a cowering young woman stands in for the threat to America, both from abroad and within, of “Hitlerism” and anti-Semitism (fig. 3). Meanwhile, in Nazi Germany, Guida Diehl, leader of the New Land Movement, was writing the following poem: “Mit eisernem Besen / Aus Herzen und Haus / Das undeutsche Wesen / Zum Lande hinaus!” (With iron broom / From hearts and house / Drive un-German creatures / Into the wilderness!).<sup>3</sup> Because its primary aim is by nature nationalist, the conventions of nationalist melodrama are useful not only to liberal democracy, as in the eighteenth-century bourgeois tragedy, but to nations with widely differing political systems.<sup>4</sup> Fascists deployed the genre, as did the Allies, and each side employed its own version of a politically useful binary opposition: fascism versus democracy in the Allied nations and Germans versus “non-Germans” among Nazis. These binary oppositions provide the grid upon which nationalist melodrama can proceed: the democratic family threatened by fascism’s efforts to destroy it and the German family threatened by those who would taint its blood.

In addition to this simple coding of binaries, nationalist melodrama suits the needs of the nation by inspiring national fervor. For, despite the

fact that melodrama is a culturally devalued genre in its more general forms, nationalist melodrama, because of its political valences, legitimates the “feminine” emotionalism for which the genre is often otherwise condemned. Political rationality may have created the concept of modern citizenship, endowing the enfranchised citizen with liberal reason, but political irrationality, nationalism’s recourse to ideals and myths, binds together the “imagined community” of citizens across differences of class and other forms of entitlement.<sup>5</sup> Bhabha comments on the cultural representation of this ambivalence, which can be read in the “wavering vocabularies” through which the nation is described, including, as he puts it, “the heimlich pleasures of the hearth” and the “unheimlich terror of space/race of others.”<sup>6</sup>

Historically, much of the melodrama’s political importance revolves around the genre’s support of hierarchies of gender, race, and class in the political culture of the nation. According to the dominant tenets of early democratic nation-states, women, slaves, and the poor were originally thought not to possess the rational faculties needed to qualify them for citizen status, and hence, like children, they were in need of the political “protection” of their superior governors.<sup>7</sup> The concept of *pater familias* gives form to the process whereby white landed men are charged with the governance and protection of all subordinated citizens, whereby the term *domestic* comes to apply to both the household and that which is internal to the nation. The “interstitial intimacy” between public and private that nationalist melodrama stages thus aligns order and reason with traditional middle-class family structure and morality, often emblemized in the body of a chaste young woman.<sup>8</sup>

This is indeed the case with *Die Goldene Stadt*, directed by Veit Harlan, who was arguably Nazi Germany’s most overtly ideological feature film director. On first glance, however, *Die Goldene Stadt* appears to be a fairly conventional melodrama. The story centers on a young woman, Anna (Kristina Söderbaum), whose father (Eugen Klöpfer) is too strict and controlling for her high-spirited nature. It begins as a love story in which Anna is courting a man named Christian (Paul Klinger) who comes from the “golden city” of the title, Prague, and so represents for her both love and adventure. Her father has other plans and connives to have Christian fired so that he must return to the city without her. Anna eventually defies her father’s wishes through the prompting of their Czech housekeeper (who has her sights set on the widowed father’s fortune) and goes to the city looking for Christian. Unfortunately, he is already married to someone else when she finally gets there. Before she

is able to return to her father's farm, she falls for the manipulative seductions of her shady half-Czech cousin Tony, who also has designs on her inheritance. Her father, meanwhile, has disinherited her for leaving at all and has become engaged to the housekeeper. Anna stays in Prague and becomes pregnant, and Tony abandons her. Desperate, she returns to the farm, is rejected by her father, and drowns herself in the marsh.

Like most films produced by the German national film studio, Ufa, during the Nazi period, *Die Goldene Stadt* does not address Nazi politics directly. As Eric Rentschler writes in his book on the Nazi cinema, "If one is looking for sinister heavies garbed in ss black or crowds of fanatics saluting their Führer, one does best to turn to Hollywood films of the 1940s" instead of German films of the period.<sup>9</sup> Still, entertainment films like *Die Goldene Stadt* do contain ideological messages. Indeed, while in some ways the film is a quite ordinary "woman's film" with a tragic, ill-fated heroine, it is also a nationalist melodrama. The film is structured through the central conventions of the genre, under which the German family is faced with both an internal and external threat, and the tragedy at the end is meant to stir nationalist sentiment—in this case, against Czechs and toward internal German unity. As a mitigator of the "interstitial intimacy" Bhabha names between the public and the private spheres in national narratives, nationalist melodrama places primary political importance on domestic dramas. As in nationalist melodramas more generally, *Die Goldene Stadt* makes the romantic and sexual conduct of a young woman serve as the focal point for the enunciation of a broad range of Nazi political imperatives.

One factor that has complicated the analysis of Nazi nationalist melodrama, however, especially for leftist critics, is that fascism itself has often been characterized as sentimental and indeed melodramatic. Wilhelm Reich, for instance, built his theory of fascism in 1933 out of his observation that Hitler "repeatedly stressed that one could not get at the masses with arguments, proofs, and knowledge, but only with feelings and beliefs."<sup>10</sup> Nazism thus came to be seen as a hypermasculinized reworking of eighteenth-century sentimentalism melded with twentieth-century populism, making its rhetoric of personal sacrifice and dedication to community synchronized with these tendencies in the melodrama.<sup>11</sup> Some analysts of Nazi film, Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner, for instance, consequently do not identify nationalist melodrama as a genre in its own right (a genre found in other nations as well) but rather see the tendency toward melodrama and sentimentality in films of