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Xosé Carlos  
Veiga García

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‘Needle Nazis’: Intergroup Conflict and  
Nazi Analogies in the U.S. during the  
COVID-19 Pandemic

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DOCTORAL THESIS

**'NEEDLE NAZIS': INTERGROUP  
CONFLICT AND NAZI ANALOGIES IN  
THE U.S. DURING THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**

Author

Xosé Carlos Veiga García

Supervisor/s: Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas and Alfonso Iglesias Amorín

Tutor: Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic marked a moment of intense social polarization in the United States. While part of the population strove to promote mask wearing and mass vaccination, others considered that governments were abusing their power. In the heated debates that followed, analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust proliferated, a practice already common in U.S. politics that then gained renewed prominence. This dissertation examines this phenomenon as an expression of the multiple ways in which societies relate to the past and of its role in social conflict. Drawing on the interpretative framework of Social Identity and Collective Memory, it analyzes its impact on the U.S. press and on the social network Twitter, while tracing the history of polarization and the historical imagination of the American republic.

**Keywords:** collective memory, social identity, United States, COVID-19, polarization

**Resumo:** A pandemia da COVID-19 supuxo un momento de extrema polarización social nos Estados Unidos. Mentres unha parte do país se esforzaba no uso de máscaras e na vacinación masiva, outra consideraba que os gobernos estaban a abusar do seu poder. Nos encendidos debates que seguiron proliferaron as analoxías co nazismo e o Holocausto, unha práctica xa común na política estadounidense que adquiriu entón un protagonismo renovado. Na presente disertación abordamos este fenómeno como unha manifestación das múltiples formas en que as sociedades se relacionan co pasado e do seu papel nos conflitos sociais. Partindo do marco interpretativo da Identidade Social e da Memoria Colectiva, analizamos o seu impacto na prensa estadounidense e na rede social Twitter, ao tempo que percorremos a historia da polarización e o imaxinario histórico da república norteamericana.

**Palabras chave:** memoria colectiva, identidade social, Estados Unidos, COVID-19, polarización

**Resumen:** La pandemia de COVID-19 supuso un momento de extrema polarización social en los Estados Unidos. Mientras una parte del país se esforzaba en el uso de mascarillas y en la vacunación masiva, otra consideraba que los gobiernos estaban abusando de su poder. En los encendidos debates que siguieron proliferaron las analogías con el nazismo y el Holocausto, una práctica ya común en la política estadounidense que adquirió entonces un protagonismo renovado. En la presente disertación abordamos este fenómeno como una manifestación de las múltiples formas en que las sociedades se relacionan con el pasado y de su papel en los conflictos

sociales. Partiendo del marco interpretativo de la Identidad Social y de la Memoria Colectiva, analizamos su impacto en la prensa estadounidense y en la red social Twitter, al tiempo que recorremos la historia de la polarización y el imaxinario histórico de la república norteamericana.

**Palabras clave:** memoria colectiva, identidad social, Estados Unidos, COVID-19, polarización

*To my teachers*  
*Aos meus mestres*





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## Resumo<sup>1</sup>

A presente tese de doutoramento forma parte do grande volume de investigacións que, no marco da Historia Contemporánea, teñen virado a súa atención cara ao estudo das relacións das sociedades co pasado. Un eido de pesquisa que adoita situarse baixo as etiquetas de *memoria colectiva* ou *usos sociais da Historia*. Trátase dun traballo interdisciplinar no que empregamos ferramentas teóricas e metodolóxicas propias da Psicoloxía Social e dos Estudos da Memoria Colectiva, con achegas menores doutras áreas, como a lingüística cognitiva, a socioloxía ou a politoloxía. Alén diso, cabe sinalar que se combinaron procedementos cualitativos —seccións 4.1. e 4.2.— e cuantitativos —sección 4.3—, o que se corresponde co enfoque *mixed-methods*.

Escollemos as comparacións co Nacionalsocialismo e o Holocausto —en adiante, CNH— nos Estados Unidos durante a pandemia de COVID-19 (2020-2023) como estudo de caso. Considerámolo de interese científico e disciplinar por varios motivos. Primeiro, pola súa novidade e pola escaseza de publicacións ao respecto. As poucas que existen, ademais, posúen un enfoque fundamentalmente avaliativo, e non tanto explicativo. Segundo, porque se trata dun fito idóneo para comprender o papel do pasado na formación de identidades de grupo e nos enfrontamentos sociais. A república norteamericana encontrábase nun punto de máxima polarización político-social desde que dispoñemos de rexistros comparábeis, co que as tendencias que rixen a hostilidade intergrupala foron moi visíbeis. Terceiro, pola relevancia que a memoria do Nacionalsocialismo e do Holocausto ten na identidade estadounidense. Isto vese na súa constante aparición en contextos políticos e culturais.

Tanto o marco teórico coma o caso presentado parten do obxectivo xeral de explicar as CNH como fenómeno social, especificamente na polarización política e as dinámicas identitarias. En consecuencia, establecemos as seguintes preguntas de investigación: P1) Foron utilizadas as comparacións co Nacionalsocialismo e o Holocausto como ferramentas para o conflito intergrupala? De que xeito?; P2) Estivo relacionada a identidade política ou situacional no xeito en que se empregaron estas comparacións? Que diferenzas podemos encontrar entre os grupos?; P3) Cales foron as referencias máis comúns ao Nacionalsocialismo e o Holocausto

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis in Galician language, as required by Art. 35.2 of the Regulations for Doctoral Studies of the University of Santiago de Compostela. See RESOLUCIÓN Do 6 de Agosto de 2024 Pola Que Se Ordena a Publicación Do Regulamento de Estudos de Doutoramento., 167 Diario Oficial de Galicia (DOG) 48943 (2024), [https://www.xunta.gal/dog/Publicados/2024/20240830/AnuncioG2018-060824-0004\\_gl.html](https://www.xunta.gal/dog/Publicados/2024/20240830/AnuncioG2018-060824-0004_gl.html).

e con que elementos da Pandemia de COVID-19 estiveron asociados?; P4) Existiu unha resposta social a estas comparacións? En que consistiu?

Neste sentido, o primeiro capítulo ten como finalidade sentar o marco conceptual preciso para comprender as nosas inferencias sobre o caso, así como expoñer o noso punto de vista sobre a memoria colectiva. Comezamos explicando as nocións básicas do *Social Identity Approach* (SIA) —“Enfoque da Identidade Social”—, un campo vasto e de longa tradición nas ciencias sociais con notorias achegas empíricas e teóricas. É probablemente o que ten sido máis prolífico e sistemático no estudo da formación de grupos, en como inflúen na cognición e no comportamento humanos e nos enfrontamentos entre eles. A súa relación co noso obxecto de estudo é clara, e axúdanos a entender tanto as visións do pasado —por que o Nacionalsocialismo funciona como un referente negativo, como se formou a súa imaxe na memoria colectiva— como as dinámicas do presente —a que se debe que se empreguen estes referentes negativos contra os inimigos políticos, e como funciona este proceso. Trátase da lente teórica máis influente neste traballo.

Vímonos tamén na necesidade de dar un sentido ao formato en que se comunicaban estas comparacións, para non deixarmos fóra matices relevantes no seu impacto. Nisto foi fundamental a análise das *metáforas conceptuais*, que teñen como máximo referente a George Lakoff. Explican o funcionamento elemental das comparacións nun sentido que trascende categorías formais específicas. Os estudos deste campo amosan empiricamente como nun discurso é posíbel trasladar un elemento ao dominio conceptual doutro, de xeito que se altera a súa percepción. Esta é claramente unha das estratexias máis comúns na comunicación política, e de feito nos Estados Unidos o caso concreto das CNH xa estivo presente en diversos momentos do pasado. As loitas argumentais que se deron durante a *War on Drugs* dos anos 80 e moi especialmente na xustificación da invasión do Iraq, sobre o que existen algunhas pesquisas explícitas.

Por último, o marco teórico implicou unha análise crítica das asuncións máis coñecidas dentro dos estudos da memoria colectiva e a súa confrontación coa SIA. Centrámolos nas habituais dinámicas de reificación e na confusión entre o fenómeno neuropsicolóxico da memoria e o carácter metonímico da memoria colectiva. Lonxe de explicala en termos análogos ao procesamento de información individual, na nosa explicación apelamos a como os sistemas de crenzas partilladas e os sesgos cognitivos inflúen nos esquemas mentais e na selección de información por parte dos individuos. As motivacións que explican por que a memoria colectiva

cumpre un papel fundamental dentro das dinámicas grupais explicámolas por medio de exemplos prácticos. Postulamos que cumpre dúas funcións principais. Por unha banda, reforza a identidade endogrupal dotando aos seus membros dun senso de continuidade, unha prolongación identitaria cara o pasado, proporcionándolles fitos e crenzas compartidas, transmitindo valores, referentes e normas de conduta. Xunto a isto, a memoria colectiva tamén pode servir para lexitimar as accións do grupo no presente —por exemplo, no irredentismo nacionalista, ou nas demandas de reparación histórica—, proporcionando autoridade moral e verosimilitude. Esta teorización é a que operacionaliza o encaixe entre as teorías psicosociais sobre a identidade e o concepto de memoria colectiva. Aínda que a formalización é nosa, cabe mencionar que a interacción entre ambos dominios teóricos xa se encontraba presente na obra do propio Halbwachs.

Se esta primeira parte nos dota das ferramentas pertinentes para a análise, os dous capítulos seguintes son sínteses explicativas das peculiaridades da sociedade na que se deron estas comparacións. Isto non debe entenderse como unha simple contextualización do fenómeno, pois supoñen análises en si mesmas que contribúen a explicar as CNH na mesma medida que o estudo empírico posterior. No segundo adicámonos a entender por que a Segunda Guerra Mundial é tan relevante na identidade nacional estadounidense, así como o xeito en que se produciu a formación, consolidación e transformación da memoria colectiva dos Estados Unidos sobre esta parte do pasado. Consideramos tres fitos fundamentais: a propaganda de guerra, a institucionalización e a ficcionalización.

O nazismo posúe unha dobre vertente como inimigo de guerra e como referente do mal nun sentido amplo, unha formulación histórica e outra abstracta e fantasiosa. Debemos ter en conta que as diversas narrativas sobre o nazismo que hoxe son hexemónicas nos discursos políticos e culturais dos Estados Unidos parten do seu vencellamento co Holocausto, que á súa vez considérase unha catástrofe humana de dimensións irrepitíbeis e *quase* teolóxicas. Tal perspectiva dá lugar a unha visión do nazi como alteridade universal, agás para quenes se declaran seguidores de tal ideoloxía e outras afíns —aínda que debemos subliñar a habitual preferencia polo negacionismo do xenocidio, mesmo nestes casos. Se o nacionalsocialismo funciona tan ben como figura retórica dentro das CNH é precisamente por encerrar significados e valoracións extremas, emocionalmente intensas e de ampla aceptación na sociedade. A propaganda, que sentou en boa medida as bases das representacións audiovisuais e videolúdicas posteriores, foi o contacto máis relevante que a cidadanía do país tivo co nacionalsocialismo

durante os anos do conflito, o que lle deu unha influencia destacada na construción destas narrativas. Un proceso que se complementou coa serodia institucionalización da memoria do Holocausto, sobre todo nos anos 80 e 90. Non só non contradiciu os discursos propagandísticos, senón que intensificou a visión do nazismo como un inimigo civilizacional e, en consecuencia, a dimensión heroica da loita dos Estados Unidos contra el.

Non demoraron en aparecer tamén numerosos produtos inspirados no nazismo e no Holocausto que se desprendían da compoñente histórica e o levaban a un terreo puramente ficticio. Narrativas sobre super-viláns nazis como Red Skull, figuras cada vez máis recorrentes como os zombis nazis, a fascinación pola tecnoloxía pretendidamente futurista das *wunderwaffen* e pola estética das *schutzstaffel* levaron á Alemaña Nazi e a Adolf Hitler de figuras do pasado a referentes culturais moi comúns sobre os que existe abundosa literatura.

Estas visións maniqueas reforzaron narrativa do país como un foco de liberdades, e dotou de sentido simbólico á súa lideranza internacional posterior, na verdade máis baseada na supremacía militar e económica do que na moral. Cómpre lembrar que a guerra se converter nun dos seus fitos fundacionais non é algo irrelevante: a sociedade estadounidense encontrábase fragmentada pola discriminación aberta cara os non considerados brancos, especialmente as persoas afrodescendentes, e pola multiculturalidade. Supuxo unha misión colectiva na que se deron contactos interraciais e á que seguiron programas sociais integradores como a famosa *G.I. Bill* de 1944. Así, a memoria colectiva nacional sobre esta parte do pasado é polifacética, xeralmente maniquea e dunha relevancia fundamental no escenario público e identitario do país.

Isto non abonda para explicarmos por que as CNH foron tan habituais durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Ademais de estar moi dispoñíbel nos discursos públicos, a referencia ao Nazismo e ao Holocausto reflicte, cando se emprega contra inimigos políticos, un contexto de polarización. O terceiro capítulo céntrase precisamente nisto. Presenta á sociedade dos Estados Unidos como unha tremendamente dividida en torno a cuestións como a etnicidade, o conservadurismo ou progresismo ideolóxicos e a filiación partisana. Abordamos esta cuestión dende unha breve historia recente do país focada naqueles elementos que favoreceron o desenvolvemento da polarización que se viu durante a crise pandémica. O desenvolvemento dun identitarismo ideolóxico cada vez maior nos eidos demócrata e republicano tivo como protagonistas iniciais aos movementos polos dereitos civís das persoas negras —e non brancas, en xeral— e ao crecente rexeitamento que acordaba o modelo de programas sociais herdado do *New Deal*. A maioría de estudos consultados sitúan as transformacións decisivas nos anos 60,

cando o Partido Demócrata perdeu definitivamente a súa hexemonía nos estados do sur, os máis combativos neste aspecto, e cando se iniciou o salto á política de movementos conservadores cristianos e anti-laicos. A chegada de Ronald Reagan á Casa Branca estivo marcada por este contexto —de feito, impulsada por el—, e consolidou a polarización ao rachar coa axenda de avance nos dereitos civís, atacar aos movementos sindicais, recortar programas sociais e empregar unha retórica marcadamente relixiosa e incendiaria. Os anos 90 viron a chegada dun aparello mediático explicitamente conservador que, no esencial, chega ata o día de hoxe, con figuras como Rush Limbaugh —inventor do termo *feminazi*— e cadenas de televisión como Fox News, cuxo impacto electoral ten sido demostrado empiricamente.

O novo século viu unha división de opinións cada vez máis radical entre demócratas e republicanos sobre a xestión dos políticos dun e doutro partido, e unha falla insalvável en cales eran os problemas percibidos por cada banda do espectro ideolóxico. Estudos estatísticos amosan a intensificación do fenómeno coñecido como *sorting* —“clasificación” ou “reparto”—, un liñamento entre caracteres demográficos e socioeconómicos e as escollas electorais. As minorías sociais e as mulleres achegábanse ao Partido Demócrata —que chegou a capitalizar practicamente o 90% do voto das persoas negras en varias eleccións—, mentres que o Republicano se convertía nun dominio do conservadurismo cristián, branco e descontento coas transformacións económicas da globalización. Fitos notorios como a Guerra de Iraq ou a chegada do primeiro presidente negro escenificaron estes enfrontamentos de modo acusado, mais non hai dúbida de que a maior representación do clima de hostilidade e enfrontamento foi a vitoria de Donald Trump en 2016. Durante a súa presidencia enfrontouse a algúns dos consensos máis sólidos da democracia estadounidense, atacando á prensa e o poder xudicial, presentándose como inimigo da globalización e despregando unha violencia retórica contra os inmigrantes con poucos precedentes. Impulsada inicialmente polo *Tea Party* —un movemento político ultra conservador—, nela presenciouse a emerxencia dun nacionalismo branco anti-establishment que chegaría a ocupar o propio capitolio en 2021 e cuestionar a lexitimidade do propio sistema electoral.

De feito, foi durante a propia presidencia de Trump cando as CNH pasaron de ser anécdotas a un escándalo habitual na prensa. A súa chegada viuse como a caída da democracia dos Estados Unidos, o que deu pé a numerosas referencias a Weimar. A súa retórica histriónica e o foco particular nos inmigrantes —dos que chegou a afirmar que *envelenaban o sangue do país*— levárono a ser comparado con Adolf Hitler, e aos seus seguidores cos nazis. Esta foi unha

estratexia moi explotada por diversos sectores aíns ao Partido Demócrata, dende xornalistas e opinadores coñecidos ata historiadores da talla de Christopher Browning, a apelación á Alemaña Nazi, de xeito máis ou menos matizado, convertiuse nunha constante. Como mencionabamos ao principio, a ferramenta retórica da metáfora conceitual foi empregada para situar a Trump como un perigo e consolidar, por contraste, a cohesión intragrupal na oposición.

Durante a Pandemia deuse un salto cualitativo nesta dirección, xa que a sociedade estadounidense era especialmente sensíbel a unha crise de tales características. A pesares de ter custado a vida de máis dun millón de estadounidenses —por volta de 1,13 nas datas oficiais da pandemia, segundo datos do Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—, non existiu un verdadeiro consenso social para freala. A tendencia país á desconfianza cara o Estado, sentada nunha tradición individualista, misturouse co espallamento de crenzas acientíficas ou mesmo conspirativas, facendo das medidas de contención do coronavirus unha verdadeira area de enfrontamento política. Confinamentos, distancia social, uso de máscaras, vacinas e certificados de vacinación foron cuestionados con hostilidade, comparándoos co xenocidio xudeu e presentándoos como mostra dun autoritarismo análogo ao do rexime nazi dos anos 30 e 40. Se baixo o goberno de Trump os principais promotores desta forma de entender a política foran próximos ao Partido Demócrata, na maior parte da Pandemia foron os republicanos. A pesares de que Joe Biden só se fixo co goberno federal en xaneiro de 2021, o carácter descentralizado das medidas fixo que os alcaldes e gobernadores demócratas —así como algúns republicanos— se convertiran en obxectivo destes ataques dende o inicio por parte de sectores, sobre todo, conservadores.

A proliferación das CNH neste período foi tan exacerbada que cubriu toda clase de espazos políticos, dende congresistas como Marjorie Taylor Greene ou Warren Davidson até reunións de consellos escolares en pequenos núcleos rurais. Puidemos achegarnos ás súas dimensións por medio dun estudo amplo a través da prensa, partindo da base de datos *Media Cloud*, que nos permitiu identificar patróns de comparación e dinámicas intergrupais transversais. Tales comparacións se instrumentalizaron en dous sentidos fundamentais: deslexitimar as accións mandatarios ao equiparalas co inimigo nacionalsocialista e situar aos opositores a estas medidas como vítimas para dotalos de autoridade moral. No primeiro caso, o noso marco teórico —a SIA— explica como entre os mecanismos propios de forte confrontación intergrupala está o dos estereotipos negativos, estruturas cognitivas que median a percepción dos membros doutros grupos e a conduta cara eles. A equiparación entre

promotores das citadas medidas de contención da doenza e un paradigma de alteridade tan intenso como o nazismo funciona deste mesmo xeito, alterando os termos do enfrontamento para eliminar calquera posibilidade de negociación co rival e lexitimar as accións contra el. O senso de ameaza que deriva disto conduce a unha maior solidariedade intragrupal e permite unha maior cohesión e coordinación das accións.

A vitimización está en consonancia con isto. Como os opositores ás medidas se encontraban suxeitos á lexislación dos que as promovían, a reinterpretación do contexto en clave de desequilibrio e inxustiza resultaba vantaxoso. Nos estudos da *competitive victimhood* — que podemos traducir como “vitimización competitiva”—, sublíñase a capacidade destas estratexias discursivas para acordar emocións negativas contra o exogrupo, dotar ao endogrupo de explicacións satisfactorias para unha realidade desfavorábel e atraer a solidariedade doutros grupos —o que podería fragmentar a posición do grupo presuntamente dominante. Así, os gobernadores foron convertidos en Adolf Hitler; os certificados de vacinación, en estrelas de David; estados como California ou Nova Iorque, en novas encarnacións da Alemaña Nazi; médicos e científicos no Doutor Mengele ou participantes dunha moderna *Aktion T4*, e os contrarios, en cambio, en xudeus inocentes e vítimas aínda máis indefensas ca Ana Frank — como tentou transmitir o que logo sería ministro de saúde, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Un estudo complementario realizámolo en Twitter, o que nos permitiu contrastar o debate político que chegou á prensa co que se produciu nunha das máis importantes redes sociais do país. Isto foi posíbel por medio dunha interface de programación de aplicacións — *Application Programming Interface* ou API—, accedendo con autorización da empresa ás súas bases de datos. O proceso viuse truncado pola adquisición da plataforma por parte de Elon Musk, que cortou o acceso á maior parte das investigacións académicas restrinxindo a capacidade de recolección de información e impondo un prezo de decenas de miles de dólares. Porén, conseguímonos facer cunha base de datos suficiente —aínda que limitada— antes de que isto acontecera. Despois dun proceso de limpeza que nos levou a eliminar tweets creados por usuarios non humanos, ou non reais, publicados por contas non estadounidenses ou non afíns tematicamente á nosa pesquisa, ficamos cun conxunto de varios centos. Mediante un proceso de codificación e análise estatística, que reforzou as tendencias observadas anteriormente, véndose desta vez plasmadas en relacións estatísticas. Dada a súa presenza no conxunto de datos, tamén puidemos sistematizar mellor as respostas e críticas ás CNH por parte da

sociedade, encontrando que a maior parte delas apelaban a elementos morais ou criticaban a ignorancia daqueles que as emitían.

As conclusións desta investigación están marcadas polas respostas ás preguntas que nos propuxemos nun inicio. Con respecto á P1, a exposición anterior evidencia que as CNH foron empregadas como ferramenta no conflito intergrupar, presentándose aos que apoiaban as medidas de contención do coronavirus como Adolf Hitler e diversas outras figuras dentro do dominio conceitual do nazismo, e aos opositores como vítimas equiparábeis aos xudeus durante o Holocausto. As diferenzas identitarias e grupais sobre as que nos interrogabamos na P2 existiron, e foron máis complexas do que podería semellar nun inicio. Aínda que o contexto de polarización favoreceu unha distinción partisana clara entre demócratas e republicanos, sendo os segundos os protagonistas das comparacións, a súa resposta non foi absolutamente coherente coa dinámica política. Existiron casos en que a identidade contextual que se formou contra as medidas de contención pesou máis ca a fidelidade electoral, de xeito que houbo gobernadores republicanos que tamén foron obxecto das CNH. As referencias do pasado foron relativamente simples e máis ben previsíbeis. Respondendo á P3, estiveron concentradas en Adolf Hitler, diversos símbolos do autoritarismo da Alemaña Nazi e no Holocausto, destacando neste último caso a estrela de David e a compoñente discriminatoria, máis ca o exterminio físico en si. Finalmente, a resposta social fronte ás comparacións (P4) estivo dominada polas respostas políticas e por institucións adicadas á protección da poboación xudea ou da memoria do Holocausto, como a Anti-Defamation League, a American Jewish Committee, o Auschwitz Museum ou o Yad Vashem —estas últimas estranxeiras, mais con intervencións en diversos casos. A pesares dalgunhas iniciativas pedagóxicas, o seu enfoque foi o da condena moral, o que paradoxicamente puido contribuir a aumentar a polarización ao converter a lexitimidade das CNH nun novo terreo de combate político.

En conxunto, esta investigación amosa como o Nacionalsocialismo e o Holocausto se teñen convertido en referentes culturais amplos cunha dimensión deshistorizada. O seu encaixe nos debates políticos analizados correspóndese máis cun valor simbólico procedente da produción cultural do que en interpretacións sobre a historia. A memoria colectiva posúe tamén esta dimensión desapegada da realidade, e encaixa cos diversos mecanismos de reforzo de identidades grupais e de competición ou hostilidade intergrupar. Os procesos estudados chaman a atención dos estudos da memoria colectiva sobre a necesidade dun maior foco nesta

dimensión social e empírica, que permita afondar na comprensión do papel do pasado nas sociedades humanas.

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## Introduction

The study of representations of the past is one of the most interdisciplinary paths currently traversing historiography. Since the 1980s, the memory boom has brought new social demands connected to the role of collective memory in the public sphere. The analysis of legislation, monuments and museums, memorials, and popular culture has linked this discipline with political science, sociology, anthropology, philology, and many other fields of knowledge. This is not entirely new, as earlier schools such as the *Annales* or British Social History had already sought dialogue with psychology and economics to improve their methods. Today, however, the historian's craft encompasses more activities than the exclusive research, analysis, and narration of past events, producing studies on how societies imagine and represent them.

It is not surprising that Nazism and the Holocaust occupy such a prominent role in these fields, given their foundational character for many institutions, epistemologies, and even national identities of our era in the West. During the 1980s and 1990s the central point of interest was the establishment of a network of institutional and cultural referents to secure the memory of the Jewish genocide and of other victims of totalitarian regimes throughout the twentieth century. In contrast, in recent years we have witnessed different, and in some cases contrary, phenomena. The geopolitical order established first with the end of the Second World War and later with the fall of the socialist bloc in the Cold War is coming to an end, giving way to a world in which the hegemony of liberal ideas is being questioned. In Europe and the U.S. political and social forces have emerged whose violent and populist performativity, defense of nation and ethnic purity, conspiracist thinking, and disdain for democratic institutions clash with previous consensuses. They have led some to ask whether the world could be witnessing a resurgence of ideas thought to be buried. Such an environment has fueled polarized debates in general, and in the digital public sphere in particular, where references to this past are frequent and massive. Whether as an exercise in denialism to discredit the danger of certain political discourses or as a weapon against the ideological rival by means of instrumentalization, Nazism and the Holocaust have not only remained subjects of interest, but are recurrent today.

The United States is probably one of the Western societies where these phenomena are occurring most intensely. Its extreme degree of polarization —a long-term process with deep roots— and the centrality that the memory of the Second World War still has for its national identity make it an exceptional case for investigation in this sense. During the COVID-19

pandemic, the social crisis experienced by American society was reflected in the explosion of protest surrounding the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, in the unprecedented occupation of the Capitol by far-right groups, and in a constant political clash over the health measures to contain the pathogen. According to Abramowitz, “a growing share of Americans has come to see politics as a form of warfare with elections viewed as contests between the forces of good and evil.”<sup>2</sup> With this, although the collective memory of the 1940s has always been present in its public space, it had never been used so habitually and so aggressively as it is now against internal enemies. The case of the United States has been widely studied in political science due to the dynamics of electoral polarization, and in the field of history there is a line of analysis focused on representations of the Second World War and their role in national identity. However, there are not many studies that address the intersection between both fields: in what ways does this polarization affect how the past is understood and used? And conversely, how do the country’s subnational identities draw on these discourses when faced with such a divisive scenario? An exploration of this kind, such as the one we present here, not only sheds light on some blind spots in our knowledge about the North American power, but also holds great potential for the broader understanding of the phenomenon commonly referred to as collective memory.

Our work is part of a line of research from diverse disciplines that have been analyzing these representations of Nazism and the Holocaust, especially since the 2000s. With their massification in popular culture and public debates, numerous scholars have asked about their aestheticization, normalization, and role in the culture of contemporary societies. Good examples include publications such as *Monsters in the Mirror*,<sup>3</sup> *Nazisploitation*<sup>4</sup> or *Hi Hitler!*,<sup>5</sup> which address these questions in film, video games, literature, museums, or politics. Most of them are focused on ethical and cultural aspects; it is rare to find works that relate these representations to specific measurable social dynamics. This is understandable, since due to the lack of empirical and quantitative studies, the sources are usually cultural products. Such analyses are highly relevant for research in the social sciences, as they help us explore the possible

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<sup>2</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz, “Peak Polarization? The Rise of Partisan-Ideological Consistency and Its Consequences,” *State of the Parties Conference*, Ray Bliss Institute, University of Akron, April 11, 2021, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Buttsworth and Maartje Abbenhuis, *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Post-War Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel H. Magilow et al., *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!: How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

consequences of the operating media ecosystems. However, they are not sufficient: in order to build a cumulative knowledge base and reach systematizable conclusions, it is also necessary to employ theoretical tools based on studies with comparable and falsifiable measurement instruments, which are transversal to the various paradigms of knowledge.

One of the objectives we propose in this dissertation is to contribute to filling that gap, opening the study of the use and representation of Nazism and the Holocaust to areas more focused on empiricism and social dynamics. For this purpose, we chose analogies, that is, the rhetorical exercise of placing this side of history on the same plane with other events. This is a very common activity in political debates, and one that is of particular interest for several reasons. First, because it is a relatively understudied reality as a phenomenon in itself, especially from an explanatory point of view. Much of the literature cited treats them as a form of Holocaust trivialization or distortion, with the aim of historical correction, ethical-moral censure, or political recommendations.<sup>6</sup> It is taken for granted that such analogies are simply the product of ignorance, cynicism, or frivolity, so research on them focuses on how to prevent and combat them.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, this dissertation provides the first empirically grounded analysis — both theoretically and methodologically informed — of the ways in which representations of Nazism and the Holocaust operate within the dynamics of social polarization in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the following pages we will not evaluate these analogies, but rather provide them with an explanatory framework that allows us to insert them into broader social dynamics. For this reason we dispense with the frameworks of banalization, misuse, or distortion. Instead, we will understand them as manifestations of social confrontation, and we will delve into their analysis

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Matthias J. Becker, “Nazi Analogy/Fascism Analogies,” in *Decoding Antisemitism: A Guide to Identifying Antisemitism Online*, ed. Matthias J. Becker et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40765-0\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40765-0_9); Andreas Musolff, “Instrumentalisation of Holocaust Memory and False Historical Analogies,” in *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century: Contesting/Consuming/Commemorating*, ed. Caroline Pearce and Jane Caplan (Routledge, 2016); Michael C. Desch, “The Myth of Abandonment: The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust Analogy,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 106–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600666295>; Mark Webber, “Metaphorizing the Holocaust: The Ethics of Comparison,” *Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication* 8, no. 15 (2011): 5–30; Matthew Parnell and Mary E. Stuckey, “Holocaust Distortion During the Global Pandemic: An Exercise in Anti-Democratic Demagoguery,” *Javnost - The Public* 30, no. 1 (2023): 128–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2023.2168959>; James W. Davis, “Abusing the Holocaust Analogy?,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 4 (2006): 706–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410701190930>.

<sup>7</sup> Notable exceptions include Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “An American Führer? Nazi Analogies and the Struggle to Explain Donald Trump,” *Central European History* 52, no. 4 (2019): 554–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938919000840>; Brian Johnson, “‘Just like Hitler’: Comparisons to Nazism in American Culture,” in *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2010), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (638631883), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/just-like-hitler-comparisons-nazism-american/docview/638631883/se-2?accountid=17253>.

and interpretation in light of theories proposed by social psychology and other more specific frameworks. In this research we do not aspire to assess the ethical character of the analogies or their implications for issues such as antisemitism or denialism. Our priority is to explain them in such a way that they can be compared with other forms of intergroup hostility, and their study can, consequently, be enriched by work already done in other disciplines. To this end we chose the U.S. case during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we do so through two avenues: a study of analogies that made their way into the press, especially those made by political figures, and another on the impact of these debates on social networks, specifically Twitter. This choice is motivated by the fact that these are the two broadest, most accessible, and most reliable sources of information available to us.

Our thesis is that analogies with National Socialism and the Holocaust have allowed the social groups involved to reinforce their positions through the amplification of outgroup stereotypes and an increased perception of risk. As negative references deeply rooted in American culture, the plausible projection of attributes associated with Nazism onto political rivals makes it possible to dissociate them from the shared national identity, guide the interpretation of their discourse, and legitimize violence. This process runs parallel to the self-victimization that, either implicitly or explicitly, emerges when one of the groups perceives itself as the target of discriminatory attitudes identified as Nazi. This was fundamentally the case with conservative opposition to coronavirus containment measures, such as the mandatory use of face masks or vaccination certificates. To reach these conclusions, we deploy a theoretical and analytical framework ranging from social psychology to studies on vaccine hesitancy, constructing a comprehensive explanatory model for the phenomenon.

It is a solid theoretical framework that explains how people's perception of reality becomes biased based on their identification with particular social groups. The mechanisms of differentiation between the ingroup and the outgroup have been found to be decisive in guiding behavior in social situations where there is some perception of risk, competition, or tension. Among these mechanisms we find stereotypes and prejudices, which provide individuals with interpretive schemes and assumed information about others. This is fundamental in socially polarized contexts such as that of the United States, since these cognitive mechanisms explain the political and social decisions that led to the rejection of many health measures and to the extreme verbal violence that characterized media debates on the issue.

We also include a brief discussion of the specific format we are studying: analogies—in their broad sense. We draw on the paradigm of conceptual metaphors, whose principal reference is George Lakoff, and which provides us with an interpretive framework for verbal formulations whose psycho-cognitive implications we later analyze. With this, we seek to distance ourselves from more value-laden paradigms such as Critical Discourse Theory, which has been more frequently employed in analyses of U.S. political polarization. According to the aforementioned theory, a conceptual metaphor consists, in essence, of transferring one element into the conceptual domain of another, interpreting it through the lens of the latter, emphasizing shared aspects and minimizing differences. This is particularly fitting for the study of analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust: during the COVID-19 pandemic, that is precisely what occurred, and it has profound political utility. By transferring the events of the pandemic into the schema of 1930s and 1940s Germany, it becomes possible to imbue relatively new and unexplored events with meaning, thereby reducing the cognitive tension derived from uncertainty and consolidating a partisan narrative against rival groups—in this case, governments supportive of virus containment measures. Indeed, throughout U.S. history this type of metaphor has been widely employed, especially in times of crisis or war—the War on Drugs or the invasion of Iraq, to cite just two examples.

For this reason, it is also essential to undertake a detailed study of what the American public has come to assume about Nazism and the Holocaust. The metaphor would serve no purpose if there were not a strong cultural tradition representing this part of the past; it would appear implausible and lose its emotional impact. To this end, we must develop a theoretical model of collective memory consistent both with the preexisting academic tradition and with the paradigm employed in our thesis—the aforementioned Social Identity Approach. After offering a critique of the tendency within certain strands of Memory Studies toward the reification of memory and organicist explanations, we propose the account we consider most conducive to reconciling this phenomenon with social psychology. For us, collective memory constitutes part of the filters through which information about reality—and, in this case, about the past—is selected, filters that are implicit in adherence to a given social identity, what within SIA has been referred to as social influence. Representations of the past serve various functions in the creation and legitimization of social identities, providing group members with symbols that project identity diachronically and lend justification to their present actions.

There are at least three fundamental questions that must be answered in this chapter: why this memory plays such a central role, how it became so deeply embedded in popular culture, and how the set of beliefs about Nazism and the Holocaust that served as an anchor of plausibility for analogies during the pandemic came to be constructed. To this end, we explain the role of the Second World War as one of the foundational myths of the current American republic at a time when its civic identity was divided by racial discrimination and the country's growing ethnic diversity. Likewise, we trace the history of the introduction of Nazism into American culture, from perceptions of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and wartime propaganda efforts to the mnemonic explosion of the 1980s and the prolific cultural production that accommodated its representations. Throughout the recent history of the United States, Nazism has been configured as an almost legendary otherness against which to legitimize, by contrast, the values of the nation's liberal democracy—a process decisively reinforced by its association with the Holocaust as the greatest human massacre of all time, incomparable and—in this narrative—inexplicable.

Once the core components of the analogies under study are clarified, it is necessary to focus on the social context in which they developed. As noted above, the United States at that time was at its highest measurable point of polarization, and detailing the process that led it there contributes significantly to understanding why an event of such magnitude shattered many of the basic consensuses of the state's crisis management strategy. We analyze the consolidation and fragmentation of social movements for civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s, the conservative reaction of the so-called New Right, the emergence of a media ecosystem increasingly conducive to echo chambers, and the growing electoral division along racial and ideological lines.

Other factors, however, also decisively shaped the social response under analysis. The country is characterized by a deeply rooted cultural individualism, distrust of governmental and health institutions, the spread of therapeutic methods not supported by science, and a widespread tendency to believe in conspiracy theories among broad sectors of the population. Moreover, political polarization was not confined to electoral processes but extended into science itself, through debates such as those surrounding environmental regulations, further undermining the credibility of the scientific ecosystem and its authority across various social strata. Without this, it would be difficult to explain the plausibility of comparisons between vaccination campaigns and mass genocides, or between health research institutions and the cruel medical tortures carried out by the Nazi regime.

Finally, Chapter 4 contains the empirical analyses of the press and the social network Twitter. As of May 5 2025, the date in which the WHO declared that the COVID-19 was over, approximately 1.13 million people had died in the United States from the virus.<sup>8</sup> This number of deaths was much greater than those of other diseases. If we were to compare it to the amount of people who died from influenza in the same period, the number doesn’t reach 20.000.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, to put this in perspective, the 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic had a much greater relative impact on the U.S. mortality. Thus, the particularity of the COVID-19 pandemic is not based on its epidemiological profile, but on its political and social consequences, which constitute the base of our analyses here, focused on the so-called “COVID mandates” — restrictive measures to contain the pandemic. We carry out an initial analytical chronicle of the events of the pandemic through the press, focusing on the aforementioned analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust, commenting on and highlighting the details of most of the controversies that arose in this regard. This allows us to identify a clear Republican predominance among the authors of these analogies, although their political targets were not limited to Democrats, but included all kinds of public figures and institutions that supported coronavirus containment measures. In these cases, the most common mechanisms of analogy were established—for example, lockdowns and mobility restrictions were portrayed as signs of the loss of freedom under Nazism, and vaccination certificates were compared to discriminatory symbols such as the yellow stars during the Holocaust.

The second part of the chapter is devoted to analyzing this same phenomenon in the debates that took place at the time on the social network Twitter—at the time of writing these lines, renamed X by its new owners. We use data processing techniques to obtain a set of tweets that we subject to qualitative analysis through coding methods and statistical description. Whereas the study of the press followed a chronological criterion, here we analyze the analogies from a thematic perspective, delving into the most common elements and relating them to our theoretical framework and to the information presented in previous sections.

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<sup>8</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Surveillance and Data Analytics,” CDC. COVID-19, May 9, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/covid/php/surveillance/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Influenza,” National Center for Health Statistics, July 15, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/flu.htm>.

## Objectives and general methodology

This research is framed within a mixed-methods paradigm.<sup>10</sup> This means that it does not belong to a single discipline, but rather draws on diverse strategies to address the problem from an epistemologically pragmatic standpoint.<sup>11</sup> Both qualitative and quantitative procedures are employed, conducting interpretative analyses informed by empirically supported theories, and contrasting claims with our own findings. The methodological particularities of each case are explained in the corresponding sections. In sections 4.1. and 4.2. we carried out an analysis of the press, taken from sources available on the *Media Cloud* online database —a project carried out by various universities and researchers— and additional articles taken from our Twitter dataset. The latter was obtained through the use of an API —Application Programming Interface— with Twitter’s permission, and the treatment of the data implied several cleaning and encoding processes before statistical analysis.

As noted previously, our general objective is to explain analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust as a social phenomenon. To this end we rely on the theoretical framework of the Social Identity Approach, presented in Chapter 2. This approach studies people’s social identity, how they organize into groups, and how these groups confront one another. We consider it an appropriate framework because of the large body of experimental material it offers and the diversity of its contributions. We use its categories mainly in interpretative analyses. Theories of metaphor and collective memory also serve as reference points, especially regarding the way in which these analogies were formulated in the case we studied, and as a bridge with historiographical research.

The chosen case is that of the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its relevance was already explained in the introduction: it is a society at the peak of polarization, for which there are studies available, in which the Second World War is also a central element of national identity. We approached it through two sources. The first is a dataset of news articles extracted from the MediaCloud platform and another from Twitter, which we also used to expand the former. The details of the extraction, cleaning, and processing of these data are explained in the corresponding sections of Chapter 5. As mentioned earlier, we chose them because of their accessibility, reliability, and ability to capture the phenomenon under study.

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (SAGE, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> David L. Morgan, “Paradigms Lost and Pragmatism Regained: Methodological Implications of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods,” *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 1 (2007): 48–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2345678906292462>.

Other alternatives, such as personal interviews, social networks other than Twitter, or television were either beyond our reach or lacked open channels for obtaining research data.

Thus, as part of the stated general objective, we propose to answer the following questions:

Q1) Were analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust used as tools for intergroup conflict? In what way?

Q2) Was political and/or situational identity related to the way these analogies were used? What differences can be found between groups?

Q3) What were the most common referents of Nazism and the Holocaust, and with which elements of the pandemic were they associated?

Q4) Was there a social response to these analogies? What did it consist of?

In this study we encountered some limitations in answering these questions due to the sudden closure of access to Twitter data in 2023. The platform's new ownership imposed fees of tens of thousands of dollars for researchers to access archives, and only in a limited way. As a result, our dataset remained incomplete, and the analyses carried out respond only to part of what was initially planned.

## Chapter 1. Theoretical considerations: social identity, collective memory and metaphors

Analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust—hereafter, ANH—cannot be treated as statements in a vacuum. All the cases we analyze took place in the public sphere of communication, expressed a mood or opinion on current affairs, and were directed at someone and frequently against someone. Thus, they must be analyzed for what they are: social interactions. As such, they possess motivations and formats that differentiate them from other kinds of interactions, whose characteristics we must study in order to explain the various phenomena surrounding them.

The central argument of this dissertation is that these ANHs function as mechanisms of social differentiation that emerge in particularly acute contexts of intergroup conflict, derogating the image of the rival group by associating it with negative stereotypes drawn from past examples—the Nazis—, attacking the legitimacy of their actions by understanding them in the light of phenomena almost universally considered catastrophic—the Holocaust—, and thereby legitimizing the stance of one's own group. To achieve this association, representative strategies are used, in the form of verbal or visual discourses, metaphors, and comparisons, in ways that increase the persuasive force of the stereotypical content being created. Alongside this, the shared belief system about the past, commonly studied under the concept of collective memory, provides materials for comparison that are loaded with pre-established evaluative associations and emotional triggers. This is fundamental, because it allows the authors of the comparisons to discharge a large amount of negative emotions and value judgments upon their rivals without needing to make them explicit.

These three elements, *social identity*, *representational strategy based on comparisons or metaphors*, and *collective memory*, are the three lenses upon which our interpretation of the object of study rests, arranged in a hierarchical order that extends from the general social dimension of the phenomenon to its specificity as a product of the beliefs that groups share—or do not share—about the past. In the following sections of this theoretical block we will study each of them in sufficient depth to demonstrate their analytical value and to introduce the reader to the basic notions needed to understand the explanations that will later be developed in the empirical block. We are, then, before the analytical and propositional core of this research work.

## 1.1. Social identity and group theories

The properly social framework is, as stated, what articulates and organizes the conceptual apparatus we use in our thesis, where the analysis of comparison or metaphor as a representational tool and collective memory as a source of references are inserted. The choice of interpretive tools provided by social psychology is based on three fundamental reasons. The first is the sociopolitical context we are dealing with: the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will see in section 4, the American society that reached 2020 was experiencing the highest levels of polarization in more than half a century, and it also had structural sociological characteristics that made it particularly sensitive to the political measures required by the pandemic situation. The second is due to the specific part of the past that was present in the comparisons. Nazism functions in Western societies as a negative referent, as something that, when used in a comparison against a person, can only serve as a means of attack and distancing.

In both cases, the social element of alterity and of the relationships established between people who do not mutually identify predominates. That is, the social dynamics surrounding the comparisons are not those of cooperation, but rather of confrontation, those proper to competition and, at a certain point, to social conflict. Social psychology is one of the disciplines that has developed these aspects in the most profound, empirical, and systematic way, especially after the epistemological shock<sup>12</sup> brought about by the Second World War. The analyses of prejudice, stereotype, group influence over the individual, and their framing within broader social phenomena have occupied a prominent place in it since the 1950s. Finally, this area is the most suitable for our research because it provides us with more tools to analyze individual or group behaviors, as we are working with small populations and individualized cases, and not so much with large volumes of aggregated data, as would be typical of other fields of research.

In the following sections we will understand the bases of the study of social identities and how they apply to intergroup conflict. We will see what motivates individuals to identify with a group and to take actions against others; how these confrontations work and how the construction of out-group stereotypes takes place. These are the mechanisms within which ANHs are framed, and which will give us the keys to interpret them in the empirical block.

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<sup>12</sup> See Dermot Moran, "Introduction: Towards an Assessment of Twentieth-Century Philosophy," in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century Philosophy*, ed. Dermot Moran (Routledge, 2008).

### 1.1.1. Cognitive aspects of social categorization

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is one of the most influential frameworks in the study of human identities, and today it provides us with the theoretical tools and empirical knowledge needed to understand the dynamics of their formation and functioning—something particularly useful when analyzing polarized contexts such as that of the United States during the COVID pandemic. From its perspective, we can understand *social identity* as the link between the individual—the basic unit of human sociability—and the groups with which they identify. In Tajfel’s classic definition—he being one of the founders of the study of social identities—it consists of “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership.”<sup>13</sup> Turner, one of his disciples, advanced the Self-Categorization Theory, a refinement and expansion of the former, which explains that these groups function as social categories: contextual cognitive representations of how people are divided into groups, and that the *self-concept*—the description and evaluation a person makes of themselves<sup>14</sup>—is composed of many of them. That is, just as individuals use categories to make sense of the material world—“furniture,” “animals,” “cities”—they do the same with the social environment and with themselves—“man”, “black”, “conservative”.<sup>15</sup> These categories serve both internal and external functions. On the one hand, they allow the individual to organize their self-perception, maintaining, through a selection based on their own interests, a positive self-image differentiated from others—what is known as *positive distinctiveness*.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, they constitute a fundamental mechanism for interpreting social stimuli and, consequently, for guiding one’s behavior toward others and one’s participation in social dynamics.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Emergence and cognitive basis of categories*

Now then, how do categories emerge, how are they organized, and what makes individuals identify with some and not with others? The formation of categories takes place through the comparison of stimuli, calculating the perceived similarities and differences between people

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<sup>13</sup> Henri Tajfel, *Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 255.

<sup>14</sup> American Psychological Association, “Self-Concept,” 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/self-concept>.

<sup>15</sup> For an explanation of the first researches that related categorical perception of objects to stereotypes and social categories, see Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (Routledge, 1988), 68–73.

<sup>16</sup> John C. Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), 27, 29–30.

<sup>17</sup> John C. Turner, “Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group,” in *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, ed. Henri Tajfel (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15–40.

along one or several contextually relevant dimensions. The ratio between the average difference perceived between a group of people and the rest (interclass differences) and the average difference perceived among those people themselves (intra-class difference) is called the meta-contrast ratio,<sup>18</sup> which is what makes a category clearer and more noticeable. The higher this meta-contrast ratio is for a particular individual—that is, the more they differ from members of other groups on that dimension and the more they resemble those of their own group—the greater their prototypicality. There is a broad discussion on the specific contents of categories but in general we can state that they are associated with denotative information, concerning the expected attributes of people as members of the group, based on perception, and evaluative information, which involves value judgments about those expected attributes and about the category as a whole, accompanied by the emotions this triggers in the individual.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to emphasize the perceptual nature of these differences and similarities, since the categorization process is one in which numerous cognitive biases intervene, altering the perception of reality. One of the most important for our purposes is accentuation, which implies that when people identify others—or themselves—as part of these cognitive categories, they tend to undervalue intra-class differences—assimilation—and to overvalue interclass differences—contrast—along dimensions relevant to the category.<sup>20</sup> What this produces is that the attributes considered typical of a category are applied more strongly to the individuals included in it, and at the same time it is precisely what makes categorization so relevant for studying social phenomena: people’s judgments are, in fact, affected by the social categories they use.

In 1963, Henri Tajfel and A. L. Wilkes wanted to demonstrate this tendency at the cognitive level, and for that they conducted a test involving the estimation of the length of eight lines of different sizes—each between 16.2 and 22.9 cm long. They presented them to three groups of volunteers: in group C, the four shortest lines were labeled “A” and the longest ones “B”; in group R, the labels were assigned randomly; and in group U there were no labels—the control group. The experiment showed that participants had a clear tendency to exaggerate the

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<sup>18</sup> According to Campbell’s definition of *entitativity*, “the relative level of intra-entit coefficients against the background of inter-entit coefficients”, referring to similarity coefficients in Q-type correlations, see Donald T. Campbell, “Common Fate, Similarity, and Other Indices of the Status of Aggregates of Persons as Social Entities,” *Behavioral Science* 3, no. 1 (1958): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830030103>.

<sup>19</sup> See Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 229; David L. Hamilton and Tina K. Trolier, “Stereotypes and Stereotyping: An Overview of the Cognitive Approach,” in *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*, ed. John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner (Academic Press, 1986), 133.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Tajfel, “Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice,” *Journal of Biosocial Science* 1, no. 2 (1969): 173–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021932000023336>.

differences between the lines that separated categories A and B—the 4th and 5th lines in order of length—when these categories corresponded to different lengths, with a very high average deviation from the actual difference. They also noted an effect of underestimating the differences among the A and B lines, especially toward the center of the groups—2–3, 3–4 and 5–6, 6–7—also deviating downward. This did not occur in situations R or U, and they showed that such differences were significant. This experiment has been replicated on multiple occasions.<sup>21</sup> For example, when estimating average temperatures across 48 days, Joachim Krueger and Russell W. Clement asked a group of students to estimate the average annual maximum and minimum temperatures of pairs of days falling within the same month compared with pairs of days falling on the boundaries between two months. They then repeated the experiment with 30 days spread across only three months and 10 days within a single month. In all experiments, tendencies to underestimate changes in temperature within the same month were observed, something that did not occur with days falling in different months, although without Tajfel's boundary contrast.<sup>22</sup>

The translation of this cognitive bias into social categories is not just theoretical, but enjoys solid empirical support. Taylor et al. carried out a series of tests based on racial and gender categories in 1978. They first took a group of white students and presented them with a conversation between six people about an advertising campaign, three of them white and three Black. Each time one of them spoke, their face was projected on the wall so participants could identify them. Half were instructed to try to memorize which speaker had made each proposal, and the others were asked not to focus on each individual, but rather on the conversation as a whole. The result was that participants tended to confuse more often what one white or Black person had said with what another of the same ethnicity had said—an intraracial error—than with what someone of a different ethnicity had said—an interracial error. An almost identical procedure was carried out on another occasion, this time with a group of men and women listening to a debate in which three were men and three women, again resulting in intrasex errors being greater than intersex errors. In a third experiment, also based on sex, several recordings were used, some with groups composed only of women or only of men, and some with only one woman or man, with all of them making the same statements in the same tone of voice.

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<sup>21</sup> For a modern review of these effects, see Robert L. Goldstone and Andrew T. Hendrickson, "Categorical Perception," *WIREs Cognitive Science* 1, no. 1 (2010): 69–78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.26>.

<sup>22</sup> Joachim Krueger and Russell Clement, "Memory-Based Judgements about Multiple Categories: A Revision and Extension of Tajfel's Accentuation Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 1 (1994): 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.1.35>.

The results were that participants evaluated women's groups and men's groups in markedly different ways, and that the differences were accentuated when only one of the participants in the conversation belonged to a different gender.<sup>23</sup>

This verification has also been carried out with ideological categories. In 1988, McGarty and Penny developed a questionnaire to identify biases related to categorization based on political preferences, using 12 political statements taken from various sources that had previously been rated on a scale from 1 to 100—where 1 was more “left-wing” and 100 more “right-wing”—by 17 judges. Participants had to place themselves on that same scale and evaluate a series of political terms (radical, reactionary, left wing, right wing...) from 1 to 10 as good or bad concepts. They were then divided into three groups to evaluate each of the 12 political statements again, from 1 to 100, depending on whether they considered them more left- or right-wing. The first group, the control, was given the statements without any information about their authorship. In the second group, the labels “Author A” and “Author B” were added, applied according to whether the statement had been rated above or below 50 by the 17 initial judges. A third group received informative labels such as “American, right-wing, political candidate,” and a fourth was asked to guess, before evaluating them, whether the statements had been made by Author A or Author B. As a result, the differences in scores between statements considered right- or left-wing were greater in the groups that contained some kind of prior categorization—Author A or B, or informative labels—and in these groups the intraclass differences were also smaller.<sup>24</sup>

Taking into account these biases provoked by categories, it is also necessary to remember that the same individuals can be perceived as similar along one particular dimension—for example, their opinion on the safety of COVID vaccines—and very different along others—such as the sports they practice—so categories are always contextual and dimension-dependent. Categories are organized into several layers or levels and are related to one another through hierarchies: the category “American” includes “Democratic Party voter,” which in turn includes “office worker” or “middle class”,<sup>25</sup> and the interactions among all these categories within individual perception generate alterations in the organization of social stimuli.<sup>26</sup> Categories are

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<sup>23</sup> Shelley E. Taylor et al., “Categorical and Contextual Bases of Person Memory and Stereotyping,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, no. 7 (1978): 778–93, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.7.778>.

<sup>24</sup> Craig McGarty, “Categorization, Accentuation and Social Judgement,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 27, no. 2 (1988): 147–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1988.tb00808.x>.

<sup>25</sup> See the well-known “rings of inclusion” in Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 1st ed. (Addison-Wesley, 1954).

<sup>26</sup> Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*, 45; Craig McGarty, *Categorization in Social Psychology* (SAGE, 1999), 32–33.

compared within the same level of hierarchy—a Democratic voter is compared to a Republican in political terms, not according to their nationality—with categorical coincidence being considered positive—in-group favoritism, which we will explain in detail later—and non-coincidence negative. In their 1998 study, Urban and Miller explain that when several salient categories are at play, they are evaluated according to whether or not individuals identify with them and in what proportion they are present. Thus, depending on the context, the greater the coincidence with the observer, the better the evaluation the observer makes of the observed—additivity—especially in categories with greater contextual weight—category dominance—and in mixed or balanced situations the evaluation can be either positive or negative depending on psychological elements such as personalization, mood valence, cognitive overload, or the differences in importance between the categories in conflict.<sup>27</sup>

*Salience of social categories: accessibility and fit*

Given that social categories are infinitely varied and contextual, it is necessary to clarify when some or others operate in individual perception. The degree of activation of a category in a given context is called salience, and it is expressed in a gradual and probabilistic way, because the cognitive systems that activate categories are not linear, and these can be more or less activated. In a social interaction, the salience of each category depends on two basic dimensions: accessibility and categorical fit—also called applicability.<sup>28</sup> Accessibility can be summarized as the probability that a category will be activated, before assessing its degree of adequacy to the specific context. It is determined by past experiences that influence the recurrence of categories with a certain degree of stability in individual memory—possibly having high or low chronic accessibility—and by the short-term effects of recent events.<sup>29</sup> Some categories are used on a daily basis, generating very high chronic accessibility, as is the case of sex or of racial categories among people with high racial prejudice. In a series of five experiments, Stangor et al. played participants a tape in which they listened to a conversation among a group of eight people, four women and four men, with two Black people and two white people of each sex. Similar to the

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<sup>27</sup> Lynn M. Urban and Norman Miller, “A Theoretical Analysis of Crossed Categorization Effects: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 4 (1998): 894–908, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.4.894>.

<sup>28</sup> This is the basic model of Jerome S. Bruner, “On Perceptual Readiness,” *Psychological Review* 64, no. 2 (1957): 123–52, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0043805>, later developed by Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*, 126–32.

<sup>29</sup> Mathias Blanz, “Accessibility and Fit as Determinants of the Salience of Social Categorizations,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29, no. 1 (1999): 44–47, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199902\)29:1%253C43::AID-EJSP909%253E3.0.CO;2-Q](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199902)29:1%253C43::AID-EJSP909%253E3.0.CO;2-Q).

experiments we saw earlier, photographs of these people were projected on the wall as they spoke, and later participants were asked to assign each statement to the person who had made it, thus evaluating whether assignment errors occurred more often across classes or within the same class. In each experiment some condition was varied, and the researchers found that sex and race categories were accessible in all cases—high chronic accessibility—even when others were at play, the latter especially among people with high racial prejudice.<sup>30</sup>

Accessibility can also be manipulated through priming effects, which imply that the activation of a category by a given stimulus increases its probability of being reactivated for a subsequent period of time.<sup>31</sup> One of the best-known cases in this regard—and one most relevant to our study example—is what happens through exposure to mass media. Thus, Arendt and Marquart showed that, after exposing a group of volunteers to reading news that associated politics with corruption, those who already had a predisposition to implicitly consider politicians more corrupt tended to display this association more explicitly.<sup>32</sup> Power et al. explored the effects of this on racial stereotypes, producing three newsletters about a fictitious African American student (Chris Miller), each of which presented him in a different way: one with insinuations appealing to negative stereotypes about African Americans, another with positive counter-stereotypes, and a neutral one. 110 white students were each randomly assigned to one of these newsletters. After reading, a short questionnaire informed them and asked about two media events: the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police and the news that Magic Johnson had contracted HIV, requesting them to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the degree of individual responsibility of each person for the event. Those who had first read the stereotypical text tended to attribute more responsibility to the individual—internal responsibility. The same result occurred when this study was applied to the gender variable.<sup>33</sup>

Among the categories highlighted by the process of accessibility, the individual employs those that are pertinent to the situation, that is, those possessing a greater categorical fit. The degree to which a category fits depends on two conditions: that it is useful for distinguishing individuals from each other—structural or comparative fit—maximizing the meta-contrast ratio

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Stangor et al., “Categorization of Individuals on the Basis of Multiple Social Features,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62, no. 2 (1992): 207–18, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.62.2.207>.

<sup>31</sup> E. Tory Higgins, “Knowledge Activation: Accessibility, Applicability, and Salience,” in *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, ed. E. Tory Higgins and Arie W. Kruglanski (The Guilford Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Florian Arendt and Franziska Marquart, “Communications,” *Communications* 40, no. 2 (2015): 185–97, <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2015-0010>.

<sup>33</sup> Gerard J. Power et al., “Priming Prejudice: How Stereotypes and Counter-Stereotypes Influence Attribution of Responsibility and Credibility among Ingroups and Outgroups,” *Human Communication Research* 23, no. 1 (1996): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1996.tb00385.x>.

mentioned earlier, and that there is a concurrence of attributes between its specifications and those of the individuals to whom it is applied—normative fit.<sup>34</sup> Let us imagine, referring to our object of study, a white, Republican, conservative activist man attending a meeting to organize a demonstration against vaccination policies. At the meeting, categories such as anti-vaccine or conservative will be accessible because he employs them in his daily life, and there is normative fit because the people present there align with those attributes. Yet precisely for that reason they lack structural fit, since they are not useful to differentiate him from other attendees. By contrast, categories such as “Republican” might be so if a discussion arises about whether or not to blame Donald Trump, in which independents or apolitical participants intervene, since in that case it would serve to differentiate him from them and identify with those supporting his stance.

When we speak of “orienting behavior” we refer to the fact that the salience of social categories activates a series of cognitive mechanisms that seek the individual’s self-preservation through collaboration with those he considers part of the same group. As a consequence of the categorical biases described above, as the salience of social categories increases, the salience of personal characteristics diminishes. The greater the salience of a social category, the less the perception of the individual traits of the people who belong to the same group, giving rise to the process called depersonalization, through which members begin to be perceived by the observer more in terms of the normative or prototypical attributes of the social category to which they are assigned, and less in terms of their personal ones. People apply this both to others and to themselves, so the process is not only outwardly directed but also internalized, with the observer, in such situations, assuming more strongly the normative attributes of the salient categories with which they identify—what the theory calls self-stereotyping—which is the matrix of the basic group phenomena we will see below.

As evidence of this, in two studies Voci asked football fans and company employees to rate themselves, their team or company, and the rival team or company on four contextually relevant dimensions—football and competition-related aspects in the first case, and work-related aspects in the second. Taking for granted that these were categories relevant to the context, accessibility was manipulated by creating conditions of high accessibility—during the match for football fans, by evoking the rival company for the workers—and of low accessibility—at home or without mentioning the rival company. In high-accessibility contexts,

a significant correlation emerged between the scores participants gave to themselves and those they attributed to the in-group, above those given to the out-group.<sup>35</sup>

The mechanisms seen in this section are fundamental to understanding our object of study. First, the contributions of Social Identity Theory show that social categorization is a cognitive phenomenon with the capacity to distort people’s perception. The fact of identifying oneself and others as part of social groups leads to underestimating intragroup differences and overestimating intergroup ones, which simplifies the terms of interaction by annulling, to a greater or lesser extent, personal variables. This facilitates the establishment of conceptual equivalences between groups, such as those drawn between the Nazis and, for example, the Democrats who promote vaccination mandates. The generalizations we will see in political debates do not imply ignorance of the complexities of the situation, but rather a reading of it through the lens of social categories. In a polarized framework, the out-group member has their attributes as an independent person erased to reinforce those that coincide with the stereotypical representation.

Beyond this, categorical salience also explains the terms in which political debates during the coronavirus pandemic were carried out. That is, the debates in which ANHs were inserted were not necessarily about the actual containment measures of the pathogen. The activation of identity categories made the arguments for or against vaccination mandates into a scenario of intergroup confrontation. In these, as predicted by the postulates of the Social Identity Approach, the discourse was not aimed at providing information with which to evaluate the situation in material terms, but at ensuring the status of one’s own group over the one considered rival. It is on these aspects of intergroup conflict that we will focus in the following section.

### 1.1.2. Intergroup phenomena

In this section we will understand the different phenomena that can emerge from the contact between people who identify with different social categories. We will see how these lead to group dynamics aimed at sustaining group identity in a desirable sense and, consequently, improving individual social identity. Here lies the core of attitudes toward what groups conceive as rivals, which directly connects this field with our research. Thus, first we will present the

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<sup>35</sup> Alberto Voci, “Relevance of Social Categories, Depersonalization and Group Processes: Two Field Tests of Self-Categorization Theory,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2006): 73–90, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.292>.

motivations individuals have for participating in intergroup conflict, and then move on to the dimension that interests us most: stereotypes, symbolic representations of alterity.

*Motivations for social categorization and their consequences*

In general, theories of identity and categorization have focused more on the cognitive aspects that activate social categories and how these affect intergroup relations than on the motives that lead someone to identify with some groups and not with others. The so-called motivational aspects are, however, necessary to understand intergroup dynamics. They must explain why individuals are willing to favor the groups with which they identify over others. Within the Social Identity Approach three complementary dimensions have been particularly valued: the *need for positive self-esteem*, the *seek for optimal distinctiveness*, and the *need for uncertainty reduction*.

In the introduction to the previous section we already outlined some elements of the *self-esteem hypothesis*, which posits that people seek to maintain a positive self-image, and that part of this depends on their social identity—their membership in social groups or categories. Thus, directing their actions toward improving the social status of the groups with which they identify is an effort that reverts upon themselves. This is achieved through two parallel processes: favoring the in-group over the out-groups and, when necessary, derogating the latter. This perspective enjoyed empirical support through the experiments of the so-called *Minimal Group Paradigm (MGP)*, which showed that it was possible to trigger certain in-group favoritism responses in contexts where intergroup distinction was not very significant, created *ad hoc* through a simple choice of artistic preferences—Kandinsky vs. Klee—without face-to-face contact. Participants were asked, based on this distinction, to complete some point-allocation exercises. These were designed so that there were always three possible strategies: achieving the maximum benefit for both groups, the maximum benefit for one's own group, or the maximum difference between the gain of the in-group and that of the out-group. The result was that the majority chose the third option, even in situations where this implied a lower gain for the in-group. The conclusion was that this favoritism not only sought the best for the in-group, but also that it ended up in a better relative position compared to others.<sup>36</sup> Hogg, Turner et al. carried out two similar experiments to demonstrate that this form of intergroup

<sup>36</sup> Henri Tajfel et al., "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1971): 149–78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202>.

discrimination could, as the model explained above would predict, increase the self-esteem of group members. However, the results were mixed: the effects of intergroup conflict only became evident in participants’ self-esteem when situations of intense competition occurred. In practice, this meant accepting that the self-esteem hypothesis was not the only motivational explanation for group membership, and establishing whether its relationship with in-group favoritism was causal or consequential continues to be debated today.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, throughout the 1990s and 2000s further factors continued to be sought to explain what motivates people to self-categorize as members of a group and to favor it. Marilyn B. Brewer developed the so-called *Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT)*, which places at the center the dual human need, with an evolutionary component, to maintain a sense of belonging (*assimilation*) and a sense of difference from others (*distinctiveness*). As can be intuited, these two attributes seem to be opposed: the more inclusive a group is, the less it differentiates itself from others, and the more restricted it is, the harder it is to achieve inclusiveness. The point of balance at which both needs are satisfied is called *optimal distinctiveness*. Since it depends on comparative parameters, this is a contextual, not essential, property, such that a group may provide it in one situation and not in another.<sup>38</sup> Thus, with regard to intergroup relations, the search for distinctiveness can lead to in-group favoritism dynamics.<sup>39</sup>

The pursuit of a better self-concept, of a sense of belonging and difference, is complemented here by the need to reduce uncertainty. People experience discomfort when they do not understand the stimuli they receive or lack guidelines on how to act. The psychological need to reduce this uncertainty is what Kruglanski calls *need for cognitive closure (NFC)*, the need to obtain answers to certain issues and avoid ambiguity.<sup>40</sup> According to Hogg, this is a fundamental motivation for people when identifying with a certain group, since the cognitive

<sup>37</sup> Michael A. Hogg et al., “Social Categorization, Intergroup Behaviour and Self-Esteem: Two Experiments,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, n.d.; Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, “Comments on the Motivational Status of Self-Esteem in Social Identity and Intergroup Discrimination,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 317–34, for a problematization of the applicability of the concept *self-esteem*. It should be noted that although the Minimal Group Paradigm is a fundamental methodological approach in numerous studies for allowing greater control of variables, it has been criticized for the artificiality of the situation it creates, and some of its hypotheses, such as the degree of activation of ingroup favoritism, have been qualified. See Sabine Otten, “The Minimal Group Paradigm and Its Maximal Impact in Research on Social Categorization,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (October 2016): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.06.010>.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey J. Leonardelli et al., “Optimal Distinctiveness Theory,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Mark P. Zanna and James M. Olson, vol. 43 (Elsevier, 2010), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(10\)43002-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(10)43002-6).

<sup>39</sup> Constantina Badea et al., “The Bases of Identification: When Optimal Distinctiveness Needs Face Social Identity Threat,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 1 (2010): 21–41, <https://doi.org/10.1348/000712608X397665>. The author shows that these dynamics occur mainly in contexts where the perception of threat is low, since in such situations individual preferences for achieving that balance point have greater room to operate.

<sup>40</sup> Donna M. Webster and Arie W. Kruglanski, “Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 6 (1994): 1049–62, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.1049>.

effects derived from categorization—the exaggeration of entitativity, the acceptance of prototypes and normative social contents or beliefs—make the interpretation of the world appear simpler and more predictable.<sup>41</sup> The empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis is also an eloquent example of the effects that NFC has on intra- and intergroup dynamics. In various experiments these conditions were manipulated by categorizing volunteers under conditions that induced high levels of uncertainty or certainty, with the former consistently showing greater tendencies to favor the in-group, a sense of belonging, and even elevated self-esteem.<sup>42</sup> In other cases, the complementary effect was also perceived: that a greater perception of group entitativity reduced individuals' uncertainty about themselves and increased their adherence to in-group patterns.<sup>43</sup>

The three elements mentioned, despite their limitations and the ongoing debate, are those that the Social Identity Approach today considers essential for understanding the motivations that lead individuals to identify with social categories. Groups fulfill the functions of providing people with interpretive frameworks and rules of conduct; belonging to them makes people feel connected and protected, but at the same time distinct from others, and all this results, when the group holds a positive status, in reinforcement of social identity and self-esteem in general. This framework allows us to read with the proper tools the situation that took place in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. A situation of high uncertainty—about the ability to confront the virus, about its origin, about the measures taken by the government—to which were added policies that attacked the heart of the belief system of part of the American population, characterized by values of self-promotion and anti-statism. The political division of the proposals to deal with the pandemic, far from remaining in a merely ideological terrain, thus became a scenario of identity confrontation in which what was at stake were not merely material elements such as the economy or mobility. The debate staged in the political arena and on social networks was a competition for status in which social identification provided people with interpretive frameworks of the pandemic that transcended the recommendations of national

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<sup>41</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 39 (2007): 69–126, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)39002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)39002-8).

<sup>42</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "Subjective Uncertainty Reduction through Self-Categorization: A Motivational Theory of Social Identity Processes," *European Review of Social Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2000): 223–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792772043000040>. For studies that put this theory in dialogue with neural activity models, see Jacob B. Hirsh and Sonia K. Kang, "Mechanisms of Identity Conflict: Uncertainty, Anxiety, and the Behavioral Inhibition System," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 20, no. 3 (2016): 223–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868315589475>.

<sup>43</sup> Michael A. Hogg et al., "Uncertainty, Entitativity, and Group Identification," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 (2007): 135–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2005.12.008>.

and international health organizations. A situation in which the dynamics proper to intergroup conflict—as we will see in the case of comparisons with Nazism—became the habitual tone of debates about the pandemic.

*Origins and development of intergroup conflict*

The different theories proposed regarding individuals’ motivation to identify with certain groups already outline scenarios that may lead to social competition. An attack on a group’s status, its distinctive character, or its belief system may result in a perception of threat to the group’s identity. The classical theorization of SIT, although grounded in the *self-esteem hypothesis* paradigm, still offers an interpretive framework widely accepted for understanding the possible reactions when this occurs. According to Tajfel and Turner, the extent to which the group fulfills its functions for the individual depends on the process of social comparison. In this process, the in-group and out-group are contrasted in terms of their relative prototypicality with reference to the immediately higher and more inclusive superordinate category. That is, groups compare themselves within a broader identity framework whose normative content is accepted by both.<sup>44</sup> The outcome of this comparison is either a reinforcement or deterioration of status, which in turn contributes positively or negatively to the individual’s social identity.

In any situation in which the group’s status is threatened, three possible scenarios are envisaged: social mobility—if the individual attempts to move to another group with higher prestige on their own; social creativity—by altering the characteristics of the group itself or the terms of comparison in order to increase status; and social competition—where members of the in-group directly compete with the out-group in relevant dimensions through various mechanisms. Not all these options are always available, since there are contexts in which *permeability*—the possibility for an individual to move from one group to another—is low or nonexistent, making *social mobility* impossible. This is the case with innate social categories, such as race, or in societies where rigid social structures exist, such as the estates of feudal Europe.<sup>45</sup>

Since our research focuses on a context of high social polarization and hostile interactions, what is most relevant to us is the study of one of these dimensions: social competition and conflict. This may take the form of competition over symbolic or material elements, but such a

<sup>44</sup> Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*.

<sup>45</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in *Intergroup Relations: Essential Readings*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams (Psychology Press, 2001).

condition is not indispensable: the mere perception of intergroup antagonism is sufficient.<sup>46</sup> In all cases, two fundamental mechanisms are activated: first, the activation and intensification of the processes of depersonalization and intragroup solidarity previously described, making the group function in a more coordinated way and shaping the group's reading of social *cues*; second, a stronger *intergroup bias*, the tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group.

As for the cognitive consequences underlying the first mechanism, we have already developed its main lines in section 3.1.1, noting that the greater the social competition, the more acute and pronounced the effects described there will be. With regard to *intergroup bias*, this encompasses a broad range of reactions, ranging from the simple desire to promote the in-group to enhance its relative advantage over the out-group—the *in-group favoritism* we have previously seen at work in the MGP—to processes of discrimination and active degradation of the out-group, known as *out-group derogation*. In most cases, intergroup bias is based on in-group favoritism, since preference is an inherent feature of social categorization, whereas hostility requires greater cognitive processing.<sup>47</sup> Favoring the in-group is considered normative, whereas actively attacking or harming the out-group is not. As an empirical example, Struch and Schwartz analyzed intergroup attitudes in a sample of Israeli citizens residing in northern Jerusalem. Their research found that traces of in-group favoritism showed no correlation with aggressive behavior toward the out-group; rather, such behavior depended on factors such as dissimilarity in values, perceived intergroup permeability, or perceived humanity of out-groups.<sup>48</sup>

The escalation of *intergroup bias* into aggression is mainly due to the degree of perceived threat,<sup>49</sup> which can be explained by various factors. According to Integrated Threat Theory, these include, among others, *realistic threats*, conflicts perceived as existential, in competition for sociopolitical or economic positions; *symbolic threats*, related to belief and value systems; pre-existing attitudes toward the out-group; and even anxiety linked to interaction.<sup>50</sup> Other elements include the salience of the category in which the intergroup comparison takes place for group

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<sup>46</sup> This is the center of the first debates on intergroup conflict, when theories such as the *Realistic Group Conflict Theory* prevailed, see Muzafer Sherif, *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> Marilyn B. Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?," *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 578–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00126>.

<sup>48</sup> Naomi Struch and Shalom H. Schwartz, "Intergroup Aggression: Its Predictors and Distinctness from In-Group Bias," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56, no. 3 (1989): 364–73, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.56.3.364>.

<sup>49</sup> Fons Van de Vijver et al., "Multiple Categorization and Intergroup Bias: Examining the Generalizability of Three Theories of Intergroup Relations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, no. 1 (2022): 34–52, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000342>.

<sup>50</sup> Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan, "An Integrated Threat Theory of Prejudice," in *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination*, ed. Stuart Oskamp (Psychology Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605634-3>.

identity—the more central and defining it is, the greater the tendency to perceive any challenge as a danger<sup>51</sup>—or the relative position between groups, since a sense of vulnerability facilitates the perception of threat.<sup>52</sup>

### *Stereotypes and social influence*

In moments of hostility, two mechanisms characteristic of intergroup bias become accentuated: stereotypes—cognitive schemas containing denotative and connotative information about out-groups—and prejudices, which can be understood as pre-established attitudes toward them. Together, stereotype and prejudice lead to discriminatory behaviors in situations of intergroup hostility.<sup>53</sup>

Stereotypes constitute a type of cognitive *schemas*<sup>54</sup> where beliefs, inferences, evaluations, and definitions of the out-group are inserted, which may be either positive or negative, tied to reality or distorted, and often reductionist and hyperbolic. They act as repositories of data that people access when encountering a member of the out-group, allowing them to rely on more information than what is provided by appearance alone. But not only that: stereotypes also shape how that information will be perceived, selected, analyzed, and stored, prioritizing what is consistent with prior beliefs.<sup>55</sup> People tend to select observations about others that reinforce or intensify these stereotypes, trying to preserve their worldview as much as possible. When evidence contradicts this set of beliefs, it can be dismissed as an error of interpretation or attributed to the context—thus activating the mechanism of *cognitive dissonance*, since individuals tend to preserve their beliefs.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the behaviors of out-group members are explained by stereotypes through *attribution*—explanations of the origin or cause of such behaviors—and

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<sup>51</sup> Brian Mullen et al., “Ingroup Bias as a Function of Salience, Relevance, and Status: An Integration,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22, no. 2 (1992): 103–22, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420220202>.

<sup>52</sup> Steven L. Neuberg and Mark Schaller, “Intergroup Prejudices and Intergroup Conflicts,” in *Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. Charles Crawford and Dennis L. Krebs (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), <http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/SchallerNeubergChapter2008.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> John F. Dovidio et al., “Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination: Theoretical and Empirical Overview,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, ed. John F. Dovidio et al. (SAGE Publications, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446200919.n1>.

<sup>54</sup> We will return to this concept later, in section 1.3.2.

<sup>55</sup> David L. Hamilton and Donal E. Carlston, “The Emergence of Social Cognition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Cognition*, ed. Donal E. Carlston (Oxford University Press, 2013), 32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730018.013.0002>.

<sup>56</sup> According to Festinger, people tend to assess their own beliefs having the in-group as a point of reference, see Leon Festinger, “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,” *Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (1954): 117–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>.

*pattern recognition*, detecting or creating tendencies in the data and adding them to the available information.<sup>57</sup>

Three experiments conducted by Sherman et al. in 2005 may serve as an illustration. In the first two experiments, participants were presented, in different forms, with a series of statements about a supposed homosexual man from Chicago named Robert, some consistent with homosexuality stereotypes—such as studying interpretive dance in college—and others inconsistent—such as frequently watching football. The experimenters also measured each participant’s tendency toward prejudice using a standard test. The results showed that prejudiced participants tended to remember the stereotype-inconsistent traits better, and when asked, they attributed them to exogenous and circumstantial causes. In the third experiment, an association test was used, presenting sentences alongside a photo of a Black man, with stereotype-consistent statements carrying a hostile connotation and inconsistent ones a friendly one. The results reinforced what we have been saying about perceived threat: when stereotype-consistent behaviors were associated with hostility, highly prejudiced individuals stopped paying attention to the inconsistent ones, focusing instead on the consistent (hostile) ones.<sup>58</sup>

The content of stereotypes is particularly interesting for our case study, since comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust function as a form of attribution—a stereotype-consistent way of explaining the actions of the out-group. These belong to the systems of beliefs and behaviors that people acquire when identifying with groups, a phenomenon known as *social influence*. The information received may be of an informational type, fulfilling the epistemological function we saw earlier in Uncertainty-Identity Theory, or normative, aimed at maintaining intragroup cohesion.<sup>59</sup> This process should not be understood within a framework in which the group “transfers” knowledge to the individual, but rather as one in which the individual selects information based on their identification. This occurs through selection criteria: people tend to place more trust in those with whom they identify (homophily) and, as we have said, strive to

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<sup>57</sup> David L. Hamilton et al., “Stereotype-Based Expectancies: Effects on Information Processing and Social Behavior,” *Journal of Social Issues* 46, no. 2 (1990): 35–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1990.tb01922.x>.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey W. Sherman et al., “Prejudice and Stereotype Maintenance Processes: Attention, Attribution, and Individuation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 4 (2005): 607–22, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.4.607>.

<sup>59</sup> This is illustrated by Solomon Asch’s famous experiments, in which volunteers were placed in groups of actors pretending to be participants. When evaluating the length of lines, the actors deliberately defended the wrong answer, leading some individuals to adopt the same position. In later interviews, Asch found that some had done so out of doubt and belief that the group was right, while others, though still confident in themselves, joined the group’s decision to avoid conflict and integrate more easily. See Solomon Asch, *Social Psychology* (Prentice-Hall, 1952), 387–417, 450–501. The terms and definitions that we used come from different studies published in Morton Deutsch and Harold B. Gerard, “A Study of Normative and Informational Social Influences upon Individual Judgment,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 51, no. 3 (1955): 629–36, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046408>.

achieve greater prototypicality, which constitutes a motivational element.<sup>60</sup> In addition, individuals with a high *Need for Cognitive Closure* tend to rely more on stereotypes provided by groups to guide intergroup interactions,<sup>61</sup> making them a kind of habitual *shortcut*, especially in situations of hostility.

This already allows us to understand the mechanisms underlying the debates during the pandemic. Liberals and conservatives, supporters and opponents of vaccination mandates, found themselves in an acute situation of intergroup competition. Naturally, we should not think of these categories as separate silos. We present them as opposite poles, but there are many shades of grey between both extremes. This explanation is only a way of making the study of this competition operational in terms of group identities. In it, real elements, such as the economy or civil liberties, and symbolic ones, such as individualist and libertarian values versus more collectivist and statist ones, were at stake. Suspicions of a possible authoritarian drift, mistrust and uncertainty about vaccines, and the high uncertainty caused by the pandemic, with thousands of deaths and overwhelmed healthcare systems, all created a context that clearly favored the perception of identity threat. In this context, marked mechanisms of out-group derogation were activated, thus reinforcing socially competitive readings and interactions: stereotypes and prejudices that found in conspiracy theories one of their most evident expressions. All these aspects will be detailed and supported with empirical evidence in the following sections.

## 1.2. The role of comparisons and stereotypes in intergroup conflict

In the previous sections, we presented the fundamental elements of how social identities function in conflict. This laid the groundwork for understanding the motivations and objectives that led politicians and opinion-makers to formulate attacks of such magnitude as the ANHs. We already know that there are conditions under which people, when they feel their social identity is threatened, perceive reality in simpler terms, mediated by the groups with which they identify, and are willing to defend it through hostile attitudes.

What now concerns us are the means that were used to channel this hostility. Why ANHs fulfill their function well in communicational terms, how they play their role as a bridge between

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<sup>60</sup> Russell Spears, “Social Influence and Group Identity,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 72, no. 1 (2021): 367–90, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-070620-111818>.

<sup>61</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “Groups as Epistemic Providers: Need for Closure and the Unfolding of Group-Centrism,” *Psychological Review* 113, no. 1 (2006): 84–100, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.113.1.84>.

intergroup conflict and collective memory. We do not intend to set out a treatise on cognitive linguistics, since we have already pointed out that our interest lies in social relations and imaginaries of the past. However, we consider it necessary to pause to analyze what empirical research shows us about how these types of comparison formats differ, at least, from others that exist.

### 1.2.1. Analogies as conceptual metaphors

The first thing we must do is define in greater detail what we mean by the concept of *analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust*. In fact, the numerous statements we have studied in this work do not fit only within the formal definition of *comparison*, since in order to place the realities of the Pandemic alongside those of the past, many other formats were used, as is usual in natural language, such as metaphor or analogy. In some cases the distinction is itself a challenge, as in the case of symbols used in demonstrations or memes on social media.

Thus, for example, a classic debate in studies of linguistic psychology has been whether metaphor and comparison are truly interchangeable realities, for which several hypotheses have been established—whether metaphors are comparisons, whether they are forms of categorization, whether they can be first one and then the other (*career of metaphor*)... Numerous experiments have systematically tested that, even though they share properties, the neuropsychological effects they provoke as linguistic expressions are different.<sup>62</sup>

In our work we are not interested in the specific linguistic manifestation of the parallelisms established between present and past. Although this is also a legitimate and highly relevant perspective of study, our focus is directed toward the consequences of such comparisons in terms of intergroup dynamics. That is, we do not intend to investigate the differences in neuropsychological impact of using a particular linguistic expression, but rather to understand the social function it fulfills, what it suggests to us about the conception and uses of the past, how it contributes to conflict and, at the same time, how it reflects it.

In this sense, we draw on the broader theorization proposed by George Lakoff, that of *conceptual metaphors*. From his perspective, these are experiences of one conceptual domain through another conceptual domain, and they may take various forms of linguistic expression. Common expressions in everyday language may not take the canonical form of metaphors (*X*

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<sup>62</sup> Catrinel Haught, “A Tale of Two Tropes: How Metaphor and Simile Differ,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 28, no. 4 (2013): 254–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2013.826555>.

is Y) yet function, in fact, as such: “Look *how far we’ve come*” or “I’m *feeling blue*” are conceptual metaphors because they transfer a domain of experience into another.<sup>63</sup> Brought into the analysis of political discourse, Charteris-Black identifies conceptual metaphors in discursive formulas that by no means have the clear form of metaphors. Thus, the fragment of a Churchill speech “while France had been bled white and England was supine and bewildered, a *monstrous growth* of aggression sprang up in Germany, in Italy and Japan” would implicitly carry the concept NAZISM IS A MONSTER and the conceptual metaphor A NATION IS A PERSON.<sup>64</sup> We will see that in many of the statements we analyze, a good part of the conceptual metaphors also remain implicit.

These conceptual metaphors have two elements, the *source domain* and the *target domain*, with those characteristics of the first that are coherent with the structure of the second being transferred. Among these are inferential norms, associated feelings, and networks of meaning.<sup>65</sup> This means that, by omitting certain elements, the *target* is structured through the conceptual domain of the *source*. This is what Dedre Gentner, a key reference for the *Structure-Mapping Theory*, calls *structural alignment*, applied to analogies—which, in this case, can also function as conceptual metaphors. From this perspective, knowledge can be understood as organized into propositional networks in which there are attributes and relations among them. An analogy would discard the attributes and preserve the relations—*structural alignment*.<sup>66</sup>

There is experimental evidence of the applicability of this theory to how people understand discursive representations, as in the 2011 experiment by Thibodeau and Boroditsky, which showed how different metaphorical formulations of a political problem can change the perceived necessary solutions. In a series of five experiments, with between 185 and 485 different volunteers each, they showed that presenting crime “as a virus” or “as a beast” significantly altered the choice for a punitive or reformist response, as well as the conceptual associations made or the sources sought for information—seeking to confirm one’s point of view.<sup>67</sup> However, the theory of Conceptual Metaphors has received criticism for the relatively

<sup>63</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3637992.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230319899>.

<sup>65</sup> George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd Ed., ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge University Press, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173865.013>.

<sup>66</sup> Dedre Gentner, “Structure-Mapping: A Theoretical Framework for Analogy,” *Cognitive Science* 7, no. 2 (1983): 155–70, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0702\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0702_3).

<sup>67</sup> Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, “Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning,” *PLoS ONE* 6, no. 2 (2011): e16782, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0016782>.

small volume of consistent empirical evidence supporting it and for its excessive reliance on the so-called *researcher's intuition*.<sup>68</sup> More recent evidence nevertheless continues to support its central tenets, such as the fact that metaphors are cognitive structures. Thus, for example, in 2025, a quantitative analysis based on complex systems theory evaluated the evolution of the meanings of thousands of words throughout the entire recorded history of the English language, using a thesaurus from the University of Glasgow. The result showed that transfers of words from one domain to another—acquiring a metaphorical meaning—occurred as part of consistent and structured networks, not randomly, suggesting enduring cognitive structures underlying metaphors.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.2.2. Conceptual metaphors and intergroup conflict

Applied to the study of intergroup conflict, this theorization is useful for the new object because it means that ANHs can function as mechanisms for transferring attributes between different domains—collective memory about Nazism and the Holocaust as the *source* and the COVID-19 pandemic as the *target*. To shape this hypothesis we will appeal to two domains in which these properties fit the theoretical model of social conflict: the establishment of *frames* for interpreting political reality and the creation and sustaining of stereotypes.

#### *Framing events*

The most widely known definition of *framing* comes from communication theory, and it entails selecting certain aspects of reality to make them seem more salient.<sup>70</sup> That is precisely what we have just set out for conceptual metaphors: certain attributes of the source domain and the target domain are made to stand out to achieve a viable equivalence. Thus, metaphors become one of the most important tools for framing, which is why they have remained so present in political debates. A 2019 meta-analysis that reviewed more than 90 empirical studies found moderate, yet consistent and significant, effects in the degree of pervasiveness of conceptual metaphors in political discourse.<sup>71</sup> Charteris-Black has studied how metaphors have

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<sup>68</sup> Matthew S. McGlone, “What Is the Explanatory Value of a Conceptual Metaphor?,” *Language & Communication* 27, no. 2 (2007): 109–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2006.02.016>.

<sup>69</sup> Marie Teich et al., “Diachronic Data Analysis Supports and Refines Conceptual Metaphor Theory,” *PLoS Complex Systems* 2, no. 8 (2025): e0000058, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcsy.0000058>.

<sup>70</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

<sup>71</sup> Britta C. Brugman et al., “Metaphorical Framing in Political Discourse through Words vs. Concepts: A Meta-Analysis,” *Language and Cognition* 11, no. 1 (2019): 41–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2019.5>.

contributed to creating “political myths” throughout history, explaining how Clinton developed a political discourse that sought to present him as a president with ethical values (“GOOD GOVERNING IS CREATING”), or how Bush persistently emphasized the organic personification of the U.S. (“THE NATION IS A PERSON”) and the transactional component of moral actions (“MORAL ACTIONS ARE FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS”).<sup>72</sup>

According to the Metaphorical Framing Model set out by Ottatti et al., these metaphors direct attention and modulate the listener’s interpretation of reality, often without even needing to make them explicit.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in contexts of intergroup conflict, metaphors can play an essential role in activating the sense of threat perceived by members of the in-group and fostering the orientation of their actions toward intragroup solidarity and prototypicality. For example, during the Gulf War the metaphor of the personification of the state was extensively used to portray Iraqis as acting like a homogeneous unit with interests opposed to those of the U.S., itself viewed in turn as an organism with a will of its own.<sup>74</sup> In the so-called *war on terror*, martial metaphors played a prominent role by giving concrete form to an abstract out-group—jihadist terrorism—and it was one of the key moments for employing analogies with the Second World War, with references to Pearl Harbor, the Munich Agreements, or the malevolent nature of Nazism. This heightened the perception of emergency, the need for national unity, and tolerance toward extraordinary actions by the government.<sup>75</sup>

During COVID-19, war metaphors were also common. Both in President Joe Biden’s speeches and in the U.S. press one could find numerous references to the conceptual metaphor of the Pandemic as a war, doctors as heroes and soldiers, masks and tests as weapons, and the virus as an enemy or a wild animal, beyond the United States, again, as an organic entity.<sup>76</sup> This fits the aforementioned model of the conceptual metaphor as a strategy to increase the

<sup>72</sup> Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*.

<sup>73</sup> Victor Ottatti et al., “The Metaphorical Framing Model: Political Communication and Public Opinion,” in *The Power of Metaphor: Examining Its Influence on Social Life*, ed. Mark J. Landau et al. (American Psychological Association, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1037/14278-009>.

<sup>74</sup> George Lakoff, “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf,” *Cognitive Semiotics* 4, no. 2 (2012): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogsem.2012.4.2.5>.

<sup>75</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “What Should This Fight Be Called?: Metaphors of Counterterrorism and Their Implications,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 8, no. 3 (2007): 97–133, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6053.2008.00035.x>.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Antonella Luporini, “Metaphor, Nominalization, Appraisal: Analyzing Coronavirus-Related Headlines and Subheadings in China Daily and The Wall Street Journal,” *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies* 21, no. 1 (2021): 253–73, <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2021-2101-15>; Tran Thi Thanh Truc, “Analyzing War Metaphors in the Context of the COVID-19: A Critical Metaphor Analysis,” *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 15, no. 6 (2024): 1959–66, <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1506.21>; Layal Alkhatib, “A Comparative Analysis of the Coronavirus Discourse by Exploring the Themes and Dominant Conceptual Metaphors in American Newspapers in 2020 and 2022” (Malmö University, 2022), <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-52984>.

perception of threat or conflict and thus improve intragroup cohesion. ANHs share functions with this: by pointing to the political-ideological rival as a wartime enemy, one implies that it is a kind of existential danger, thereby justifying more severe actions against it. In the case of the Nazis, it is not only a matter of former enemies, but also, as we shall see, of an absolute evil, which multiplies this effect.

As we have seen, metaphors with warlike and polarizing content have not been an anomaly in the recent history of the United States, not even those referring to the Second World War.<sup>77</sup> Later we will show that ANHs as images of the enemy had already been used even before Bush, to frame the Vietnam War or the War on Drugs. What was indeed a particular innovation of the comparisons from Donald Trump's first presidency through the years of the pandemic was that these metaphors were directed at an internal enemy and not an external one. The frame created by employing this kind of metaphor against the political opponent is that of a total denial of their inclusion in the superordinate national category, replacing intergroup competition with open hostility. Reading vaccination as a "Nazi experiment" or certificates as a "Star of David" activates the conceptual domain of Nazism and the Holocaust, whose sources draw, to a large extent, from collective memory. An emotional activation occurs and inferences about the situation are guided from this.

### *Stereotyping out-groups*

But framing is not the only potentiality of metaphors. As we anticipated, they are of enormous interest for the creation and consolidation of out-group stereotypes. They make generalizations about large groups of people more plausible, the attribution of undesirable traits, and the projection of negative feelings stemming from other source domains.<sup>78</sup> A good example of this are conceptual metaphors that involve animals, so historically common in political discourse and propaganda.<sup>79</sup> This is not only a matter of image, but the choice of animal clearly reflects the needs of the aforementioned *structural alignment*; that is, it tells us about the traits assumed in this case of the *target*.

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<sup>77</sup> Nicholas Howe, "Metaphor in Contemporary American Political Discourse," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 3, no. 2 (1988): 87–104, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327868ms0302\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327868ms0302_2).

<sup>78</sup> Anne Maass et al., "The Role of Metaphors in Intergroup Relations," in *The Power of Metaphor: Examining Its Influence on Social Life*, ed. Mark J. Landau et al. (American Psychological Association, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1037/14278-008>.

<sup>79</sup> Nick Haslam et al., "Kittens, Pigs, Rats, and Apes: The Psychology of Animal Metaphors," in *Why We Love and Exploit Animals: Bridging Insights from Academia and Advocacy*, ed. Kristof Dhont and Gordon Hodson (Routledge, 2020).

Thus, Black people are represented as gorillas<sup>80</sup> because there is a colonial stereotype of underdeveloped African tribes, they are associated with manual labor—a legacy of slavery and subsequent poverty—and therefore with strength, brutality, and reduced ingenuity. In National Socialist propaganda, the national in-group could be metaphorically presented as a body that can be attacked by parasites, and Jews would be among them. They were represented as arachnids or vampiric bats in the sense that they keep draining the nation’s blood, among many other possibilities. A notion of parasites also found in some contemporary anti-immigration discourse.<sup>81</sup> The rich are like pigs<sup>82</sup> because they are associated with the idea of abundance and, therefore, of fatness, but an abundance that is not refined, rather consisting in the very will to devour.

The use of conceptual metaphors makes it possible to increase *positive distinctiveness* with respect to the out-group, since differences with it are perceived as even more exaggerated thanks to the emotional charge. Their capacity to simplify reality by carrying it into more straightforward, less ambiguous conceptual domains reinforces a cognitive tendency we have already seen as classic in social categorization: minimizing intragroup differences and maximizing intergroup ones.<sup>83</sup>

In all the cases explained so far, the *source* is the animal world, which provides an optimal source for the creation of metaphors thanks to its universal character within a given culture, and there also exist certain shared beliefs about animals that allow easy crafting of similarities. Consider the stereotypes inherited from fables: the cunning fox, the brave lion, the cowardly hen, the foolish donkey. Thus, a 2022 study investigated perceptions of animals in a group of elementary school children who had read Aesop’s fables, finding that, for the 17 proposed animals, the traits the children attributed tended to coincide en masse, with few exceptions.<sup>84</sup> All of them are part of the imaginary of a concrete category we might refer to as the “animal kingdom”, which comprises these sets of images, beliefs, associated evaluations, and inferential

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<sup>80</sup> Philip A. Goff et al., “Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 2 (2008): 292–306, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.2.292>.

<sup>81</sup> Andreas Musolff, *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 73–144, <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/political-metaphor-analysis-9781441160669/>; Andreas Musolff, *Metaphor, Nation and the Holocaust: The Concept of the Body Politic* (Routledge, 2010), <https://www.routledge.com/Metaphor-Nation-and-the-Holocaust-The-Concept-of-the-Body-Politic/Musolff/p/book/9780415406112>.

<sup>82</sup> Haslam et al., “Kittens, Pigs, Rats, and Apes: The Psychology of Animal Metaphors,” 90–103.

<sup>83</sup> Sam Glucksberg, “How Metaphors Create Categories — Quickly,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>84</sup> Moushaffa Shahid et al., “Semantic Derogation in Animal Metaphors: A Case Study of Aesop’s Fables,” *Harf-o-Sukhan* 6, no. 2 (2022): 477–87.

norms. In this way, it is possible to create out-group stereotypes that refer to ideas like “letting the wolf guard the sheep.” The inferential rules of conceptual metaphors question basic elements of the individual’s agential element, attributing automatic traits to the person, stripping them of volition, and ceasing to consider them an *agent* in themselves, in a process called dehumanization.<sup>85</sup>

The conceptual domain we study in this research also possesses its own internal networks of meaning, with different categories, attributes, and modes of relation. This can be connected to what Wertsch calls *schematic narrative templates*, referring to the systems of characters, functions, and settings that mediate representations of the past.<sup>86</sup> That is: Nazism and the Holocaust furnish not only *specific* elements, but also narrative schemas that are useful for narrating the present. Thus, Adolf Hitler can be the authoritarian tyrant, the perverse villain, revenge turned into a bloodthirsty desire; Josef Mengele can represent the excesses of a science emptied of moral orientation and capable of serving evil; Josef Goebbels can be the example of manipulative propaganda and the loss of critical thinking; and the *gelbe Sterne* that Jews were forced to wear can be the archetype of discrimination. Inserted into conceptual metaphors, they can function—as they indeed did—to legitimize views contrary to vaccination mandates, but also to project their attributes toward political enemies and predispose the public in its interpretations and behaviors toward them. We will discuss the contents of this collective memory about Nazism and the Holocaust in the next section.

### 1.3. Collective memory

Up to this point we have analyzed the social dynamics and the rhetorical and conceptual strategies that gave rise to ANHs. In this section we will focus on identifying the source from which they draw, the contents that allow such references to be understood by a social majority and thus constitute useful material for the construction of political discourses. For this purpose we turn to the field of collective memory, which is not only the one that has developed the most research in this regard, but also the one that serves as a bridge between the social sciences and historiography.

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<sup>85</sup> C. Tipler and J. B. Ruscher, “Agency’s Role in Dehumanization: Non-Human Metaphors of out-Groups,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 5 (2014): 214–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12100>.

<sup>86</sup> James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 60–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613715>.

As we saw earlier, metaphors require the existence of a prior network of conceptual associations on which similarities can be constructed. This *structural alignment* between the *source domain* and the *target domain* requires that listeners possess some information in their memory about the terms of the comparison, so that they can understand the equivalence the speaker wishes to establish between the two. That is why we noted that the most common case is for metaphorical *sources* to be archetypal elements known to everyone—the body, animals, war, etc.—and about which there are interpretative agreements. The historical images employed in ANHs also possess a certain archetypal value within U.S. social imaginaries, as we will see in next sections. The vast majority of citizens recognize Adolf Hitler and classify him as a “bad person” whose ideas they disagree with,<sup>87</sup> know that the Holocaust occurred and that it took place in Germany, and even—to a lesser extent, but still mostly—recognize the names of several concentration and extermination camps, such as Auschwitz,<sup>88</sup> and that the United States fought against Nazi Germany during the Second World War—and even exaggerates its role.<sup>89</sup> The knowledge networks and basic agreements this implies are what give meaning to political discourses that employ ANHs, making them useful for persuasion.

Understanding this phenomenon is therefore fundamental to this dissertation. However, *Memory Studies* is an umbrella term for a field of study where many disciplines converge, each with its own methodological agreements.<sup>90</sup> This results in a diversity of concepts, approaches, and assumptions that makes it impossible to develop autonomous research frameworks.<sup>91</sup> In other words, *Memory Studies* is a meeting point, not a differentiated discipline with its own internal logics. In general—though with notable exceptions—the core and most stable part of the field has developed in recent decades as a hermeneutic and normative space of cultural and ethical-moral critique.<sup>92</sup>

This does not mean, however, that the framework of collective memory is fundamentally incompatible with those we have considered so far. On the contrary: its breadth and malleability

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<sup>87</sup> *Views on Hitler*, Survey report (YouGov, 2024), [https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/Views\\_on\\_Hitler\\_poll\\_results.pdf](https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/Views_on_Hitler_poll_results.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> *Holocaust Awareness and Knowledge Survey*, Survey report (Claims Conference, 2018), [https://www.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Holocaust-Knowledge-Awareness-Study\\_Executive-Summary-2018.pdf](https://www.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Holocaust-Knowledge-Awareness-Study_Executive-Summary-2018.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> *World War II*, Survey report (YouGov, 2024), [https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/World\\_War\\_II\\_poll\\_results.pdf](https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/World_War_II_poll_results.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 13–94, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230321670>.

<sup>91</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 179–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00198>.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203941478>.

allow us to adapt it in theoretical terms and to draw on works produced within it that suit our needs. In the sections that follow we will first present some of the main debates surrounding collective memory, taking an active position within them to clarify its use in this study, and second, outline the features that make it an object of interest that fits within the Social Identity Approach and enriches it.

### 1.3.1. Concept and implications of collective memory in Memory Studies

#### *Reification and metonymy*

The term *collective memory* has been used throughout history in very different ways, often as a system of knowledge storage attached to a human group and transmitted across generations.<sup>93</sup> These would remain present in traditions and customs, in mythology and religion, in cultural artifacts, in art, or in language itself. Paul Connerton referred to this form of memory as *embodied memories*, in the sense that memory is “presented in particular forms of bodily movement and expression,” in rituals and collectives full of symbolism.<sup>94</sup> This is consistent with Durkheim’s early readings of collective representations in religion and tradition in Australian tribal societies.<sup>95,96</sup> In this sense, *collective* memory would function as a kind of extrapolation of individual memory toward an organic collective entity, being “the ability to retain information or a representation of past experience, based on the mental processes of learning or encoding, retention across some interval of time, and retrieval or reactivation of the memory.”<sup>97</sup>

This conception of memory as something that can be *stored* or *embodied* in practices and artifacts is the cornerstone of part of memory studies, and was what quickly attracted the interest of cultural studies. Jan and Aleida Assmann were pioneers in developing this argument, normatively establishing mechanisms of transmission between individual and collective experience. Thus, the cycle of transmission of experiences would give them a double life. First,

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La Memoria, La Historia, El Olvido* (Trotta, 2003); Jacques Le Goff, *El Orden de La Memoria: El Tiempo Como Imaginario* (Paidós Ibérica, 1991); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>94</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Themes in the Social Sciences (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628061>.

<sup>95</sup> MISZTAL, Barbara A., “Durkheim on Collective Memory”, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, vol. 3, n. 2, 2003, pp. 123–143; DURKHEIM, Émile, *Las formas elementales de la vida religiosa. El sistema totémico en Australia*, Madrid, Akal, 1982, pp. 346–347.

<sup>96</sup> Barbara A. Misztal, “Durkheim on Collective Memory,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3, no. 2 (2003): 123–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X03003002001>; Émile Durkheim, *Las Formas Elementales de La Vida Religiosa: El Sistema Totémico En Australia*, trans. Fernando Alvarez-Uría (Akal, 1982), 346–47.

<sup>97</sup> American Psychological Association, “Memory,” 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/memory>.

as *communicative memory*, which would be the product of direct interpersonal interaction, frequently oral and of short duration (3–4 generations), circulating in families and circles of proximity. Then, as *cultural memory*, which would represent its passage into cultural representations, fixed in group traditions and expanding from the family to large social structures, persisting for centuries or millennia and creating or reinforcing collective identities. These would continue to function as memory, only reconstructed, contrasting inherited knowledge against contemporary frameworks.<sup>98</sup> This process would give rise to a passive storage of memory—an *archive*—, which, just like individual memory, would be selectively activated according to the priorities of remembering groups, through history, religion, and art—the *canon*.<sup>99</sup>

From these theories emerges, according to their own internal logic, an apparent contradiction: if collective memory functions analogously to individual memory, how is it possible for someone to experience something *not lived*? This question gained particular importance toward the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when the gradual disappearance of the generation that had lived through the Holocaust raised concerns about the presence of trauma among their descendants and the need to preserve Holocaust memory at the social level. Marianne Hirsch considers that family memories, transmitted through interpersonal communication, but also through photographs, writings, and other artifacts, allow not only knowledge of what their ancestors went through, but also the *adoption* or *embodiment* of their same experiences, “as we might ourselves have lived through [them],” establishing a psychological connection that is almost equally intense and traumatic.<sup>100</sup> Alison Landsberg took this argument a step further, directly affirming that people can *acquire* memories of experiences not lived through mass culture, incorporate them into their autobiographical memory as if they were their own, and thus mediate their subjective relationship with the world and with themselves. These memories would be like prostheses—*prosthetic memories*. The emergence of the Holocaust in public space also raised the question, in the U.S. context, of to what extent this might be an impediment to other memories, such as slavery, LGBT experiences, or women’s struggles, generating dynamics that some considered “competing memories.” In response, Rothberg created the notion of *multidirectional memory*, according to which collective memory is

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<sup>98</sup> Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>.

<sup>99</sup> Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (De Gruyter, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.97>.

<sup>100</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 33–34, <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-generation-of-postmemory/9780231156523/>.

constructed in the public sphere through the traumatic contributions of many human collectives, and not in a purely group-based way. For this, the author explicitly denies that memories *belong* to some groups and not to others, affirming that they are all constructed—appealing to *screen memories* from psychoanalysis—through processes of borrowing, substitution, and recovery.<sup>101</sup>

Because of the rhetorical tropes often employed in the theoretical expositions of many works in *Memory Studies*, it is difficult to specify their hypotheses in a way that makes them testable and falsifiable. For this reason, it is necessary to proceed with caution in evaluating them. First, these texts share the belief that there is a dependent link between people’s lived experiences and representations of collective memory. Otherwise, the notion of “storage” of experiences, the *communicative–cultural memory* continuum, and all debates about the possibility of experiencing past trauma through it would make no sense. Second, they all accept the *reification* of memory. If memory can be stored and reconstructed, covered up as a *screen memory*, transferred as *postmemory* or *prosthesis*, or borrowed between groups, then it necessarily must possess a defined entity. This goes hand in hand with a third assumption, that of the analogy between neurological phenomena and social behaviors. The vocabulary of remembering, forgetting, trauma, anxiety, and other clinical concepts permeates the literature on memory. One could defend their metonymic character only up to a certain point, because when metonymy ceases to be an occasional rhetorical resource and begins to guide inferential logics, it becomes a description. Finally, memory would be used by groups and sometimes created partly within them, but would not depend on them. Notions such as transfer, prosthetic character, *embodied* memories, and multidirectional memory necessarily imply that memory is *something* that travels through time and space, changing groups, being constructed and renegotiated. It is not that each group constructs its version of the past, but that memories circulate among them in a dialogical way.

Such conceptions partially conflict with various aspects of what we empirically know about how belief systems are produced, propagated, and internalized within social groups. The aim of this dissertation is not to provide a wholesale critique of the common tenets of *Memory Studies*, but to reconcile the concept of collective memory with the Identity Approach. That is why we will limit ourselves to contrasting only very briefly these assumptions with the SIA

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<sup>101</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783330>.

paradigm, in order to show those points of friction that lead us to adopt somewhat different perspectives in our work.

First, our theoretical framework holds that belief systems within groups are not constructed through “acquisition” or “transfer.” Precisely the most significant contribution of the cognitive turn proposed by the SIA was the notion that stimuli are filtered, organized, and interpreted according to social identification.<sup>102</sup> This means that although group members do incorporate descriptive information into their belief systems, they do so selectively and contextually, depending on the interests of the moment and their attitudes toward other groups. In fact, part of the information contained, for example, in in-group and out-group stereotypes—the purely denotative part—, which represents one of the most studied and tested elements of these belief systems, can be consistent with reality in some cases—even debatably so, as Oakes notes when referring to the *Kernel of Truth debate*<sup>103</sup>—, but its function is above all analytical and evaluative:<sup>104</sup> groups employ their belief systems to reinforce their status, obtain positive distinctiveness, and orient action, not to seek truth. Applied to the study of collective memory, this means that belief systems do not draw from “transferred” or “acquired” memories, but from processes of selection and evaluation of information based on contextual criteria. A photograph, a testimony, or even a historiographical description may indeed contain precise information about past experiences that people can learn, but its treatment in social and identity terms is not one of “acquisition” or “embodiment,” but of selection, evaluation, and use.

Second, the belief systems present in social identities respond to dynamics different from the neuropsychological mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. Belonging to certain groups does not grant individuals access to defined sets of information—the *archive* mentioned above—from which to “reconstruct memories,”<sup>105</sup> but rather favors patterns of selection and evaluation of available information consistent with the needs of each moment, which over time results in stable coincidences of certain areas of knowledge of enduring relevance.<sup>106</sup> The view

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<sup>102</sup> Tajfel, “Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice.”

<sup>103</sup> Penelope J. Oakes et al., *Stereotyping and Social Reality*, Stereotyping and Social Reality (Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 19–24.

<sup>104</sup> See the *Stereotype Content Model* empirically tested in Amy J. C. Cuddy et al., “Stereotype Content Model Across Cultures: Towards Universal Similarities and Some Differences,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2009): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466608X314935>.

<sup>105</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105–40, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.105>.

<sup>106</sup> Here we are studying the identity component of social representations of the past, and not the general knowledge of it. That’s why it falls into the dominion of social cognition, see Jay J. Van Bavel et al., “The Group Mind: The Pervasive Influence of Social Identity on Cognition,” in *New Frontiers in Social Neuroscience*, ed. Jean Decety and Yves Christen (Springer, 2014), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02904-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02904-7_4); Hogg, “Subjective Uncertainty

of belief systems about the past as a “memory” analogous to the individual one stems from an essentialist and overly stable notion of social categories. The groups considered are often families, nations, African Americans in the U.S., or Holocaust victims, social units that are seen as possessing memory and transferring it to individuals, mediating their identity and making them incorporate it into their autobiography. The truth is that although certain categories remain more present for the individual than others—*chronic salience*—, the consensus today in SIA and much of psychology and neuropsychology is that social identity is a complex system in which many categories intervene. Thus, for individuals there is no single “*collective memory*,” but depending on categorical salience at each moment, they may identify more with some parts of the past than with others, and even hold contradictory views.<sup>107</sup>

*Memory: individual and collective*

The metonymic and reifying perspective of collective memory has also given rise to debates about its collective character. Clearly, if memory is understood as an analogous system with mechanisms similar to those of individual memory, one could argue that groups cannot possess it: what would exist is a sum of individual memories, and it would make no sense to study it as a collective phenomenon. Jeffrey Olick is one of the authors who has developed this question in theoretical terms, criticizing the individualist paradigm for its inability to explain social phenomena that cannot be reduced to individuals, and defending a collectivist vision supported by arguments such as the existence of “memories” of past events even when all those who lived through them have already died, for example through *memory devices*; the need for people to rely on information coming from the group and society in order to produce memories; and the permeable character, even in neurological terms, of human memory. For him, “There is no individual memory without social experience nor is there any collective memory without individuals participating in communal life.”<sup>108</sup>

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Reduction through Self-Categorization: A Motivational Theory of Social Identity Processes”; Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*.

<sup>107</sup> Galen V. Bodenhausen and C. Neil Macrae, “Stereotype Activation and Inhibition,” in *Stereotype Activation and Inhibition: Advances in Social Cognition, Volume XI*, ed. Robert S. Wyer (Psychology Press, 1998). This study showed how the activation of certain social categorizations can make some stereotypes relevant while inhibiting others depending on the social context.

<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>.

This is a debate with deep roots. For Durkheim this kind of representation of the past had an existence beyond the sum of the perspectives of each of the individuals in the group,<sup>109</sup> being collective imaginaries essential to their identity. His disciple, Maurice Halbwachs—considered the classical reference in collective memory studies—, saw it differently, for his focus was on individuals and the social groups in which they were embedded. In his book *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, one perceives a continuity between the memory acquired by individuals through life experience and group imaginaries. He begins by reviewing how people’s capacity to remember past experiences is diminished when there is no prior *social framework* in which to insert them, as would be, in his view, the case of dreams, which he approached from a Freudian perspective.<sup>110</sup> Halbwachs looks to the *social framework* as a system of spatio-temporal references provided by “groups”—which at certain points he calls “affective communities”—, and considers that although it is possible to distinguish between autobiographical memory, more centered on the individual, and another collective one, based on recollections that the subject did not experience, they are interrelated, in such a way that people use group memories to contextualize their own and endow them with historical meaning.<sup>111</sup>

The question of what is the best epistemological perspective for studying collective memory is part of a broader discussion in modern social sciences from which it cannot be detached. The question on which it rests could be formulated as follows: Are social phenomena a sum of individual experiences, or are they semi-autonomous entities that must be studied independently? This question had its main focus precisely in the schools created by the works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim on religious experiences. Whereas for Weber moral norms are constructed by subjects through individual action and every social phenomenon had to be explained from a subjective standpoint, for Durkheim they had to be understood as something external, irreducible to the sum of individual experiences, and subject to their own rules and internal logics.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> In this regard, Durkheim was one of the pioneers in differentiating the study of so-called collective mentalities from those of individuals, see Durkheim, *Las Formas Elementales de La Vida Religiosa: El Sistema Totémico En Australia*, 403–8. and Juan Pablo Vázquez Gutiérrez, “La Concepción Del Hecho Social En Durkheim: De La Realidad Material al Mundo de Las Representaciones Colectivas,” *Política y Sociedad* 49, no. 2 (2012): 331–51, [https://doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_POSO.2012.v49.n2.38872](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_POSO.2012.v49.n2.38872).

<sup>110</sup> Patrick H. Hutton, “Sigmund Freud and Maurice Halbwachs: The Problem of Memory in Historical Psychology,” *The History Teacher* 27, no. 2 (1994): 145–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494601>.

<sup>111</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

<sup>112</sup> Henrik Jensen, *Weber and Durkheim: A Methodological Comparison* (Routledge, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203115855>.

The interpretation of this question has a double ontological and methodological dimension, since it is not the same to ask ourselves what social facts *are* as it is to ask *how we should study them*. Although both realities are connected, much of the scientific debate has moved away from the purely ontological discussion, appealing instead to reasons of practice and utility.<sup>113</sup> This debate is known in modern science as that between individualists and holists, and it was present in epistemological clashes for much of the twentieth century. However, the empirical evidence that sensible reality can also be broken down into increasingly smaller elements, and that even natural sciences such as physics cannot apply the same rules to all levels of analysis, shifted the paradigm.<sup>114</sup>

In this sense, contemporary authors argue that the most productive and pragmatic view that can serve today for the understanding of social phenomena is precisely that of systems theory, which has also been widely employed in the Natural Sciences and which allows for an integral vision of the objects of knowledge that reconciles the study of human beings and their environment thanks to the establishment of conceptual frameworks and general principles applicable to different types of systems.<sup>115</sup> Today it is argued that, as complex systems, human societies follow a series of principles shared with some forces of physics and other natural realities—such as climate—that, in short, prevent linear normative schemes of prediction.<sup>116</sup> Positioning himself against the individualism/holism binomial in a more integrative vision favorable to this theory, philosopher of science Mario Bunge affirmed:

“Contrary to the radical individualist tenet, society is not an unstructured collection of independent individuals. It is, instead, a system of interrelated individuals organized into systems or networks of various kinds. In fact, every one of us belongs at once to several systems: kinship, friendship and collegueship networks, business firms, schools, clubs, religious congregations, etc. This explains the many identities every one of us has.”<sup>117</sup>

Thus, it is possible to understand collective memory as a heuristic that allows us to study social realities without discarding the emergent phenomena that arise from the interaction among its components. This does not imply reifying collective memory or turning its study into

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<sup>113</sup> Harold Kincaid, “The Empirical Method of the Holism–Individualism Dispute,” *Philosophical Studies* 75, nos. 2–3 (1994): 135–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00989884>.

<sup>114</sup> Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*.

<sup>115</sup> Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory* (George Braziller, 1968), 38.

<sup>116</sup> Stefan Thurner et al., *Introduction to the Theory of Complex Systems* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>117</sup> Mario Bunge, “Systemism: The Alternative to Individualism and Holism,” *Journal of Socio-Economics* 29, no. 2 (2000): 154, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-5357\(00\)00059-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1053-5357(00)00059-0).

something detached from individual agency, but rather creating interpretative instruments based on empirical evidence and on testable assumptions.

### 1.3.2. Collective memory and social identities

The model of collective memory we propose does not discard all the knowledge produced in the context of *Memory Studies*, but rather interprets it in light of the theoretical standards of the study of social identities and taking into consideration the volume of empirical work available in that regard. For us, collective memory is not an autonomous reality, but a heuristic concept to refer to the influence of social identities on the knowledge, evaluation, and use of the past. We will develop these aspects in the following sections.

#### *Cognition and social influence*

In previous sections we have already pointed out the role that social identity plays in the formation of stereotypes and prejudices. However, we now need to detail more deeply the mechanisms by which social identity mediates individual cognition, in order to explain how this affects representations of the past. According to the most accepted theories in current psychology, human cognition is nourished by sensory stimuli and systems for filtering and interpreting them. While the first depends on the proper functioning of perceptual apparatuses and attentional capacity, the second comes from systems of information about oneself and about the external world acquired throughout life through personal experience and social influence. The processes of formation, updating, and maintenance of these information systems, as well as their internal dynamics, are enormously complex objects of study that have received attention from various disciplines —not only social psychology, but also sociology, political science, history or even philology—, usually treated only partially, without there being an integral theory to explain them. In social psychology, the framework provided by concepts such as *schemas*<sup>118</sup>, which refer to different interdependent dimensions of the same cognitive phenomenon, is common.<sup>119</sup>

*Schemas* are models (*templates*) or dynamic cognitive structures applicable to multiple situations in which the information received by the perceptual apparatuses is fitted for later

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<sup>118</sup> Sometimes the plural of *schema* is found in the literature as *schemata*.

<sup>119</sup> Ian Andrew James et al., “Schemas Revisited,” *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* 11, no. 5 (2004): 369–77, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.409>.

interpretation. They are diverse, may overlap with one another, and can intervene at the same time.<sup>120</sup> For example, for someone to be able to understand the figure of Josef Mengele, they must first have internalized concepts such as “person”, “past”, “science”, “doctor”, or “crime.” Such *schemas* are constructed differently for each person depending on their social environment and subjective experience, in such a way that groups intervene in them. Thus, even before reaching more concrete levels of knowledge, we know that people hold different concepts, for example, about what an individual is and what their relation to the collectivity is,<sup>121</sup> and we also know that different historical periods have provided diverse conceptions of the past.<sup>122</sup> They are generally learned in stages of neurodevelopment, but evolve throughout life with subjective experience through processes of *assimilation*—through which new information is modified to fit predefined *schemas*—and *accommodation*—those that intervene on the *schemas* to adapt them to new information that collides with them.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the networks in which they are embedded also influence the *accessibility* of data—how available they remain for everyday use—, the relations established between them, and the rules of inference. Thus, what we commonly call beliefs are in fact verbal representations of these networks of information. This is fundamental for understanding the functioning of collective memory, since it means that groups not only determine the selection and evaluation of sets of data and specific images, but are present in the very structures through which the learning of historical knowledge takes place.

The formation of these *schemas* that organize cognition takes place, as we have said, from the earliest stages of life, and is mediated by the aforementioned social influence of the groups with which the individual identifies—already defined in previous sections—, since most of the knowledge we acquire comes from other people. This is a natural process that could hardly occur otherwise: if our first source of knowledge is our parents and the environment around us in childhood, how could we escape the influence of groups? However, there are also specific incentives for the individual not only to receive social influence passively, but also to seek it. At

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<sup>120</sup> Asaf Gilboa and Hannah Marlatte, “Neurobiology of Schemas and Schema-Mediated Memory,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 21, no. 8 (2017): 618–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2017.04.013>.

<sup>121</sup> The Chinese population is influenced by collectivist culture at the cognitive level, with significant differences in their identification with the individual and the collective self. Huating Wu et al., “Do Chinese People Have a More Positive Emotional Bias towards the Collective Self? Evidences from the First-Person and the Third-Person Perspectives,” *Current Psychology* 44 (2025): 6430–41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06582-6>.

<sup>122</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>123</sup> Barbara Hanfstingl et al., “Assimilation and Accommodation,” *European Psychologist* 27, no. 4 (2022): 320–37, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000478>.

least two can be mentioned: the need to conform to *in-group prototypes* and to satisfy the *need for cognitive closure*, both already mentioned in the section on social identity.<sup>124</sup>

The system of interdependencies, information transmission, and mutual control formed by these interindividual mechanisms gives rise to what social psychology has called *shared realities*, which include the aforementioned *in-group prototypes* and the systems of beliefs and information about the world that favor the *depersonalization* of individuals—to varying degrees depending on the moment—in order to allow the operativity of groups.<sup>125</sup> This makes it evident that individual cognition cannot be separated from social influence, and therefore that the groups in which people develop their lives remain fundamental references for understanding their systems of information and beliefs.

#### *Collective memory as a system of beliefs*

Thus, what we have called “collective memory” is a dimension of these systems of beliefs shared by members of the same group. Specifically, it is a particular way of selecting, organizing, evaluating, and representing the information available about those parts of the past that remain relevant to it, adapting them to contextual interests mediated by social identity. We must keep in mind that not all elements of reality are equally relevant to group identities, nor are all dimensions of the same category. Thus, for a conservative political identity, food choices may have a certain relevance—empirical studies show a much lower proportion of Republican vegans or vegetarians than Democrats—<sup>126</sup> but the amount of salt put in food is something far less significant. However, the past occupies a preeminent place because of its explanatory and legitimizing potential.

The convergence of the Social Identity Approach tradition with the study of collective memory has not taken place so much through the cognitive mechanisms we referred to earlier, nor through systems of beliefs or shared realities, but through the paradigm of the so-called *social representations*. These come from the tradition of continental European social psychology,

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<sup>124</sup> Hogg et al., “Uncertainty, Entitativity, and Group Identification”; Kruglanski et al., “Groups as Epistemic Providers: Need for Closure and the Unfolding of Group-Centrism.”

<sup>125</sup> Michael A. Hogg and Mark J. Rinella, “Social Identities and Shared Realities,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 23 (October 2018): 6–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.10.003>; E. Tory Higgins et al., “Shared Reality: From Sharing-Is-Believing to Merging Minds,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 2 (2021): 103–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721421992027>.

<sup>126</sup> Samantha L. Mosier and Arbindra P. Rimal, “Where’s the Meat? An Evaluation of Diet and Partisanship Identification,” *British Food Journal* 122, no. 3 (2020): 896–909, <https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-08-2019-0631>. The authors analyzed various variables over a sample of 4,000 U.S. consumers, consistent with findings on conservative populations in other countries.

which, contrary to Anglo-Saxon empiricism, opts for phenomenological analyses. Social representations were defined by their most classical proponent, Serge Moscovici, in the following way:

“Rather than a kind of shadow cast upon society by a particular kind of experience or knowledge, a social representation is a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.”<sup>127</sup>

What hinders the operativity of this concept for empirical studies is precisely the breadth of such a definition, which to this day has not yet been resolved. This has already been criticized, pointing to the methodological weakness of the studies carried out in this regard. Thus, Fraser accused most of the academic literature belonging to the theory of social representations of making biased generalizations about diverse samples and lacking statistical significance,<sup>128</sup> while other criticisms have attacked the lack of truly operative definitions, social determinism, or being an apparent simplification of more elaborate and developed psychocognitive theories.<sup>129</sup> Without clear hypotheses and exclusive conditions, the concept of *social representation*—as formulated in its day by Moscovici—may serve as a framework in which to fit objects of study, but not as a theory that provides us with explanatory tools for phenomena. Its limitations do not lie in its inadequacy as a narrative scheme for describing social phenomena, but in the fact that its presuppositions, not being formalized, are difficult to verify in empirical terms and are difficult to integrate with the corpus of knowledge we already possess about the functioning of mental processes mediated by social factors.

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<sup>127</sup> Serge Moscovici, “Foreword,” in *Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis*, ed. Claudine Herzlich (Academic Press, 1973).

<sup>128</sup> Colin Fraser, “Attitudes, Social Representations and Widespread Beliefs,” *Papers on Social Representations* 3, no. 1 (1994): 1–13.

<sup>129</sup> Caroline Howarth, “A Review of Controversies about Social Representations Theory: A British Debate,” *Culture & Psychology* 11, no. 4 (2005): 431–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X05058586>; Michael Billig, “Studying the Thinking Society: Social Representations, Rhetoric, and Attitudes,” in *Empirical Approaches to Social Representations*, ed. Glynis M. Breakwell and David V. Canter (Clarendon Press, 1993).

*Group functions of collective memory*

As we mentioned, this issue has not prevented social representations from constituting, nevertheless, the most frequently used bridge between studies of collective memory and Social Identity Theory. The classic formulation of this bridge was established by Bar-Tal, for whom collective memory is a concept that refers to the application of social representations to the specific case of the past. In the theoretical literature from the perspective of social psychology, reflection has taken place on the possible functions that collective memory fulfills within groups in different contexts. On this point, there is a certain consensus, which can be summarized in two fundamental areas: reinforcement of *positive distinctiveness* and legitimation.<sup>130</sup>

The concept of *positive distinctiveness* has already been described in previous sections, and we know that it is based on the need of group members to feel, on the one hand, difference in relation to other groups—in which the so-called *meta-contrast ratio* intervenes—, and on the other hand, to improve their own self-concept through adherence to collective identity. We suggest that collective memory affects this for three reasons, which lead to the development of the aforementioned dynamics of selection and analysis.<sup>131</sup> First, identification with elements of the past provides group members with a sense of continuity, as if the group were a *diachronic collective subject* that transcends their vital and ideological limitations. That is, through identification, individuals are able to situate themselves in another time and to give meaning to historical information. We also know that this extension provides them with a sense of continuity, which reinforces the existential narrative of the group. A paradigmatic case of this is shown by sociologist T. B. Gongaware, who for two years followed two pro-civil rights organizations composed of young members of the indigenous ethnic groups of the United States. In this study he identified the process he called *collective memory anchoring*, by which these groups “made a direct connection between the current interaction and a related event or series of events in the past (...) the anchor helps participants avoid a breach in continuity by providing elements from the past that could be used in formulating the current actions.”<sup>132</sup> Along these lines, Bar-Tal also expressed himself, noting that collective memory as a form of social representation “shared

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<sup>130</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, “Collective Memory as Social Representations,” *Papers on Social Representations* 23, no. 1 (2014): 5.1-5.26.

<sup>131</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings, “Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves,” in *Memory in Context: Context in Memory*, ed. Robert M. Farr and Serge Moscovici (Psychology Press, 1998); Darío Páez and James H. Liu, “Collective Memory of Conflicts,” in *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bar-Tal (Psychology Press, 2010).

<sup>132</sup> Timothy B. Gongaware, “Collective Memory Anchors: Collective Identity and Continuity in Social Movements,” *Sociological Focus* 43, no. 3 (2010): 222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2010.10571375>.

narrative indicates to society members that the common present is a continuation of the common past.”<sup>133</sup> In other words, it is a mechanism that reinforces internal cohesion through a symbolic and emotional link between group members in the present and those who become their referents from the past.

As a consequence, the past becomes a source of symbols and narratives about the group itself which, by the effect of antiquity, add a greater impression of authenticity. These *anchorages* may consist of formal events that create group culture, such as commemorative events or festivities that honor the in-group’s past, but also monuments or cultural creations—books, music, films, etc. These reinforce group cohesiveness by making its members share a series of referents. In fact, if we look at national identities, the creation of this common past is usually one of the most frequent strategies in those states that, because of their ethnic diversity or geographic dispersion, need these elements to generate a sense of national unity, that is, to develop a superordinate and cohesive identity. Pierre Nora devoted a series of seven volumes—the famous *Lieux de Mémoire*—precisely to explaining the construction of the French national past through this kind of symbols, which for him could be material—places, monuments, pictorial works—, but also immaterial—Joan of Arc, the French Revolution. For him, in what he called the “classical model,” the French state had created a clear superordinate identity linked to commemoration,<sup>134</sup> which was also capable of becoming the diachronic subject mentioned above: “no more discontinuity existed between our Greco-roman cradle and the colonies of the Third Republic (...) the holy nation thus acquired a holy history.”<sup>135</sup> Participation in some of these commemorations creates a sense of community and, at the same time, transmits and reinforces the system of beliefs that is of interest to group identity.<sup>136</sup> In cases such as the United States or Australia, former British settler colonies that became independent without a clear nationalist movement, the national integration of the population depended even more on cultural innovation, within which commemorations and the creation of symbols drawn from

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<sup>133</sup> Bar-Tal, “Collective Memory as Social Representations,” 5.2-5.5.

<sup>134</sup> Pierre Nora, “The Era of Commemoration,” in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (Columbia University Press, 1998), 614–15.

<sup>135</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

<sup>136</sup> Hiro Saito, “From Collective Memory to Commemoration,” in *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, ed. John R. Hall et al. (Routledge, 2010); Brian S. Osborne, “Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33, no. 3 (2001): 39–77, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2001.0023>.

collective memory—such as the War of Independence itself in the American case—played an even more central role.<sup>137</sup>

A third way in which representations of the past reinforce cohesion and in-group identity is through their role as channels of transmission of moral values. Two theoretical forms of narratives about the past can be identified in which it serves as an authority to validate in-group systems of beliefs and behaviors. According to German philosopher and historian Jörn Rüsen, these are the *traditional*, in which the past is considered a kind of mandate of continuity based on unquestionable preconditions, and the *exemplary*, in which concrete cases are extracted from it to demonstrate more general rules.<sup>138</sup> Two cases in which the authority of the past and the in-group system of values converge are certain religions—notably those that possess a mythology or their own vision of history—and political movements of various kinds. Thus, in his study of the already analyzed *cultural memory*, Jan Assmann identified in the religious texts of ancient Egypt a link with the past that functioned at the same time as a moral guide and as a guarantor of strong identity in the context of that era,<sup>139</sup> which “establishes individual identity and membership of the community (...) *maat* even promises to confer immortality on this identity, in the form of survival beyond death in the social memory of the group.”<sup>140</sup> It should be noted that in these cases the relationship between the system of moral beliefs and the past is reciprocal: behavioral mandates gain strength because they are imposed by tradition, and at the same time the past times from which this tradition draws are interpreted in light of that same system of beliefs.

On the other hand, Aurélie Campana’s study of the collective memory of Chechen separatists is revealing as to how these elements also apply outside the religious sphere. The Chechens possess their own mythology with symbols that refer to values desired and shared by much of the community in which they grow up. In it, legendary elements such as the wolf (*borz*), which represents courage, bravery, and freedom, are mixed with historical memories of centuries-old confrontations against the different political entities that this imaginary identifies with the Russian nation. It highlights figures such as the *abrek* or *obarg*, who represent the guerrillas that resisted in the mountains against the foreign invader and therefore bravery, the epic of fighting against a more powerful enemy, patriotism, and the pursuit of freedom. One of

<sup>137</sup> Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17–56, 136–54.

<sup>138</sup> Jörn Rüsen, “Tradition: A Principle of Historical Sense-Generation and Its Logic and Effect in Historical Culture,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 4 (2012): 42–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2012.00658.x>.

<sup>139</sup> Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 154–69.

<sup>140</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 90.

the clearest milestones of memory in this sense was the great deportation of 1944, when much of the Chechen ethnic group was deported to Central Asia by the Soviet authorities, which came to reinforce this narrative of values of resistance and the quest for freedom.<sup>141</sup>

This last example leads us to the other major function of collective memory in the context of social identity: the legitimation of present actions. In fact, the legitimacy of the group was already being reinforced by each of the elements mentioned above. The group's sense of continuity can be used to push it toward the claim of supposed historical rights, as is the case of nationalist irredentism. Examples of this type are abundant, but there are two particularly clear cases in this sense. The State of Israel was built on the foundations of Zionist nationalism, an ideology that demanded the creation of a sovereign state for all Jewish people worldwide, and that historically claimed the land then known as Palestine for itself. As Zerubavel explains, Zionist nationalism had a binary view of Jewish history in which the ancient era was seen as a moment of flourishing, in contrast to the subsequent diaspora, which represented decline. Consequently, recovering the geographic location where this supposed flourishing had taken place became a priority, which was used as a legitimizing discourse for migrations to the land of Palestine and later for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in that territory.<sup>142</sup>

The idea of continuity also affects claims for historical reparation by groups that consider themselves or are considered historically oppressed. That is, members of the group in the present identify with those they understand as members of the group in the past and feel heirs to their needs for reparation. For Torpey, there are two types of claims in this sense: those that seek the restoration of a group for some kind of harm suffered—genocides, war crimes, etc.—in the past, and those that demand specific social measures to resolve a present situation of supposed economic or political disadvantage caused by past harms, usually colonial or slavery-based situations.<sup>143</sup> In our view, both are part of the group's legitimation by continuity, with the difference that in the second case the harm would still persist and would require a greater effort for change by the state. A very illustrative case is the movement for reparations for Black people in the United States, which—although with clear precedents that can be traced back to the Civil War—experienced a process of re-emergence since the decline of the Civil Rights Movement

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<sup>141</sup> Aurélie Campana, "Collective Memory and Violence: The Use of Myths in the Chechen Separatist Ideology, 1991–1994," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2009): 43–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000902726767>.

<sup>142</sup> Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13–38.

<sup>143</sup> John Torpey, "Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: Reflections on Reparations," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 2 (2001): 337–38, <https://doi.org/10.1086/321031>.

in the 1960s, in favor of more fragmented groups that, beyond legal recognition of their rights, pursued *affirmative actions* that would make them effective.<sup>144</sup> The well-known *Black Manifesto* of 1969 by James Forman—National Black Economic Development Conference—summarized in this way the historical resistance of Black people in the United States in its prologue: “we started on the shores of Africa, for we have always resisted attempts to make us slaves and now we must resist the attempts to make us capitalists,” and later, in the manifesto itself, “For centuries we have been forced to live as colonized people inside the United States, victimized by the most vicious, racist system in the world.”<sup>145</sup> One element to underline is that they make a call for the recognition of historical oppression over all Black people in the world, and moreover blame white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues for this historical oppression. That is, the discourse is clearly creating a universal and diachronic in-group category, that of the *blacks*, and another out-group category with the same characteristics, that of the white religious congregations. This narrative was exponentially intensified in a later work of great relevance to the Black reparations movement, *The Debt. What America Owes to Blacks*, by lawyer and activist Randall M. Robinson. He devoted the entire first chapter to a genuine effort to link the Black collective subject of the present with that of the past. In doing so, he not only fulfilled the objective of legitimizing the reparation claims that emerged in his time, but also the need to provide this collective subject with a source of symbols that went beyond the times of slavery, immersing it in the historical legacy of the African empires.<sup>146</sup>

Both cases presented are fulfilling the function of legitimizing the demands of the group in the present, while at the same time providing it with a source of symbols and its own narrative that enhances *positive distinctiveness*. The social category “Jew” within Zionism appeals to a set of individuals historically divided geographically and culturally, most of whom suffered prejudice and lack of acceptance in the societies in which they lived. Similarly, the Black people of the United States who were the political subject of the reparations movements found themselves in a situation of socioeconomic disadvantage and suffering the consequences of structural racism in American society. In both cases, presenting an idealized past that also provides contextually credible tools to support their claims for recognition represents opening a door to the

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<sup>144</sup> John Torpey, “Paying for the Past? The Movement for Reparations for African-Americans,” *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 2 (2004): 171–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475483042000219814>.

<sup>145</sup> James Forman, “Manifesto to the White Christian Churches and the Jewish Synagogues in the United States of America and All Other Racist Institutions,” National Black Economic Development Conference, 1969, 4,6.

<sup>146</sup> Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (Penguin, 2000), 11–28.

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improvement of self-concept, which according to the theories of the Social Identity Approach, is one of the motivations of individuals to sustain their identification with the group.

## Chapter 2. Nazism and Holocaust in the American Collective Memory

Now that we have presented the theories necessary to understand the social phenomenon implied by the ANHs, we must apply these interpretative frameworks to the particular case at hand. One of the most important questions of our research is why these historical references occupied such a prominent place in the debates of the pandemic. That is, why, in a context of heightened intergroup conflict and the activation of political identity categories, recourse was made to historical references and the collective memories of the enemy defeated during the Second World War in order to attack the present enemy. Although establishing a direct causality is always a dubious task without the proper means, we suggest that there were, at least, two *enabling elements* for this: their role in national identity and the strong presence of Nazism and the Holocaust in popular culture.

### 2.1. The Second World War and American National Identity

The first variable that we should take into account is the role of that war in American national identity, employed as a unifying narrative legitimizing the values defended by its institutions, its subsequent actions, and its role in the world. If we recall, social comparison between two groups usually takes place in terms of the immediately superior and more inclusive superordinate category, so that the groups in conflict during the pandemic employed American national prototypes as the framework for out-group hostility.

#### 2.1.1. War as melting pot

The Second World War constituted a fundamental foundational framework for the American republic during the rest of the twentieth century in terms of identity, symbolism, and popular culture. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the country had been the entry point for millions of immigrants: between 1850 and 1910, the foreign-born population multiplied by seven, with Germans and Irish as the most represented groups, but with notable contingents also coming from the rest of the United Kingdom, Canada, France, or Sweden, later

joined by large numbers of Russians and Italians.<sup>147</sup> If we add to this the significant percentage of African American population, around 15% in the first decades of the new century,<sup>148</sup> as well as the communities of Native Americans and the growing number of Jewish citizens, we can affirm that the United States that entered the great world conflict was, to a large extent, a mosaic of cultures and identities. And not all of them in harmony: violence against African Americans and ethnic conflict in general increased during this period.<sup>149</sup> This was the high point of racial segregation, which, protected by the doctrine of *Separate but Equal* consecrated by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, allowed for the creation of separate schools, churches, and even restaurants for Black, Hispanic, and other minority populations.<sup>150</sup> To this we must add religious conflict, which affected not only the aforementioned Jews, but also the important contingents of Catholic population that now inhabited the American landscape. Ethnic conflict and the labor consequences it carried with it — as the labor market became much more competitive due to the influx of immigrants — led to much more restrictive and selective policies based on nationality, with the well-known *quotas* of 1921 and 1924 being approved, with later modifications.

This fragmentation was intensified by the growing labor and political conflict experienced by the country throughout the 1920s and 1930s, especially after the Great Depression. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the entry of the United States as a belligerent power in the midst of the Second World War brought about a shift in interethnic relations and in the concept of *American identity*, which until then had barely occupied space in the public arena. During the war, the need for national unity to contribute to the war effort led the government and other key actors in American society to carry out major integration efforts, with dozens of organizations created specifically for this purpose. There was also a certain ideological turn toward rejecting theories of racial supremacy and ethnocentrism as the basis of the nation that nourished Nazi ideology, now an enemy of war — something to which the very predecessors of SIT contributed decisively — which made it possible to move toward a model

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<sup>147</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel et al., “How the Origins of America’s Immigrants Have Changed since 1850,” *Pew Research Center*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/22/how-the-origins-of-americas-immigrants-have-changed-since-1850/>.

<sup>148</sup> Gary D. Sandefur et al., “An Overview of Racial and Ethnic Demographic Trends,” in *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences. Volume I*, ed. National Research Council (National Academies Press, 2001).

<sup>149</sup> Susan Olzak, “Labor Unrest, Immigration, and Ethnic Conflict in Urban America, 1880–1914,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 6 (1989): 1303–33, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229114>.

<sup>150</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (Longman, 1980).

in which a certain cultural pluralism was accepted on the basis of the so-called *common ground*, which could also be referred to as *American values*.<sup>151</sup>

However, if the home front marked a significant shift in this regard, the battlefield was no less important. 16.4 million Americans served in the different branches of the armed forces during the conflict, among them more than 900,000 African Americans,<sup>152</sup> more than one million Italian Americans,<sup>153</sup> more than half a million Jews,<sup>154</sup> and almost 55,000 Native Americans,<sup>155</sup> among others. The war experience was not the same for all ethnic and racial minorities. While Japanese Americans faced serious problems in participating in the war, as they were considered *enemy aliens*, immigrants of European origin were integrated into white units, along with Native Americans whose participation rates were particularly high. By contrast, segregationist policies followed African Americans into the army, where they mostly performed logistical support tasks behind the lines, and when they did participate in combat, they did so in non-integrated units often led by white officers.<sup>156</sup> However, this did not prevent contact between white and Black units and the possibility for some of the latter to participate in environments that had until then been closed to them. Films such as *The Negro Soldier* and *Home of the Brave* were shown to soldiers to raise awareness of the situation of African Americans. In fact, the positive desegregation-related experiences that took place during the war led the Truman administration in 1948 to prohibit segregation in the military through *Executive Order 9981*, which marked a turning point, considering that this had not yet taken place in civilian life.<sup>157</sup>

This did not at all mean the end of ethnic and racial tensions. In addition to the internment of American citizens of Asian origin in the Pacific in concentration camps during the war itself,<sup>158</sup> the rise of anti-communism during the harshest years of the Cold War, which to some

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<sup>151</sup> Philip Gleason, “Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of the American Identity,” *The Review of Politics* 43, no. 4 (1981): 483–518, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500039071>.

<sup>152</sup> David Armor, “Changing Minority Representation in the U.S. Military,” *Armed Forces & Society* 36, no. 2 (2010): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X09349792>.

<sup>153</sup> Salvatore Lagumina, *The Humble and the Heroic: Wartime Italian Americans* (Cambria Press, 2006), 152–53.

<sup>154</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>155</sup> David E. Rohall, “Native American ‘Warriors’ in the US Armed Forces,” in *Inclusion in the American Military: A Force for Diversity*, ed. Morten G. Ender and Michael D. Matthews (Lexington Books, 2017).

<sup>156</sup> Rhonda Evans, *A History of the Service of Ethnic Minorities in the U.S. Armed Forces* (Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, 2003).

<sup>157</sup> Thomas A. Bruscino, “Minorities in the Military,” in *A Companion to American Military History. Volume I*, ed. James C. Bradford (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 890.

<sup>158</sup> The forced displacement affected more than 110,000 people, some of them already descendants of several generations in the country.

extent fostered discriminatory discourses against minorities,<sup>159</sup> and the marked resistance of Southern Democrats against the advance of the civil rights movement represented significant veins of intergroup conflict in this sense. Nevertheless, the G.I. Bill allowed broad sectors of the population to access universities and the housing market,<sup>160</sup> and the renewed influence of war veterans, who supported non-discrimination policies, was felt in school curricula and in political discourse in general.<sup>161</sup> However, what the Second World War did achieve was to reinforce the master narrative of American identity that later proved so necessary.

### 2.1.2. Building a national narrative of WW2

This permeated American political and popular culture for decades, turning the Second World War into a reference point for the values of American society. The *four freedoms* enunciated by Roosevelt in his 1941 *State of the Union* address<sup>162</sup> and later immortalized by Norman Rockwell echoed the pro-interventionist position in the war, which sought to dismantle the traditional American fear of seeing the country involved in foreign affairs with arguments that invoked the defense of civilization, freedom, and justice embodied in American ideals.<sup>163</sup> This was reflected in wartime propaganda, where films such as the famous *Why We Fight* presented the United States as a bulwark of freedom and civilization, linking its progress to armed struggle through images that recalled the War of Independence and the First World War, in contrast to an “other world” where the “lighthouses” of freedom had been extinguished, the population lived in misery, and violence was chosen over democracy as a way to solve problems.<sup>164</sup> Radio, another of the great mass media of the era, also experienced a considerable propaganda effort. According to Horten, the Roosevelt administration managed to place the most popular and powerful

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<sup>159</sup> See, for example, the suspicions about the Civil Rights Movement during the second *red scare* and how they contributed to its subsequent radicalization James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

<sup>160</sup> Not forgetting that it did not affect all sectors in the same way. The Black population was clearly discriminated against in the process due to the decentralization of the law, which allowed southern state institutions to place obstacles for Black veterans to benefit, for example, from mortgage advantages, and the segregation system prevented historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) from providing education to all new applicants; see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (W. W. Norton, 2005), 79–96.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Bruscino, *A Nation Forged in War: How World War II Taught Americans to Get Along* (University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 177–204.

<sup>162</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Message to Congress,” FDR Presidential Library, January 11, 1944, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/address-text>.

<sup>163</sup> Ted Grimsrud, *The Good War That Wasn't — and Why It Matters: World War II's Moral Legacy* (Cascade Books, 2014), 32–52.

<sup>164</sup> *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*, directed by Frank Capra, 1942, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbUo3oQ9nYM>.

medium of the moment — radio — at the service of a cause: ensuring that Americans knew “what this war is all about,” creating a propaganda apparatus that strove to transmit the idea that the war was an inevitable struggle for the defense of Americans’ rights against those who sought to take them away.<sup>165</sup> We will delve further into this aspect of the contrast between the in-group and the out-group in the following section.

What interests us about the war era, in which auteur cinema could be confused with propaganda film, is how it framed the memories both of the general public who remained on the home front and of the veterans themselves when they returned. And not only that: the intertextuality inherent in cultural production led many of the great works of later popular culture to imitate, to some extent, the canons already established at that time. We are speaking of works such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949, dir. by Allan Dwan), *To Hell and Back* (1955, dir. by Jesse Hibbs), *The Longest Day* (1962, dir. by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton & Gerd Oswald), *The Great Escape* (1963, dir. by John Sturges), or *Patton* (1970, dir. by Franklin J. Schaffner) which, even while introducing certain moral dilemmas and several layers of interpretation,<sup>166</sup> contributed to a hegemonic narrative in cinema that exalted patriotism and individual heroism, either cloaked in the epic of victory or martyrically magnified by the pain of wartime suffering in more modern productions. This superficial duality can be seen in the difference between *The Longest Day* and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, dir. by Steven Spielberg) in their treatment of the landing at Omaha Beach in June 1944, probably the best-known military milestone of the American intervention in the European theater during the war. The former offers a simple portrait, based on collective effort and a clean victory against the German enemy, while the latter results in a visually striking hyperrealism where the battle is read more as a slaughter than as a glorious event. Yet what lies beneath both films is heroism, read in different ways, without questioning the country’s entry into the war. A characteristic — the use of audiovisual technical advances without the underlying message undergoing substantial changes — that we could also extend to other acclaimed modern productions such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001, dir. by Michael Bay), the series *Band of Brothers* (2001, created by Steven Spielberg & Tom Hanks), or more recently

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<sup>165</sup> Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda during World War II* (University of California Press, 2002), 13–88.

<sup>166</sup> John Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 130–95. Naturally, across the audiovisual production concerning the Second World War one can find dissonant and even critical representations, such as the more pessimistic, individual, and philosophical perspective of *The Thin Red Line* (1998), the abandonment of soldiers after the war in *The Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), or the Japanese perspective shown in *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). However, it is difficult to argue that these works managed to dislodge the Second World War from its role in reinforcing the *positive distinctiveness* of American identity.

the film *Fury* (2014, dir. by David Ayer). A grand narrative that was also anchored in other products of mass popular culture inspired by the Second World War, whether comic book sagas such as *Captain America Comics* (1941 – 1950, pub. by Timely Comics) or, from the 1980s onwards, the vast video game industry on the Second World War, which to a large extent tended to echo cinema — *Medal of Honor* (from 1999 onwards, created by Steven Spielberg) or *Call of Duty* (from 2003 onwards, developed originally by Infinity Ward).

And not only that. As we mentioned earlier, collective memory has among its functions that of anchoring the present group to those individuals from the past with whom it identifies, and this is often done through sites of memory and commemorations. Thus, the Second World War has its own particular commemorations — Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day (December 7<sup>th</sup>), National World War II Memorial Day (May 29<sup>th</sup>), Victory in Europe Day (May 8<sup>th</sup>), etc. — but it is also markedly present in two of the twelve federal holidays currently observed in the United States,<sup>167</sup> namely Memorial Day (last Monday in May) and Veterans Day (November 11). This was also consecrated in the numerous monuments, often infused with a rhetoric as heroic and dramatic as it was patriotic and sacred.<sup>168</sup> A good example of this is the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford (Virginia), inaugurated in June 2001, whose motto is “Valor, Fidelity, and Sacrifice.” The memorial is divided into three areas, each referring to a phase of Operation Overlord: the English Garden, where the emblem of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) forms a giant sword symbolizing the Allies’ planning of the attack on Nazi Germany; the Invasion Plaza, which contains a symbolic staging of the landing and the cliffs the soldiers had to climb; and the Victory Plaza, adorned with a triumphal arch and a *Final Tribute*, representing one of the ways fallen soldiers were buried after combat.<sup>169</sup> Beyond the implicit interpretation and the symbolism that this kind of construction suggests, American political authorities themselves have explicitly endowed these monuments with an aura of heroism. At the opening of the National World War II Memorial in 2004, President

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<sup>167</sup> U.S. Government, “American Holidays,” 2024, <https://www.usa.gov/holidays>.

<sup>168</sup> The religious character of the United States’ collective memory of the Second World War has emerged at various points throughout recent history. Thus, for example, in his well-known speech of June 6, 1984 at the Omaha Beach Memorial, Ronald Reagan spoke of the war as a victory in “the defense and preservation of our sacred values”; see Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a United States-France Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-Day,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, June 6, 1984, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-united-states-france-ceremony-commemorating-40th-anniversary-normandy>. Moreover, in most cemeteries associated with those who fell in the Second World War, and even in the 2004 memorial itself, there was a blend of religious faith and patriotism, with crosses and other religious symbols, and a mixture of civil and sacred space.

<sup>169</sup> William F. Lawson, “The National D-Day Memorial, Bedford, Virginia,” *The Saber and Scroll Journal* 6, no. 2 (2017): 113–22.

George W. Bush Jr. appealed to the “heroes” who had liberated in that and other wars the United States had fought in defense of its freedoms and founding ideals, linking their struggle to the fight against terrorism and praying for divine blessing upon the families of the soldiers.<sup>170</sup> For Lowe, the study of monuments and of American collective memory of the war reflects “that American depth of feeling about the war comes not from a sense of history, but from a sense of identity (...) the war is nothing but a screen upon which they have projected much deeper ideas and emotions (...).”<sup>171</sup>

This marked presence of the war in American mentality and popular culture meant that its use as a rhetorical device — just as we will see later with the COVID-19 pandemic — became widespread early on. Myths such as that of the *Greatest Generation*<sup>172</sup> and of the United States as arbiter of the Western world were created out of a heroic and nationalist narrative that would gain strength both as a counterpoint to other wars more ambiguous in moral terms, such as Vietnam, and as a justification for the United States’ role in the world. Thus, the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan sought to interpret the defeat in the recent Indochina conflict in light of the narrative scheme of the Second World War, “unequivocally equating the war with the worldwide defense of peace and freedom, suggesting that it had been undertaken in an altruistic effort to give present and future generations a better world. It had become, in a word, World War II.”<sup>173</sup> In Ronald Reagan’s case, he would employ this same framework on numerous occasions during his presidency to justify his policy of law and order in the streets and the fight against terrorism. Thus, in a speech delivered on April 30, 1981 at the first annual commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust, he sought to equate the challenges of the national community in the present with those of the past:

“We recall the pain only because we must never permit it to come again. And yet, today, in spite of that experience, as an entire generation has grown to adulthood, who never knew the days of World War II, and we remember ourselves, when we were younger, how distant history seemed, anything that came before our time — and so the signs do exist: the ugly graffiti, the

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<sup>170</sup> George W. Bush, “Prayer for Peace, Memorial Day, 2004,” White House Archives, May 30, 2004, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/ww2/text/index.html>.

<sup>171</sup> Keith Lowe, *Prisoners of History: What Monuments to World War II Tell Us about Our History and Ourselves* (Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>172</sup> See Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections* (Random House Publishing Group, 2001).

<sup>173</sup> Robert J. McMahon, “Rationalizing Defeat: The Vietnam War in American Presidential Discourse, 1975–1995,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2, no. 4 (1999): 538, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2010.0165>.

act of violence, the act of terrorism here and there, scattered throughout the world and not quite large enough in dimension for us to rally as we once did in that war.”<sup>174</sup>

The metaphors with the Second World War also clouded trade disputes with Japan — at that time the United States’ main economic rival — with various public figures and media comparing Japanese acquisitions of American assets with bombings or likening the need for a trade agreement to the peace that had ended the war in the Pacific decades earlier. In this same vein, abortion — for conservatives, a Holocaust —, the AIDS crisis — for some victims, a kind of Auschwitz perpetrated by an irresponsible government —, or feminism — for Rush Limbaugh, the source of “femi-Nazis” — were also cast in this light.<sup>175</sup> The same occurred during 9/11, when the Bush administration revived the epic discourse of the war against the absolute evil of Nazism to project its aura onto Islamic terrorism, thereby legitimizing radical actions such as the invasion of Afghanistan or the War on Terror within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom. The president’s rhetoric inflamed public opinion by describing the attacks as a kind of new Pearl Harbor of the twenty-first century and the terrorists as heirs to the fascist ideology that the United States had once been compelled to bring to an end.<sup>176</sup>

## 2.2. National-Socialism as a Representation of “the Other”

If the memory of the Second World War serves to represent cohesion and a positive self-image of the in-group, it also provides American identity with an out-group archetype against which to project itself. This is one of the characteristics of collective memory that makes it especially interesting as an area of study for theories of social identity and conflict, because it means that groups mobilize not only against real out-groups with which they compete in material or symbolic terms, but also against some that no longer even exist or that are entirely imaginary. In any case, it is possible to agree that, as with any other stereotype, representations of Nazism do not necessarily depend on historical reality, but are instead the product of the set of beliefs and images that the producing group holds about it. In the following pages we will examine which characteristics of Nazism shaped its initial construction in U.S. culture, and how

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<sup>174</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the First Annual Commemoration of the Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, April 30, 1981, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-first-annual-commemoration-days-remembrance-victims-holocaust>.

<sup>175</sup> Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (Yale University Press, 1995), 431–97.

<sup>176</sup> David Hoogland Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2004): 339–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2005.0005>.

it eventually detached itself from historicity to become a source of aesthetic and narrative reference.

Although we also consider its evolution throughout the twentieth century, our emphasis is on the war itself and on propaganda. We made this choice consciously for two reasons. First, the war was the moment when most of the narrative tropes of warfare that would later be developed were constructed — exaggerating aspects such as heroism and downplaying others such as the human cost — especially in cinema, which until the turn of the century was one of the main vehicles of mass culture: “Sacrifice, obedience, choral contribution, moral clarity in battle, due respect for the enemy, and the other wartime tropes endured in postwar Hollywood cinema”<sup>177</sup>. Second, because it was then that the information ecosystem was most restricted, and the influence of the out-group stereotypes projected onto Nazism was able to penetrate society more forcefully. Both reasons make the productions of that period useful for explaining a large part of those that followed.

### 2.2.1. Nazism in Propaganda and the Culture of War

The case of Nazism is not like that of other wartime enemies. As noted earlier, the United States portrayed the conflict as a moral struggle between the values of Western democracies and the barbarism and lack of freedoms embodied by the Axis dictatorships, but this was not a completely new strategy. Already during the Great War, the country’s authorities had depicted the Central Powers as political models antithetical to American democracy, and their barbaric character had been reinforced even through historical and racial metaphors, comparing Germans, for example, to the Huns.<sup>178</sup> However, the German Empire had little in common with the totalitarian system later established under Nazi Germany, and its image was not so deeply marked by the commission of large-scale genocides — although it did bear responsibility for numerous crimes, both before and during the conflict.<sup>179</sup> The memory of Nazi Germany as a wartime enemy, by contrast, became inextricably linked to the authoritarian ideology and the

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<sup>177</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 272.

<sup>178</sup> This even extended to the point of trying to convince German-Americans themselves living in the United States that they should not support their fatherland because the war was not between nations but between political systems. See Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 162–68.

<sup>179</sup> The German army committed various forms of war crimes against civilians during the First World War, which today can be counted in thousands of deliberate killings and destroyed infrastructure in France, Belgium, and Poland, as exposed in John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (Yale University Press, 2001), 74–86; Marion Wallace and John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 165–82.

National Socialist movement led by war criminals and genocidaires, and consequently, to the persecution of Jews and to the Holocaust. The incendiary speeches, megalomaniac projects, omnipresent reverence for military culture, and the Nazi propaganda apparatus itself all influenced and amplified the image that its Allied enemies held of it.

However, this image of Nazi Germany as tied to the Holocaust would not spread on a mass scale until long after the war. The impact of the genocide committed by the Germans was moderate among the American population during the 1930s. The repeated attacks of the Nazi regime against the Jews were known, especially in the written press, but they were not seen as part of a planned project for the mass extermination of this population, and at first — especially until 1935, with the publication of the Nuremberg Laws — there was even a certain tendency to exonerate the German government of them, considering them spontaneous manifestations due to the polarized context or, at most, the product of Hitler's own weakness in containing the masses that his antisemitic discourse had inflamed.<sup>180</sup>

The position of the U.S. government was not one of explicit confrontation with the German regime in this regard, and there was no clear political effort in the 1930s to instrumentalize the discrimination against Jews against it. This was due to several factors. The country's position was officially neutral, and before the war it had passed several Neutrality Acts (1935, 1936, 1937, and 1939, although the latter already allowed the sale of arms to belligerents), which reflected Congress's will to keep the country out of European conflicts. Thus, the government had no incentives to actively mobilize the population. Moreover, some of the discriminatory measures being imposed in Germany against the Jewish population, particularly those aimed at segregation — as well as lynchings and other forms of physical violence and vandalism — could be related to those already existing in large sectors of the country against African Americans. In fact, Whitman's work has shown that not only were there parallels, but that part of these German discriminatory policies were inspired by the United States itself.<sup>181</sup>

Another element that made it neither easy nor attractive to instrumentalize the persecution was that antisemitism was widespread among the American population, and during the years of the Great Depression that preceded the outbreak of the Second World War, it

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<sup>180</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (Free Press, 1986). The author notes how even the journalistic coverage of these laws prioritized, for example, the issue of the flag change over the ban on mixed marriages or the loss of citizenship by Jews.

<sup>181</sup> James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

intensified: Roosevelt’s presidency was marked, among the most religious sectors, by suspicions that the country had been “sold to the Jews” to the detriment of Christians. In 1938, a survey conducted for a report on antisemitism in the United States confirmed that half of the people had negative opinions about Jews, more than a third blamed them for the oppression they suffered in Europe, and more than three quarters did not want the government to admit refugees from Nazi persecution.<sup>182</sup> The country even had prominent circles of Nazi sympathizers exerting pressure against any initiative targeting Nazi Germany, such as the German-American Bund, which came to have several tens of thousands of members and to stage major actions, such as a rally of more than 20,000 attendees at Madison Square Garden in New York in February 1939.<sup>183</sup>

The image transmitted of Germany at that time was of an authoritarian and militaristic regime with strong antisemitic overtones, but not yet a declared enemy nor a greater threat to Western civilization than, for example, the Bolsheviks might represent. In fact, Adolf Hitler’s appointment as chancellor even aroused a certain restrained enthusiasm among the more conservative sectors of American politics, who believed that perhaps the dictatorship would be able to keep the communist threat away from German society.<sup>184</sup> Roosevelt himself was aware of this state of public opinion, and for some years considered that Hitler’s dictatorship posed no immediate danger to the United States and would probably collapse under its own weight.<sup>185</sup> To find true representations of the Nazis as enemies we must wait until the beginning of the Second World War, when a public–private propaganda complex began first to prepare society for a possible entry into the conflict and later for sustaining the war effort.

*Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released just months before the German invasion of Poland, is considered one of the first successful films to directly attack the danger that Nazi Germany posed to the United States. Its main target was the *Bund* and other pro-Nazi organizations operating in the country, portraying Nazis as violent gangsters and criminals, and the ruling regime in Germany as a ruthless conspirator.<sup>186</sup> During the war itself, beginning in June 1942, the Office of War Information (OWI) began to function as a propaganda office charged with

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<sup>182</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 105–27; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (Pantheon Books, 1984), 311–44.

<sup>183</sup> Susan Canedy, *America’s Nazis: A Democratic Dilemma* (Markgraf Publications Group, 1990).

<sup>184</sup> Robert A. Rosenbaum, *Waking to Danger: Americans and Nazi Germany, 1933–1941* (Praeger, 2002), 4–6, 77–90.

<sup>185</sup> Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War Against Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–45.

<sup>186</sup> Eric J. Sandeen, “Confessions of a Nazi Spy and the German-American Bund,” *American Studies* 20, no. 1 (1979): 69–81.

supervising propaganda and advising cultural productions, so that, in coordination with the private sector, it could control information about the war.<sup>187</sup> Of particular interest to our research is the manual it issued for the film industry on how to represent the war. In it, the Nazis were already identified as enemies, representatives of a greater and more dangerous force — violent militarist ideology — and it stressed the need to make citizens understand that this could not be defeated by a peace agreement. According to its guidelines, the German enemy sought military conquest of the world and the overthrow of democracy, an objective embedded in the very nature of fascism, which made negotiation with it impossible.<sup>188</sup> In other words, the main feature of the wartime enemy in this case — the trait distinguishing it from others — was its militarist and antidemocratic vocation.

In the following years, the OWI emphasized that films should not present overly caricatured versions of the Nazis or sweeping generalizations about the German people, prioritizing more analytical messages about the nature of fascism. This did not prevent the proliferation of Manichean representations of the conflict, serving the need to legitimize the war effort. In *Why We Fight: The Nazi Strike* (1943), we can find most of the stereotypical elements of the Nazis as wartime enemies: their ambitions of conquest, the grandiloquence of their leaders, or the famous *goose-step*, which, as we will see, became one of the most used icons of Nazism in comparisons during the COVID-19 pandemic. Projected onto this was another of the traits commonly attributed to them in popular culture: blind faith in orders and the absence of independent thought — “The only thing old about this new army was the goose step, and even Hitler couldn’t improve on that ancient German form of torture, designed to make man stop thinking and blindly obey. Goose stepped until they become so insensitive as weapons.”<sup>189</sup> A militarist and fundamentalist vocation of Nazi ideology that appeared caricatured in films such as *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1942), which parodied an ordinary day in the life of a Third Reich citizen, contrasting it with life in the United States.<sup>190</sup> The indoctrination of youth — *Hitler’s Children*, 1943 — the criminal, irrational, and unscrupulous character of the Nazi Party itself and the ridicule of its leader — *Hitler’s Gang*, 1944 — and the moral corruption

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<sup>187</sup> Clayton D. Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors: America’s Crusade Against Nazi Germany* (University Press of Kansas, 1996), 113.

<sup>188</sup> Office of War Information, *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry* (Office of War Information, 1943), <https://www.spyculture.com/the-enemy-is-militarism-office-of-war-information-manual-for-film-makers/>.

<sup>189</sup> *Why We Fight: The Nazis Strike*, directed by Frank Capra, 1943, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-y\\_oz06\\_cQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-y_oz06_cQ).

<sup>190</sup> David Welch, *World War II Propaganda: Analyzing the Art of Persuasion during Wartime* (ABC-CLIO, 2017), 143–44.

of German society — *The Seventh Cross*, 1943 — emerged as tropes in Hollywood cinema during these years,<sup>191</sup> laying the groundwork for many later representations.

Nazi antisemitism began to appear in films such as *The Mortal Storm* (1940), in which Dr. Viktor Roth is forced to wear an armband with the letter “J” — in reference to the German word “Jude” — and witnesses the decline of German society into the radicalism of the new regime’s doctrines.<sup>192</sup> However, as we have said, the Holocaust was largely excluded from representations of the Nazis as wartime enemies due to its limited presence in American public debate at the time. In fact, the first formal recognition by the U.S. government that the Germans were carrying out the mass extermination of Jews occurred on December 17, 1942, alongside eleven other Allied governments. The declaration already spoke of deportations to occupied territories in Eastern Europe, forced labor, and mass executions of “hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women and children,” as well as of “Hitler’s often repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe.” It was issued amid numerous reservations among senior State officials, who doubted its authenticity and feared the social reaction it might provoke.<sup>193</sup> Elmer Davis, then director of the OWI, was very reluctant to publicize the atrocities committed against Jews in Europe throughout the war, fearing that they would appear too implausible to audiences and cause the institution to lose credibility.<sup>194</sup>

At the end of the war, the Nuremberg Trials constituted the first major public and detailed exposure of the crimes committed by the National Socialist regime, attracting the attention of leading U.S. newspapers, which on several occasions dedicated their front pages to it.<sup>195</sup> American society would not begin to incorporate the Holocaust into public debate and popular culture, or institutionalize its memory, until decades later. It is important to stress that this should not be interpreted as a lack of awareness. On the contrary, research such as Baron’s has shown that what has been interpreted in the literature as ignorance was in fact a lack of specificity, since the notion of “Holocaust uniqueness” had not yet been consolidated — indeed, the term itself was not even in use.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: Patriotism, Movies and the Second World War from “Ninotchka” to “Mrs. Miniver”* (Macmillan, 1987), 286–320.

<sup>192</sup> Lester D. Friedman, “Darkness Visible: Images of Nazis in American Film,” in *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen*, ed. Murray Pomerance (State University of New York Press, 2004), 263–64.

<sup>193</sup> “Declaration of December 17, 1942,” <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/declaration-of-december-17-1942>.

<sup>194</sup> Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors: America’s Crusade Against Nazi Germany*, 180–81.

<sup>195</sup> William Bosch, *Judgment on Nuremberg* (University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 73–95.

<sup>196</sup> Lawrence Baron, “The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 62–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/17.1.62>.

During the 1950s, the English versions of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952, pub. by Doubleday as *The Diary of a Young Girl*), *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946, written by Viktor E. Frankl, published in the U.S. in 1959 by Beacon Press), and *If This Is a Man* (1947, written by Primo Levi, published in the U.S. in 1959 by The Orion Press) were published, some of the best-known works of Holocaust testimony. In 1960, Adolf Eichmann was captured to be tried in Jerusalem, which caused enormous global shock — particularly in the United States — for once again bringing to the public arena the massacre perpetrated by the Nazis and its organized, even bureaucratic, dimension.<sup>197</sup> Hannah Arendt's perspective, expressed in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), was so controversial that it became a milestone in itself, sparking debates about the spectacular nature of the trial, the role of Jewish leaders during the genocide, and Eichmann's very banality.<sup>198</sup> Around the same time, Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961, with a profound revision from 1985) was published, which would become a monumental reference work for Holocaust historiography. In the following years, films such as *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961, dir. by Stanley Kramer) and *The Pawnbroker* (1961, Edward Lewis), which spoke explicitly about the genocide, contributed greatly to raising awareness of it among the American public.<sup>199</sup> However, throughout these decades an important delaying factor remained in society: the notion that, in the context of the Cold War, placing too much emphasis on the Holocaust could tarnish the reputation of Bonn's Germany and weaken the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>200</sup>

This part of the past would not acquire the centrality in the United States that we know today until the 1980s and 1990s, a period characterized by what historiography has called the *Memory Boom*, a surge of commemorations, memory politics, academic work on memory, and cultural interest in it. According to Winter, this was driven by factors such as identity politics, growing demand for cultural consumption, and the cultural turn in historiographic studies.<sup>201</sup> Thus, in 1978 NBC broadcast for the first time the series *Holocaust*, which became the second most-watched program on U.S. television and depicted the harsh realities of Nazi

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<sup>197</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (Schocken, 2011).

<sup>198</sup> Anson Rabinbach, "Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 63, no. 1 (2002): 261–81, <https://doi.org/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.63.1.0261>.

<sup>199</sup> Barry Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust: Race, Refuge, and Remembrance* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 133–43.

<sup>200</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 127–45.

<sup>201</sup> Jay Winter, "The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the 'Memory Boom' in Contemporary Historical Studies," *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 363–97; Michael Kammen, "Review of Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory," *History and Theory* 34, no. 3 (1995): 245–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505624>.

extermination.<sup>202</sup> The series was strongly criticized by various survivors, such as Elie Wiesel, for presenting a romanticized, even fetishized, image of what had happened, anticipating the phenomenon we will later study of *Holocaust trivialization*.<sup>203</sup> However, just one month after the premiere of this series, President Jimmy Carter decided to create a Presidential Commission on the Holocaust aimed at drafting a report with proposed measures to protect the memory of the tragedy.<sup>204</sup>

In 1979, following these recommendations, the Day of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust was established in the country, an annual week dedicated to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, timed to coincide with Israel’s commemoration of Yom HaShoah, a variable date observed since 1951 — in April or May. In 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in the very center of Washington, D.C., with a speech by then-president Bill Clinton, in which he consecrated the significance of the Holocaust in national collective memory. In his address, he reiterated several times that the Holocaust was the symbol of what evil could do to humanity, placed the event as a “triumphant” step forward toward the immortality of its victims, and underscored how it demonstrated the role of the United States in the world: “Our task, with God’s blessing upon our souls and the memories of the fallen in our hearts and minds, is to the ceaseless struggle to preserve human rights and dignity. We are now strengthened and will be forever strengthened by remembrance. I pray that we shall prevail.”<sup>205</sup>

In popular culture, films such as *Schindler’s List* (1993, dir. by Steven Spielberg) and *The Pianist* (2002, dir. by Roman Polanski), and literary works such as the comic *Maus* (1980-1991, created by Art Spiegelman), which became major successes with the public, consolidated the representation of the Holocaust in the global public sphere, and particularly in the United States.<sup>206</sup> Thus, it became institutionalized within the broader narrative of the Second World

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<sup>202</sup> Mar E. Cory, “Some Reflections on NBC’s Film Holocaust,” *The German Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1980): 444–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/405850>.

<sup>203</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 96–107.

<sup>204</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Report to the President: President’s Commission on the Holocaust* (President’s Commission on the Holocaust, 1979), <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20050707-presidents-commission-holocaust.pdf>.

<sup>205</sup> William J. Clinton, I, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (U.S. Government Publishing Office, 1993), 478–80, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1993-book1/html/PPP-1993-book1-doc-pg478-2.htm>.

<sup>206</sup> It should be noted that the proliferation of narratives about the Holocaust—sometimes politically instrumentalized—has been criticized by scholars such as Norman G. Finkelstein, see Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (Verso, 2024).

War in American collective memory and, consequently, as a symbol of its heroic secular struggle against the evils of the world.

### 2.2.2. Dehistoricization

The transition from Nazism, represented in postwar propaganda culture as a war enemy and a particularly cruel and bloodthirsty ideological antithesis, to the now classic icon of popular culture takes place through a process of dehistoricization. For Johnson, in his extensive study of representations of Nazism in U.S. Cold War popular culture, Nazism became for the United States the moral anchor that could guide the relativism into which Western ethics had sunk after the conflict, in order to continue legitimizing the superiority of democratic models. In this way, the Nazis would have been the epitome of evil, a kind of new devil that, once named, could completely disqualify any argumentative adversary, and which had become a perfect tool for interpreting any new enemy of the United States, including the Soviet regime — paired with Nazism under the term “totalitarianism.”<sup>207</sup> This apparent emptying of Nazism of its historical component until it became a kind of moral symbol is closely related to its use in the comparisons that are the subject of our study, and for that reason it is worth examining it in detail.

In fact, the first evidence that Nazism was beginning to cease being a mere historical fact — albeit still in a very early and incipient way — can be found in the 1930s and 1940s themselves. Two parallel processes, of very different nature in social, economic, and cultural terms, help explain this phenomenon. On the one hand, its treatment as a philosophical and theological problem, which gave it a *perverse* dimension transcending historical chronology; on the other, the detachment between its aesthetics and the context in which they were produced and used through reappropriation, understood not only as referring to characteristic visual elements, but also to discursive schemes.

#### *Nazism and the Holocaust as the epitome of perversion*

One of the factors that make Nazism more attractive to popular culture is its archetypal character. As we already explained in the first chapter when discussing the intersection between stereotype and metaphor, social identities tend to be anchored in references shared by members

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<sup>207</sup> Johnson, “‘Just like Hitler’: Comparisons to Nazism in American Culture.” develops the argument that Nazism functioned, as a negative and opposing example, as an ethical guide for the West, and that once it had been turned into the paradigm of evil, it was instrumentalized to attack socialist regimes during the Cold War.

of the group, which fosters intragroup cohesion. Nazism, beyond a historical fact, is also today one of the cultural references of the West with regard to evil.<sup>208</sup> The power and radicality of ANHs lies precisely in this, in the invocation of a form of evil almost universally accepted, which, due to its historical dimension, can be even more transversal than religious evil. In this section we will investigate how it acquired this archetypal character, illustrating it through the work of various European and American intellectuals. We will do so through the notion of *perversion*, a concept underlying some of the most notable works that tried to give it a theological or philosophical meaning, and which crosses morality, culture, and identity.

As is logical, some of the most notable proposals in this sense came from Jewish religious thinkers, since they were the first victims of Nazism. In 1941 the American writer and businessman Theodore N. Kaufman, an opponent of U.S. entry into the war, self-published the essay *Germany must perish!*, in which he argued that the only way for the world to achieve lasting peace would be by exterminating the German people through mass sterilization and distributing the country's lands among its neighbors. This essay is relevant to us because its reasoning presented Germany as the incarnation of “evil,” degeneration, and moral perversion from Teutonic origins up to the present.<sup>209</sup> A less grandiloquent historical trajectory was also taken by lawyer Louis Nizer in 1944, who traced the German thirst for blood and violence even back to Roman antiquity, characterizing it as a people who had always rejected honest labor and civilization itself. Moreover, for him, Germany possessed an inherent drive toward homosexuality, both cause and symptom of its evils: “the root causes of German sadism and of the inferiority complex which seeks to express itself through conquest and domination (...) Hitler's and Hess's own ‘aestheticism,’ Goering's abnormal practices (as determined by a Swiss court), and the evil conduct of the Streichers and other Nazi leaders, fit well into the characteristic pattern of bestiality.”<sup>210</sup> This argument, previously put forward by the anarcho-liberal Anton Constandse,<sup>211</sup> was also observed by Samuel Igra, who in 1945 devoted a book to the issue in which he turned homosexuality not just into a historical German sin, but into its very national essence, also the cause of its perversions and crimes. Although Igra, as in other

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<sup>208</sup> Eva Kingsepp, “Hitler as Our Devil? Mainstream Representations of Nazi Germany in Popular Media,” in *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Popular Culture*, ed. Maartje Abbenhuis and Sara Buttsworth (ABC-Clio, 2010), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-39009>.

<sup>209</sup> Theodore N. Kaufman, *Germany Must Perish!* (Argyle Press, 1941).

<sup>210</sup> Louis Nizer, *What to Do with Germany* (Ziff-Davis, 1944), 18.

<sup>211</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, “The ‘Jews’ of the Antifascist Left,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 3 (2010): 244, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903489126>.

cited examples, tried to cloak this interpretation of Nazism as a kind of mass psychological analysis, the text reveals a clear religious vocation:

“It is simply sexual perversion. Its morbid history in the German blood dates from the time of the Teutonic Knights, flowing onwards and downwards and expanding throughout the centuries until it reached a devastating flood in the Germany of the last Kaiser and of Hitler. This is the real canker at the root of German life, and is the veritable pest which has spread devastation so often throughout Europe. But homosexuality, or sexual perversion, must not be taken here in its restricted meaning as a physical vice or disease; it has a far wider connotation (...) a practical denial of life at its very source, a perversion of nature, its addicts look with cynicism on the whole human race and the normal instincts of mankind.”<sup>212</sup>

This reading was indebted to the mass psychoanalysis already carried out by Wilhelm Reich in 1933 in his well-known book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, where he stated that fascism possessed a sexual structure similar to that of Platonic Greece, “‘purity’ in the ideology, pathological disturbances in actual sexual life”,<sup>213</sup> and it would remain present long afterwards. In works such as Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* and Luchino Visconti's *The Damned*, both from the 1960s, homosexuality and, in broader terms, the moral concept of *sexual perversion*, both represented in a dark, morbid, and sadistic way, became one of the key characteristics of Nazism in part of the European and American intelligentsia. Far from being one of the multiple forms of human sexuality that were persecuted under the Nazi regime, homosexuality symbolized in this imaginary the spiritual dimension of Nazism, a secular essence that had tainted the German *geist* for millennia, forcing it to fall into other equally execrable forms of depravity.<sup>214</sup> Another obvious consequence of this is that attributing the characteristic of “homosexuals” to the Nazis deepened the construction of the negative stereotype about them that was so necessary for the positive distinctiveness of the group. This war enemy would not only be authoritarian and opposed in a political or military sense, but also a moral degenerate who carried sin with him from before his very own existence.

Another milestone was brought about by the Frankfurt School, founded in 1923 and known for its blend of Freudianism and Marxism through Critical Theory. Some of the scholars

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<sup>212</sup> Samuel Igra, *Germany's National Vice* (Quality Press, 1945), 17–18.

<sup>213</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Orgone Institute Press, 1946), 78.

<sup>214</sup> Xosé Carlos Veiga García, “The Imaginary Reich. Construction of the Mythology of Nazism in \*La Caduta Degli Dei\* and \*Il Portiere Di Notte\*,” *Historia Contemporánea*, no. 76 (2024): 1053–84, <https://doi.org/10.1387/hc.27612>.

associated with it also sought to interpret the perversion embodied by Nazism in historical terms, albeit in a different sense. In their book first published in 1947 and with several later editions, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer attacked the way in which scientific rationalism, which had hegemonized Western thought since the Enlightenment, had found in its main shortcomings the necessary degeneration that had ultimately led it toward fascism: “The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and probability (...) No matter which myths are invoked against it, by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian.” While bourgeois society claimed reason as a just and universal value, its *degeneration*, fascism, “unmasking reason,” showed, by making explicit the preference for the particular over the universal, that such universality simply did not exist.<sup>215</sup> The discourse of Adorno and Horkheimer thus introduced the notion of Nazism as a form of perversion.<sup>216</sup>

That Nazism represented the decline of the West was also interpreted by the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai, who in his book *The War Against the West* (1938) recounted how Nazism and other ideologies, such as Bolshevism, carried out an attack against all Western values of ethics, morality, participatory democracy, liberalism, and even the very idea of community or reason. According to his reasoning, the new culture that was flourishing in Nazi Germany was opposed to civilization, among other things because of its lack of Christian morality, elevating race as the organizing ideal and abandoning man's character as a universal value in itself. Following Erich Voegelin, the new German regime was “daemonic” — in the Greco-Roman rather than the Christian sense — opposed to the holy and the moral, because it prioritized the material and vitalist dimension, even the aesthetic one, giving rise to a social order incompatible with the political and civic community as it was known in the West.<sup>217</sup>

In summary, Nazism was seen very early on as something that transcended its chronological boundaries and empirical analysis. The shock represented first by the rise of Nazism and later by the discovery of the Holocaust was the source of all kinds of interpretations, among which the evaluation of it in terms of alterity reigned supreme. It represented an *other* in war, but also a broader *other*, a projection of those characteristics of the human being and of the

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<sup>215</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 4, 174.

<sup>216</sup> See the interpretation of Antonios Vadolas, *Perversions of Fascism* (Karnac Books, 2009), 7–34. He also introduces the continuation of this idea of perversion in the decades following the postwar period, with figures such as Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Lacan.

<sup>217</sup> Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (Viking Press, 1988), 187–88.

German nation that could make it incompatible with morality and civilization. A mythifying idea that ultimately sank deep into culture, contributing to the construction of an archetype based on history, yet almost independent of it, malleable and applicable to the wide variety of contexts demanded by rhetorical and cultural production.

*Swastikas, monsters, and pornography*

Alongside this process of intellectualization of Nazi perversity, there was also the creative work in literature, comics, and above all film inspired by Nazi Germany and the war, which involved transferring the aesthetics, symbols, and discourses of the regime into purely fantastic and fictional settings.<sup>218</sup> This is fundamental, because it directly marks the process of dehistoricization that we spoke of at the beginning. In it, new codes were developed that would accompany the representations of Nazism in mass culture up to the present day, nourished by the narratives of alterity already existing in propaganda and in war culture.

Thus, in 1941 *Red Skull* appeared, a villain in the aforementioned comic *Captain America*, created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, both Jews who served in the U.S. Army. Although an initial version represented him as an American businessman sold out to the Nazis, the canonical version soon took hold, making him Johann Schmidt, an agent linked to Adolf Hitler who sought to sabotage the U.S. war effort. This is just one example of how during the war comic book artists began to use already established narrative tropes and conventions to represent Japanese and Germans in their stories, portraying them as evil, violent, and bullying.<sup>219</sup> In 1943 Steve Sekely released the horror film *Revenge of the Zombies*, in which a doctor named Max Heinrich von Altermann was preparing a zombie army for Nazi Germany. This was followed, in 1947, by Robert A. Heinlein's publication of *Rocket Ship Galileo*, a science fiction novel in which a group of teenagers discover a Nazi space base on the Moon and must confront its commander.

In these three examples we already find condensed many of the tropes that later characterized Nazism in mass culture. First of all, as we have already mentioned several times in this text, the Nazis are a representation of evil, and therefore fit perfectly into the archetype of the villain, the most common — if not almost exclusive — role of the Nazi in culture. This

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<sup>218</sup> Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1–38.

<sup>219</sup> Cord A. Scott, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from WWII through Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Naval Institute Press, 2014).

figure is, for Propp — known for his empirical systematization of the most common figures in Russian folk narration, reaching many universal elements — a fundamental element, because it is the one that triggers the action, to the point that even when there may be some kind of implicit “villainy.”<sup>220</sup> Greimas adds that both the villain — whom he calls *opponent* — and the helper represent deeper dimensions in mentality, the benevolent and malevolent forces of the world.<sup>221</sup> Thus, cinema usually seeks to make the villain distinguishable from the viewer, which is achieved by creating a sense of “alterity,” applying negative stereotypes and de-individualizing him, denying him personal attributes that could provoke empathy — a process we already saw earlier when discussing social categories. In addition, the villain must be perceived as an enemy through undesirable actions or attitudes, and as a danger, so that the hero's actions and the plot itself make greater sense.<sup>222</sup>

The *nazi villain* has the particularity of not only representing an execrable morality — with common vices such as greed or lack of compassion — but also an antithetical ideology and megalomaniac desires for global domination. He does not devote himself to small evil deeds, but is part of, or himself seeks to execute, great projects that compromise the destiny of humanity. If we wanted to insert him into the categories proposed by Coogan, he could belong to almost any of them,<sup>223</sup> or represent something more prosaic like an “enemy commander,” as in the cases of Major Strasser, Gestapo officer in *Casablanca* (1942, dir. by Michael Curtiz), Colonel Hans Landa, SS officer in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009, dir. by Quentin Tarantino), or Colonel Vogel in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989, dir. by Steven Spielberg). These are usually military figures who appear as faithful executors of the will of a higher authority. They deepen the amoral perception of the Nazi war and bureaucratic apparatus, frequently clothed in values such as loyalty, patriotism, and sense of duty — the same values many Nazi prisoners who had participated in World War II sought to convey after the war.<sup>224</sup> Thus, in *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019, created by Frank Spotnitz)<sup>225</sup> — an alternate history in which the Axis won the war — Obergruppenführer Smith is an example of this representational ambiguity in

<sup>220</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 25–83.

<sup>221</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 204–5.

<sup>222</sup> Lennart Soberon, “Vivisectioning the Villain: A Framework for the Analysis of Enemy Image Construction in Cinema,” in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 62–72.

<sup>223</sup> Peter Coogan, “The Supervillain,” in *The Supervillain Reader*, ed. Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 23–59.

<sup>224</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (Yale University Press, 2008), 237–81.

<sup>225</sup> It was based on the 1962 novel written by Philip K. Dick.

which, even as the executing arm of other Nazis portrayed as still more perverse, he is depicted in various scenes of the series as a father concerned for his children, willing to sacrifice himself for his family and his homeland, and who values loyalty even above his own safety.

Among these villains we also find “monsters,” not always in a bestial sense, but certainly in terms of inhuman behavior, as is the case with the commanders of concentration camps. Consider, for example, *Ilse, She Wolf of the SS* (1950, dir. by Don Edmonds), a maniacal and depraved character who shows not an ounce of empathy throughout the film, or Frau Engel, commander of the fictional extermination camp Camp Belica in the video game *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014, dir. by Jerk Gustafsson & Jens Matthies). The very *Red Skull* we discussed earlier could be included as well, since his red mask and magical character — he does not die but is transferred into different bodies — strip him of any trace of humanity. One could argue that most Nazi characters in popular culture belong to this category, because it is the one that best conveys the degree of alterity we discussed earlier — the Nazis as something contrary to civilization and to the concept of the human being as we understand it.<sup>226</sup>

The monster paradigm is undoubtedly the Nazi-zombie. This archetype has its own narrative genre, and as we have seen was among the first to appear and to transfer Nazism into the realm of science fiction. The zombie, as understood in modern cinema — as a terrifying, cannibalistic creature that generally moves in hordes, in the style of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)<sup>227</sup> — is precisely, for Luckhurst, a product of the trauma caused by World War II and the images of the *Muselmann* from the Holocaust.<sup>228</sup> The intersection between Nazis and zombies occurs on two fronts. First, as part of the morbid curiosity about the German ability to develop hyper-technological and fantastical weapons — in the style of the *wunderwaffen* — without moral scruples, as in the aforementioned *Revenge of the Zombies*, *The Frozen Undead* (2017, dir. by Laurent Herbiet), or *Shock Waves* (2017, dir. by Ken Wiederhorn). On the other hand, the most common in this genre is that the Germans themselves become zombies, thus creating a monstrous enemy who serves as the perfect villain, entirely emptied of humanity by his zombie condition and, at the same time, without the traces of victimization that usually accompany such a condition — since he was not innocent when alive. Kooyman considers that

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<sup>226</sup> Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart and David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 1–35, <https://bkwrks.com/book/9780809327249>.

<sup>227</sup> Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism,” *Boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (2008): 85–108, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2007-027>.

<sup>228</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (Reaktion Books, 2015), 92–113; Leigh Fenton, “The Demise of the Cinematic Zombie: From the Golden Age of Hollywood to the 1940s,” in *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade*, ed. Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare et al. (Lexington Books, 2014), 235.

the mixture of both cancels out the deep historical dimension of Nazism and the zombie's capacity for denunciation and social satire, facilitating a narrative trope highly suitable for achieving the maximum exponent of alterity.<sup>229</sup> The moral and ideological complexities of the military confrontation against Nazism disappear before the image of a beast that retains only violence and bloodlust: “The historical malevolence of Nazi ideology manifests metaphorically in the blood thirst of the mindless zombies.”<sup>230</sup>

The Nazi-zombie is a character in which certain aesthetic anchors are used to activate the belief system related to a historical element without being bound by the limitations imposed by factuality. That is, it is an example of how the aesthetics of Nazism can be completely detached from its original context and used to create any other element of fiction.<sup>231</sup> This appreciation for Nazi aesthetics experienced a strong boost in the 1960s and 1970s. The writer Susan Sontag wrote in 1975 about what she perceived as a new obsession of her time with the aesthetic elements of Nazism, which had not only been emptied of their original meaning but even fetishized and sexualized through the “natural link” between fascism and sadomasochism.<sup>232</sup> And indeed, at the same time that the memory of the Holocaust — as we have already seen — was beginning to take shape in Europe and the United States, the symbols and uniforms used in Nazi Germany had already begun to experience a second life as props in pornographic films. Films such as *Love Camp Seven* (1969, dir. by Lee Frost) and *Ilse, She Wolf of the SS* told stories of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps where sadomasochistic tortures gave way to innumerable sexual references, just as happened in the Italian *Sadiconazista* genre represented by films such as *Salon Kitty* (1978, dir. by Tinto Brass), *La Bestia in Calore* (1977, dir. by Luigi Batzella), or *L'ultima orgia del III Reich* (1977, dir. by Cesare Canevari). These films employed uniforms similar to those of the Nazi SS, the omnipresent swastika, and the setting of prisoners in a German concentration camp to stage a fetishistic spectacle. A form of exploitation of a narrative trope

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<sup>229</sup> Ben Kooyman, “Snow Nazis Must Die: Gothic Tropes and Hollywood Genre-Fication in Nazisploitation Horror,” in *War Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>230</sup> Johan Höglund, “Virtual War and the Nazi Zombie Gothic in Call of Duty,” in *War Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>231</sup> Sabine Hake, *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 159–88; Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film*, 1–38.

<sup>232</sup> Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/>.

that came to be called *nazisploitation*, a genre that was not limited merely to sexual content and has survived to the present day.<sup>233</sup>

Although it is difficult to quantify the social impact of each of these cultural products individually, it is clear that their cumulative effect changed how pop culture represented the Nazis. The relevance of this phenomenon is that Nazism becomes in it a source of aesthetics attractive to the spectator, emptied of historical content and with the sole function of generating impact and entertainment. For this reason, the genre of *nazisploitation* today designates a broader range of creations related to Nazism and the Holocaust. A good example is video games such as the *Wolfenstein* series (from 1992 onwards, initially developed by Muse Software), which employ the aesthetics of Nazism to create ludic-fictional alternate worlds in which the player enjoys a semiotics — German words, uniforms, swastikas, references to Adolf Hitler — that recalls Nazi Germany and World War II, although populated with magical and futuristic elements. In the world of cinema, the case of *Iron Sky* (2012, dir. by Timo Vuorensola) is paradigmatic, a saga in which Nazis are turned into science fiction villains equipped with all kinds of futuristic dieselpunk-looking artifacts. Now, the fact that the aesthetics of Nazism are detached from their historical context does not mean that this kind of product is not a reflection of collective memory. The narrative tropes reveal to us the way in which their creators expect society to understand Nazism. In fact, contrary to what was once thought in certain analyses from cultural studies, the elements most morally difficult to represent because of their moral weight in collective memory, such as the Holocaust,<sup>234</sup> did come to be represented in these *nazisploitation* environments.<sup>235</sup>

### 2.2.3. Adolf Hitler, “the psychopathic god”

All the characteristics we have mentioned up to this point are gathered in the figure of Adolf Hitler, who deserves a certain separate discussion due to his character as the *par excellence* icon of Nazism. The construction of an image of the dictator also began before the war itself.

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<sup>233</sup> Magilow et al., *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*; Lynn Rapaport, “Holocaust Pornography: Profaning the Sacred in Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22, no. 1 (2003): 53–79.

<sup>234</sup> Jeff Hayton, “Digital Nazis: Genre, History and the Displacement of Evil in First-Person Shooters,” in *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, ed. Daniel H. Magilow et al. (Continuum, 2012). Hayton argued at the time that the Holocaust could not and should not be represented in the digital medium, which thus avoided confronting the moral problems of employing the aesthetics of Nazism.

<sup>235</sup> The erotic films we mentioned take place in concentration camps — a clear reference to the Holocaust — while in the very video games of the second era of the *Wolfenstein* saga, since 2014, this appears represented directly through Jewish characters, extermination camps, and even crematoria.

U.S. public opinion — difficult to measure due to the few sources of the time, beyond the press — was initially ambivalent, considering him just another example of German militarism, extravagant in his manners, but capable of containing the Bolshevik threat in the country and providing solutions for a future peace. In the first years of his rule, a significant part of the press even went so far as to consider that the explosions of anti-Semitic violence that existed in Germany were something that happened beyond his will, as a consequence of his weakness, and not because he desired it.<sup>236</sup> This perspective would change greatly over time, deteriorating more and more until reaching outright rejection by the late 1930s.<sup>237</sup>

In terms of what helped construct the Hitler we see today,<sup>238</sup> the first traits projected onto him were the already well-known authoritarian character of Nazism, as well as the particularities of being a megalomaniac narcissist. In *Hitler's Reign of Terror* (1934, dir. by Michael Mindlin), Cornelius Vanderbilt denounced the situation of the nascent Nazi Germany, the book burnings, brutalities against political enemies, and the persecution of Jews. In a scene filmed in the U.S., Hitler was interviewed, showing the narcissistic and megalomaniac character of the dictator.<sup>239</sup> However, rather than Hitler being portrayed by an actor, it was more common for him to form part of the film's context, inserted through real images of his speeches or as an entity present in the orders he gave to other characters. His first major debut as a film character was in Charles Chaplin's well-known *The Great Dictator* (1940), a biting critique in which the filmmaker, through the parodic dictator Adenoid Hynkel, painted him as a childish, irrational, hysterical being full of hatred toward Jews and toward anyone who did not think like him. Its impact was enormous, becoming one of the three highest-grossing films between 1940 and 1942, although it faced some criticism for what was considered bad taste in placing Adolf Hitler or the suffering of the Jews in Germany in a comedic context.<sup>240</sup>

This film served as a hinge between the restrained position that characterized the appeasement of the pre-war period and the postwar propaganda efforts. Subsequently, Hitler

<sup>236</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (Free Press, 1986), 48–55.

<sup>237</sup> Toni McDaniel, “A ‘Hitler Myth’? American Perception of Adolf Hitler, 1933–1938,” *Journalism History* 17, no. 3 (1989): 46–53.

<sup>238</sup> The most extensive research we know published so far in English on the construction of Adolf Hitler in U.S. culture, although focused specifically on literature, is Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction, 1939–2002* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>239</sup> Jaime Noguera, *Hitler En El Cine* (T&B Editores, 2014), 55–56.

<sup>240</sup> Robert Cole, “Anglo-American Anti-Fascist Film Propaganda in a Time of Neutrality: \*The Great Dictator\*, 1940,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21, no. 2 (2001): 137–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439680120049487>; Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 177–86.

became a symbol of the war enemy, opening the way for his representation in all kinds of formats, including the comedic ones that had been questioned in Chaplin's case.<sup>241</sup> During the war, propaganda posters depicted Hitler either as the constant presence of the lurking enemy, as a punching bag symbolizing the will to crush the adversary, or as a skunk or clumsy puppet.<sup>242</sup> Hitler's presence was common in wartime films, frequently being the object of assassination — or attempted assassination — as in *Man Hunt* (1941, dir. by Fritz Lang), *Hitler, Dead or Alive* (1942, dir. by Nick Grinde), or *The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler* (1943, dir. by James P. Hogan), depicted as irrational, capricious, and psychopathic — *The Hitler Gang* (1944, dir. by John Farrow) — or in brief cameos, as a representation of the war itself. The image of Hitler was parodic, rarely attempting to delve into his personality.

Hitler's appearances in cinema cannot be explained solely as acts of anti-Nazi propaganda, but also as testimony to the fascination the German dictator generated even before the war itself, with speculations about morbid aspects such as his sexuality or sanity.<sup>243</sup> In 1943, the psychologist Henry A. Murray submitted to the CIA a report on Adolf Hitler's personality that drew on secondary sources, as well as an analysis of his writings and speeches. His detailed psychological analysis, which did not follow any standard clinical procedure, gives us insight into his perception of the German dictator:

“That Hitler's attitude toward sex is pathological is already clear from what has been said above. The best sources we have do not, however, tell us explicitly what it is that is wrong with Hitler's sex life. As far as can be ascertained, it is completely lacking in respect, even contemptuous (7); it is opportunistic (18; 15) and in the actual sexual relationship there is something of a perverse nature along with a peculiar enslavement to the partner of his choice (...)”<sup>244</sup>

Hitler was considered a pathological person in every aspect, including his sexuality, something capable of generating morbid curiosity. Part of this fascination stemmed from the image that Hitler himself and the Nazi apparatus had tried to create in the two previous decades around the so-called *Führer Myth*: the chancellor was presented as a divine blessing fallen upon

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<sup>241</sup> Marc Hieronimus, “Hitler Is Fun: Sixty Years of Nazism in Humorous Comics,” in *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Popular Culture*, ed. Maartje Abbenhuis and Sara Buttsworth (ABC-Clio, 2010), 75–100, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400687259.ch-004>.

<sup>242</sup> Cécile Vallée, “Monsters and Clowns Incorporated: The Representations of Adolf Hitler in British and American WWII Propaganda Posters,” *Revue LISA/LISA e-Journal* X, no. 1 (2012): 126–50.

<sup>243</sup> McDaniel, “A ‘Hitler Myth’? American Perception of Adolf Hitler, 1933–1938,” 51.

<sup>244</sup> Henry A. Murray, *Analysis of the Personality of Adolph Hitler* (Office of Strategic Services, 1943), <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/THE%20PERSONALITY%20OF%20ADOLPH%5B16194070%5D.pdf>.

Germany, sometimes even using religious language.<sup>245</sup> In Germany itself, rumors about the dictator's mental and physical health began to proliferate in mid-1942, and the image of the chancellor in his final days, deprived of all mental clarity and finally committing suicide, would end up permeating the imaginary about the dictator. The idea of Hitler as a psychologically ill person, and the attempt to explain his crimes through this lens, persisted for decades. Even in 1977, in the book *The Psychopathic God*, historian Robert G. L. Waite “diagnosed” Hitler with various pathologies and dysfunctional personality traits that would have had direct consequences on his exacerbated nationalism and antisemitism, both projections of supposed sexual desires toward his mother and other “sexual perversions.” Once again, we witness the representation of Nazism under an idea of perversion that, for Waite, represents “cultural self-portraits in the negative. What we talk about when we talk about Hitler is also who we are and who we are not.”<sup>246</sup>

The shadow cast by the dictator into our own times was marked by a great inflation of his role during the dictatorship and the war, so that all the narrative tropes we have so far seen about Nazism fell upon him. In the first place, during the Nuremberg trials one of the most common argumentative strategies of the defense of those considered war criminals was the so-called *Befehlsnotstand* or *Befehl ist Befehl*, attempting to exculpate their acts during the Nazi dictatorship as a matter of obedience to orders given by superiors. This conveyed the idea that the crimes committed by the Nazi apparatus had been designed in a centralized and hierarchical manner, often by Hitler himself.<sup>247</sup> Goering himself attempted this when he had to justify the numerous war crimes of which he was accused, such as the executions at Stalag Luft III or the policy of deportations and forced labor, implying that he had no control over these events and that they all emanated from Hitler himself.<sup>248</sup> In later films this idea of his cruelty would be made clear, such as in *Hitler* (1962, dir. by Stuart Heisler), *The Bunker* (1981, dir. by George Schaefer), or *Inside the Third Reich* (1982, dir. by Marvin J. Chomsky).

The figure of Hitler also underwent a conversion from historical fact to cultural archetype.<sup>249</sup> For Rosenfeld, who studied his projection in literature, Hitler's afterlife made him evolve toward a form of fiction thanks to the psychopathological character of his antisemitism

<sup>245</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Clarendon Press, 1987), 106–8.

<sup>246</sup> Robert G. L. Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (Random House, 1993), 366.

<sup>247</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, 237–81.

<sup>248</sup> See the testimony of one of the main prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials, Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (Random House, 1992), 418–19.

<sup>249</sup> Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!*

and the genocide that accompanied it, to the fascination created by the narrative of his rise to power and conquest of Germany. Unlike Stalin or Mao, less striking in their personalities and not so enveloped in a messianic or mystical aura, Hitler was able to attract the attention of Western culture, both of those who approach him with the intention of representing history and of those who use him as material for cultural creation.<sup>250</sup> Beyond appearing spontaneously or as a background presence in numerous films of historical representation, Hitler also appeared as a comic, clumsy, and effeminate character in *Which Way to the Front?* (1970, dir. by Jerry Lewis), or disputing with Freud in the experimental film *The Empty Mirror* (1996, dir. by Barry J. Hershey).

Good examples of the extreme to which dehistoricized representations arrived are those that played with the fantasy that Hitler might have survived the bunker and still be alive somewhere in the world, as in *They Saved Hitler's Brain* (1968, though originally from 1963, dir. by David Bradley), in which Hitler's head remains alive in a liquid solution and present in plans to reconquer the Reich, or *The Boys from Brazil* (1978, dir. by Franklin J. Schaffner), where Mengele produces clones of Hitler to bring him back to life in another way. Even more fanciful examples can be found in comics, with the character *The Hate-Monger*, created by Stan Lee in 1963, the result of a Nazi scientist's experiment to transfer Adolf Hitler's brain into another body, or the *Mechahitler* that appeared in 1992 as an enemy in the video game *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992, dev. by Id Software) a human-robot hybrid in which the former dictator has cannons for hands. All of them show us the creative potential that arose from the cultural exploitation of Nazi aesthetics.

Nazism has, therefore, in the U.S. collective memory, several layers. On the one hand, it represents the enemy defeated in a war that catapulted the United States to the status of world superpower, validating its national identity and allowing it to represent itself — by opposition — as the champion of democratic and Western liberal values. However, unlike other authoritarian regimes the country has faced throughout history, the fact of having committed the Holocaust endows it with an ahistorical sense, making it a symbol of incarnate evil, of a theological perversity that, precisely because of its extreme character, can contaminate everything placed on a plane of similarity and dignify whoever opposes it. Bartov described it in this way, referring to the predominant perspective in postwar Germany:



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<sup>250</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Indiana University Press, 1985).

“‘the Nazi,’ is thus both everywhere and nowhere. On the one hand, ‘he’ lurks in everyone and, in this sense, can never be ferreted out. On the other hand, “he” is essentially so different from ‘us’ that he can be said never to have existed in the first place in any sense that would be historically meaningful or significant for ‘us,’ (...) Hence ‘we’ cannot be held responsible for ‘his’ misdeeds. Just like the Devil, ‘the Nazi’ penetrates the world from another sphere and must be exorcised; conversely, ‘he’ is a metaphor of the satanic element in humanity. (...)”<sup>251</sup>

In this way, what the author considers an exculpatory will becomes a hostile accusation when Nazism is employed in discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. A projection of everything the in-group *does not want to be* onto an enemy out-group. The argumentative appeal of Nazism and the Holocaust was precisely their nature as the ultimate representation of evil against which contemporary American identity was constructed. Present in the most diverse forms in popular culture and detached from its historicity, this part of the past today remains inscribed in the repository of the nation's symbolic and rhetorical resources as both a legitimizing *myth* and an almost universal alterity.

## Chapter 3. Contextualizing the pandemic. Political polarization and vaccine hesitancy in the United States

### 3.1. A brief history of political polarization in the United States

The political and social history of the United States throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is that of an ever-growing gap between Democratic and Republican voters. We are faced with a separation that goes far beyond ideology: as we will see later, today liberals and conservatives not only vote differently, but also sustain opposing interpretations of the world, consume in different ways, live in separate places, adopt distinct identities, and even experience major contradictions in the information they receive. This explains, to a large extent, why the analogies employed to describe one another are as extreme as possible, appealing, therefore, to the memory of the Holocaust, Nazism, and all of World War II. The political adversary has now become a representation of all those values one does not share; just as happened with the Nazis in the past, their model of society is not only no longer the same, but threatens to destroy the way of life that is so strongly defended. In the following sections, we will trace a historical overview of the main milestones that led to the situation we face today, focusing on those processes that provoked greater polarization in American society in the long term. It should be emphasized that this is not a political history of the United States as a whole, but rather a historical analysis of the elements we consider to have most contributed to polarization.

#### 3.1.1. The coming of identity

##### *The Explosion of Civil Rights*

The causes of this failure are diverse and have their origins rooted in the social changes that struck the United States in the 1960s. We can say that until the era of Lyndon B. Johnson and Barry Goldwater, both parties presented a certain degree of internal ideological and social diversity. In the Democratic Party, there still existed the so-called *Dixiecrats*, white conservatives from the *Deep South* who defended the political independence of their states, opposed the civil rights movement, trade unions, state intervention, and favored a more aggressive foreign policy. These balanced the influence of urban classes in the North and West, who were more supportive

of New Deal policies.<sup>252</sup> Meanwhile, the Republican Party was also divided between the non-interventionist liberalism represented by figures such as Robert Taft (senator from Ohio) and the more isolationist and statist positions of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Thomas E. Dewey. All this began to change in the elections of 1964, when partisan and ideological identification started to become progressively more homogeneous.<sup>253</sup>

The progress of the Civil Rights Movement in the country and the sympathies it gained among important Democratic Party figures pushed the breakdown of traditional support in the South. The anti-segregationist and egalitarian laws that Lyndon B. Johnson promoted after the death of John F. Kennedy (*Civil Rights Act*, 1964; *Voting Rights Act*, 1965; *Fair Housing Act*, 1968) sparked strong opposition in the so-called *Black Belt*, where the defense of segregation had been a central issue since the postwar period, even leading to political splits such as the one led by Strom Thurmond in 1948. This caused him to lose the traditional Democratic support of white working and urban classes in the South to Barry Goldwater — who, even so, lost nationally.<sup>254</sup> Thus began a Republican conquest of states such as Alabama and Mississippi which, with few exceptions, continues up to the electoral geography of the United States as we know it today.

There was also a conservative turn strategy in the Republican Party that bore fruit, attracting an increasing share of the suburban white vote. The rhetoric of the Nixon era, focused on elements such as public security, American patriotism, moderation of state affirmative action policies in favor of racial equality, or taxation, would continue to develop in the following decades within the *Grand Old Party*.<sup>255</sup> Kevin Phillips, a highly influential figure in the president's advisory team, explained it this way in his well-known essay: “The emerging Republican majority spoke clearly in 1968 for a shift away from the sociological jurisprudence, moral permissiveness, experimental residential, welfare and educational programming and massive federal spending by which the Liberal (mostly Democratic) Establishment sought to propagate liberal institutions and ideology — and all the while reap growing economic benefits”.<sup>256</sup>

Numerous studies on polarization in the country place the 1972 elections, Nixon vs. McGovern, as a decisive turning point. The years of Lyndon B. Johnson's administration and Nixon's presidency coincided with major changes in social movements in the United States,

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<sup>252</sup> HOPKINS, David A., *Red Fighting Blue. How Geography and Electoral Rules Polarize American Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

<sup>253</sup> SCHIER, Steven E., and EBERLY, Todd E., *Polarized. The Rise of Ideology in American Politics*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

<sup>254</sup> FREDERICKSON, Kari, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South (1932–1968)*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2001, pp. 236–238.

<sup>255</sup> THURBER, Timothy, *The Nixon Presidency*, London & New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. 28, 91.

<sup>256</sup> PHILLIPS, Kevin, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, New York, Princeton University Press, 1969.

which later influenced the Democratic Party, since it was their electoral reference force. Under the shelter of social mobilization against the country's involvement in the Vietnam War, a wave of ethnic, sexual, and gender-based movements spread the ideas and dynamics of the *New Left* throughout the United States.

The civil rights movement divided to form organizations dedicated to direct action, such as Black Power, and began to achieve victories in the political arena. Thus, the number of Black representatives in the U.S. Congress doubled between 1964 and 1970; Black communities, encouraged by the new rights acquired and migration to cities, began to organize to intervene in local and state powers, and what became known as “Black culture” was valued as both a community and national heritage. Alongside this movement flourished those of Native Americans, who founded the American Indian Movement in 1968 and led protests such as the “Trail of the Broken Treaties,” demanding compliance with old treaties. Likewise, immigrant collectives such as the so-called “Chicanos,” mostly Mexican-Americans, and those of Asian origin, demanded respect for their cultures and rejected assimilation into Euro-descendant cultural patterns.<sup>257</sup> The organization of these groups was a key point in forging the identity paradigm later adopted by American liberalism under the Democratic Party umbrella, and which can be considered one of the causes of current polarization.<sup>258</sup> The ethnic-based movements clashed in their interpretation of U.S. social reality with those more materialist and class-based. This was the case of the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), dependent on the well-known Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which failed in its attempt to create an identity of the “poor” that would overcome the divisions determined by the racial affiliation of its members.<sup>259</sup> This was partly the result of the emergence of a wing within the political movement for the rights of Black people who, beyond joining the *statu quo* enjoyed by white people, aspired to real economic changes for the members of their communities, characterized by greater radicalism and a lesser tendency to integrate and collaborate with white political movements.<sup>260</sup>

Another branch of this phenomenon was the rise of movements based on gender and sexuality. The largest, feminism, was going through what came to be called the “second wave,”

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<sup>257</sup> GOSSE, Van, *The Movements of the New Left 1950–1975. A Brief History with Documents*, Boston/New York, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005, pp. 23–35.

<sup>258</sup> See, e.g., Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics*, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2018, pp. 59–95.

<sup>259</sup> FROST, Jennifer, *An Interracial Movement of the Poor. Community Organizing and the New Left in the 1960s*, New York/London, New York University Press, 2001; and for a more contemporary testimony, UNGER, Irwin, *The Movement. A History of the American New Left, 1959–1972*, New York, Harper & Row, 1974.

<sup>260</sup> JENNINGS, James, *The Politics of Black Empowerment. The Transformation of Black Activism in Urban America*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1992, pp. 111–134.

characterized by a greater concern for the real social inequality between men and women, demanding active policies to achieve equity. The National Organization of Women (NOW) was founded as a response to the difficulties women were experiencing in integrating into and accessing the labor market, as well as other protest organizations that at that time were at the forefront — such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) — dominated by men. In these years women achieved significant successes, such as the inclusion of sex non-discrimination in employment in the Civil Rights Act — which organizations like NOW would later use in their struggles — or the famous *Roe vs. Wade* decision of 1973, which guaranteed the right to abortion until 2022. Even so, this movement also experienced important divisions depending on the ethnic identities of its members, failing to create a unified inter-class and interracial space.<sup>261</sup> Thus were born, early on, the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA, 1968), as a split from SNCC, or the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO, 1973), where radical feminists of different ethnicities organized to avoid being subordinated to the objectives of what they called “white feminism” or “hegemonic feminism,” which they claimed did not represent their interests.<sup>262</sup>

It was also during this period that a series of social movements emerged in favor of the rights of transgender and non-heterosexual people — even though at that time labels were focused on male homosexuality, with terms such as *gay liberation* or *homosexual rights*. The confrontations at Stonewall in 1969, led by a group of homosexual people harassed by the police, became a symbol of resistance for the LGBT community in those years when the law prohibited all forms of non-heterosexual sexual-affective relationships.<sup>263</sup> As a result, in various parts of the country, organizations were founded at the U.S. level, such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), and progressively also internationally, to defend their rights, growing from 50 to 900 groups in about 4 years. In 1973 they succeeded in getting the American Psychological Association to stop recognizing homosexuality as a mental disorder.<sup>264</sup>

Due to the penetration of the new movements into U.S. society, particularly defended in the university world, Jimmy Carter's presidency found itself faced with the need to promote some — limited — reforms that would satisfy the demands of civil rights groups. One of the

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<sup>261</sup> Kretschmer, Kelsy, *Fighting for NOW. Diversity and Discord in the National Organization for Women*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 90–92.

<sup>262</sup> THOMPSON, Becky, “Multiracial Feminism. Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” in HEWITT, Nancy, *No Permanent Waves. Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 39–60.

<sup>263</sup> CARTER, David, *Stonewall. The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2004.

<sup>264</sup> D'Emilio, John, “The Gay Liberation Movement,” in *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

best known affirmative action policies was the initiative of Parren J. Mitchell, which required that 10% of the budget allocated to public works fall to MBE (*minority business enterprises*) companies, that is, those including members of existing ethnic minorities such as Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut people.<sup>265</sup> But the effects were also felt on the other side of U.S. politics. If the push for anti-segregation measures provoked a shift among conservative voters in the 1960s, by the late 1970s and 1980s an even more reactive response emerged to these demands.<sup>266</sup> The Vietnam War helped sow a coalition of anti-communist evangelical Christians opposed to the values of the New Left and to liberal conservatives who had supported Goldwater's turn. The defeat in the conflict was seen by these elites as a consequence of anti-war social movements, and the *Roe vs. Wade* decision was a shock for a part of the country that defended traditional Christian values.<sup>267</sup> Jesse Helms, Republican senator and a highly influential media figure in the conservative field, claimed that the new legal situation regarding abortion was symptomatic of a “permissive society, obsessed with the idea that there should be no restraints on human behavior,” and accused the legislature of violating the Ten Commandments of Moses;<sup>268</sup> “The real cause of the breakdown is the abandonment, by millions of people, beginning with husbands, wives, and parents of their interior devotion to the principles of the universal morality (...),” said Clare Boothe Luce in a speech in Honolulu in 1978.<sup>269</sup> Thus began a dialectic of political and social confrontation that would deepen the already open divisions in American society.

#### *Ronald Reagan and the Emergence of the New Right*

Within the context of the social transformations narrated so far, a new element emerged in the conservative sphere: the entry of religious groups into party politics. Thus, in 1979 the Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, a political lobbying organization that promoted Ronald Reagan's candidacy in the 1980 and 1984 elections, making use of innovative

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<sup>265</sup> GRAHAM, Hugh David, “Civil Rights Policy in the Carter Presidency,” in FINK, Gary M. & GRAHAM, Hugh Davis, *The Carter Presidency. Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1998.

<sup>266</sup> SPRUILL, Marjorie J., “Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and The Rise of a New Southern Strategy in the 1970s,” in MAXWELL, Angie & SHIELDS, Todd (eds.), *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 41–73.

<sup>267</sup> OFFENBACH, Seth, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War*, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 185–196.

<sup>268</sup> THRIFT, Bryan Hardin, *Conservative Bias. How Jesse Helms Pioneered the Rise of Right-Wing Media and Realigned the Republican Party*, Tallahassee, University Press of Florida, 2014.

<sup>269</sup> SCHWEIZER, Peter & HALL, Wynton C., *Landmark Speeches of the American Conservative Movement*, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2007, pp. 55–72.

strategies such as the massive employment of radio and television.<sup>270</sup> Reagan was not an evangelical, and in his past as governor of California he had made some liberal decisions regarding the rights of homosexual men and voluntary interruption of pregnancy. However, thanks to a shift in his discourse toward militant anticommunism and the defense of Christian values, he obtained first 67% and later 76% of the evangelical vote.<sup>271</sup> The new president gathered around him a highly combative conservative coalition, defender of the traditional family and opposed to abortion rights.<sup>272</sup> This fostered the promotion of ideas such as creationism, belief in an internal conspiracy to eliminate religion in the United States, the need to reduce the secularity of the state, and a return to less permissive regulations regarding sexuality.

This new wave in American conservatism, labeled by some as the *New Right*, blended these aspirations to reverse the political demands of the New Left and the desire for social order with the firm belief, opposed to the logic of the New Deal and popular since the time of Goldwater, that economic growth required lower taxation and a minimal state.<sup>273</sup> The crises of the 1970s, particularly that of 1973–1974, which involved enormous price hikes, inflation, and unemployment, strengthened the doubts that some already had regarding the statist policies of Keynesian orientation dating back to Roosevelt. An important part of the Republican Party sought answers to these problems in the Austrian School (the writings of Mises and Hayek, anti-government libertarians) and also in the Chicago School, whose foremost representative was Milton Friedman, a member of Reagan’s President’s Economic Policy Advisory Board and decorated by him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.<sup>274</sup> The idea that any social or economic dynamic would lead to a more efficient distribution of resources if the state did not

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<sup>270</sup> Michael Sean Winters, *God’s Right Hand. How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (Harper Collins, 2012), pp. 113–194.

<sup>271</sup> Daniel Williams, “Reagan’s Religious Right: The Unlikely Alliance between Southern Evangelicals and a California Conservative,” in Cheryl Hudson & Gareth Davies, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s. Perceptions, policies, legacies*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 135–150.

<sup>272</sup> Erling Jorstad, *The New Christian Right (1981–1988). Prospects for the Post-Reagan Decade*, New York, Studies in American Religion.

<sup>273</sup> It should be noted that the discourse defended by Reagan did not necessarily correspond to the reality of his economic management. John Komlos, “Reaganomics: A Historical Watershed,” *CESIFO Working Papers*, no. 7301, October 2018, pp. 1–55, explains how in fact savings fell, investments continued at the pace of previous decades, dependence on debt-driven consumption also increased, the income of a large part of the population declined, GDP grew in the same way as in the 1970s (and less than in the 1950s and 1960s), the deficit increased notably, the federal debt rose sharply, etc.

<sup>274</sup> Monica Prasad, “The Popular Origins of Neoliberalism in the Reagan Tax Cut of 1981,” *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 351–383, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898030612000103>, explains how, clothed in this discourse, Reagan employed fiscal policy as a means of selling a credible response to the inflation the country was suffering.

intervene directly became rooted in the mentality of conservative American Christians of the time, supported by strong economic growth, the increase in donations to charity, and the general improvement of living standards, which placed the United States and the capitalist model in a markedly advantageous position compared to socialist states.<sup>275</sup> Reagan succeeded in leading conservative Christian organizations to defend the orientation toward free markets and low taxes as a policy not only more efficient but also *morally* superior.<sup>276</sup>

This vision of the economy and the role of the state provoked significant opposition in its era. In fact, Dan Wood places the beginning of modern political polarization in the United States in the years of Ronald Reagan. The belief that *government is not the solution, it is the problem*, which the president represented, was contrary to the demands of New Left groups, who called for government investments to alleviate inequality and even to correct situations of poverty that they perceived as the result of historical injustice. The abandonment of social welfare programs and the reorientation of state funds toward the Defense budget had as a consequence a sharp increase in preexisting inequality: the U.S. Gini index, after following a downward trend since the 1960s, experienced a strong rise during the 1980s, and in fact would not stop rising until the end of the century.<sup>277</sup> Poverty increased, and by 1988 it was higher than in any year of the previous decade.<sup>278</sup> And not only that: his economic policy was complemented by a hard stance against the labor movement, expanding employers' freedom to fight unionization and promoting the appointment of anti-union figures to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The symbol of this was the crushing of the 1981 strike by air traffic controllers organized under PATCO —Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization.<sup>279</sup>

The attitudes of the Reagan administration toward the racial question, by then one of the structural debates in the United States, also did not foster conciliation. Reagan adopted a supposedly *color-blind* stance toward racial issues, relegating them to the background. His presidency was filled with gestures that provoked anger in the Black community: reluctance to

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<sup>275</sup> Eric R. Crouse, *The Cross and Reaganomics. Conservative Christians Defending Ronald Reagan*, Lexington Books, New York, 2013.

<sup>276</sup> Dan Wood, "Party polarization from Reagan to the present," *Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association*, 2015, pp. 1–76, argues that Reagan is the first in a series of deeply polarizing U.S. presidents.

<sup>277</sup> See the data provided by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SIPOVGINIUSA>, consulted in 2025.

<sup>278</sup> The measurement of poverty is usually a complex statistic since the different indexes have changed considerably. However, in the case of the *Reaganomics*, it seems clear that the situation of the poor did not improve (unlike what had been happening in previous decades), and it seems to have worsened. Cf. Robert D. Plotnick, "Changes in poverty, income inequality, and the standard of living in the United States during the Reagan years," *International Journal of Health Services*, Vol. 23, no. 2, 1993, pp. 347–358.

<sup>279</sup> Henry S. Farber and Bruce Western, "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Declining Union Organization," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40, no. 3 (2002): 385–401, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8543.00240>.

renew the Voting Rights Act in 1982, suggestions about allowing tax exemptions for segregated schools or weakening Executive Order 11246 on the prohibition of racial discrimination in federal contracting,<sup>280</sup> the use of stereotypes such as the “welfare queen,” or the speech on *states’ rights*—delivered near the place where three civil rights activists had been murdered in 1964—, added to the significant rollback of social programs, brought about major criticism and consolidated the alignment of the Black electorate with the Democratic Party.<sup>281</sup>

This was aggravated by the erosion of the moderation and pacifism that the Civil Rights Movement had represented in the 1980s, as it focused on resistance and on protecting the gains achieved in previous decades. Protests against collaboration with the South African *apartheid* regime; the defense of Executive Order 11246 from being weakened; or grassroots movements that, in neighborhoods such as the famous New York Bronx, sought to rehabilitate housing and protect the streets, occupied the activities of these organizations.<sup>282</sup> While the administration declared a holiday for Martin Luther King Day—something that Reagan himself had opposed six years earlier<sup>283</sup>—and new rights were commemorated in museums, the older generations passed the torch to a younger generation that looked with skepticism, or even rejection, at anti-segregationist measures. Thus, Derrick A. Bell Jr., in a series of analyses considered foundational for the *Critical Race Theory* movement, put forward a particular interpretation of the consequences of the famous ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“I contend that the decision in *Brown* to break with the court’s long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation.”<sup>284</sup>

Bell criticized the fact that the process of desegregation was not taking place because of the moral conviction of the white majority in the United States, but only because it was

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<sup>280</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, “Civil Rights Policy,” in W. Elliot Brownlee & Hugh Davis Graham (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency. Pragmatic Conservatism and its Legacies*, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2003, pp. 283–292.

<sup>281</sup> Jeremy D. Mayer, “Reagan and Race: Prophet of Color Blindness, Baiter of the Backlash,” in *Deconstructing Reagan* (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>282</sup> Stephen Tuck, “African American Protest during the Reagan Years: Forging New Agendas, Defending Old Victories,” in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies*, ed. Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>283</sup> Kiron K. Skinner et al., *Reagan in His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision of America* (Touchstone, 2002), 385–86.

<sup>284</sup> Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (The New Press, 1995).

convenient for the country's contextual interests (the principle of *interest convergence*). Consequently, its real implementation left much to be desired and could even be harmful to Black children. In his view, segregation was now maintained in a hidden way as a socioeconomic phenomenon, and not a legal one. Thus, *white flight* and the demographic growth of Black neighborhoods would have provoked a new homogenization of schools, with Black children remaining in public schools and whites in other schools in better conditions, either private institutions or public schools in the more affluent neighborhoods where they lived.<sup>285</sup>

In these years, therefore, an ideological paradigm was born that no longer demanded only legal equality or some economic aid, but advocated for a comprehensive reform of the state beginning with attention to historical inequalities. Since the white majority would never accept on its own initiative a change in its privileges, the demand was not only for equal treatment at the legal and legislative level, but also for particular regulation for people according to the oppressed social categories to which they belonged.<sup>286</sup>

#### *New politics and new media*

George H. W. Bush's presidency was largely marked by continuity in terms of political polarization. His management of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and his leadership during the Gulf War did not generate new substantial domestic division,<sup>287</sup> as both were framed as confrontations between a unified national identity and external adversaries.<sup>288</sup> If anything, his administration represents perhaps the last Republican presidency in which the White House retained meaningful mechanisms of negotiation with the Democratic Party — though it would be inaccurate to suggest that it halted or reversed the broader trend toward polarization.

The 1990s brought a new decade of Democratic protagonism after twelve years of continuous Republican dominance. Bill Clinton represented the ideal of the *New Democrats*, a centrist tendency within the party, sponsored by the Democratic Leadership Council and the

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<sup>285</sup> It should be noted that this was not merely a theory, but a fact already confirmed years earlier. According to the so-called *Coleman Report*, twelve years after the famous ruling, 65% of all Black first-grade students (nationwide) attended schools where between 90 and 100% of their classmates were also Black, a figure that approached 100% in the southern states. Only 10% of Black primary and secondary students had been in classrooms where the majority of classmates were white. See James S. Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1966).

<sup>286</sup> Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (Penguin, 2024).

<sup>287</sup> For a broad account of Bush's presidency, see John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of George H. W. Bush* (University Press of Kansas, 2015).

<sup>288</sup> A study by Wood and Jordan even shows a minor, though statistically significant, moderation of polarization during Bush's term, see B. Dan Wood and Soren Jordan, "Presidents and Polarization of the American Electorate," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2018): 15.

Progressive Policy Institute, which sought to recover the then-lost vote of the middle class. The Democrats had reached the end of the Reagan presidency accumulating several defeats that were believed to be associated with an image of a party focused on culture and ethnic minorities, a weak and ineffective foreign policy, and economic policies of the New Deal that had lost much credibility in the new economic landscape of *laissez faire*.<sup>289</sup> This was an image that Republicans had exploited with relative success, particularly in the Reagan and Bush era, to the point of making some Democrats abandon the traditional label of “Liberal” and attempt to use instead that of “progressive,” without much success.<sup>290</sup> This tendency, as we will discuss later, continues to this day as part of the Republican strategy of differentiation and stereotyping of the out-group.<sup>291</sup>

Clinton maintained a moderate profile regarding civil rights. In his 1991 Cleveland speech, as a candidate for the leadership of the Democratic Party, he outlined the main lines of his position concerning the strategy the party should follow:

“Too many of the people that used to vote for us, the very burdened middle class we are talking about, have not trusted us in national elections (...) Our burden is to give the people a new choice, rooted in old values (...) this government ought to help the middle class as well as the poor when they need it (...) we have to expand world trade (...) we should demand that everybody who can go to work do it, for work is the best social program this country has ever devised (...) follow the successes of our greatest corporations in eliminating middle levels of bureaucracy, pushing decisions down to the lowest possible level (...) Is what I just said to you liberal or conservative? The truth is, it is both (...) take this fight about civil rights. The Republicans have set it up so that (...) you have got to be for quotas (...) we are for family values.”<sup>292</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s there was a decline in the favorable evaluation that most citizens had of affirmative action policies, such as preferential hiring, subsidies, or racial and gender quotas in universities. As Steeh and Krysan point out in an analysis of several statistical studies on public opinion, even Black people showed a clear tendency to increasingly reject the imposition of such measures on companies and public institutions in hiring — although the

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<sup>289</sup> Kenneth S. Baer, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton* (University Press of Kansas, 2000), 193–209.

<sup>290</sup> Adam J. Schiffer, “I’m Not That Liberal: Explaining Conservative Democratic Identification,” *Political Behavior* 22, no. 4 (2000): 293–310, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010632627542>.

<sup>291</sup> Jacob R. Neihsel, “The ‘L’ Word: Anti-Liberal Campaign Rhetoric, Symbolic Ideology, and the Electoral Fortunes of Democratic Candidates,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2016): 418–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916640902>.

<sup>292</sup> William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the DLC,” Clinton Digital Library, January 12, 1998, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/34198>.

ethno-racial affiliation of the person did seem to influence their opinion on subsidies and university admission. For example, asked in 1994, 77% of white people and 44% of Black people agreed that no special treatment should be given to Black citizens because of discrimination or prejudice, compared to 12% and 35% who disagreed, respectively.<sup>293</sup> This occurred in parallel with a series of judicial rulings and citizen initiatives that dealt a major blow to these policies. In 1995 the decision in *Adarand Constructors v. Peña* greatly limited the use of racial classifications by the government, while a year later the *Hopwood* decision directly prohibited benefiting individuals in university admissions on the basis of their race. That same year, Proposition 209 did the same in California across all educational and public employment programs of the state.<sup>294</sup>

The idea of returning to a concern for the middle class, moderation in social discourse, economic orthodoxy, and some of the traditional values of the United States allowed Clinton to pull the Democratic Party out of the state of decline in which it had been mired in recent decades (losing 4 of the last 5 electoral contests).<sup>295</sup> This does not mean that his administration completely abandoned divisive issues of racial equality, abortion rights, or gender equality, but it always adopted an accommodating profile with conservatives under the umbrella of the need for communion among the citizens of the State.<sup>296</sup> Clinton cut numerous important social programs for disadvantaged and vulnerable classes (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996), refused to accept structural reforms in the direction of racial equality, hardened measures against crime without establishing mechanisms of prevention and racial bias, and defended conservative measures in several areas, such as the prohibition of federal recognition of same-sex marriages in 1996.<sup>297</sup> His measures on civil rights were limited to appointing a certain number of people from ethnic minorities or women — always opposing any idea of quotas —, allowing non-heterosexual people to serve in the military as long as they did not declare themselves as such (*Don't ask, don't tell*), addressing some demands of the Native peoples of the United States, and reforming the voter registration system to prevent discrimination (National Voter Registration Act of 1993), among other measures.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Charlotte Steeh and Maria Krysan, “The Polls-Trends: Affirmative Action and the Public, 1970–1995,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1996): 128–58, <https://doi.org/10.1086/297745>.

<sup>294</sup> Peter H. Schuck, “Affirmative Action: Past, Present, and Future,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 20, no. 1 (2002): 46–54.

<sup>295</sup> Mark White, “Vicissitudes: 1992 and the Road to the White House,” in *The Presidency of Bill Clinton: The Legacy of a New Domestic and Foreign Policy*, ed. Mark White (I.B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>296</sup> Alex Waddan, *Clinton's Legacy? A New Democrat in Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 135–37.

<sup>297</sup> Philip A. Klinkner, “Bill Clinton and the Politics of the New Liberalism,” in *Without Justice for All. The New Liberalism And Our Retreat From Racial Equality*, ed. Adolph Reed (Routledge, n.d.).

<sup>298</sup> Steven A. Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton: The Role of Presidential Leadership* (M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

In this sense, the Democratic government of the 1990s did not represent a significant break with many of Reagan’s initiatives — rather, in several respects, a continuity. Clinton retained an image of moderation before the voters, while at the same time retaining an important part of the ethnic minority vote, which represented an increasingly large portion of the population.<sup>299</sup>

However, a series of changes in conservative and Republican circles would provoke an escalation in the dialectics of American debates that would leave a deep mark for decades. In 1994 Newt Gingrich, who later became Speaker of the House of Representatives, carried out the initiative *Contract with America*, a program of proposals inspired by the Reagan Era whose aim was to gain relevance and turn that year’s mid-term elections into a plebiscite against Clinton. The strategy worked, as Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time in decades — what came to be called the *Republican Revolution*. Gingrich inaugurated almost a new way of doing opposition, making intensive use of all media and staging an incendiary rhetoric that, in his own words, aimed to overturn the policies of the 1960s.<sup>300</sup> The confrontational strategy caused the *shutdowns* of 1995–1996, one of them the longest up to that date, leaving hundreds of thousands of state employees without pay for three weeks.

The emergence of a set of figures in the media sphere and in Republican politics during those years changed the paradigm of political communication and the way partisan confrontation was approached. The 1990s witnessed the birth of some of the best-known conservative spokespeople today, and many who, even if they did not endure — or not with the same force — were influential and decisive figures in steering a segment of public opinion. Fundamental to this, during the Reagan administration, was the abolition of the Federal Communication Commission’s *Fairness Doctrine*, which required all radio license holders to address current affairs of public interest and to do so from a certain diversity of non-coincident points of view. In 1985 the Commission published a report questioning the constitutionality of the measure, whether it was meeting its objective of improving information quality, its economic cost, the obstacles it posed to freedom of expression, the governmental control it implied, possible consequences in terms of corruption of public agents, etc. It was abolished by the FCC

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<sup>299</sup> Pew Research Center, “The Changing Demographic Composition of Voters and Party Coalitions,” 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/the-changing-demographic-composition-of-voters-and-party-coalitions/>.

<sup>300</sup> Steven M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined a Generation* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 123–72.

in 1987.<sup>301</sup> This enabled the development of *Talk Radio Shows*,<sup>302</sup> a format in which the political orientation and personality of the host determined all the content, under the aegis of ideologically uniform radio stations in terms of editorial line.

Rush Limbaugh's program, which became the most listened to in the United States in the 1990s, drew on the discontent of a segment of voters with the social and political changes of the era, including the return of the Democrats to federal power. In his book *The Way Things Ought to Be* (the country's bestseller at the time),<sup>303</sup> which synthesizes the lines of discourse that predominated in his radio broadcasts, he devoted himself to outraged protest and criticism of all emerging topics: the environmental movement, the free distribution of condoms in schools, feminism — which he himself dubbed “feminazism” — state secularism, the movement of people infected with HIV, abortion rights, state subsidies, and even Hollywood films.<sup>304</sup> The book is riddled with direct accusations, a rhetoric in which the separation between “them” and “us” is sharply marked, with an in-group, the “conservatives,” to whom are attributed economic success, common sense, honesty, and responsibility, and an out-group, the “liberals,” who are accused of promoting class envy, poverty, lying, depravity, and other immoral elements with the sole objective of staying in power.

The influence of Limbaugh's opinions was clear in various political debates. Hall and Cappella found in 1996 significant differences in positions regarding public policies such as Forbes's *flat-tax* proposal or how liberal certain figures were perceived to be, depending on whether respondents were regular listeners to the program or not.<sup>305</sup>

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, a market-liberalizing measure in telecommunications, favored the entry of networks like Fox News, which would become one of the best-known and most popular conservative media outlets over time. The network quickly became known for giving space to highly controversial media figures belligerent against the government and liberalism, such as Matt Drudge, who had gained great fame years earlier for his website and newsletter, the Drudge Report — although the relationship was short-lived due

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<sup>301</sup> Federal Communications Commission, *Fairness Doctrine, Commission's Rules and Regulations Concerning the General Fairness Doctrine Obligations of Broadcast Licensees* (Federal Communications Commission, 1985).

<sup>302</sup> Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party That Took Over the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 116.

<sup>303</sup> Walter Goodman, “He's No. 1,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 1993, 35.

<sup>304</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be* (Pocket Books, 1992).

<sup>305</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph H. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 214–36.

to contractual disagreements between the parties.<sup>306</sup> Other programs that also premiered on television space were later labeled sensationalist and lacking in journalistic rigor.<sup>307</sup> The network’s alignment was clearly Republican. Thus, a 2001 report found that nearly three quarters of the guests on the news program *Special Report with Brit Hume* were openly conservative, if not Republican politicians in office.<sup>308</sup> The effect of Fox News was felt in quantitative terms, increasing the Republican presidential *vote share* in 2000 by between 0.4 and 0.7 percentage points.<sup>309</sup>

This is relevant for several reasons: first, because the fact that Fox News favors Republican positions and figures reinforces the idea of an increasing tendency for people not to be exposed to versions of facts and information with which they disagree; second, because the fact of relying largely on Republican and/or conservative contributors, with a set of shared profiles and characteristics, reinforces the idea that it constitutes an echo chamber for its viewers. A 2017 study showed that Fox viewers who preferred like-minded news moved increasingly to the right, and that such platforms resulted in limited increases in political polarization.<sup>310</sup>

The emergence of these new sources of entertainment and information on public affairs in the 1990s and 2000s created a new political ecosystem in which consumers could align the media they consulted with their values, points of view, and identities. Constant exposure to information pre-filtered by media agents that resonates with the individual’s *a priori* beliefs can lead to reinforcement of those beliefs and, as a mass social process, to polarization. Thus, Amarashinghe and Raschky found that listening to Limbaugh’s program between 2006 and 2020 was associated, in the case of Republican voters, with more conservative stances and polarized attitudes — greater alignment between values and the chosen party, perception of greater ideological distance from the other party, more fixed positions, straight-ticket voting for

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<sup>306</sup> Matthew Lysiak, *The Drudge Revolution: The Untold Story of How Talk Radio, Fox News, and a Gift Shop Clerk with an Internet Connection Took Down the Mainstream Media* (BenBella Books, 2020).

<sup>307</sup> One of the examples closest to the period we are dealing with was coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In a comparison between NBC and Fox News, the result was that, while both contained distorting elements, Fox clearly opted for a stance favorable to the Bush administration. By way of example, of all the quotations of reference figures cited across the news published by the network, in the case of Fox News about 58.2% and 66% (referring to Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively) were favorable to the government; see Sean Aday, “Chasing the Bad News: An Analysis of 2005 Iraq and Afghanistan War Coverage on NBC and Fox News Channel,” *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 1 (2010): 144–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01472.x>.

<sup>308</sup> Steve Rendall, “Fox’s Slanted Sources,” *FAIR*, July 2001, <https://fair.org/extra/foxs-slanted-sources/>.

<sup>309</sup> Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, “The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (2007): 1187–234, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.122.3.1187>.

<sup>310</sup> Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, *Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2014), [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w20798/w20798.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w20798/w20798.pdf).

candidates of the same party in elections, etc.<sup>311</sup> Even more important: the existence of mass media focused on the media and cultural battle contributed to the construction of a political *ethos* that previously was not as marked. This is a fundamental change in the politics of the 1990s: support for a party and a set of values ceases to be an electoral and moral choice and becomes entry into a particular social group that acquires a series of characteristic values. This is an essentialization of political identities, *sorting* in its clearest expression.<sup>312</sup> Thus, in a National Election Studies survey in 2000, already 89% of Republican respondents identified as “Conservative,” while only 52% of Democrats declared themselves “Liberal.”<sup>313</sup>

Although Bill Clinton’s presidency was relatively moderate in form and in political ambitions, it was filled with public scandals, including the famous Monica Lewinsky case, involving a White House intern, and the sexual harassment accusations of Paula Jones. The impeachment process against Clinton in 1998 is an example of how this new media apparatus was set in motion, and also of the polarization already present in American society. The scandal of the extramarital relations that President Clinton maintained with Monica Lewinsky, a former intern, reached far greater dimensions than what opinion polls revealed in terms of real social impact.

The president’s moral standing seemed to decline broadly, but the same did not occur with his approval as a leader holding office. In fact, the correlations between media coverage of the case and poll results are weaker than they might appear.<sup>314</sup> Opinions were markedly divided by partisan affiliation of the respondents. For example, regarding the legitimacy of impeachment as a consequence of the accusations, 84% of Democrats disagreed, while 63% of Republicans supported the procedure.<sup>315</sup> This was seen by some scholars as a typical case of intergroup conflict in which social identity provides individuals with frameworks for understanding reality through a sense of closeness and distance: Lawrence and Bennett point out that among Black citizens and those with lower income, Clinton hardly lost popularity as a leader or moral standing, and given prior opinion polls, they argue that the only explanation lies in the narrative

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<sup>311</sup> Ashani Amarashinghe and Paul A. Raschky, “Competing for Attention – The Effect of Talk Radio on Elections and Political Polarization in the US,” 2022, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2206.12195>.

<sup>312</sup> Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>313</sup> Arthur Miller and Thomas E. Klobucar, “The Role of Issues in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2003): 101–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2003.tb00002.x>.

<sup>314</sup> Spiro Kiouisis, “Job Approval and Favorability: The Impact of Media Attention to the Monica Lewinsky Scandal on Public Opinion of President Bill Clinton,” *Mass Communication and Society* 6, no. 4 (2003): 435–51, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0604\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0604_3).

<sup>315</sup> Arthur H. Miller, “Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion: What Political Scientists Really Learned From the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 32, no. 4 (1999): 721–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/420158>.

they constructed about the characters of the unfolding story, their greater capacity to identify with Clinton’s image as a poor boy who had managed to reach the White House, and as a man whose private life was being subjected to the U.S. judicial system (with which individuals in these groups had had negative past experiences) and exposed to the public.<sup>316</sup>

Some figures within the Republican Party tried to capitalize on this new mobilization caused by the cultural battle. The figure of Pat Buchanan, who ran as a Republican candidate in the 1996 elections against Bill Clinton, is fundamental in this regard, because even if he did not achieve his goal, his style did leave a mark on subsequent decades, most notably through the political current of ‘Trumpism’, which we will see later.<sup>317</sup>

Perhaps the clearest and most evident demonstration of the degree of polarization the American republic had reached can be found in the 2000 electoral process itself, which pitted Bill Clinton’s former vice president, Al Gore, against the son of the previous Republican president, George W. Bush. The latter won the elections by 537 votes in Florida, where a problem with the automatic recount ended up before the U.S. Supreme Court (the case of *Bush v. Gore*). It had to be decided whether to carry out a manual recount or continue with the automatic one, due to established legal deadlines. The composition of the Court (whose members, let us recall, are renewed by the sitting president when they pass away) was, for some, decisive for the final result, since all the justices appointed by Bill Clinton voted in favor of conducting a new recount, while those who voted against were all Republicans, appointed in their time by Nixon, Reagan, and Bush Sr. — with the exception of two Republicans who joined the proposal for a new recount.<sup>318</sup> In fact, the decision notably divided public opinion: according to data gathered from various polls, 41.9% believed it was a wrong decision, with 80.5% of people stating they had a “strong opinion” on the matter. One third of citizens (29%) thought the decision had not been based on legal criteria, almost all belonging to that part of the citizenry that was against the decision. While partisan identification was found to be determinant of the

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<sup>316</sup> Regina G. Lawrence and W. Lance Bennett, “Rethinking Media Politics and Public Opinion: Reactions to the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal,” *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2001): 425–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/798222>.

<sup>317</sup> Pat Buchanan is considered a populist of his time, appealing to the economic problems of the lower classes while criticizing liberal policies: David L. Weakliem, “A New Populism? The Case of Patrick Buchanan,” *Electoral Studies* 20, no. 3 (2001): 447–61, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(00\)00028-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(00)00028-7). This has led some to consider him a precursor of Donald Trump, see Nicole Hemmer, “Pat Buchanan Paved the Way for Trump,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2022, 8.

<sup>318</sup> Ron Elving, “The Florida Recount of 2000: A Nightmare That Goes on Haunting,” *NPR*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/12/666812854/the-florida-recount-of-2000-a-nightmare-that-goes-on-haunting>.

assessment of whether the Court's decision was fair or not, the Court did not lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public.<sup>319</sup>

### *The War on Terror as Escalation*

As we will see later, the years from George W. Bush's inauguration in 2001 until Barack Obama left office in 2017 were the most intense period of polarization in recent U.S. history up to that point. Certainly, if Clinton's presidency was marked by the rise of a new media-driven right and by scandals related to the president's personal life, George W. Bush's presidency was defined by the decisions that led the country into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as by immigration, which would gain significant weight with the arrival of Trump.

The Republican government's determination to invade two sovereign countries in response to the 9/11 attacks was initially met with acceptance, but later strongly criticized as the consequences of poor planning for the post-war scenario became evident and as the dubious nature of the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction was revealed.<sup>320</sup> This initial support drew on a Manichean presentation of the facts by the president, who consistently employed religious and historical references to frame the conflict as a war between good and evil.<sup>321</sup>

The Iraq war and the fight against terrorism became central issues in the 2004 elections, which gave George Bush a renewed victory.<sup>322</sup> However, during the election the deepest division yet between Republicans and Democrats in their evaluations of Bush became clear, as he became the reelected president with the lowest approval rating since records began.<sup>323</sup> The

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<sup>319</sup> James L. Gibson et al., "The Supreme Court and the US Presidential Election of 2000: Wounds, Self-Inflicted or Otherwise?" *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 4 (2003): 535–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123403000230>.

<sup>320</sup> Jon Herbert and Andrew Wroe, "Conclusion: The Legacy of George W. Bush," in *Assessing the George W. Bush Presidency: A Tale of Two Terms*, ed. Andrew Wroe and Jon Herbert (Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>321</sup> Kevin Coe et al., "No Shades of Gray: The Binary Discourse of George W. Bush and an Echoing Press," *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 2 (2004): 234–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02626.x>.

<sup>322</sup> Although often understood as an example of the preeminence of *moral values* in voting decisions at the time, more recent studies show that other factors were more decisive, and that the moral component was, in any case, only a reinforcement for the already convinced. See D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, "Moral Issues and Voter Decision Making in the 2004 Presidential Election," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 38, no. 2 (2005): 201–9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096505056301>.

<sup>323</sup> Gary Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (University of California Press, 2011), 150–51.

elections, in general, have been seen as an example of ideological and partisan polarization, largely due to the rejection of the president, who had become a divisive figure.<sup>324</sup>

If immediately after the attacks both Republicans and Democrats approved of the war in about three-quarters of cases and viewed Bush very favorably, by 2005 circumstances had changed radically: about 80% of Republicans supported the war and 90% supported Bush’s administration, percentages that fell to around 20% among Democrats, producing a gap of between 60 and 70 points between the two. In fact, this polarization extended not only to approval of the war, but also to the beliefs that voters of each party held about it. Thus, between 2006 and 2008 around 60% of Republicans believed that Iraq possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction, while the percentages did not reach 20% among Democrats. Jacobson’s work illustrates this point: “believing in Bush’s divine appointment increased the probability of believing that Iraq possessed WMD (...)”<sup>325</sup>

9/11 and the creation of a culture of threat also had an impact on debates about immigration, an old debate that now took on a new dimension. After the attacks, unlike in other terrorist incidents, the American public’s fear of an Islamist threat remained high for a prolonged period. The association between the attacks and immigration was welcomed by part of the media sphere and also by the government itself,<sup>326</sup> which approved a security directive explicitly entitled *Combating Terrorism Through Immigration Policies*, stating that some immigrants “come to the United States to commit terrorist acts, to raise funds for illegal terrorist activities, or to provide other support for terrorist operations.”<sup>327</sup> In this context, a 2005 House of Representatives bill, known as the Sensenbrenner Bill (H.R. 4437), but officially titled the *Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act*, sought to criminalize illegal immigration with penalties of imprisonment and deportation. It also aimed to incorporate into border security agencies an office primarily dedicated to “preventing the entry of terrorists, other illegal aliens, instruments of terrorism, narcotics, and other types of contraband into the United States,” thereby linking various pre-existing problems in the country to immigration.<sup>328</sup> This bill

<sup>324</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, “The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2006): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00295.x>.

<sup>325</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “Perception, Memory, and Partisan Polarization on the Iraq War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 1 (2010): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2010.tb00667.x>.

<sup>326</sup> Mikhail A. Alexseev, *Immigration Phobia and the Security Dilemma* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>327</sup> The White House, *Homeland Security Presidential Directive-2* (The White House, 2001), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011030-2.html>.

<sup>328</sup> James F. Sensenbrenner and Peter King, *The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005* (U.S. House of Representatives, 2005), <https://web.archive.org/web/20060330034027/http://judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/immbillsection.pdf>.

was blocked in the Senate (both chambers then having Republican majorities) amid strong protests that came to be called “the birth of a new civil rights movement.”<sup>329</sup>

However, the effect that 9/11 had on rejection of immigration in the United States is statistically difficult to perceive in the long term. According to Gallup surveys, attitudes toward immigration declined among Democratic voters and, more intensely, among Republicans, but recovered beginning in 2004–2005 and generally remained higher than in 1993. The real polarization on immigration, when Republicans and Democrats began to move in directly opposing directions, did not occur until 2012, as we will see later.<sup>330</sup> In fact, the immigration issue entered the country’s public debate as a growing vector of polarization that came to be added to the traditional claims of the civil rights movement. The system of immigration quotas by nationality had been abolished in 1965, and although legislation was increasingly strict toward illegal immigration, particularly since the Reagan era, there was public concern about the loss of control and of jobs.<sup>331</sup> From Bush’s presidency through Trump’s —during which the phenomenon intensified significantly— studies identify a strong correlation between respondents’ voting patterns and their views on immigration.<sup>332</sup>

Other aspects of Bush’s presidency were overshadowed by the prominence of the war and immigration. The president and his administration were firmly opposed to affirmative action policies, such as the racial quotas that some states and universities had implemented — see the case of the University of Michigan before the Supreme Court, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003.<sup>333</sup> A significant portion of Republican voters at the time were radical evangelical Christians<sup>334</sup> who sought to persuade Bush to pass a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage —which took shape in a failed initiative in 2004—, as well as against abortion rights and contraceptive measures. Bush did little beyond channeling more state funds

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<sup>329</sup> Bill Ong Hing and Kevin R. Johnson, “The Immigrant Rights Marches of 2006 and the Prospects for a New Civil Rights Movement,” *UC Davis Legal Studies Research Paper Series*, no. 96 (December 2006), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=950365](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=950365).

<sup>330</sup> Lydia Saad, “Americans Still Value Immigration, but Have Concerns,” *Gallup*, July 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508520/americans-value-immigration-concerns.aspx>.

<sup>331</sup> Charles Hirschman, “Immigration to the United States: Recent Trends and Future Prospects,” *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* 51, no. 1 (2014): 69–85.

<sup>332</sup> Joseph O. Baker and Amy E. Edmonds, “Immigration, Presidential Politics, and Partisan Polarization among the American Public, 1992–2018,” *Sociological Spectrum* 41, no. 3 (2021): 189–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2021.1910353>. The year 2008 was decisive: from then on the probability of a Democratic voter stating in a survey that they would like fewer immigrants began to fall from 0.56 points to 0.24 in 2018, while Republicans, after an initial rise between 2000 and 2006, remained in the range of 0.50–0.60 probability points.

<sup>333</sup> Goodwin Liu, “The Bush Administration and Civil Rights: Lessons Learned,” *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy* 4 (2009): 96–100.

<sup>334</sup> John C. Green, *The Faith Factor: How Religion Influences American Elections* (Praeger, 2007).

into educational programs promoting abstinence as the best form of contraception, withdrawing funds from stem cell research, and appointing new conservative judges to the Supreme Court.<sup>335</sup> In any case, the divisions opened during the Bush era, particularly regarding the stigma toward Muslim immigrants and the renewed distrust of the state, would be felt in the decades that followed.

### 3.1.2. The Era of Polarization

#### *Obama and the coming of Trump*

Obama’s presidency did not put an end to the polarization of U.S. politics and society in all its aspects. In fact, during his terms the political and social forces that later played a central role in the greatest antagonisms of the Trump Era emerged: the Tea Party, the *Alt-Right*, and Black Lives Matter. We will see that this was not only a matter of quantitative changes—a larger portion of citizens moving toward the extremes— but also qualitative ones: the old ideas defended by conservatives and liberals gave way to more radical and violent forms.

Race became in the United States the most divisive variable in political terms, even more predictive of partisan support than factors such as educational level or income.<sup>336</sup> Therefore, it should not surprise us that during the presidency of Barack Obama, the country’s first Black president, it was the central issue. The election of an African American to lead the nation was interpreted by some as the ultimate demonstration that the United States was moving toward a “post-racial” scenario. Obama himself, without claiming that such a situation had come about, saw himself as the leader of a coalition willing to overcome its differences, “of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old.”<sup>337</sup> However, even if polarized attitudes on racial issues partially decreased among Democratic and Republican voters, this effect was neither sustained over time nor did it result in a significant improvement in inter-ethnic relations.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> John Anthony Maltese, “Communications Strategies in the Bush White House,” in *Assessing the George W. Bush Presidency: A Tale of Two Terms*, ed. Andrew Wroe and Jon Herbert (Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>336</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>337</sup> Barack Obama, “Barack Obama’s Speech on Race (Transcript),” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>.

<sup>338</sup> Monika L. McDermott, “Barack Obama and Americans’ Racial Attitudes: Rallying and Polarization,” *Polity* 46, no. 3 (2014): 449–69, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pol.2014.14>.

The dream of a “post-racial” United States was not only unfulfilled, it was not even shared by all political actors. On the one hand, there was a white conservative movement that increasingly feared the cultural and racial consequences of mass immigration and affirmative action policies, which they viewed as a form of “reverse” discrimination.<sup>339</sup> Thus, as we will see later, during his presidency doubts were even raised about whether he had been born in the United States, a theory known as *birtherism*. On the other hand, the more radical racial justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter and part of the new liberal intellectual current shaped by Critical Race Theory, believed that such a thing was not possible and that ignoring or setting aside race would merely serve to obscure the situation of non-white people in the United States. In fact, Obama was questioned by some prominent figures in the struggle for Black rights for not being sufficiently Black.<sup>340</sup> Stanley Crouch, a prominent African American poet and essayist, noted that “Obama did not -does not- share a heritage with the majority of black Americans, who are descendants of plantation slaves..”<sup>341</sup>

Indeed, the fact that the president was not white created a racial interpretive framework for many of the measures taken during his government. A broad study based on opinion polls and experimental results found that white voters’ opinions on Obama’s health care policies were particularly influenced by their attitudes toward race.<sup>342</sup> Obama’s entire presidency—even if it was not his intention—was permeated by the racial question; the correlations between support or rejection of his figure and voters’ racial positioning (more liberal or more conservative), which already existed in previous presidents, were even clearer in his case, to the point that Tesler affirms that 2008 was, in racial terms, “the most polarized election in U.S. history.”<sup>343</sup> A good example of this was precisely one of the most divisive measures of his term: the Affordable Care Act of 2010, which was passed without a single Republican vote in Congress.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the social movements that emerged in this period is their use of social media and the dynamics it promotes. Both in the liberal and conservative spheres, the leading role of *talk radio shows*, magazines, and the press was displaced

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<sup>339</sup> Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, 132–41.

<sup>340</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Is Obama Black Enough?,” *Time*, February 1, 2007, <https://time.com/archive/6921747/is-obama-black-enough/>. The article offers a good overview of the accusations received by the then-presidential candidate.

<sup>341</sup> Stanley Crouch, “What Obama Isn’t: Black Like Me on Race,” *New York Daily News*, November 2, 2006, <https://www.nydailynews.com/2006/11/02/what-obama-isnt-black-like-me-on-race/>.

<sup>342</sup> Michael Tesler, “The Spillover of Racialization into Health Care: How President Obama Polarized Public Opinion by Racial Attitudes and Race,” *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2012): 690–704, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00577.x>.

<sup>343</sup> Michael Tesler, *Obama’s Race* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 52–74.

by that of social networks, where these media became embedded in a much faster, more direct, and more polarizing community dynamic. It was precisely in this environment that the social movement known as Black Lives Matter (BLM) was born, heir to the social struggles of Black people in the 1970s and 1980s. It is the label given to a series of activist collectives that acted in a decentralized way and organized both physical and online protests to demand changes in U.S. policing and politics.<sup>344</sup> This new organization experienced moments of particular intensity in traumatic situations such as those of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (2014) and later that of George Floyd (2020). The proceedings of the U.S. justice system, often failing to convict the perpetrators, provoked massive protests involving a wide range of social actors, including grassroots organizations, civil rights movements, celebrities, and intellectual figures.<sup>345</sup>

Social media was defended by BLM activists as a disruptive space, allowing marginalized groups access to a public sphere historically dominated by white voices:

“In the public sphere, where white voices normally control the discourse and marginalize voices of the oppressed, the #BlackLivesMatter movement appeared very threatening to some (...) In previous decades, young people like those currently dominating the discourse on social media, which has in turn influenced news coverage and more mainstream or traditional forms of media, might not have had the opportunity to participate in the public sphere. Developing technology created the emergence of new subjects, or new publics, who otherwise would not have been involved in the public sphere.”<sup>346</sup>

As analyzed by Ray et al.,<sup>347</sup> the Black Lives Matter movement, as a mass phenomenon, conveyed on social networks the idea that Black people were being killed by the police with impunity, even when unarmed, while white people were not, and that there was a double media standard in these cases, treating white victims with greater humanity. The movement dedicated itself to acts of solidarity with the victims, organizing protests, documenting events, and coordinating mobilizations online. Among its priority demands were the reallocation of funds from policing toward social programs and crime prevention systems; the creation and enforcement of accountability mechanisms for officers, such as the use of body cameras and

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<sup>344</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>345</sup> Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Black Lives Matter: From a Moment to a Movement* (ABC-CLIO, 2018).

<sup>346</sup> Nikita Carney, “All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media,” *Humanity & Society* 40, no. 2 (2016): 180–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597616643868>.

<sup>347</sup> Rashawn Ray et al., “Ferguson and the Death of Michael Brown on Twitter: #BlackLivesMatter, #TCOT, and the Evolution of Collective Identities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1797–813, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334931>.

effective prosecution of excessive force; legislative reforms to improve protection against police abuse; and the fight against racial and economic inequality, as well as education.<sup>348</sup>

However, there is also an intellectual dimension of Black Lives Matter strongly influenced by the essentialist and communitarian sense of Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, which we have already seen in earlier pages. In this respect, the movement sees itself more as an heir of the theses of Du Bois,<sup>349</sup> Malcolm X, and Black Power than of the traditional civil rights movement of the NAACP. BLM participants do not believe that racial equality is possible in the short or medium term, nor that the fight against racism can be separated from the struggle against economic inequality.<sup>350</sup> In contrast to King's famous quote, asking that his four children one day not be judged "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," something defined as *colorblindness*, Onwuachi-Willig explains that "Colorblindness is not a means for ending racial subordination because ignoring race does not allow for action that can correct for and eliminate past and current racial discrimination, inequities, and biases and because racism is systemic."<sup>351</sup> Michelle Alexander, an influential intellectual and anti-racist activist, wrote about how the U.S. justice system itself, even without explicitly racist legislation, discriminated against people who were drug users or possessors, or simply residents of poor neighborhoods targeted by police raids, something she called *The New Jim Crow*.<sup>352</sup> These perspectives led the movement to distance itself from more conciliatory liberal politics, opting instead for proposals of radical change.

As can be inferred, this provoked an important response from conservatives. The very name of the movement has sparked interpretive debates about the meaning of the slogan *Black Lives Matter*, and numerous works can be found that delve into the epistemological and linguistic implications of the words used: does it mean that other lives do not matter *too*? Are activists

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<sup>348</sup> Jessi Hanson-Defusco et al., "#Polarized: Gauging Potential Policy Bargaining Ranges Between Opposing Social Movements of Black Lives Matter and Police Lives Matter," *Social Sciences* 13, no. 11 (2024): 604, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110604>.

<sup>349</sup> Aldon Morris, "W.E.B. Du Bois at the Center: From Science, Civil Rights Movement, to Black Lives Matter," *The British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. 1 (2017): 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12236>. The author explains how the intellectual legacy of Du Bois, who urged young people to use direct action as a means of protest against injustice, shaped the Civil Rights Movement and reached Black Lives Matter.

<sup>350</sup> Sharon Jones-Eversley et al., "Protesting Black Inequality: A Commentary on the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter," *Journal of Community Practice* 25, nos. 3–4 (2017): 404–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2017.1364851>.

<sup>351</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The CRT of Black Lives Matter," *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 62, no. 2 (2017): 663–76.

<sup>352</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2020), 121–74.

excluding the suffering of people who are not Black?<sup>353</sup> However, the original conflict has more to do with practical issues: if BLM arose as a protest against police violence and demanded limiting the power of public officials to use force, another part of U.S. society was left wondering whether this would not lead to situations of defenselessness, given that the number of police officers killed in the line of duty each year is also notable and emotionally significant for certain segments of the population.<sup>354</sup> Thus, in 2014 the *Blue Lives Matter* movement emerged, created to provide financial support and discursive backing to law enforcement officers facing legal proceedings derived from the use of force, a movement that can be linked to other anti-reformist currents of law enforcement historically and that has found particular resonance on the political right.<sup>355</sup> This confrontation has been understood within the psychosocial theoretical frameworks of intergroup conflict as a case of *competitive victimhood*, a conflict in which both groups seek to acquire moral authority to assert their demands, although with greater empirical evidence on the side of BLM.<sup>356357</sup>

Alongside *Blue Lives Matter*, *All Lives Matter* emerged as a slogan used in various political circles, especially conservative ones, from an interpretation of BLM as divisive and even racist. The response of scholars and activists aligned with BLM was swift, labeling supporters of this view as examples of *white fragility*, if not advocates of *white supremacy*, counter-reformists who merely want to maintain a situation that benefits them, and who fear losing their privileges.<sup>358</sup> Several academic articles have associated adherence to All Lives Matter with implicit racism,<sup>359</sup>

<sup>353</sup> Ashley Atkins, “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-Blindness and Epistemic Injustice,” *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 32, no. 1 (2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1416338>.

<sup>354</sup> National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, “Law Enforcement Deaths Throughout U.S. History.” 2024. <https://nleomf.org/memorial/facts-figures/officer-fatality-data/officer-deaths-by-year/>. Although the numbers of people killed by police generally far exceed the deaths of officers, it should be noted that these are absolute figures, and that the number of officers, as is logical, is much smaller than that of criminals, so the interpretation must be relative. See Statista, “Number of People Shot to Death by the Police in the United States from 2017 to 2024, by Race.” 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/585152/people-shot-to-death-by-us-police-by-race/>.

<sup>355</sup> Vance D. Keyes and Latocia Keyes, “Dynamics of an American Countermovement: Blue Lives Matter,” *Sociology Compass* 16, no. 6 (2022): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12979>.

<sup>356</sup> SOLOMON, Johanna; MARTIN, Adam, “Competitive victimhood as a lens to reconciliation: An analysis of the black lives matter and blue lives matter movements,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, vol. 37, 2019, pp. 7-31.

<sup>357</sup> Johanna Solomon and Adam Martin, “Competitive Victimhood as a Lens to Reconciliation: An Analysis of the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter Movements,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2019): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21267>. We’ll dive more into this concept in Chapter 4.

<sup>358</sup> Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter* (Lexington Books, 2018).

<sup>359</sup> Keon West et al., “Implicit Racism, Colour Blindness, and Narrow Definitions of Discrimination: Why Some White People Prefer ‘All Lives Matter’ to ‘Black Lives Matter,’” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 60, no. 4 (2021): 1136–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12453>.

with a hidden agenda to advance *whiteness* and weaken the BLM movement,<sup>360</sup> and with the perpetuation of systemic racism through a rhetoric of *color-blindness*, that is, denying the persistence of systemic racism in the United States and trivializing the situation of Black people.<sup>361</sup>

This group dynamic reinforces what was previously said about the polarizing character of the racial issue during Barack Obama's presidency and afterward. However, it was during Donald Trump's presidency that the movement's activity became more intense and provoked the strongest feelings of support and rejection, as shown by surveys.

If the developments we find in the liberal sphere changed the communication and political action strategies of the traditional social groups of the Democratic Party, the new trends in the Republican Party completely transformed the conservative landscape, and this is a fundamental point in the extreme process of radicalization of U.S. society. In this case, we must distinguish between two tendencies: a political process within the party, with the founding of the Tea Party and the rise of Trumpism,<sup>362</sup> and another at the social level, with the appearance of the *alt-right* and a growing tendency toward distrust of the state and the political *establishment*.

The Republican Party had been losing its moderate wing since the Reagan era, overtaken by the evangelical New Right, and had already been marginalized during Bush's presidency, which cost it control of the chambers on several occasions.<sup>363</sup> Thus, the movement known as the "Tea Party" emerged as a conservative response to the economic stimulus and social protection policies promoted by Obama's presidency, such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—a Keynesian measure focused on overcoming the economic damage of the Great Recession—and the aforementioned Affordable Care Act. At first, it was merely a social outburst in some cities of the country, such as Chicago, amplified by major outlets like Fox News. From there, thousands of local organizations appeared across the country staging protests, and with the 2010 elections many members of the Republican Party joined the wave. The Tea Party Express or the Boston Tea Party were created, going hand in hand with a

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<sup>360</sup> Sang Hea Kil, "Reporting From the Whites of Their Eyes: How Whiteness as Neoliberalism Promotes Racism in the News Coverage of 'All Lives Matter,'" *Communication Theory* 30, no. 1 (2020): 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz012>.

<sup>361</sup> John Tawa et al., "All Lives Matter: The Cost of Colorblind Racial Attitudes in Diverse Social Networks," *Race and Social Problems* 8, no. 8 (2016): 196–208, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-016-9176-6>.

<sup>362</sup> Geoffrey Kabaservice, "The Forever Grievance: Conservatives Have Traded Periodic Revolts for a Permanent Revolution," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/12/04/tea-party-trumpism-conservatives-populism/>.

<sup>363</sup> Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 363–88.

preexisting network of libertarian organizations such as FreedomWorks. This conglomerate functioned as a pressure group to ensure that Republican candidates adopted more radical and anti-statist positions in the 2010 elections.<sup>364</sup>

This new trend was based on a minority but influential social base in the United States. The most notable quantitative data, from a New York Times and CBS poll,<sup>365</sup> indicate that Tea Party supporters were mainly people of mature or advanced age (about one third were retirees), middle class, college-educated, white, with a higher-than-average proportion of evangelicals (39%), very conservative (73%), and identified with the Republican Party, which 66% of them voted for in 2010. Moreover, this population segment already showed clear signs of polarization: 88% disagreed with Obama, and more than half could not name any positive attribute of the then-president; a significant portion doubted that he had been born in the United States—thus believing that the fact that he was president was illegal, or could be. Almost all were convinced that he was leading the country toward socialism, understood as state ownership of the economy, and thought that, in any case, his government was heading in the wrong direction. And something consistent with what we have already noted elsewhere in the text: 63% claimed Fox News as their main source of information.

Its impact is somewhat debated. It has not been possible to prove quantitatively that support from influential Tea Party figures or voter sympathy for it were significant factors in the Republican Party's improved results in the 2010 elections.<sup>366</sup> However, the same study observes an impact in the primaries. The data suggest that the massive protests and media impact of the Tea Party allowed the reinvention of a Republican Party that lacked clear leadership and was damaged by the final years of Bush's presidency, influencing the political debate agenda and even transferring funds to Republican candidates.<sup>367</sup> In fact, sympathy for the Tea Party is related to greater interest in political issues, more activism, higher participation

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<sup>364</sup> Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>365</sup> The New York Times and CBS News, "National Survey of Tea Party Supporters," *The New York Times*, April 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-national-survey-of-tea-party-supporters>.

<sup>366</sup> Christopher F. Karpowitz et al., "Tea Time in America? The Impact of the Tea Party Movement in the 2010 Midterm Elections," in *The 2010 Congressional Midterm Elections*, ed. Gary C. Jacobson (Routledge, 2011).

<sup>367</sup> Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.

in events, and greater interest in electoral processes.<sup>368369</sup> This qualitative change in the process of Republican radicalization eventually gave rise to the Trumpist movement.

In the second decade of the new century, a new vector of polarization emerged that would gain increasing prominence until the Trump era: the so-called *alt-right*. Unlike other social actors such as Black Lives Matter, it was not a movement that acquired a defined identity, but rather a label generally applied from the outside to various political groups that emerged at the intersection of certain paleo-conservative activist circles, neo-reactionaries, white nationalists, and other tendencies, generally driven by the progressive penetration and generalization of social media.<sup>370</sup>

Inspired by the French *Nouvelle Droite*, with the racial theses of Alain de Benoist and the replacement conspiracy theory of Renaud Camus at the forefront, the alt-right set out to contest spaces traditionally occupied by the left on the Internet, in a cycle of confrontations with the political rival that produced even greater radicalization in the then-new digital spaces.<sup>371</sup> Thus, sites such as VDARE, Breitbart News, The Right Stuff, or American Renaissance gained prominence, promoting anti-immigration rhetoric, white identitarianism, anti-feminism, anti-egalitarianism, anti-globalism, and anti-environmentalism.<sup>372</sup> Groups self-identified as Alt-Right define themselves by their opposition to what they call the Establishment Right, that conservative political spectrum that compromises, to a greater or lesser extent, on these issues. Although it would gain mass appeal during Trump's campaign, in these early years it remained confined to internet forums, alternative media such as those mentioned, and social networks.

This opposition to what they conceive as the norm within U.S. politics and to the theses of liberalism is the basic element that all groups included in this category have in common. From there, the issues on which each small group focuses are diverse (ranging from gender, with *Men Going Their Own Way*, to race, by the white nationalists of American Renaissance, to the fear of a conspiracy of liberal elites, with QAnon followers...) and the proposed solutions can be contradictory, confronting protectionist with free-market positions, statist with anarchists, U.S.

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<sup>368</sup> PARKER, Christopher S.; BARRETO, Matt A., *Change They Can't Believe In. The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 218-240.

<sup>369</sup> Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 218–40.

<sup>370</sup> Matthew N. Lyons, *CTRL-ALT-DELETE: The Origins and Ideology of the Alternative Right* (Political Research Associates, 2017).

<sup>371</sup> Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017).

<sup>372</sup> Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, *The Fringe Insurgency. Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2017).

nationalists with Pan-Germanists, fundamentalist Christians with promoters of paganism. However, the success of the social movements we group under this label lies precisely in their ability to integrate these apparently irreconcilable differences into a common cause against the chimera of progressivism.<sup>373</sup>

Thus, we see that the identity fragmentation that had been taking place years earlier on the left also entered the right. This is fundamental for understanding how advanced the process of radicalization already was at this point. According to Phillip W. Gray, there are a series of common features between what he calls the *intersectional left* and the identitarian paradigm of the Alt-Right —while recognizing that both do not represent the same danger to society or moral value. These consist, first, in the identification of a human group under an identity category considered to possess privileged knowledge, a vision closer to reality than the majority can perceive thanks to its own life experience (non-white people, women, or LGBT in the first case, and white heterosexual men in the second); second, in the use of this identity category and the beliefs associated with it as a lens to observe reality in relation to it, what is called *category-based epistemology* (the famous “violet lenses” of intersectionality or the “alternative” theories of the Alt-Right); third, the belief in an enemy that is majority and dominant in society, whose influence is embedded in social structures and determines their evolution (the relationship of capitalism and Christianity with all the historical injustices of oppressed peoples for the intersectional left, or the Jews and liberal elites in the case of the Alt-Right).<sup>374</sup>

The emergence of the Alt-Right cannot be separated from the media phenomena already mentioned, such as the birth of a conservative activist information ecosystem, the so-called “culture war” on social media and platforms like YouTube, or the rise of relevant actors in the new digital world, “professional opinion-makers” like Milo Yiannopoulos, who, rather than replacing the previous media agenda, managed to “frame” the concerns and political opinions of the conservative electorate.<sup>375</sup> Thus, the most significant event of those early years, the moment when this subculture became known to the general public and the *mainstream* press, was the so-called GamerGate: a wave of media harassment of women professionals in the video game industry and journalism throughout 2014 and 2015. It spread mainly through blogs,

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<sup>373</sup> For an in-depth overview of the different facets of this subculture, see George Hawley, *The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2019) or Andrew Marantz, *Anti-Social: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation* (Viking, 2019).

<sup>374</sup> Philip W. Gray, “‘The Fire Rises’: Identity, the Alt-Right and Intersectionality,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 141–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451228>.

<sup>375</sup> Burton Speakman and Marcus Funk, “News, Nationalism, and Hegemony: The Formation of Consistent Issue Throughout the U.S. Political Right,” *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 3 (2020): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1733616>.

specialized press, YouTube channels, and Twitter. The connections of this phenomenon with the Alt-Right universe became evident through the bridge of anti-feminism and anti-progressive rhetoric that characterizes it. In the words of Nagel,

“Gamergate brought gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion and it also politicized a broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left”<sup>376</sup>

President Barack Obama had to face radicalized and visceral opposition from these movements. His social policies were clearly against the ideological principles of movements such as the Tea Party, and the fact of being the first non-white president of the United States led part of the Alt-Right to see his rise as yet another sign of racial replacement. Thus, on the night he was elected in 2008, the website *Stormfront* was full of messages warning of “White racial genocide.”<sup>377</sup> One of the most notorious attacks was the aforementioned conspiracy about his origins, promoted by Donald Trump himself.<sup>378</sup>

#### *Trumping American Politics: Divided Left and the New Republican Party*

The arrival of Donald Trump at the White House is considered a milestone in the recent history of political polarization in the United States and, to a great extent, a culmination of the previous process.<sup>379</sup> Trump based most of his discursive and electoral strategy on what the most conservative wing of the Republican Party had been doing for decades, pushing the party toward more extreme positions.<sup>380</sup> The legacy of his first presidency is still too recent to benefit from mature historiographical analyses, and the fact that it coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic diverted part of the attention in that direction.

Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 can be understood precisely as a result of the growing polarization that had been shaping the country for many decades. Compared with Obama’s election against Romney in 2008, in this case both candidates were held in much lower regard

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<sup>376</sup> Nagel, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, 22.

<sup>377</sup> Robert Futrell and Pete Simi, “The [Un]Surprising Alt-Right,” *Contexts* 16, no. 2 (2017): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504217714252>.

<sup>378</sup> Anthony Zurcher, “The Birth of the Obama ‘Birther’ Conspiracy,” *BBC News*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37391652>.

<sup>379</sup> Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 137–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218811309>.

<sup>380</sup> Michael Espinoza, “Donald Trump’s Impact on the Republican Party,” *Policy Studies* 42, no. 5 (2021): 563–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1950667>.

by their opponents, including Hillary Clinton herself, the rival of the real estate magnate, with both being described as “the two most unpopular presidential candidates in polling dating back more than 30 years.”<sup>381</sup>

Trump and Clinton voters had fundamentally different understandings of what was happening around them. Among the former, a much more pessimistic view of the country’s present and future prevailed than among the latter, and an element that clearly could affect their voting decision was the identification of the main problems facing the country. Here the divergence was not simply diverse, but often opposed: what for the Trump voter was clearly the most serious problem the country faced, immigration (66%), for the Clinton voter was the least important (17%); and what for the latter was the central issue to resolve, the gap between rich and poor (70%), for the Trump supporter was the second least important (31%)—something that did not substantially change even after controlling for income level.<sup>382</sup> Trump voters rejected free trade, demanded more control over immigration, supported surveillance of Muslims—an inheritance of the Bush era as we have mentioned—opposed economic regulation, and rejected public aid. In short, the number of fundamental disagreements between voters of the two parties overwhelmingly exceeded the points of convergence, something that turned the 2016 election into a true representation of the ideological rupture dividing American society. However, if the election was already a highly antagonistic process, Trump’s presidency was even more so. What is of greatest interest in his legacy is that which most clearly influenced the response of conservative Republicans during the coronavirus crisis, and which also generated greater political polarization in the country: his populist rhetoric.

One of the most characteristic features of Donald Trump’s discourse was intergroup confrontation. He did this both from the superordinate national category—against external actors—and also against intracategorical out-groups, those he considered internal enemies—Democrats, opposing institutions, fake news, etc. His style combined a sense of *permanent campaign*, through rallies with his electoral base and the constant use of Twitter as a mobilization tool.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> ABC News and The Washington Post, *Clinton Hits a New High in Unpopularity; On Par with Trump Among Reg. Voters* (ABC News / The Washington Post, 2016), <https://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1144-59ClintonTrumpFavorability.pdf>.

<sup>382</sup> Pew Research Center, *Clinton, Trump Supporters Have Starkly Different Views of a Changing Nation* (Pew Research Center, 2016), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/08/08-18-2016-August-political-release.pdf>.

<sup>383</sup> See Robert C. Rowland, *The Rhetoric of Donald Trump* (University Press of Kansas, 2021).

First, against immigrants. The president explicitly rejected the notion of *political correctness* when speaking about immigration, setting himself against the Democrats and labeling them as weak. He framed it as a phenomenon linked to globalization.<sup>384</sup> During the campaign he became known for the fierce attacks he directed against Muslims, something connected to the strong concern he expressed about terrorism, exploiting the image of the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) —a jihadist militant group— and security measures, a theme that would lose strength in his discourse in 2018, when he began to focus more on Latin American immigrants.<sup>385</sup> The image of Muslims as possible terrorists was insinuated in various speeches,<sup>386</sup> and it was precisely one of the reasons why he was compared with Adolf Hitler, as we will see later. If Muslims represented terrorism, Latin Americans represented crime and job loss, for which the solution was the construction of the wall.<sup>387</sup> The recurrence of the strategy of fear is not something that should surprise us: if we recall the theoretical framework, the Integrated Threat Theory already explained that the perception of threat was capable of increasing attitudes of in-group cohesion and solidarity, an activation that favors the acceptance of social influence for the reduction of uncertainty.

Trump used foreign policy as a tool to convey the impression of permanent crisis, which maintained a climate of mobilization and identity salience.<sup>388</sup> In his speeches he used the rhetorical figure of the working people against global elites, and exalted American exceptionalism as an argument for the renegotiation of international treaties presented as unfair, which has been interpreted as populism of Jacksonian tradition.<sup>389</sup> Thus, with the tariffs on aluminum and steel in 2018, he managed to create a climate on social media dominated by concepts such as the defense of the working class, threatened sovereignty, or anti-elitism, populist keys that framed the situation as intergroup conflict, reducing questioning of the

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<sup>384</sup> Laura Finley and Luigi Esposito, “The Immigrant as Bogeyman: Examining Donald Trump and the Right’s Anti-Immigrant, Anti-PC Rhetoric,” *Humanity & Society* 44, no. 2 (2020): 178–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832627>.

<sup>385</sup> Jonny Hall, “In Search of Enemies: Donald Trump’s Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric,” *Politics* 41, no. 1 (2021): 48–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935377>.

<sup>386</sup> See, for example, the *Muslim Ban* speech Mohsin Hassan Khan et al., “Muslims’ Representation in Donald Trump’s Anti-Muslim-Islam Statement: A Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019): 115, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020115>.

<sup>387</sup> Massimiliano Demata, “A Great and Beautiful Wall?: Donald Trump’s Populist Discourse on Immigration,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 5, no. 2 (2017): 274–94, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.5.2.06dem>.

<sup>388</sup> Hall, “In Search of Enemies.”

<sup>389</sup> Corina Lacatus, “Populism and President Trump’s Approach to Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Tweets and Rally Speeches,” *Politics* 41, no. 1 (2021): 31–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935380>.

measure itself.<sup>390</sup> This fits within an idea of American national decline induced by the corruption of the elites and by globalism, which allowed him to place himself as the savior of the people.<sup>391</sup>

As we have said, the rhetoric of the new occupant of the White House was characterized by replacing partisan dialectics with populist ones, positioning himself as the voice of a nation aggrieved by corrupt liberal elites, using resentment and hostility as a political tool.<sup>392</sup> This is a phenomenon already studied in American politics as *negative partisanship*: while a large part of the U.S. population holds negative and rejecting attitudes toward both parties, they nevertheless maintain increasingly strict loyalty in voting and activism toward one of them, driven more by affective components and racial attitudes than by ideological preferences.<sup>393</sup> The partisan tensions generated by Trump led to particularly polarizing peaks during his presidency, notably the 2019 impeachment over his pressure on Ukraine, the harsh response to the Black Lives Matter protests, or his insinuations about electoral fraud<sup>394</sup> that promoted the storming of the Capitol in 2021, already in the midst of the pandemic.

Trump’s attack on U.S. institutions eroded the image of governance in the country by replacing meritocratic criteria with loyalty and personal relationships in the appointment of officials, leading to high turnover rates and a politics of reprisals.<sup>395</sup> Those institutions he could not directly control and that acted against him—the FBI with its dossier on Russian influence in the elections or the federal judiciary blocking the *travel ban* against Muslim countries—became in his discourse part of a supposed *Deep State* whose mission was to end his government.<sup>396</sup> These confrontations required mastery of informational social influence over his supporters, which he pursued with a constant strategy of attacking the American press, systematically

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<sup>390</sup> Jean-Christophe Boucher and Cameron G. Thies, “‘I Am a Tariff Man’: The Power of Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric under President Trump,” *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (2019): 712–22, <https://doi.org/10.1086/702229>.

<sup>391</sup> Rubrick Biegon, “A Populist Grand Strategy? Trump and the Framing of American Decline,” *International Relations* 33, no. 4 (2019): 517–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819852399>.

<sup>392</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, “Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of Resentment,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (2020): 2–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1698756>.

<sup>393</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven W. Webster, “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans,” *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (2018): 119–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12479>.

<sup>394</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, “Donald Trump and the Parties: Impeachment, Pandemic, Protest, and Electoral Politics in 2020,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2020): 762–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12682>.

<sup>395</sup> Donald P. Moynihan, “Populism and the Deep State: The Attack on Public Service Under Trump,” SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 3607309 (Social Science Research Network, May 21, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3607309>.

<sup>396</sup> Robert B. Horwitz, “Trump and the ‘Deep State,’” *Policy Studies* 42, no. 5 (2021): 473–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1953460>.

targeting CNN/MSNBC, The New York Times, or The Washington Post while privileging aligned outlets such as Fox News.<sup>397</sup>

It is likely that Trump's government action further widened the preexisting gap within the population of the country, but it is clear—given the historical trajectory we have traced up to this point—that it was not the only factor. American society was already deeply fractured. Iyengar et al. emphasize the concept of *affective polarization* to describe this divide: it is not only a matter of political-ideological separation, but a true emotional rejection of the other, due to the progressive separation accompanied by the already mentioned phenomenon of *sorting*—the alignment between individual traits and one's party.<sup>398</sup> Republicans and Democrats are increasingly demographic labels, since the people who follow each party not only *think* differently but also *are* different. This phenomenon fosters a general trend toward greater prejudice against the opposing party, generating feelings of rejection and resentment that, due to the reduced availability of spaces for encounter, are increasingly difficult to resolve.<sup>399</sup>

In 2019, 55% of Republicans considered Democrats immoral, a slightly higher percentage than that of Democrats toward Republicans (47%), to which must be added high percentages on both sides in stigmas such as stupidity, closed-mindedness, laziness, or anti-patriotism.<sup>400</sup> In the last half century, the average electorate has undergone strong radicalization. If in 1972 Democrats who considered themselves “very liberal” were 16%, by 2012 they were already 28%, and the same effect, only more pronounced, occurred with “very conservative” Republicans, who rose from 21% to 51%, more than doubling the level of radical attitudes. The gap in evaluations of presidential candidates also grew from 46.8 points to 105.2 in the same period, indicating a severe asymmetry in the way members of both parties evaluated politics.<sup>401</sup>

As we will see in the following sections, these differences extended also to other aspects that proved decisive during the pandemic: trust in the state and health institutions, belief in conspiracy theories, or in so-called *alternative medicine*. The society we are examining was one in

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<sup>397</sup> Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, “Discursive Deflection: Accusation of ‘Fake News’ and the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 2 (2018): 2056305118776010, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118776010>.

<sup>398</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

<sup>399</sup> See the ANES (American National Election Studies) analyses conducted by Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>400</sup> Sara Atske, “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” *Pew Research Center*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>.

<sup>401</sup> Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*.

which conflict was evident, with ever weaker feelings of intergroup proximity and more stereotypical views of the other. This fits with the massive use of ANHs.

### 3.2. U.S. Society and the Pandemic

U.S. society was already fertile ground for political polarization when the first moments of the pandemic arrived. However, this was not the only factor that made it into a kind of *perfect storm* for the country. Beyond this, the U.S. had a series of internal features that made it particularly sensitive to an event of such characteristics: a highly rooted individualism, widespread distrust towards state institutions, a particular abundance of so-called alternative medicine, and decades of politicization of science before. The virus not only mobilized intergroup conflict in a partisan sense, but also awakened various forms of distrust toward state institutions. This is what allows us to explain the singularity of the conjuncture experienced between 2020 and 2023.

#### 3.2.1. A distrusted state society

Understanding why the policies of coronavirus containment, and particularly vaccination efforts, became a trigger of political conflict in the United States requires analyzing the strong distrust that exists toward the state and health institutions in the country. Along with it, disinformation, rumors, opportunistic discourses, and conspiracy theories found fertile ground to spread, contributing to the polarization of the process.

##### *American individualism*

Even though it is today the world's largest economic power and the paradigmatic example of capitalist development, the United States is a society born of the colonial past. This means that, unlike in Europe, where state powers had spent centuries building a certain capacity for oversight of the population and control over the territory, in the North American country state and federal governments remained little present in the daily lives of citizens farther from the coastal cities during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

According to the *Frontier Thesis*, this would have led citizens of the young republic to believe less in the state to solve their problems than in other places, and would even have created a certain endemic distrust toward it, being known more for its regulatory and tax-collecting ambitions than for taking care of the inland settlers. This is a famous interpretation of U.S.

society and culture set out by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. Turner developed an analysis of the nation's history according to which the foundational ideals of the United States were formed by those pioneers who fought to settle the frontier and push it toward the Pacific: "There is a strain of fierceness in their energetic petitions demanding self-government under the theory that every people have the right to establish their own political institutions in an area which they have won from the wilderness."<sup>402</sup>

It would be, then, the spirit of a land of small landowners in opposition to the great statist holders of the coast. This would have influenced Jefferson in establishing the principles of U.S. democracy through the values of the "West." The ideological implications of this theory, which should probably be treated more as a hermeneutic of history than as an explanatory framework close to reality, have been analyzed on numerous occasions, and today historiography no longer follows Turner's postulates to the letter.<sup>403</sup> The classic interpretation has numerous underlying problems: it promotes an essentialist, determinist, and even somewhat simplistic view of the construction of the U.S. nation.<sup>404</sup>

However, although Turner's vision may be considered outdated, there are parts of his theory that remain relevant.<sup>405</sup> The fact that the United States had for more than a century a frontier territory in which new settlers had to struggle on their own to ensure survival against all kinds of dangers and difficulties (indigenous populations, animals, adverse climate, etc.), without aid from the state or from a dense social fabric like the one that existed in Europe, from which many of them came, shaped the mentality of part of American society. Such conditions would have created an individualistic and self-sufficient spirit that went hand in hand with distrust toward a state that, while able to collect taxes, offered few solutions in return.<sup>406</sup>

The implications of this *frontier culture* have been empirically confirmed, for example, in gun ownership<sup>407</sup> or in the willingness to reduce public investment in aid for the poor.<sup>408</sup> Studies show that the length of time a region was a frontier is correlated with these and other parameters

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<sup>402</sup> Frederick J. Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," *The Atlantic* 91, no. 547 (1903): 86–97.

<sup>403</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, *The Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890–1990* (University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>404</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (W.W. Norton, 1987), 20–23.

<sup>405</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (W.W. Norton, 1996). The author defends individualism as an integral part of the U.S. value system, particularly among the white population.

<sup>406</sup> Samuel Bazzi et al., "Frontier Culture: The Roots and Persistence of 'Rugged Individualism' in the United States," *Econometrica* 88, no. 6 (2020): 2329–68, <https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA17444>.

<sup>407</sup> David Yamane, "The Sociology of U.S. Gun Culture," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 7 (2017): e12497, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12497>.

<sup>408</sup> Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, 125–27.

associated with individualism.<sup>409</sup> It should be noted that Republican voters are precisely those who most identify with these values, including self-sufficiency and distrust of the state. Thus, when we analyze which axioms they consider most important for themselves and also when choosing a leader, we see that they usually look at financial success, the ability to be self-sustaining, or good personal image, and less at issues such as altruism, which is more relevant for Democrats.<sup>410</sup> Such a difference also exists when comparing the preference that each has for individualist traits such as hard work, ambition, and determination as opposed to open-mindedness, sociability, and closeness.<sup>411</sup> This stronger individualism leads Republican voters to value less state intervention and to distrust more all measures that might restrict their freedoms, even when they are oriented toward the common good—in our case, avoiding health system collapse and the spread of a potentially deadly disease among the most vulnerable population.

This distrust of the state goes hand in hand with a loss of credibility in many other institutions, including the health system itself, which is critical for our study. Thus, while in 1974 both Republicans and Democrats declared trusting medical institutions at 55–60%, that percentage declined steadily to fall below 33% in 2022.<sup>412</sup> This is a trend observed across a wide variety of surveys, affecting the private health system, pharmaceutical companies, and fundamental public institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).<sup>413</sup> In this regard, it is necessary to differentiate between distrust toward the competence of the health system, that is, its capacity to treat medical problems, and its ethical aspects: studies have shown that these are different dimensions, and that the same population may believe that the system is effective but unethical.<sup>414</sup> An experiment conducted in 2004 with a sample of 400 people in Philadelphia showed that up to 53% of participants had doubts or were convinced that it was possible that the health system was practicing experiments on them without informing them, and 63% thought that some medicines

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<sup>409</sup> Adam M. Rosenberg, “The Frontier Origins of U.S. Gun Culture,” 2024, <https://adamrosenberg.github.io/frontier-gun-culture>.

<sup>410</sup> Kenon M. Sheldon and Charles P. Nichols, “Comparing Democrats and Republicans on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Values,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2009): 589–623, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00448.x>.

<sup>411</sup> Kimmo Eriksson, “Republicans Value Agency, Democrats Value Communion,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2018): 173–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272518761529>.

<sup>412</sup> National Opinion Research Center, “Confidence in Medicine,” 2022, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/trends?category=Politics&measure=conmedic>.

<sup>413</sup> Robert J. Blendon and John M. Benson, “Trust in Medicine, the Health System & Public Health,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (2022): 67–82, [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01939](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01939).

<sup>414</sup> Judy A. Shea et al., “Development of a Revised Health Care System Distrust Scale,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23, no. 6 (2008): 727–32, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-008-0561-5>.

contained elements not disclosed to consumers.<sup>415</sup> This was replicated with a larger sample of 961 people in 2005, obtaining similar results, 39% for the first measure and 71% for the second.<sup>416</sup>

### *Race and healthcare*

Another of the reasons that has been used to explain distrust toward health institutions in the United States are ethnic minorities, particularly Black and Hispanic people. The term “minorities” should not mislead us. The non-white population—including Hispanics—in the United States is more than 40%, and in states such as Texas, Maryland, Nevada, or California they are the majority. Regarding Black people in particular, we are speaking of one third of the population in Louisiana or Georgia, and the majority ethnicity in Washington D.C.<sup>417</sup> In this case it is not due to an anti-statist tradition. In fact, the broadest surveys do not show significant differences according to race in confidence in government.<sup>418</sup> Detailed studies show that, even though they often believe that white people tend to govern with racial bias, ethnic minorities do not have greater distrust toward government than white people.<sup>419</sup>

Nevertheless, the Black population generally has lower vaccination rates for most diseases,<sup>420</sup> not only linked to a worse economic situation, but also to knowledge and personal beliefs.<sup>421</sup> A study conducted between March 2020 and February 2021 showed that distrust toward coronavirus vaccines among Black people could be up to three times greater than among white people in the United States.<sup>422</sup> Evidence points to a more complex lack of trust in health institutions, which could explain why this is not reflected in the general indicators most frequently used. Black people do not believe more strongly in the incompetence of the health

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<sup>415</sup> Abigail Rose et al., “Development and Testing of the Health Care System Distrust Scale,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 19, no. 1 (2004): 57–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2004.21146.x>.

<sup>416</sup> Katrina Armstrong et al., “Distrust of the Health Care System and Self-Reported Health in the United States,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 21, no. 4 (2006): 292–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1497.2006.00396.x>.

<sup>417</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the United States: 2010 Census and 2020 Census,” 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-the-united-states-2010-and-2020-census.html>.

<sup>418</sup> Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024* (Pew Research Center, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.

<sup>419</sup> Jeffrey W. Koch, “Racial Minorities’ Trust in Government and Government Decisionmakers,” *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2019): 19–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12531>.

<sup>420</sup> Peng-jun Lu et al., “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Vaccination Coverage among Adult Populations,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 49, no. 6 Suppl 4 (2015): S412–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2015.04.023>.

<sup>421</sup> Charleigh J. Granade et al., “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Adult Vaccination: A Review of the State of Evidence,” *Health Equity* 6, no. 1 (2022): 206–23, <https://doi.org/10.1089/heap.2021.0116>.

<sup>422</sup> Long H. Nguyen et al., “Self-Reported COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy and Uptake among Participants from Different Racial and Ethnic Groups in the United States and the United Kingdom,” *Nature Communications* 13, no. 1 (2022): 636, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-28200-3>.

system, but they have more doubts about its ethics and intentions: statements such as “the health system conducts experiments on patients without their knowledge” or “it lies to make money” were significantly more widely accepted—more than twice as much—among Black people than among white people.<sup>423</sup> This remains consistent, although moderated, when we apply other variables such as socioeconomic or educational level.<sup>424</sup> Several works indicate that this may have to do with the collective memory of the long history of abuses against the Black population by U.S. health institutions, highlighting episodes such as the Tuskegee syphilis project, where hundreds were used as experimental subjects without having been previously informed and without receiving treatment.<sup>425</sup> Beyond this, over time structural racial discrimination has been identified in the treatment of patients by health professionals, including a lower volume of diagnostic testing or the incidence of negative stereotypes about patients, which very likely also influences the lower trust of Black people toward the health system.<sup>426</sup>

### *Vaccine hesitancy*

With all that has been mentioned, distrust toward government in the United States is far from being only an underlying cultural issue or the product of a political value system: it is a historical and increasingly serious problem in the country. Although the phenomenon depends, evidently, on the party of the person responding to the survey and on who is in power at the time, there is a general trend toward a very sharp increase in distrust. Thus, between 1964 and 2024, the percentage of people who say they believe that the government will do the right thing most of the time or always fell from 77% to 22%.<sup>427</sup> These findings are consistent with those revealed by other studies, for example Gershtenson and Plane, based on ANES data from 2004, 2010, and 2014.<sup>428</sup> Among the data offered by the authors are several that are key for our research: those with lower levels of trust in government are also those who place less importance on compliance with the law and show a greater tendency to believe they know more than the

<sup>423</sup> Katrina Armstrong et al., “Differences in the Patterns of Health Care System Distrust Between Blacks and Whites,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 23, no. 6 (2008): 827–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-008-0570-5>.

<sup>424</sup> Katrina Armstrong et al., “Racial/Ethnic Differences in Physician Distrust in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 7 (2007): 1283–89, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2005.080762>.

<sup>425</sup> Vanessa Northington Gamble, “Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and Health Care,” *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (1997): 1773–78, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.87.11.1773>.

<sup>426</sup> John F. Dovidio et al., “Disparities and Distrust: The Implications of Psychological Processes for Understanding Racial Disparities in Health and Health Care,” *Social Science & Medicine* 67, no. 3 (2008): 478–86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.03.019>.

<sup>427</sup> Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024*.

<sup>428</sup> Joseph Gershtenson and Dennis L. Plane, “In Government We Distrust: Citizen Skepticism and Democracy in the United States,” *The Forum* 13, no. 3 (2015): 481–505, <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2015-0027>.

rulers.<sup>429</sup> This is relevant for us because it demonstrates that these may be key factors in understanding citizens' attitudes toward the measures of coronavirus containment during the pandemic we are analyzing.

But can we really affirm that distrust toward government influences people's willingness to be vaccinated? After all, concern for one's own health goes beyond political beliefs. Well, the hypothesis we have just formulated has already been tested in various pandemic situations. For example, Lee et al., in the context of avian flu, asked a significant sample of parents about their children's vaccination status and their opinions about government and health service providers. The results were quite clear: among those who said they did not trust the government and the health institutions dependent on it, there were about 63% more people who decided not to vaccinate their children; 33% of people who attended alternative therapy, and parents who considered vaccines unimportant for children's health more than doubled those who did trust the government. Among them, non-white ethnicities were overrepresented, being 75% more than among those who did trust the government.<sup>430</sup> The same conclusions were reached by Mesch and Schwirian in 2014, in the context of swine flu, where they found that people who believed in the competence of government were willing to be vaccinated at 59.6%, while those who did not were at 32.2%.<sup>431</sup> Another study, from 2005, conducted with 2435 parents, showed that as vaccine exemptions for their children increased—a permission requested by them not to have to vaccinate their children, for moral or other reasons—distrust toward government and health authorities also increased, doubling and tripling, respectively, between those who rejected only one vaccination and those who rejected ten.<sup>432</sup> The importance of individualism was reinforced in the data shown in this study when analyzing the frequency with which parents who vaccinated and those who did not vaccinate their children agreed with certain statements, with 51.3% of those with some exemption opposing the vaccination requirement because it went against the right to decide, and 27.5% stating that “parents know what is best for their children.”

These precedents seem to clearly indicate that such a relationship exists in general, and the data regarding the coronavirus pandemic are no less so. The largest study conducted so far,

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<sup>429</sup> Gershtenson and Plane, “In Government We Distrust: Citizen Skepticism and Democracy in the United States,” 493.

<sup>430</sup> Charlotte Lee et al., “Hurdles to Herd Immunity: Distrust of Government and Vaccine Refusal in the US, 2002–2003,” *Vaccine* 34, no. 34 (2016): 3972–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.06.048>.

<sup>431</sup> Gustavo S. Mesch and Kent P. Schwirian, “Confidence in Government and Vaccination Willingness in the USA,” *Health Promotion International* 30, no. 2 (2014): 213–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dat021>.

<sup>432</sup> Lee et al., “Hurdles to Herd Immunity: Distrust of Government and Vaccine Refusal in the US, 2002–2003.”

nourished with nearly half a million interviews, showed that distrust toward government was the second most chosen reason by those who said they would not be vaccinated (up to 40%), after their own doubts about the vaccine. This was also a notable factor among those who, from a skeptical position, were still deciding whether to take the vaccine or not.<sup>433</sup>

### 3.2.2. Pseudo-science and science distrust

The existence of a confrontation around vaccines does not depend only on distrust toward the institutions that promote them, but also on people’s attitudes toward science. In the United States there are several forms of skepticism widespread among the population. It is true that, although most citizens ceased to trust the state and medical institutions over the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, scientific professionals still maintain high levels of credibility. However, the percentages of people who say they trust them little or not at all increased during and after the coronavirus pandemic, rising from 12% in April 2020 to 27% in October 2023. That is, toward the end of the pandemic, distrust in science had doubled, and among those who still said they trusted, the intensity declined.<sup>434</sup>

#### *Of politics and science*

The loss of confidence in the scientific system is not a new phenomenon, and it has not affected all sectors of the population in the same way. In particular, conservatives began to show increasing skepticism toward science from the time of Ronald Reagan, which intensified under later Republican leaders such as George W. Bush. This decline was accompanied by a growing gap with progressives and persists even at higher levels of education.<sup>435</sup> The main reasons behind this confrontation between the U.S. right and the scientific establishment are historical and have to do with the collision between the political ideals and electoral interests of part of the Republican Party—supported by business lobbies—and those areas of scientific research that called for stricter regulation in certain sectors of the economy. To this we must add a demographic issue: the U.S. scientific ecosystem is made up of people who vote mostly for the

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<sup>433</sup> Khai Hoan Tram et al., “Deliberation, Dissent, and Distrust: Understanding Distinct Drivers of Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccine Hesitancy in the United States,” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 74, no. 8 (2022): 1439–41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciab627>.

<sup>434</sup> Alex Tyson and Brian Kennedy, *Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking* (Pew Research Center, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trust-in-scientists-and-views-on-their-role-in-policymaking/>.

<sup>435</sup> Gordon Gauchat, “Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974–2010,” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 2 (2012): 167–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412438225>.

Democratic Party and align with the *liberal* platform,<sup>436</sup> with only a tiny share being Republicans. Thus, although the image of U.S. academia as a nest of far-left extremists is false, it is true that a conservative looking toward science will find few politically kindred figures amid a sea of centrist and progressive positions.<sup>437438</sup>

As we mentioned in earlier chapters, the New Right established a new reality in the GOP during the 1980s, increasing the importance of evangelical voters to the party. Ronald Reagan, who led this ideological turn, publicly mocked atheists, claimed that evolutionism was only a highly debated theory, advocated teaching creationism in schools, and supported the interpretation of the universe as intelligent design.<sup>439</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that stem cell research or the promotion of contraceptive methods became vectors of conflict from the 1980s onward, to which controversies such as the causes of acid rain, the harmful effects of tobacco, or the use of carcinogenic products in the agri-food industry would later be added.<sup>440</sup>

In the transition between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the confrontation between U.S. conservatism and scientific consensus began to be marked by research on climate change. A coalition of business interests, associations, conservative media, and Republican politicians questioned scientific consensus, casting doubt on the need for climate regulations.<sup>441</sup> A prominent and well-studied phenomenon to date is the proliferation of denialist think tanks funded by business lobbies from sectors interested in avoiding climate regulations that could harm their interests. These organizations were born in the 1970s under the umbrella of

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<sup>436</sup> In 2009, 81% of scientists identified themselves as *Democratic leaners*, 55% as firm Democrats, and only 12% as *Republican leaners* and 9% as conservatives. See Pew Research Center, *Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media* (Pew Research Center, 2009), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2009/07/09/section-4-scientists-politics-and-religion/>.

<sup>437</sup> Despite the overall figures, detailed studies show that the ideology professed by U.S. scientists is complex, with large differences between fields. Thus, while the percentage of Democratic voters reaches almost 80% in disciplines such as Psychology or History, Republicans have a simple majority in accounting or elementary education, in addition to differences by gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. See GROSS, Neil & SIMMONS, Solon, “The Social and Political Views of American College and University Professors”, in *idem, Professors and their politics*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 19–52.

<sup>438</sup> Despite the overall figures, detailed studies show that the ideology professed by U.S. scientists is complex, with large differences between fields. Thus, while the percentage of Democratic voters reaches almost 80% in disciplines such as Psychology or History, Republicans have a simple majority in accounting or elementary education, in addition to differences by gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. See Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, “The Social and Political Views of American College and University Professors,” in *Professors and Their Politics*, ed. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>439</sup> National Center for Science Education, “Reagan Favors Creationism in the Public Schools,” 1980, <https://ncse.ngo/reagan-favors-creationism-public-schools>; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast,” Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, April 2, 1988, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-national-prayer-breakfast-6>.

<sup>440</sup> Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (Basic Books, 2005), 25–77.

<sup>441</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, ed. John S. Dryzek et al. (Oxford University Press, 2011).

expansive state policies and social movements, and their activities are based on publishing large quantities of books, reports, and press articles designed to sustain conservative positions in public debate and in legislation. Their importance is such that of the approximately 110 books published between 1970 and 2005 that supported denialist or revisionist positions on climate change, only 9 did not have a conservative think tank behind them.<sup>442</sup> We are speaking of organizations such as the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the Heartland Institute, or the Cato Institute. These institutions attempt to shape an *alternative academy*, providing institutional backing to studies not endorsed by science and that are increasingly less specialized: only 1 in 3 authors of denialist books between 2000 and 2010 held a doctorate related to the natural sciences, and 50% lacked this academic degree.<sup>443</sup> This is in addition to other activities such as creating research and training programs in universities, school textbooks, campaigns to legitimize business sectors, advertising, legislative initiatives, and even organizing citizen protest groups.<sup>444</sup>

In fact, much of the distrust conservatives maintain toward science has been attributed precisely to environmental studies and their linkage to the development of new state policies: a 2013 study found that the same distrust conservatives showed toward science in general did not apply as much to so-called *production scientists*, that is, those more involved in production processes, and that this distrust was much higher when it came to pronouncing on the application of scientific studies to the design of public policies.<sup>445</sup> This is reflected in the population’s particular beliefs: a broad study based on various national and regional surveys in the United States showed that while 70–75% of Democratic voters believe that climate change is happening and is due primarily to anthropogenic factors, this percentage falls to around 30% for Republicans. Among the latter, although the vast majority accept that climate change is occurring, they consider that human activity is not one of the causes.<sup>446</sup>

Donald Trump’s first presidency marked a before and after in this process of political confrontation with science. His statements range from complete indifference to claiming that

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<sup>442</sup> Peter J. Jacques et al., “The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Scepticism,” *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 3 (2008): 349–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010802055576>.

<sup>443</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Peter J. Jacques, “Climate Change Denial Books and Conservative Think Tanks: Exploring the Connection,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 6 (2013): 699–731, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213477097>.

<sup>444</sup> Robert J. Brulle, “Denialism: Organized Opposition to Climate Change Action in the United States,” in *Handbook of U.S. Environmental Policy*, ed. David M. Konisky (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020).

<sup>445</sup> Aaron M. McCright et al., “The Influence of Political Ideology on Trust in Science,” *Environmental Research Letters* 8, no. 4 (2013): 044029, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/8/4/044029>.

<sup>446</sup> Lawrence C. Hamilton et al., “Tracking Public Beliefs About Anthropogenic Climate Change,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 9 (2015): e0138208, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138208>.

climate change theories are a Chinese conspiracy to make U.S. industry less competitive, casting doubt on their viability with elements such as the existence of cold days—which, in his interpretation, run counter to so-called global warming—his uncle’s opinions, or the various climate conspiracies announced in the media and on alt-right blogs.<sup>447</sup> During his term, more than 126 actions of censorship of scientific information related to climate change and its impact were identified, in addition to major budget cuts in federal agencies dedicated to this issue, the removal of climate information from government websites, and interference in publications.<sup>448</sup> Trump also installed denialist figures at the head of various government agencies, as in the case of Scott Pruitt at the Environmental Protection Agency, who denied the role of carbon dioxide emissions in climate change<sup>449</sup> and spread falsehoods about scientific consensus, such as the existence of a supposed “hiatus” in global warming.<sup>450</sup>

This historical entrenchment of the U.S. right against those scientific consensuses that could hinder economic growth resulted in a politicization of science in public debate. From the long-standing debates over tobacco and the use of hazardous substances in the agri-food industry to global climate change, the American electorate was subjected to denialist and science-distorting discourses. The same process would be repeated, as we shall see later, during the coronavirus pandemic—only this time on a pre-existing foundation of polarization that allowed it to be taken to previously unthinkable extremes. [Note for final review: consider reading Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt*, to strengthen this section or include a minimal reference if appropriate.]

### *The Alternative*

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is the main *de facto* competitor to evidence-based medicine and the most widely accepted methods of scientific research. It is an umbrella concept that covers a large number of supposedly therapeutic methods, either traditional or linked to contemporary subcultures such as New Age, including *mind-body medicine*,

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<sup>447</sup> Kari De Pryck and François Gemenne, “The Denier-in-Chief: Climate Change, Science and the Election of Donald J. Trump,” *Law and Critique* 28, no. 2 (2017): 119–26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-017-9207-6>.

<sup>448</sup> Romany Webb et al., “When Politics Trump Science: The Erosion of Science-Based Regulation,” *Environmental Law Reporter* 50, no. 9 (2020): 10708–13.

<sup>449</sup> Tom DiChristopher, “Scott Pruitt’s Latest Climate Change Denial Sparks Backlash from Scientists, Environmentalists,” *CNBC*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/09/scott-pruitts-latest-climate-change-denial-sparks-backlash.html>.

<sup>450</sup> David Doniger, “Scott Pruitt’s Climate Denial Shines Thru His Senate Answers,” *NRDC*, January 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/david-doniger/scott-pruitts-climate-denial-shines-thru-his-senate-answers>.

*energy medicine, herbal medicine, etc.*<sup>451</sup> What differentiates it from other therapies is that it offers aids not supported by empirical research to address certain health problems, although some of them are considered healthy and may eventually be integrated into medical services. Its role in questioning coronavirus containment strategies is varied: on the one hand, it offers an alleged alternative that reduces the perceived need for the methods promoted by the authorities—such as vaccines—which are commonly regarded by these consumers as more artificial, dangerous, and invasive;<sup>452</sup> on the other hand, it is not uncommon for practitioners to disseminate pseudoscientific or denialist information among their followers. Some of them are found among the so-called *Disinformation Dozen*, a list of twelve people responsible for spreading about 65% of all available online misinformation about vaccines, according to the Center for Countering Digital Hate.<sup>453</sup> One such case is Joseph Mercola, an osteopath and preacher of Alternative Medicine who sells vitamin supplements and other products,<sup>454</sup> promotes pseudoscientific studies and unproven cures such as hydrogen peroxide, and spreads falsehoods about the development, effectiveness, usefulness, and side effects of vaccines.<sup>455</sup>

It has a significant influence on the population. In 2008, a government survey estimated that 38% of U.S. adults made common use of it.<sup>456</sup> However, these percentages may be misleading due to the classification criteria of certain activities as CAM. Practices supported by science and highly recommended such as meditation, breathing exercises, or yoga are grouped together with pseudoscientific therapies such as chiropractic, reiki, “natural” supplements with medicinal purposes, or homeopathy. Thus, in 2023, 24% used teas, medicinal herbs, or plant-based supplements, 18% essential oils, etc., while a minority turned to homeopathy (6%), crystal healing or Reiki (4%).<sup>457</sup>

<sup>451</sup> National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, *Expanding Horizons of Health Care: Strategic Plan 2005–2009* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, 2005), 2.

<sup>452</sup> Matthew Browne et al., “Going Against the Herd: Psychological and Cultural Factors Underlying the ‘Vaccination Confidence Gap,’” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 9 (2015): e0132562, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0132562>.

<sup>453</sup> Center for Countering Digital Hate, *The Disinformation Dozen* (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2022), <https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/210324-The-Disinformation-Dozen.pdf>.

<sup>454</sup> Sheera Frenkel, “The Most Influential Spreader of Coronavirus Misinformation Online,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/technology/joseph-mercola-coronavirus-misinformation-online.html>.

<sup>455</sup> Joseph Mercola and Ronnie Cummins, *The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing the Great Reset, Lockdowns, Vaccine Passports and the New Normal* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2021).

<sup>456</sup> National Institutes of Health, *According to a New Government Survey, 38 Percent of Adults and 12 Percent of Children Use Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (National Institutes of Health, 2008), <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/according-new-government-survey-38-percent-adults-12-percent-children-use-complementary-alternative-medicine>.

<sup>457</sup> Preeti Vankar, “Share of U.S. Adults Who Used Select Alternative Medicine Treatments as of 2021,” 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1341758/us-adults-who-used-select-alternative-medicine-treatments/>.

In any case, it is clear that there is a portion of the U.S. population that believes in remedies other than those endorsed by health institutions. There is some association between CAM use and the tendency not to vaccinate. For example, a 2015 study found that among people who distrusted vaccination, 42.1% consumed herbal remedies (compared to 24.7% of those who strongly supported it), 36.1% participated in so-called *body therapies*, and about 20% used “energy” therapies or homeopathy, percentages that generally doubled those of people who did believe in vaccines.<sup>458</sup> This is complemented by a 2016 analysis, in which a large sample of children collected in 2012 showed that some alternative therapies, such as AMS (homeopathy, naturopathy, etc.) or MBBT (massage, osteopathy, chiropractic...) were associated with significantly lower percentages of flu vaccination.<sup>459</sup> Another 2021 study reinforced these same findings for adult vaccinations, showing that homeopathy and naturopathy consultants or chiropractors observed a clear trend of lower vaccination compared to those who did not seek such consultations.<sup>460</sup>

### 3.2.3. Conspirational thinking

Distrust toward vaccines, the state, and science, as well as susceptibility—or even predisposition—to accept univocal, simplifying narrative schemes about reality, fosters the proliferation of conspiratorial theories. According to Van Prooijen, one of the experts who has most thoroughly analyzed this pattern of thought, what characterizes conspiratorial theories and distinguishes them from others is the causal explanation of an event grounded in the belief that behind it there is a specific group of people acting in secret and for their own benefit.<sup>461</sup> Although most conspiratorial beliefs are rarely stated so directly, during the coronavirus pandemic we were able to observe these patterns from the outset.

Now then, if anything marked the coronavirus pandemic and set it apart from other emergency situations, it was the multiple conspiracy theories that found an audience among the citizenry and the political class in the United States, especially among the more conservative. Here we can distinguish three types of conspiracy theories: those that doubt the origin of the

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<sup>458</sup> Browne et al., “Going Against the Herd: Psychological and Cultural Factors Underlying the ‘Vaccination Confidence Gap.’”

<sup>459</sup> William K. Blesser et al., “Complementary and Alternative Medicine and Influenza Vaccine Uptake in US Children,” *Pediatrics* 138, no. 5 (2016): e20154664, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-4664>.

<sup>460</sup> Wiebke Kathrin Kohl-Heckl et al., “Complementary Medicine Use and Flu Vaccination – A Nationally Representative Survey of US Adults,” *Vaccine* 39, no. 36 (2021): 5635–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.08.022>.

<sup>461</sup> Jan-Willem van Prooijen, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2018).

virus; those that doubt the very existence or the actual severity of the virus; and those that distrust vaccines, either their effectiveness or the intentions of those who are developing and promoting them. In fact, the analysis shows us that these three strands are thoroughly interconnected, such that within a single worldview doubts can coexist about whether the virus really exists or whether it was created in a Chinese laboratory.

#### *Lab leak or biological weapon?*

The very origin of the pandemic was a point of doubt from the moment it came to light. SARS-CoV-2 is a virus that, like others in its family (*Betacoronavirus - Sarbecovirus*), is capable of causing a severe respiratory illness, particularly deadly among at-risk populations. This is a class of pathogen very common among bats, and its genetic trace corresponds to that of other viruses identified in various animals sold for human consumption at the Huanan market and its surroundings, in Wuhan (People’s Republic of China),<sup>462</sup> the capital of the province where the first cases were identified. For this reason, the most widely accepted hypothesis today about its origin is that it is a zoonotic disease, that is, transmissible between animals and humans. There are precedents for this, such as SARS-CoV in 2002, which began in Guangdong, likewise originating in bats, but with palm civets as the intermediate host.<sup>463</sup>

However, prior knowledge about this type of virus did not prevent the international community from experiencing a degree of distrust toward information provided by the Chinese system. The fact that COVID broke out within a dictatorship without the checks and guarantees typical of democratic systems led to the view that several international investigations were necessary, since in the same province there is a laboratory, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, dedicated to studying coronaviruses such as RaTG13, genetically very similar to the one that caused the pandemic. This seems logical, as the institute is located in the area near its object of study. In any case, suspicion of a possible leak of the pathogen from that laboratory led the WHO to send a team of international experts to China to assess the possible origins of the disease on the ground, together with local scientists, certifying a zoonotic origin as the most probable,<sup>464</sup> and subsequent studies like the one cited above seem to bring us closer to that

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<sup>462</sup> Alexander Crits-Christoph et al., “Genetic Tracing of Market Wildlife and Viruses at the Epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Cell* 187, no. 20 (2024): 5468–82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2024.08.007>.

<sup>463</sup> David Macdonald, “The Wet Market Sources of COVID-19: Bats and Pangolins Have an Alibi,” 2021, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/science-blog/wet-market-sources-covid-19-bats-and-pangolins-have-alibi>.

<sup>464</sup> World Health Organization, *WHO-Convened Global Study of Origins of SARS-CoV-2: China Part* (World Health Organization, 2021), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-convened-global-study-of-origins-of-sars-cov-2-china-part>.

hypothesis. Although the exact form of the initial infection remains uncertain today, in part due to the inability to access Chinese databases, the laboratory-leak hypothesis lacks public, verifiable evidence and remains only a suspicion, even if certain precedents do exist.<sup>465</sup>

Conspiracy theories do not, however, follow the timelines and procedures of scientific inquiry. In the context of confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China, the U.S. population was particularly receptive to negative news about what they perceived as an “enemy” of the country, particularly conservative Republicans.<sup>466</sup> President Donald Trump himself did not take long to accuse China under the *lab leak* hypothesis during his presidency, from the first months of the pandemic.<sup>467</sup> This misinformation favored the emergence of another theory—this one truly conspiratorial: that what would have leaked from the Wuhan laboratory was not a simple sample of one of the coronavirus variants being studied, but an entire biological weapon. Various self-described *alternative* information sites quickly spread false information about the virus that persisted to the present day. The most detailed development was perhaps carried out by Great Game India, a red-pill rhetoric site that has already played a role in spreading such information in the past. Its theories about the origins of the coronavirus in a Canadian laboratory that was allegedly robbed by the Chinese found a broad reception in spaces known for conspiratorial discussion, such as 4Chan or certain Reddit forums, as well as in far-right-linked media like InfoWars, later jumping into the mainstream and eventually reaching the U.S. Senate at the hands of Tom Cotton.<sup>468</sup>

Both theories have been widely discounted based on the virus's own characteristics and its mode of infection and spread.<sup>469</sup> However, these narratives are not immune to the country's geostrategic interests: in a context like the coronavirus pandemic, attributing its escape to the incompetence and carelessness of Chinese scientists—or worse still, to the development of a biological weapon (bearing in mind that such weapons are prohibited by the Biological Weapons Convention). The role of U.S. intelligence agencies, publishing reports on the matter that

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<sup>465</sup> Robert Walgate, “SARS Escaped Beijing Lab Twice,” *Genome Biology* 5, no. 4 (2004): 2004-04-28, <https://doi.org/10.1186/gb-2004-5-4-spotlight>.

<sup>466</sup> Christine Huang et al., *Americans Remain Critical of China* (Pew Research Center, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/01/americans-remain-critical-of-china/>.

<sup>467</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Benjamin Mueller, “Lab Leak or Not? How Politics Shaped the Battle Over Covid's Origin,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/19/us/politics/covid-origins-lab-leak-politics.html>.

<sup>468</sup> Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, “A Perfect Storm: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in the United States,” in *COVID Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (Routledge, 2023).

<sup>469</sup> Dacre Knight, “COVID-19 pandemic Origins: Bioweapons and the History of Laboratory Leaks,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 64, no. 3 (2021): 465–67, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2021.0025>.

contradicted scientific research without providing evidence, is noteworthy.<sup>470</sup> In fact, the U.S. government was not the only one to disseminate such narratives for political purposes. Alongside theories of Chinese involvement in the origins of the coronavirus, we find others of the opposite sign: in response to U.S. accusations about the coronavirus (including Donald Trump referring to the pathogen as the “China Virus”), various media outlets linked to the Chinese government (*People’s Daily*, *Global Times*) began spreading rumors that it could have originated in the United States rather than within the Republic’s territory.<sup>471</sup>

### *CoronaHOAX*

It does not seem logical to claim at the same time that the coronavirus is a weapon of the Chinese government to attack the United States and that it does not exist, being an invention. However, this is one of the conspiratorial beliefs most present in our dataset, and it has various levels of depth: from those who speak of a “hoax” in the sense that the virus would not really be deadly or would not have sufficient severity to justify containment measures, to those—more minority—who directly denied its existence. In a survey conducted during the early months of the Pandemic, up to 29% of respondents came to believe that COVID-19 was being exaggerated and 31% that it was purposefully created.<sup>472</sup> We could then ask: why would global authorities invent a threat like the coronavirus, which paralyzed the economy and caused countries to suffer billion-dollar losses? The documentary “Plandemic,” released in 2020 and watched by millions of people in the United States (as well as around the world), makes a series of claims about the coronavirus and other diseases that lead viewers to broadly distrust the role of health authorities in the birth and spread of the coronavirus.<sup>473</sup>

### *Vaccinegate*

Most of the scientific community agrees that the speed at which the coronavirus vaccines were developed can be considered an achievement of modern medicine. Developing a vaccine

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<sup>470</sup> Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Unclassified Summary of Assessment on COVID-19 Origins* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Unclassified-Summary-of-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf>.

<sup>471</sup> DFRLab (Atlantic Council), *Weaponized: How Rumors About COVID-19’s Origins Led to a Narrative Arms Race* (Atlantic Council, 2021), 30–40.

<sup>472</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski et al., “Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?,” *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, no. Special Issue on COVID-19 and Misinformation (2020): 1–12.

<sup>473</sup> “Plandemic 1 - Official Full Movie - Plandemic Official,” Plandemic, June 3, 2023, <https://plandemic.com/plandemic-1/>.

within a matter of months could only have been achieved through the collective effort of thousands of experts in the field. However, this speed also seemed to play against the credibility of the vaccines. As we saw above, the prevalence of beliefs such as that vaccines were developed too quickly or without taking into account the usual safety requirements remained high.<sup>474</sup> This caused declines in the number of people vaccinated, especially at the beginning.

These beliefs, although based on mistaken assumptions and spread as misinformation, are not necessarily conspiratorial: vaccines could in principle be unreliable, and politicians could be sweetening reality to convince the population. However, during the pandemic numerous discourses emerged betting on a different reality. A report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue identified a series of conspiracy theories, some specific to vaccines, and others mere transfers of more general beliefs: vaccines would contain microchips that, linked to a 5G network designed with the support of Bill Gates (in some versions, promoter of the pandemic), would serve population control; *Big Pharma* (a concept referring to the large pharmaceutical companies) would be instrumentalizing the coronavirus to secure their economic benefits through vaccine marketing, or even supporting the dark objectives of actors involved in other conspiracies...<sup>475</sup>

Conspiracy theories about vaccines cover a wide spectrum of pseudoscientific or outright false beliefs about their safety, necessity, and the intentions of their promoters.<sup>476</sup> Among the most common among the population

### *The size of conspiracies*

But how widespread are these conspiracy theories and how might they be affecting vaccination? A Pew Research Center study from July 2020, when the vaccines had not yet been approved by the administration during Donald Trump's first term, found that 25% of U.S. adults believed the conspiracy theory that the coronavirus may have been a planned event to be

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<sup>474</sup> Up to 50% by June 2021, according to Stephen R. Neely et al., "Vaccine Hesitancy and Exposure to Misinformation: A Survey Analysis," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 37, no. 1 (2022): 179–87, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-021-07171-z>.

<sup>475</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Anti-Vaccine Conspiracies* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Anti-vaccination-conspiracies-External-October-2022.pdf>. Another study identified some of these same conspiracy theories in a sample of the U.S. population, including those about microchips and possible physical harm caused by vaccines, see Sun Kyong Lee et al., "Misinformation of COVID-19 Vaccines and Vaccine Hesitancy," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 11 (2022): 6782, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116782>.

<sup>476</sup> I. Ullah et al., "Myths and Conspiracy Theories on Vaccines and COVID-19: Potential Effect on Global Vaccine Refusals," *Vacunas* 23, no. 2 (2022): 93–97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vacun.2021.10.001>.

probably or definitely true, 36% the opposite, and the rest (39%) had no opinion.<sup>477</sup> A large survey in January 2021 found that 59% of the population did not fully trust the vaccines. Of these, 26.2% (that is, 15.46% of the total) believed the virus had been deliberately created in a Chinese laboratory, and 20% believed it was being exaggerated. A further 18.6% thought the vaccines would be used to control people, and smaller percentages (although always above 10%) believed that the vaccines would be used to track people’s locations, that they would cause people to contract coronavirus instead of preventing it, that they would alter patients’ DNA, that they were poison, or simply unnecessary. More than 40% said they simply did not believe in them.<sup>478</sup>

Belief in this type of theory surrounding serious diseases is not new. There were also doubts about the origin and treatment of HIV and AIDS, with theories ranging from it being created by the U.S. government, or that one was not the cause of the other, to the claim that antiretrovirals used in treatment were responsible for the disease.<sup>479</sup> “AIDS denialism” began as early as 1981 (at least) and, like the theories that would later affect COVID-19, found support in pseudo-scientific forums promoted by state governments (see the case of South Africa) and a large network of propagators at all levels, including online.<sup>480</sup>

A 2016 experiment addressed this problem, exposing an experimental group to conspiratorial information about vaccines, as well as to data refuting it, in various orders. The results were clear: any exposure to conspiratorial information, even if later refuted, led to an increase in such beliefs, in the perception of vaccines as dangerous, and a decline in vaccination intentions.<sup>481</sup> In fact, the consequences of this had already been seen in the cases of other diseases: in 2014–2015 the United States experienced outbreaks of diseases that had already been considered very rare or even eradicated, such as measles, after a wave of non-vaccination.<sup>482</sup> At the same time, a YouGov study showed that medical conspiracy theories were not only not a

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<sup>477</sup> Pew Research Center, *Less-Educated Americans More Inclined to See Some Truth in Conspiracy Theory That COVID-19 Was Planned* (Pew Research Center, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>.

<sup>478</sup> Katherine Kricorian et al., “COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy: Misinformation and Perceptions of Vaccine Safety,” *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21645515.2021.2002063>.

<sup>479</sup> Nicoli Nattrass, “Promoting Conspiracy Theory: From AIDS to COVID-19,” *Global Public Health* 18, no. 1 (2023): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.2011942>.

<sup>480</sup> Seth C. Kalichman, “HIV Does Not Cause AIDS: A Journey into AIDS Denialism,” in *Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science*, ed. Allison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman (MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>481</sup> Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas, “Prevention Is Better than Cure: Addressing Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 47, no. 8 (2017): 459–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12453>; Sahil Loomba et al., “Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation on Vaccination Intent in the UK and USA,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (March 2021): 337–48, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01056-1>.

<sup>482</sup> Demetri A. Pananos et al., “Critical Dynamics in Population Vaccinating Behavior,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 114, no. 52 (2017): 13762–67, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704093114>.

residual phenomenon, but were widely known and accepted among the U.S. population. To cite only the most recurrent: that the pharmaceutical industry pressures to prevent cures for serious diseases from being found, that cell phones cause cancer, or that vaccines are dangerous for children.<sup>483</sup> During the Coronavirus Pandemic, conspiracy theories and misinformation were more available and disseminated than with other diseases, due to the scale of its global spread: border closures, lockdowns, and other restrictions on fundamental freedoms. On more than a few occasions, they were instrumentalized by certain sectors of the political spectrum to attack the management of their respective governments.



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<sup>483</sup> Eric J. Oliver and Thomas Wood, “Medical Conspiracy Theories and Health Behaviors in the United States,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 174, no. 5 (2014): 817–18, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2014.190>.

## Chapter 4. Nazi and Holocaust comparisons during COVID-19

### 4.1. The precedents. Comparisons during Donald Trump’s First Presidency

The comparisons with the Holocaust that we will observe during the COVID-19 pandemic were not a historical anomaly in the United States. Since the Reagan era, public comparisons with Nazism, although not as concentrated in time, had already appeared in various contexts. However, it is during Donald Trump’s first presidency that we can begin to speak of World War II as a prominent conceptual framework for understanding the present. Analyzing this precedent reveals the role that such comparisons play in political and intergroup conflict: while during the COVID-19 pandemic most of the analogies came from Republicans, opposing public policies mainly promoted by liberals, in this earlier period the main actors belonged to the Democratic sphere.

In this chapter, we will offer a brief exploration, as a counterpoint, of the comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust made during the early phase of Donald Trump’s political career. To that end, we will focus on the main axes of comparison—personality, discourse, supporters, public policies—analyzing key events through news coverage and opinion pieces published in the press.

#### *Donald Trump as the ‘American Hitler’*

Donald Trump entered American politics as an outsider. Marked by incendiary rhetoric, a strong cult of personality, and radical anti-immigration proposals, his arrival at the White House was a shock to the public sphere of the country and, to some extent, to the entire international scene. The proliferation of far-right groups—carriers of all kinds of extremist discourse—supporting candidate Donald Trump at the time was a situation with few known precedents in a country where social protest had traditionally been led by the Civil Rights Movement and others linked to ideological liberalism. In this context, it is unsurprising that references to extreme historical situations proliferated, such as the Nazi rise to power in the Weimar Republic, along with numerous journalistic accounts portraying Donald Trump with traits reminiscent of a diffuse idea of “fascism” and of the dictator Adolf Hitler.

There are several elements surrounding Donald Trump that might lead observers to draw such analogies. To begin with, in the 1990s, before becoming president, he had acknowledged

owning a copy of the speeches of the Austrian dictator,<sup>484</sup> and his ex-wife Ivana claimed that he kept it near his bed and consulted it regularly.<sup>485</sup> This led a new edition of the book —titled *My New Order*— to include a photo of Trump on the back cover in which he appeared to be making a fascist salute.<sup>486</sup>

This prompted many to warn of the danger of dismissing as a clown someone who could in fact represent a real threat. Trump had indeed been caricatured as a comical and extravagant figure in the eyes of both national and international liberal media during his early years. His background as a television showman, his loud rhetoric, and the grandiose manner in which he often presented himself to the public made him the target of widespread mockery—from the Chinese outlet *The Global Times*, which directly called him a “clown”<sup>487</sup> to a group of professional comedians in Cleveland who complained that he was giving them a bad name.<sup>488</sup> POLITICO itself used the following ironic tone to describe his presidential ambitions:

“The campaign playground has never witnessed a player like Trump before. Sometimes his feints for the White House resemble the stunt runs mounted by comedians (...) other times, Trump’s I-can’t-make-up-my-mind shtick conjures visions of Mario Cuomo and Sarah Palin and their Hamlet acts (...) Still other times —like when he’s sleeping or when you’re just waking— Trump seems no more improbable a candidate for president than Ben Carson (...) or other public figures who have never won an election but think they’d look good in the Oval Office.”<sup>489</sup>

These comparisons intensified as Donald Trump gained media traction, particularly during the Republican primaries between February and June 2016. Reactions to his incendiary speeches multiplied—sometimes even leading to strong protests—at a time when he was not yet the official candidate. The growing sense that he might indeed become President in the near future sparked concerns that the country could be heading toward a situation reminiscent of the Weimar Republic in the 1930s.

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<sup>484</sup> Jonathan Karl, “Donald Trump’s History with Adolf Hitler and His Nazi Writings: Analysis,” *ABC News*, November 21, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trumps-history-adolf-hitler-nazi-writings-analysis/story?id=105810745>.

<sup>485</sup> Vanity Fair, “7 Takeaways from Vanity Fair’s 1990 Profile of Donald Trump,” *Vanity Fair*, August 12, 2015, [https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/08/donald-trump-marie-brenner-ivana-divorce?srltid=AfmBOoolXxsfGGTtVfaQ1puVm4sblZstPtuiXZ\\_TCXBgcHcEvmDed4ER](https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/08/donald-trump-marie-brenner-ivana-divorce?srltid=AfmBOoolXxsfGGTtVfaQ1puVm4sblZstPtuiXZ_TCXBgcHcEvmDed4ER).

<sup>486</sup> Adolf Hitler, *My New Order*, trans. Raoul de Roussy de Sales (Ishi Press International, 2016).

<sup>487</sup> Kristie Lu Stout, “Big-Mouthed Clown? China Reacts to Donald Trump’s Rise,” *CNN*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/16/world/china-donald-trump>.

<sup>488</sup> Martha Bayne, “Clowns to Trump: You’re Giving Us a Bad Name,” *Belt Magazine*, October 7, 2016, <https://beltmag.com/clowns-trump/>.

<sup>489</sup> Jack Shafer, “Donald Trump and the Clown Show,” *Politico Magazine*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/donald-trump-and-the-clown-show-118756/>.

In March 2016, political commentator Glenn Beck said on ABC’s *This Week* that Trump might seem entertaining, just like “Adolf Hitler in 1929,” and that people should look carefully at the example of the Austrian dictator<sup>490</sup> Already in 2017, just weeks after Donald Trump had taken office, Jewish-American scholar Ron Rosenbaum—an expert on the life of Adolf Hitler—published an article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in which he denounced the newly elected president by comparing him to the infamous dictator. In it, he warned that, as with Hitler, Trump had been underestimated by the press and gradually normalized until, by the time people recognized his true intentions, it was too late—he had already risen to power.<sup>491</sup> While Rosenbaum nuanced that the comparison was not absolute—“to compare Trump’s feckless racism and compulsive lying was inevitably to trivialize Hitler’s crime and the victims of genocide”—most of the outlets that reported on the piece echoed the message that Trump was following the “Hitler’s Playbook.”<sup>492</sup>

These comparisons were echoed by comedian Louis C.K., who circulated an email among his followers urging them to stop voting for Donald Trump::

“P.S. Please stop it with voting for Trump. It was funny for a little while. But the guy is Hitler. And by that I mean that we are being Germany in the 30s. Do you think they saw the shit coming? Hitler was just some hilarious and refreshing dude with a weird comb over who would say anything at all. (...) American democracy is broken enough that a guy like that could really fuck things up. That’s how Hitler got there. He was voted into power by a fatigued nation and when he got inside, he did all his Hitler things and no one could stop him.”<sup>493</sup>

His deceitful and manipulative character was widely acknowledged. In October, well-known American journalist Charles Blow published an op-ed in the British newspaper *The Independent*, exploring the parallels between Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler—not Hitler the murderer, but Hitler the liar. In this short essay, he not only drew the comparison based on Trump’s tendency to lie and manipulate voters, but also defended the analogy, stating that although he was aware of the difficulties and controversy that invoking Hitler tends to provoke,

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<sup>490</sup> Melissa Chan, “Glenn Beck Compares Donald Trump to Hitler,” *Time*, March 10, 2016, <https://time.com/4248841/glenn-beck-donald-trump-hitler/>.

<sup>491</sup> Ron Rosenbaum, “Against Normalization: The Lesson of the ‘Munich Post,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 28, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/normalization-lesson-munich-post/>.

<sup>492</sup> Clive Irving, “Trump’s War on the Press Follows the Mussolini and Hitler Playbook,” *The Daily Beast*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trumps-war-on-the-press-follows-the-mussolini-and-hitler-playbook>.

<sup>493</sup> Itay Hod, “Louis C.K. Slams ‘Insane Bigot’ Donald Trump: ‘The Guy Is Hitler,’” *The Wrap*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.thewrap.com/louis-c-k-slams-insane-bigot-donald-trump-the-guy-is-hitler/>.

he did not believe it was a mistake in this case, because the similarities truly existed: “I prefer the boot of truth to slam down to earth like thunder, no matter the shock of hearing its clap.”<sup>494</sup>

In other words, it was not only the new president who was being compared to Adolf Hitler; the press itself was seen as potentially falling into the same traps as that of the Weimar Republic—falling for the lies of the autocrat. This was a systemic analogy that invited readers to see the present through the lens of another era, using the reference to the rise of Nazism to convey a sense of extreme danger—one learned largely through the cultural products that shape collective memory.

### *Idolatrous masses and cult of personality*

As previously stated, the majority of Donald Trump’s voters were far from the stereotype of fanatical protesters that has occupied so much space in the media. They were, above all, white men from dispossessed working-class backgrounds in former industrial hubs, farmers from southern states, and disenchanted middle classes from the suburbs of cities like Cleveland or Minneapolis. However, the pro-Trump movement projected a more violent image: groups of fanatics and white nationalists marching in Charlottesville, storming the Capitol, and crowding rallies where they performed gestures resembling fascist salutes under the tireless xenophobic proclamations of their leader.

Unlike previous Republican presidents, Donald Trump created a movement with its own aesthetic, drawing on a mixture of elements from the past. The slogan America First, which encapsulated the desideratum of prioritizing U.S. interests in all international agreements, came from a long tradition rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Party—opposed to immigration—the anti-interventionist campaign of Woodrow Wilson during World War I, and the isolationist America First Committee. Make America Great Again, on the other hand—a nostalgic slogan appealing directly to voters from decaying industrial areas—was originally crafted by Ronald Reagan for his 1980 campaign and later used rhetorically by Bill Clinton in various speeches during his presidency. Both played leading roles in a full-blown aesthetic transformation of the Republican Party, in which MAGA hats, anti-immigration rhetoric, and ultraconservative discourses gained ground at the expense of its more liberal factions.

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<sup>494</sup> Charles M. Blow, “Donald Trump May Not Be Adolf Hitler – but His Habit of Weaponising Untruths Offers an Eerie Parallel,” *The Independent*, October 29, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-adolf-hitler-comparison-weaponing-untruths-lying-mendacity-propaganda-mein-kampf-nazis-a8010416.html>.

This new Republican identity was accompanied by a new, hyper-personalist leadership. Accounts of Donald Trump’s egocentric character—many of them from people within his closest circle—are countless. During his presidency, Trump bypassed institutional communication channels and began voicing his opinions directly through his Twitter account. He used dramatic and grandiloquent language to describe the nation’s challenges, filled with enemies—immigrants, liberals, foreign powers—and anti-establishment rhetoric, and he amassed a multitude of tireless supporters whose loyalty he loved to showcase in massive rallies. This style, labeled by some as populist, was one of the reasons for his identification with major tyrants in history and for the likening of his followers to those of Nazism.

Analogies between his political rallies and those of authoritarian regimes were, therefore, superficially easy to draw, as the following examples show. Already during Trump’s presidential campaign, *The Huffington Post* compared a rally in Florida to those held by Adolf Hitler, who had asked his followers to raise their right arms in a show of commitment to his political project.<sup>495</sup> The following day, the popular television program *Saturday Night Live* released a pair of sketches portraying Trump and his supporters as racists and Nazis, as something not seen “since Germany in the 1930s.”<sup>496</sup> A year later, university professor Magnus Linden published an article in *The Conversation*, headlined by an image from the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg—most likely from Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will*. The psychology expert connected support for Donald Trump with support for the Nazis in Hitler’s Germany, through the age-old question of why certain personality types are more likely to accept and follow authoritarian figures.<sup>497</sup>

Although these comparisons share a similar vocabulary, they differ in their underlying intent. The first two are similes that express the media’s outrage toward the rise of a political style they saw as profoundly inappropriate. They use the past as a mirror to warn citizens of the seriousness of the situation: Trump’s behavior, in their view, is something that had only been witnessed during the National Socialist era. The aim was to legitimize the political argument that the then-presidential candidate posed a threat to democracy. The third comparison, by contrast, fell more within the realm of analogy, seeking to offer explanations and frame these developments within a broader phenomenon: how is it possible that some people vote for

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<sup>495</sup> Janie Valencia, “This Donald Trump Rally Looks Like A Scene From Nazi Germany,” *HuffPost*, March 6, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-right-hand-salute\\_n\\_56db50d8e4b03a405678e27a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-right-hand-salute_n_56db50d8e4b03a405678e27a).

<sup>496</sup> Tim Molloy, “SNL: Watch ‘Racists for Trump’ Ad — ‘SNL’s’ Big Reversal on Donald Trump,” *The Wrap*, March 5, 2016, <https://www.thewrap.com/snl-watch-racists-for-trump-ad-snls-big-reversal-on-donald-trump/>.

<sup>497</sup> Magnus Linden, “Trump’s America and the Rise of the Authoritarian Personality,” *The Conversation*, February 15, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/trumps-america-and-the-rise-of-the-authoritarian-personality-72770>.

Trump? The point was not merely to associate Trump with Nazism, but to raise awareness about the psychosocial factors that could lead to his victory. Thus, although both types of discourse evoke the past, they fulfill different functions in terms of emotional activation of historical imaginaries—one being more immediate and direct, the other more reflective and indirect. Of course, the similarities between both cases were extremely abstract: during the 2016 campaign and the first months of the presidency, Trump’s followers did not have their own armed groups, did not openly harass political opponents, minorities, or the press, and did not, in principle, threaten to seize power by force.

The turning point would come months later with the events in Charlottesville, when a large portion of the American public saw their fears materialize in an outburst of political violence that seemed to confirm the country’s authoritarian drift. The *Unite the Right* rally, convened in early August 2017 by white nationalist organizations, made headlines worldwide.<sup>498</sup> Protesters displayed neo-Nazi and fascist symbols and chanted racist slogans like “Go the fuck back to Africa” or “Dylann Roof was a hero,” referring to the young man who, just two years earlier, had gunned down nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>499</sup> The worst came the next day, when clashes between protesters and counter-protesters led to violence, and one of the former drove into a crowd, killing a woman.<sup>500</sup> Trump’s response was one of equivocation and a certain protection of the protesters from media criticism, calling them “very fine people,”<sup>501</sup> which led to a political scandal and renewed speculation about his sympathy for white nationalist ideas and racism. If Trump had already appeared linked to extremist movements in the U.S., his refusal to explicitly condemn these groups reinforced the perception that he was complicit in their violence.

A few days after the events, *The Conversation* published an article accusing the president of following the “10 stages of genocide” outlined by genocide expert and founder of Genocide Watch, Gregory H. Stanton. The piece suggested that the emergence of some form of genocidal violence in the U.S. was far from impossible, and that Trump—through his stigmatization of

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<sup>498</sup> Sarah Rankin, “Officials: White Nationalist Rally Linked to 3 Deaths,” *Associated Press*, August 13, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/b8560c3ebaac4deb9043bb695f2eb1db>.

<sup>499</sup> Joe Heim, “Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/>.

<sup>500</sup> Brandon Shulleeta, “At Least One Dead as U.S. White Nationalists Ignite Virginia Clashes,” *Reuters*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/at-least-one-dead-as-us-white-nationalists-ignite-virginia-clashes-idUSKBN1AS0QU/>.

<sup>501</sup> Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: ‘Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,’” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>.

minorities and his equivocal stance on Charlottesville—might be enabling such a scenario.<sup>502</sup> Years later, novelist Danuta Hinc would write that those events and Trump's comments had made her realize that these were not people who seemed to be Nazis or who imitated them, but people who genuinely were: "No one expected this country to turn back the clock of the world."<sup>503</sup> In this context, the evocation of past genocides through the logic of the *slippery slope* became a powerful strategy for raising civic awareness about the dangers of the movement embodied by Trump, and for providing discursive support to political opposition.

These references were not limited to journalism. Institutions devoted to preserving Holocaust memory, and even survivors themselves, also contributed to the comparisons between the Trump regime and Nazism. For instance, the Anne Frank Center—a U.S.-based organization affiliated with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam—attacked Trump on Twitter by drawing a direct comparison to Hitler:

"Alarming parallels of history escalate. The president creates his own media. He exploits youth at a rally. He endorses police brutality. He demonizes people who believe, look or love differently. He strips vulnerable people of their families, jobs and ability to live. He believes Congress should change its rules to give him more power. Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect believes Never Again to any people, and now."<sup>504</sup>

This invocation of "Never Again" became part of the broader narrative portraying the event as a dangerous slip toward the abyss of racial genocide, linking it to the well-known public memory of Holocaust victim Anne Frank. In other words, Donald Trump was not only framed as a symbol of the resurgence of populist and authoritarian leadership in the United States, but as the face of an entire social movement that could lead to regime change and, ultimately, genocide. In terms of group identity, the association between Trump's supporters and historical Nazism contributed to the activation of out-group prejudice through the lens of collective memory of World War II—endowing this discourse with a rich reservoir of stereotypes and conceptual schemas, and imbuing the struggle against Trumpism, as once against Hitler's followers, with an existential dimension.

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<sup>502</sup> The Conversation, "Warning Signs of Mass Violence – in the US?," *The Conversation*, August 18, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/warning-signs-of-mass-violence-in-the-us-82546>.

<sup>503</sup> Danuta Hinc, "Nazis and the Layers of Shame," *Popula*, February 6, 2019, <https://popula.com/2019/02/06/nazis-and-the-layers-of-shame/>.

<sup>504</sup> Anne Frank Center, "Alarming Parallels of History...," *Twitter (Now X)*, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170809230813/https://twitter.com/AnneFrankCenter/status/894884499078631424>.

*Attacks on the press and the judiciary*

A significant part of the fears about an authoritarian drift under Donald Trump, as voiced by the liberal press and political elites in the United States, stemmed from his challenge to two foundational pillars of democratic checks on political parties: the press and the judiciary. As shown throughout this dissertation, many warned about the danger of allowing someone like him to reach the White House and dismantle such oversight mechanisms, just as the Nazis and other authoritarian movements had done in interwar Europe.

From the outset, Trump's relationship with the American press was marked by mutual hostility. During his presidency, he staged constant attacks against outlets he deemed disloyal, initiated unprecedented legal actions against journalists, restricted their access to government information, attempted to pressure the owners of major newspapers—as was the case with Amazon and The Washington Post—and favored aligned media such as FOX, National Review, or Breitbart News.

On Twitter, Trump repeatedly targeted specific media outlets, insulting and denigrating them as “fake news.”<sup>505</sup> This term was linked by some to the German “Lügenpresse” (“lying press”), coined during World War I to refer to media critical of the Second Reich and later popularized by Nazi propagandists. At the time, the term was experiencing a resurgence, used by neo-Nazi groups in Europe such as PEGIDA. Several U.S. media outlets drew parallels between Trump and these groups for following a similar strategy. In June 2019, Salon magazine published an article making this comparison explicit, referring to the Republican leader's contempt for truth and likening his rhetoric to Hitler's so-called “big lie” about the Jews in *Mein Kampf*. The article also highlighted several controversies between the government and the so-called disloyal press, including proposals to revoke NBC's broadcasting license and attempts to pressure Time Warner into selling CNN.<sup>506</sup>

Academic Helene Julia Sinnreich, an expert in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, published an article in *Common Dreams* warning that the United States was entering a slippery slope. While Trump had not committed genocide like Adolf Hitler, she emphasized that the Austrian dictator had not started there either. Sinnreich argued that Trump's attacks and indirect censorship of the press mirrored the strategies used by autocrats like Hitler during their rise to

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<sup>505</sup> Leonard Downie Jr, *About the Trump Administration and the Media Report* (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020), <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/04/trump-media-attacks-credibility-leaks/>.

<sup>506</sup> Richard E. Frankel, “Trump, the ‘Lying Press’ and the Nazis: Attacking the Media Has a History,” *Salon*, June 9, 2019, <https://www.salon.com/2019/06/09/trump-the-lying-press-and-the-nazis-attacking-the-media-has-a-history/>.

power: “Trump has repeatedly warned against a terrorist attack that might be perpetrated by an undocumented immigrant. For Hitler, it was the Reichstag fire on Feb. 27, 1933, that led to his political opponents being incarcerated in Dachau.”<sup>507</sup>

Trump’s clashes with the judiciary were also numerous. First, the new president focused on appointing highly ideological judges and issuing a series of executive orders aimed at reducing checks on presidential power.<sup>508</sup> Furthermore, he repeatedly used his position to attempt to steer judicial processes against him toward courts aligned with the executive branch, thereby delegitimizing the judiciary.<sup>509</sup> His personal attacks on various judges who blocked government orders they deemed unlawful completed the image of a president at odds with, and eager to control, the judicial system.<sup>510</sup> The well-known historian Richard J. Evans expressed concern about this in an interview with Isaac Chotiner for *Slate*, noting that this had been one of the tools Hitler used to seize power. As Evans stated when asked about these attacks:

I think if you look at Hitler’s seizure of power, which happened between his appointment in January 1933 and the summer of 1933, it was achieved by two means. One is by legal, or pseudolegal, means, and there he had to rush legislation past the national parliament in order to give him supreme power to make laws. These laws included, in the end, setting up a one-party state, and also closing down oppositional newspapers, and so on. And of course Hitler’s propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, was an inveterate and incorrigible liar. He was an inventor of news. And he also was very strongly attacked in the liberal and left-wing press and threatened to shut it down, and in the end he actually did. Or he took it over.<sup>511</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the National Socialist regime that ruled Germany during parts of the 1930s and 1940s was far from the only one to question the freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary. Numerous countries contemporaneous with Trumpism—Russia, the Philippines, North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, and many others—could serve as examples of such undemocratic behavior. The appeal to collective memory must be understood as a way of framing the comparison within a simple dilemma: if American

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<sup>507</sup> Helene Sinnreich, “Beware of Another Reichstag Fire,” *Common Dreams*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/02/28/beware-another-reichstag-fire>.

<sup>508</sup> David M. Driesen, “Donald Trump and the Collapse of Checks and Balances,” *SMU Law Review Forum* 77 (2024): 207–11.

<sup>509</sup> Maria Elisabetta De Franciscis, “The Independence of the Judiciary in the Trump Era,” *DPCE Online* 45, no. 1 (2021): 945–72.

<sup>510</sup> Brennan Center for Justice, *In His Own Words: The President’s Attacks on the Courts* (Brennan Center for Justice, 2017), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/his-own-words-presidents-attacks-courts>.

<sup>511</sup> Isaac Chotiner, “Too Close for Comfort,” *Slate*, February 26, 2017, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/02/historian-richard-evans-says-trumps-america-isnt-exactly-like-the-third-reich-but-its-too-close-for-comfort.html>.

institutions are not strictly respected, the alternative is the Third Reich. This is a rhetorical device that invokes a universally condemned alterity—Nazism—with which no one is expected to identify, thereby placing the political opponent in a no-man's-land.

*The long shadow of the Weimar Republic*

Comparisons between Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler did not remain limited to questions of rhetoric or personality; they also referred to the way in which he came to power. In opinion pieces, analyses, and interviews on the subject, all the well-known milestones in the historical process that led to the fall of the Weimar Republic found a place. The Reichstag fire, the Enabling Act, the complicity of German conservatism and the collaborationist elites, *Kristallnacht*, armed troops serving the Nazis in the streets—these were all evoked to establish and reinforce such parallels. Thus, Donald Trump was also presented as a minor threat, a harmless buffoon who, having slipped out of the system's control, had now become a serious problem for national and global stability.

The American fascination with the possibility of falling into some form of authoritarian regime is something that has permeated much of the country's dystopian literature throughout the twentieth century, with notable examples such as *Fahrenheit 451* (1953, written by Ray Bradbury), *The Man in the High Castle* (1962m written by Philip K. Dick), *Parable of the Talents* (1998, written by Octavia E. Butler), or *The Plot Against America* (2004, written by Philip Roth), many of which were adapted for the screen in the twenty-first century, sometimes with great impact. In 2019, Dick Virden published an article in *MinnPost* referring to one of these novels, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), by Sinclair Lewis, which describes a dystopian scenario in which a newly elected president imposes a fascist-style dictatorship in the United States. "Will we, like ordinary Germans in the '30s, explain away each incremental step as freedom after freedom is lost and restraints on executive power loosened? (...) The chants, 'lock her up' or 'send them back' are disturbing echoes of the 'sieg heils' and 'Jews perish' of Hitler's Germany."<sup>512</sup> For this reason, the fear that Donald Trump might impose a dictatorship in the country should not be attributed solely to his figure or to the satirical intentions of his political opponents: such an idea is, in fact, a longstanding feature of the American political imagination.

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<sup>512</sup> Dick Virden, "A Slide Toward Fascism? It Could Happen Here," *MinnPost*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2019/08/a-slide-toward-fascism-it-could-happen-here/>.

Thus, the panic that the new president would subvert the entire constitutional order was palpable from the very beginning of his term. Trump had arrived at the White House attacking the press, disregarding judicial rulings, and promising to dismantle long-standing political consensus—on foreign policy (NATO, free trade agreements, relations with Europe), for example. Just weeks after his official inauguration, journalist Paul Waldman was already warning Americans to remain vigilant against any attempt by Trump to exploit a terrorist attack or other major event to acquire extraordinary powers or push through legislation that would otherwise be unacceptable—drawing direct comparisons with the Reichstag fire and Hitler’s accusations against the communist threat.<sup>513</sup>

In November, near the midterms, a public radio station in Boston (Massachusetts), owned by Boston University, published an analysis by journalist and historical communicator Rachael Cerrotti, in which she compared Kristallnacht to Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 election, accusing him of harming minorities and using lies as a propaganda strategy.<sup>514</sup> These warnings were joined, later that year, by Barack Obama, who urged Americans to stay vigilant so as not to fall into the same fate as Nazi Germany.<sup>515</sup>

This rhetorical strategy was, at its core, a narrative about the anti-democratic and therefore illegitimate character of Donald Trump. At the time, the new occupant of the White House had not presented himself as a guarantor of institutional order, but he had also shown no signs of planning a coup or seeking extraordinary powers. As such, the comparisons were not rooted in actual similarities between him and the Austrian dictator. Rather, they were references to the past that served to frame the presidency: a narrative of exceptionality, danger, and vigilance, expressing the anxieties of the political and cultural establishment in the face of such an anomalous figure as Trump. Throughout Trump’s presidency, there were repeated calls to stop him as soon as possible in order to prevent an authoritarian consolidation in the country, as had happened with Adolf Hitler. “The intelligentsia of Berlin and the literati and all the artists were just busy doing their thing. Hitler rose to power. There were a lot of chances to stop him, and they didn’t speak out (...) If you read the history, you won’t be surprised. It’s exactly the same,” the singer Linda Ronstadt stated in an interview with CNN.<sup>516</sup>

<sup>513</sup> Sinnreich, “Beware of Another Reichstag Fire.”

<sup>514</sup> Rachael Cerrotti, “The 9th of November: From Kristallnacht to Trump,” *WBUR Cognoscenti*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2017/11/09/kristallnacht-trump-rachael-cerrotti>.

<sup>515</sup> Associated Press, “Obama: Protect Democracy or Risk Taking Path of Nazi Germany,” *Associated Press*, May 25, 2017, <https://apnews.com/general-news-1e65e204686e4ab9bf5c28c81381313d>.

<sup>516</sup> Brooke Seipel, “Linda Ronstadt: Trump Is ‘like Hitler, and the Mexicans Are the New Jews,’” *The Hill*, January 2, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/476417-linda-ronstadt-trump-is-like-hitler-and-the-mexicans-are-the-new-jews/>.

The media environment even went so far as to feature Holocaust survivors to reinforce this narrative. Stephen B. Jacobs, a survivor of Buchenwald, told *Newsweek* that, in his view, the United States “feels like 1929 or 1930 Berlin”—years he had not lived through—although he also stated that Trump could not be a fascist because he did not have the mental capacity to understand what fascism was.<sup>517</sup> He was not alone. Henry Siegman, another survivor who arrived in the U.S. at the age of twelve, published an article in July 2018 in which he compared Trumpism to Nazism and rejected the idea that such analogies were hyperbolic. He argued that Trump had come to power in much the same way as Hitler—through lies and threats of violence—and even suggested that Trump might pass legislation resembling the Enabling Act of March 1933.<sup>518</sup> In this imaginary, then, Trump did not merely share traits with Adolf Hitler; individuals who had lived through that period were confirming that the political process unfolding before them was reminiscent of what they had once experienced—an authority drawn from their own status as survivors.

To the survivors, we must add prominent academics, whose analogies were generally more nuanced than the similes described earlier. In October 2018, Christopher Browning—arguably one of the most acclaimed and respected historians of World War II in the United States—published an article in *The New York Review of Books* establishing parallels between the United States and Nazi Germany. He compared Trump to Neville Chamberlain for his trust in deals with authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un; he likened the contemporary regime to Weimar Germany, with Mitch McConnell playing the role of gravedigger as Hindenburg had done; and he compared Trump’s Republican followers to the conservatives who enabled Hitler’s rise to power. For Browning, the key difference with previous authoritarian regimes was that today’s do not need to formally dismantle the democratic system: they can continue to hold elections and allow a free press while hollowing democracy out from within.<sup>519</sup> A similar comparison appeared in another article published that December, which likened Trump’s followers to Hans Frank, a Nazi war criminal who, according

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<sup>517</sup> Shane Croucher, “I’m a Holocaust Survivor — Trump’s America Feels Like Germany Before Nazis Took Over,” *Newsweek*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/im-holocaust-survivor-trumps-america-feels-germany-nazis-took-over-876965>.

<sup>518</sup> Henry Siegman, “What My Escape From Hitler’s Germany Taught Me About Trump’s America,” *The Nation*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/escape-hitlers-germany-taught-trumps-america/>.

<sup>519</sup> Christopher R. Browning, “The Suffocation of Democracy,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/25/suffocation-of-democracy/>.

to his son, was not particularly antisemitic nor a true believer in Hitler’s proclamations, but rather driven by ambition.<sup>520</sup>

Another well-known historian of Nazism, Benjamin Carter Hett, also commented on the analogies between Nazi Germany and the contemporary American political scene in an interview with *The Sun*. He argued that, like Hitler, Trump had come to power following a political shift to the left—Barack Obama’s presidency, which he claimed had triggered the Tea Party movement. He saw parallels in the hatred of women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants, and in both leaders’ inability to make reasoned arguments: “Hitler... could only make angry arguments. Trump, too, can’t make an appeal to reason.” Hett also criticized Fox News, claiming that, just as Stalin’s USSR and Hitler’s Germany had developed propaganda apparatuses, Trump’s regime had done the same in an “American way”—through the private sector, represented by organizations like Fox News. The comparisons continued into discussions of violent political language, anti-intellectualism, and Republican complicity. However, despite all this, Hett stated clearly that he condemned comparisons between Trump and Hitler, or between his followers and the Nazis, arguing that such analogies were disrespectful to those who had suffered under the Nazi regime and that he could not support them in any way.<sup>521</sup>

The understanding of Donald Trump as the leader of an authoritarian regime became so deeply marked by the memory of the Holocaust that many contemporary publications on the Nazi past included direct references to him. In November, *The New Yorker* published an article by Mireille Juchau discussing the story of Charlotte Beradt, a witness of authoritarianism whose experiences were compiled in the book *The Third Reich of Dreams*, based on the dreams she had during that period. The article concluded by quoting psychoanalyst Frances Lang, a reader of Beradt’s work: “In her own practice, she has noticed widespread uneasiness following Trump’s election. She has asked her friends and colleagues to begin collecting dreams.”<sup>522</sup> The Trump regime, like the Third Reich, seemed to be producing a psychological state of anxiety that could, in the future, serve as the foundation for a similar book on the dreams of those living under authoritarianism.

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<sup>520</sup> Barry Lando, “Trump’s Enablers – An Appalling Parallel,” *Common Dreams*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/12/03/trumps-enablers-appalling-parallel>.

<sup>521</sup> David Barsamian, “Big Lies. Benjamin Carter Hett On What We Can Learn From Hitler’s Rise to Power,” *The Sun Magazine*, April 2019, <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/26656-big-lies>.

<sup>522</sup> Mireille Juchau, “How Dreams Change Under Authoritarianism,” *The New Yorker*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-dreams-change-under-authoritarianism>.

The final year of Donald Trump's presidency was shaped by the pandemic and the looming elections, which shifted some aspects of the comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust. Just as his arrival had been framed as the fall of Weimar, his departure was expected to mirror the fall of totalitarianism. In January, a journalist for *New York Magazine* asked what would happen to Trump's collaborators once he finally left the White House, comparing them to the collaborators of Vichy France and to American industrialists who had sympathized with Nazism in the 1930s, such as Henry Ford or James Mooney.<sup>523</sup> Joe Biden's victory in November 2020 was thus celebrated as a redemption of American democracy in the face of what had been portrayed as a Nazi-like rise. Christiane Amanpour, Chief International Anchor at CNN, put it this way:

“This week, eighty-two years ago, Kristallnacht happened. It was the Nazis' warning shot across the bow of our human civilization that led to genocide against a whole identity, and in that tower of burning books, it led to an attack on fact, knowledge, history, and truth. After four years of a modern-day assault on those same values by Donald Trump, the Biden-Harris team pledges a return to norms.”<sup>524</sup>

The Biden-Harris victory over Trumpian authoritarianism was thus framed in epic terms as a moment of national liberation. Amanpour's analogy legitimized the new administration as a beacon of hope against the darkness of totalitarianism—casting Trump as a defeated fascist, and Biden and Harris as counterparts to the Allied coalition. In this way, the entire presidency of Donald Trump, from beginning to end, was framed using the analytical tools of World War II, with collective memory functioning as a legitimizing force for political identities within an ongoing intergroup conflict.

### *Immigrants and concentration camps*

The element that prompted the most comparisons between Donald Trump's presidency and Adolf Hitler's dictatorship was his strong anti-immigration rhetoric, which was directed particularly at non-white immigrants. During the 2015–2016 campaign and his subsequent presidency, he claimed that Mexico was sending criminals into the United States, promised to ban Muslims from entering the country and to deport existing Syrian refugees, to expel all

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<sup>523</sup> Frank Rich, “What Will Happen to The Trump Toadies?” *New York Magazine Intelligencer*, January 5, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/01/what-will-happen-to-trumps-republican-collaborators.html>.

<sup>524</sup> Jacob Magid, “CNN's Amanpour Apologizes for ‘Juxtaposing’ Trump with Nazi Crimes,” *The Times of Israel*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cnns-amanpour-apologizes-for-juxtaposing-trump-with-nazi-crimes/>.

undocumented immigrants without the right to prior trial, to suspend birthright citizenship (*ius soli*), and—perhaps most symbolically—to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it.

The president’s statements on immigration, often delivered through his Twitter account, relied heavily on stigmatizing language and negative labels. According to one study, nearly 73% of Donald Trump’s speeches mentioned immigration, doubling the rate of his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush.<sup>525</sup> Some of the most incendiary claims he made in this regard—such as immigrants “poisoning the blood of our country”—led him to become the first U.S. president to explicitly clarify to the press that he did not own a copy of *Mein Kampf*.<sup>526</sup>

His most recurrent talking points were criticized and compared to the anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric of National Socialist leaders. For instance, Bill Maher, host of HBO’s *Real Time*, drew comparisons between Trump and Hitler through a fake translation of a Trump speech, adding comedic annotations such as: “We’re going to have to build a camp. And I will make the Jews pay for it,”<sup>527</sup> referencing Trump’s well-known promise to build a wall on the Mexican border. On another occasion, CNN analyst Samantha Vinograd—who had worked in the Obama administration and would later return to government under Joe Biden—compared Trump’s discourse to that of the Nazis for his invocation of the need to “defend America’s values and reclaim our nation’s priceless heritage.” Drawing on the memory of her Jewish relatives persecuted during the Holocaust, Vinograd criticized Trump for using that rhetoric to attack immigration and redirect resources toward threats she deemed baseless.<sup>528</sup> Perhaps one of the most striking examples in this regard was that of a political official from Dallas County, who circulated a campaign email featuring side-by-side images of Hitler and Trump. The image drew a point-by-point comparison in terms of racism, chauvinism, and xenophobia, establishing a parallel between Muslims and Jews.<sup>529</sup>

<sup>525</sup> Sean Richey, *Collateral Damage: The Influence of Political Rhetoric on the Incorporation of Second-Generation Americans* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 57–70.

<sup>526</sup> Lalee Ibssa et al., “Trump Claims He’s Never Read Hitler’s ‘Mein Kampf,’ as He Doubles down on Anti-Immigrant Phrase,” *ABC News*, December 19, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-claims-read-hitlers-mein-kampf-doubles-anti/story?id=105794639>.

<sup>527</sup> Real Time with Bill Maher, “Bill Maher Translated One...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2016, [https://x.com/RealTimers/status/706016655348879360?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E706016655348879360%7Ctwgr%5Ed1d2d5b22d3f5add11f3b139f062b9e0cf0485ce%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thewrap.com%2Fbill-maher-compares-donald-trump-to-hitler-on-real-time%2F](https://x.com/RealTimers/status/706016655348879360?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E706016655348879360%7Ctwgr%5Ed1d2d5b22d3f5add11f3b139f062b9e0cf0485ce%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thewrap.com%2Fbill-maher-compares-donald-trump-to-hitler-on-real-time%2F).

<sup>528</sup> Christina Zhao, “Donald Trump’s Talk of ‘Preserving Our Heritage’ Is ‘Sick’ and Reminiscent of Hitler, Says Former Obama Official,” *Newsweek*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trumps-talk-preserving-our-heritage-sick-and-reminiscent-hitler-says-1349955>.

<sup>529</sup> CBS News, “Dallas County Commissioner Compares President Trump to Adolf Hitler in Flier,” *CBS News*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/texas/news/dallas-county-commissioner-compares-president-trump-adolf-hitler-in-flier/>.

The comparisons were not limited to political satire and journalistic commentary. Some academics, too—such as political scientist Kathleen B. Jones—reflected on the similarities between Donald Trump’s anti-immigration aspirations and Adolf Hitler’s racist ideology. In remarks given to a journalist from the Wisconsin-based magazine *Isthmus*, she stated that, if Trump’s policies were implemented, it would amount to a kind of “re-colonization” of America, drawing “parallels with what happened in Germany and Russia between the two world wars.”<sup>530</sup>

But Donald Trump was not only accused of sharing ideological views with Adolf Hitler over immigration policy; there were also moments during his presidency in which he was directly accused of antisemitism. On August 20, amid a controversy involving Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib—both outspoken supporters of Palestine—Trump made a statement that triggered national uproar: “Where has the Democratic Party gone? Where have they gone where they are defending these two people over the state of Israel? (...) I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.”<sup>531</sup>

With this, he implied that, since the Democratic Party—according to him—was not defending Israel’s interests, Jews who supported it were acting against both Israel and themselves. Several Jewish organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League, strongly rejected the comment, recalling how similar accusations had been used for centuries to attack Jews—most notably in the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>532</sup> *The New York Times* published a report linking Trump’s remarks to the antisemitic myth of “dual loyalty” propagated by the Nazis, drawing a connection between this rhetoric, the Holocaust, and the rise of antisemitic attacks in the United States fueled by the white nationalism Trump was allegedly promoting.<sup>533</sup>

Although at first glance such comparisons may appear to derive from the racist tone of many of Trump’s speeches—openly aligned with the theses of nativist white nationalism—it is important to recognize the profound ideological differences between the two systems. German Nazism did not define race based on physical appearance—white skin, blond hair, blue eyes—

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<sup>530</sup> Baynard Woods, “Jackson, Trump, Hitler e as Sementes Do Fascismo Global,” *Isthmus*, July 19, 2017, <https://isthmus.com/opinion/democracy-in-crisis/jackson-trump-hitler-and-the-seeds-of-global-fascism/>.

<sup>531</sup> Jonathan Lemire and Darlene Superville, “Trump: Any Jew Voting Democratic Is Uninformed or Disloyal,” *Associated Press*, August 21, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/1bc3065eb2e4414289ef0ac1ac4ebaf7>.

<sup>532</sup> Jonathan Greenblatt, “To Compare COVID-19 Rules...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2020, <https://x.com/JGreenblattADL/status/1279788443212677123>.

<sup>533</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “The Toxic Back Story to the Charge That Jews Have a Dual Loyalty,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/us/politics/jews-disloyal-trump.html>; Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Accuses Jewish Democrats of ‘Great Disloyalty,’” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/us/politics/trump-jewish-voters.html>.

or simply “European” origin, as is evident in its desire to exterminate Poles and Slavs. Hitler’s concept of race was an ethnic one, according to which the Germanic peoples inherently possessed superior characteristics and were thus destined to become a global power and “Germanize” other populations. This ideology called for the extermination or marginalization of other inferior races—*Untermenschen*—including those located beyond the borders of the Reich. In contrast, the anti-immigration policies promoted by large sectors of the Republican Party, among them figures like Donald Trump, appeal to notions of public order, such as the belief that Latino and Muslim immigrants bring violence, and to a sense of European identity that protects the legacy of the country’s original settlers, in order to restrict migratory flows—similar to other moments in U.S. history. The similarities between these perspectives are far fewer than the differences, resting mainly on the acceptance of certain racial prejudices and the stigmatization of the other.

These comparisons, therefore, are not based on true historical similarities between Trump’s and Hitler’s discourse, but rather on Nazism’s status as the archetypal symbol of racism in modern history—making it a suitable reference for a hyperbolic portrayal of Trump’s discourse on immigration. This framework not only places the Republicans in the position of the authoritarian threat against which the U.S. national narrative was constructed after World War II, but also frames immigrants as defenseless victims.

In this sense, there is no doubt that the real point of reference for these comparisons were the detainment facilities operated by private contractors under Trump’s administration near the border, designed to hold immigrants attempting to cross illegally. These centers often housed unaccompanied minors and individuals living in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions, with deaths and abuses reported by international organizations.<sup>534</sup> In June 2019, Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—Representative for New York—compared these detention centers to concentration camps, triggering media backlash due to the term’s close association with the Holocaust.<sup>535</sup> Concentration camps have existed across various historical periods and regimes—including the United States during World War II—as a way of holding large populations of detainees, prisoners of war, or refugees, in controlled facilities.<sup>536</sup> However, the central role of

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<sup>534</sup> Eunice Hyunhye Cho et al., *Justice-Free Zones. U.S. Immigration Detention Under the Trump Administration* (ACLU, 2020),

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting\\_resources/justice\\_free\\_zones\\_immigrant\\_detention.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/justice_free_zones_immigrant_detention.pdf).

<sup>535</sup> Caroline Kelly, “Ocasio-Cortez Compares Migrant Detention Facilities to Concentration Camps,” *CNN*, June 18, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/18/politics/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-concentration-camps-migrants-detention>.

<sup>536</sup> See Aidan Forth and Jonas Kreienbaum, “A Shared Malady: Concentration Camps in the British, Spanish, American and German Empires,” *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 2 (2016): 245–67.

the Holocaust in historical consciousness meant that the first image invoked by the media was that of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the extermination of European Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime.

One month later, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article by David L. Ulin who, writing as a Jew, supported Ocasio-Cortez's comparison and argued that Trump's camps were just another step on the path toward genocide: "The Final Solution, however, did not emerge full-on but incrementally. It was implemented in 1941, but its roots lie in Hitler's anti-Jewish policies in the early 1930s — the normalization of discrimination and hate speech, then the detention and the stripping away of rights. Sound familiar?" The article sparked debate in the paper, which received letters from Jewish readers who, reflecting on the reality of concentration camps, condemned the comparison to varying degrees.<sup>537</sup> Marjorie Perloff, a Holocaust refugee who arrived in the U.S. at age six, criticized Ocasio-Cortez's analogy, arguing that the problem was not being Jewish or Latino, but attempting to enter the country illegally. Paul Koretz, by contrast—a Democratic member of the Los Angeles City Council—defended the comparison, saying the situation may not yet reflect the Holocaust, but certainly resembled Germany in 1931 or 1932.<sup>538</sup>

In other words, although the comparison was seen as exaggerated by a portion of American society, including members of the Jewish elite, for the Democratic opposition it served as an effective tool to distort the image of the anti-immigration discourse promoted by Donald Trump. But it was more than that: as a rhetorical device, it also allowed for the framing of private sector companies that supported Trump. Amazon, for example, had been accused of providing facial recognition software to the government and collaborating with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), thus violating ethical norms regarding privacy protection.<sup>539</sup> Likewise, companies such as GEO Group and CoreCivic—both involved in the

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<sup>537</sup> David L. Ulin, "I'm Jewish and I Don't Say This Lightly: 'Never Again' Is Right Now in America," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-07-25/concentration-camps-border-holocaust-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>.

<sup>538</sup> Los Angeles Times, "Letters to the Editor: America Has Concentration Camps on Its Border? That's Absurd and Ahistorical," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-07-29/america-has-concentration-camps-on-its-border-thats-absurd-and-ahistorical>.

<sup>539</sup> Maya Kosoff, "Jeff Bezos Fails to Explain Away Amazon's Partnership with ICE," *Vanity Fair*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/11/jeff-bezos-fails-to-explain-away-amazons-partnership-with-ice>.

private management of detention centers—worked with ICE in the operation of internment facilities for undocumented immigrants.<sup>540</sup>

*The American Prospect* published an article by Ronald Knox, professor at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, in which he compared the support of German industrialists such as IG Farben for the Nazi regime—and their collaboration in the Holocaust—with the contemporary situation involving immigration detention camps in the United States. Knox wrote:

Before Hitler’s rise in the 1930s, Farben and other industrial monopolists remained wary of the Nazi regime. But when the Nazis took power and began detaining, interning and deporting Jews—a program that mirrors America’s treatment of Central and South American immigrants today—Farben began cooperating with the Nazis and, ultimately, with the Holocaust itself.<sup>541</sup>

Direct comparisons with the Holocaust were not the only strategy used to discredit these policies through the collective memory of World War II. The historical role of the United States in rejecting Jewish refugees was also invoked. Holocaust historian Richard Breitman, writing in *Time* magazine, recalled how restrictive immigration policies during the war had prevented thousands of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution from entering the country—at a time when the modern legal concept of refugee did not yet exist. He thus criticized Donald Trump for trying to revive the same provisions that had once allowed the exclusion of those victims—specifically, the notion of someone being a likely or potential “public charge” to the state.<sup>542</sup>

In short, the immigration debate in the United States during Donald Trump’s first presidency was deeply shaped by the memory of the Holocaust, viewed as the ultimate historical expression of racial discrimination. The Jewish genocide was invoked as a political argument both to condemn Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric and to support a more open-border policy—through a symbolic construction of the immigrant as an analogue to the victims of Nazism. That is, in response to political debates over border control and citizenship access, Democrats drew on collective memory as a morally unambiguous framework on which to build arguments that were broadly understandable and legitimizing to the majority.

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<sup>540</sup> Yuki Noguchi, “Under Siege And Largely Secret: Businesses That Serve Immigration Detention,” *NPR*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/30/736940431/under-siege-and-largely-secret-businesses-that-serve-immigration-detention>.

<sup>541</sup> Ron Knox, “Monopolies, Trump, the Border, and Fascism,” *The American Prospect*, July 10, 2019, <https://prospect.org/power/monopolies-trump-border-fascism/>.

<sup>542</sup> Richard Breitman, “The Troubling History of How America’s ‘Public Charge’ Immigration Rule Blocked Jews Fleeing Nazi Germany,” *Time*, October 25, 2019, <https://time.com/5712367/wwii-german-immigration-public-charge/>.

## 4.2. The COVID-19 pandemic

To prepare this synthesis, we carried out a press review that required the creation of a database of news items in which comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust were mentioned during the COVID-19 pandemic. The extraction of news was carried out through the Media Cloud platform, created by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and the MIT Media Lab's Center for Civic Media, today managed by a university consortium. It contains a database fed by the daily collection of millions of news items published by media outlets on their social media accounts,<sup>543</sup> and has today become a fundamental tool for scientific research on the media. In our case we used the collection “United States – National #34412234,” because it restricts the media included to verifiable sources and remains stable over time. We accessed it through a simple search query. The result was a dataset containing 515 news items from 103 different media outlets in the period between the declaration of the pandemic and its end by the WHO, from March 13, 2020 to May 17, 2023. This was complemented with the extraction of news items shared by Twitter users appearing in our tweet dataset, discussed in section 5.2.3.

The reading of all the news items in this dataset was used to create another dataset called “events,” in which we recorded all the comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust that we found, as well as the condemnations of them and the ensuing apologies, when they occurred. This can be found in the Appendices —Table 1. From these we extracted the most precise possible date on which the event took place, the authorship, political affiliation, type of event, a brief summary of what happened, the motivations behind it, the terms of the comparisons, and the target. In the following sections we present an analytical account of the events during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we will contrast with the findings from the Twitter dataset discussed in later subsections.

### 4.2.1. The rise of totalitarianism: lockdowns and essential workers

The first containment measures against the coronavirus were the ones that had the greatest social impact. Never before in the history of the United States had state governments ordered the closure of most businesses and the confinement of most of the population in their homes, which raised distrust about a possible authoritarian drift in the country. Several studies

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<sup>543</sup> H. Roberts et al., “Media Cloud: Massive Open Source Collection of Global News on the Open Web,” *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 15, no. 1 (2021): 1034–45, <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18127>.

in newspapers and journals analyzed the temporary suspension of fundamental rights around the world and warned about a possible democratic backsliding, implementing massive transit controls, postponing electoral processes, and cancelling, *de facto*, the right of assembly, among other measures.<sup>544</sup> This was troubling in a context in which authoritarian countries such as the People’s Republic of China seemed—in the eyes of part of the public—to be dealing with the disease more effectively than Western democratic regimes.<sup>545</sup>

The strategy against the coronavirus was strongly decentralized. The federal government focused on establishing basic guidelines, granting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Anthony Fauci—at the time director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—a reference role in recommending state policies. Of the 50 states that made up the federation, 29 issued *stay-at-home orders* by the end of March, with more joining in the following month, 30 closed all non-essential businesses, 39 banned all gatherings or gatherings of more than 10 people, 44 prohibited table service in restaurants and bars, and 47 closed schools.<sup>546</sup> Most states began to implement the strictest measures toward the end of March and early April, easing them in May and June.<sup>547</sup>

### *Going down the (nazi) slippery-slope*

The rules analogy favoured that the first period of the pandemic was marked by metaphors related to the rise of the Nazi regime in the Weimar Republic and the totalitarian character of the Third Reich, directed above all against state governors. Already then we can perceive the partisan bias of such comparisons: although the targets were from both political sides, the emitters were all Republicans.

The first documented comparison coming from the political field was against the Democratic governor of Colorado, Jared Polis. After the order closing in-person bars and

<sup>544</sup> Florian Bieber, “Authoritarianism in the Time of the Coronavirus,” *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/authoritarianism-coronavirus-lockdown-pandemic-populism/>.

<sup>545</sup> Larry Diamond, “America’s COVID-19 Disaster Is a Setback for Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/americas-covid-19-disaster-setback-democracy/610102/>.

<sup>546</sup> Mathew Alexander et al., “United States Response to the COVID-19 pandemic, January–November 2020,” *Health Economics, Policy and Law* 16, no. 1 (2021): 6–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744133121000045>; Amanda Moreland et al., “Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement — United States, March 1–May 31, 2020,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 35 (2020): 1198–203, <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6935a2>.

<sup>547</sup> Laura Hallas et al., “Variation in US States’ COVID-19 Policy Responses,” *Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker*, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, 2021, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>.

restaurants, schools, and the stay-at-home order,<sup>548</sup> the Republican opposition leader, Patrick Neville, expressed his opposition to the measure in a radio interview, stating that they had to believe more in “the American spirit and the American people to get us through this, and not these panic orders and these shutdown orders and what’s leading to a Gestapo-like mentality.”<sup>549</sup> Weeks later, given that the governor was Jewish-American and had lost family in the Holocaust, Neville retracted his statement, saying that he “should have said authoritarian, not Gestapo,” indicating that both terms could function as synonyms.<sup>550</sup>

We see represented here the individualist spirit we mentioned in previous sections, for which the exercise of force demonstrated by the government was excessive, as well as the conceptual equivalence between *Gestapo* and a broad sense of *authoritarianism*. The central message of this and other Republican politicians was not yet so much directed at out-group attack —though that too— but rather at warning. The use of ANHs here functions as part of the argumentative structure of the *slippery slope*: if the government were allowed to continue deciding the fate of the citizenry, the worst could happen.

A more explicit example of this occurred when Brad Little, governor of Idaho, received intense criticism from the Republican opposition for having proclaimed a stay-at-home order, along with other measures similar to those detailed in the previous case.<sup>551</sup> The order established a distinction between “essential” and “non-essential” businesses, whereby the former could continue activity (these were, as we mentioned, health, security, etc.), while the latter had to promote remote work and close their physical premises.<sup>552</sup> Subsequent evidence showed that those who had been declared “essential workers” were more vulnerable to infections and the economic problems derived from them, so that, far from being a privilege, such designation became a risk factor.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Moe K. Clark, “The Moments That Have Shaped Colorado’s Response to Coronavirus,” *The Colorado Sun*, March 31, 2020, <https://coloradosun.com/2020/03/31/colorado-coronavirus-timeline-events/>.

<sup>549</sup> Jon Murray, “Colorado Republicans Act as Watchdogs on Polis’ Coronavirus Policies,” *The Denver Post*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/04/08/coronavirus-colorado-republicans-jared-polis/>.

<sup>550</sup> James Walker, “Jewish Colorado Governor Tears Up After GOP Leader Compares Stay-At-Home Order to Nazism,” *Newsweek*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/jewish-colorado-governor-gop-leader-stay-home-order-nazism-1498494>.

<sup>551</sup> National Governors Association, *Idaho – Coronavirus State Actions* (National Governors Association, 2020), <https://www.nga.org/coronavirus-state-actions/idaho/>.

<sup>552</sup> Idaho Office of the Governor, *Governor Little Issues Statewide Stay-Home Order, Signs Extreme Emergency Declaration* (Office of the Governor of Idaho, 2020), <https://web.archive.org/web/20200401003500/https://gov.idaho.gov/pressrelease/governor-little-issues-statewide-stay-home-order-signs-extreme-emergency-declaration/>.

<sup>553</sup> Xue Zhang and Mildred E. Warner, “COVID-19 Policy Differences across US States: Shutdowns, Reopening, and Mask Mandates,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 24 (2020): 9520, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249520>.

However, the opposition interpreted it differently. In an interview with podcaster Jess Fields, Republican state representative Heather Scott reflected on this distinction made by the government:

“That’s not different than Nazi Germany, where you had government telling people either you are an essential worker or a non-essential worker, and the non essential workers got put on a train (...) You can’t take away people’s lives and property without compensation, and that’s exactly what he would be doing. I mean, they are already calling him Little Hitler – Gov. Little Hitler.”<sup>554</sup>

Scott was transferring the entire narrative framework of the Second World War to the reading of an emergency situation. She brought together in one place Nazi authoritarianism—embodied in *Little Hitler*—and the memory of the Holocaust. The issue quickly reached national and international press. A local Human Rights association stated that it was an “extreme ignorance of history,” and that the congresswoman’s remarks showed “such deep disregard and lack of respect for what the Jewish people experienced during the time of the Holocaust.”<sup>555</sup> The Republican politician also received criticism from the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations and from a local rabbi, Tamar Malino, who simply said that “mass murder and genocide is not the same thing as deciding which businesses should essentially stay open and which should stay closed”.<sup>556</sup>

The parallel drawn by Scott referred to the Nazi policy of postponing deportation to the East of those Jews whose work was considered indispensable, either because it involved specialized tasks or because they formed an important part of the war apparatus, allowing them to remain in the Ghetto with a permit.<sup>557</sup> This became widely known thanks to *Schindler’s List*, one of the most popular films about the Holocaust and one that marked a milestone in its dissemination in the United States.<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> KTVB, “Rep. Heather Scott Compares Idaho to Nazi Germany,” *YouTube*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhbPo5Y-i3I>; Chad Sokol, “Idaho Rep. Heather Scott Calls Governor ‘Little Hitler,’ Compares Nonessential Workers to Holocaust Victims,” *The Spokesman-Review*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/apr/16/idaho-rep-heather-scott-calls-governor-little-hitl/>.

<sup>555</sup> Emma Tucker, “‘That’s No Different than Nazi Germany...’ Said Idaho State Rep. Heather Scott,” *The Daily Beast*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/heather-scott-idaho-lawmaker-blasted-for-comparing-state-coronavirus-orders-to-nazi-germany/>.

<sup>556</sup> Ben Kesslen, “Idaho Lawmaker under Fire for Comparing State Coronavirus Response to Nazi Germany,” *NBC News*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/idaho-lawmaker-under-fire-comparing-state-coronavirus-response-nazi-germany-n1187651>.

<sup>557</sup> Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 21–125.

<sup>558</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 214. For an analysis of representations see Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart and David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 36–69, <https://bkwrks.com/book/9780809327249>.

A new controversy took place in Ohio. There, Governor Mike DeWine, a Republican, declared a state of emergency and began closing schools and in-person businesses, prohibiting visitors to prisons and nursing homes, and adopting other social distancing measures. On March 22, he issued a stay-at-home order extended until early May.<sup>559</sup> On April 21, after Dr. Amy Acton, director of Ohio's Health Department, expressed enthusiasm for coronavirus immunity certificates that were being tested in other countries,<sup>560</sup> Sara Marie Brenner, wife of state senator Andrew Brenner, published a Facebook post that said:

“With a German accent, in your head say ‘Show me your papers’. This is downright scary! You don’t issue people certificates to be able to function outside of their home. You don’t issue people a certificate to allow them to go to work. This is the mark of the beast type talk. This is worse than China, for heaven’s sake. This actually feels like Hitler’s Germany, where you had to have blond hair and blue eyes to be able to function anywhere, and you were damned otherwise,” publicly replying to her husband, who said he would not allow this to happen in the state.<sup>561</sup>

In this passage, Nazi Germany is explicitly connected with the devil and with Communist China, reinforcing the notion of a conceptual network in which Nazism and the Holocaust are linked to the broader category of totalitarianism and, more specifically, of *evil* in the theological sense. The matter did not end there, since the wife of the Republican leader also posted a photo of what looked like a Nazi concentration camp with the caption “If people were told to get in cattle cars to be taken to virus protection camps, most of you would rush to get in line...”. James Pasch, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League in Cleveland, and Governor Mike DeWine himself quickly condemned this behavior, which was preceded by demonstrations against coronavirus containment measures with anti-Semitic symbolism.<sup>562</sup>

As we can see, the alternative to Nazism was generally socialist regimes, present (China) or past (USSR). This behavior fits with the *ethos* of American identity as a bastion of freedom

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<sup>559</sup> Amol Soin et al., “Ohio Response to COVID-19 and Its Impact on Interventional Pain Management Practices,” *Pain Physician* 23, no. 4S (2020): S439–47.

<sup>560</sup> Tyler Buchanan, “Ohio Lawmaker, in Facebook Post Criticizing Jewish Health Director for Coronavirus Shutdown, Says He Won’t Let the State Become Nazi Germany,” *Cleveland.Com*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2020/04/ohio-lawmaker-in-facebook-post-criticizing-jewish-health-director-for-coronavirus-shutdown-says-he-wont-let-the-state-become-nazi-germany.html>.

<sup>561</sup> Tyler Buchanan, “GOP Lawmaker Says He Won’t Let Jewish Health Director Turn Ohio into Nazi Germany,” *Ohio Capital Journal*, April 22, 2020, <https://ohiocapitaljournal.com/2020/04/22/gop-lawmaker-says-he-wont-let-jewish-health-director-turn-ohio-into-nazi-germany/>.

<sup>562</sup> Bob Jacob, “State Senator, Wife Compare Acton’s Statement to Being in Nazi Germany,” *Cleveland Jewish News*, April 23, 2020, The Internet Archive, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200427111415/https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local\\_news/state-senator-wife-compare-acton-s-statement-to-being-in-nazi-germany/article\\_64ee96e-855b-11ea-b8ed-9f3c3d562068.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20200427111415/https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/state-senator-wife-compare-acton-s-statement-to-being-in-nazi-germany/article_64ee96e-855b-11ea-b8ed-9f3c3d562068.html).

and democratic rights, while also with a strongly stereotypical view of both Nazism and socialism. The grouping of both under the same category is consistent with the tendency toward intracategorical homogenization and exaggeration of intercategory differences that is characteristic of social cognition in moments of salience. A good example occurred in Pennsylvania. There, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf was at the center of a controversy over lack of transparency in granting exceptional opening permits for businesses in the state, at a time when these were highly coveted due to the shutdown. The Republican opposition demanded the publication of evidence showing how each of those permits had been granted.<sup>563</sup> On May 4, during a hearing of the Pennsylvania House State Government Committee, Cris Dush, Republican state senator, compared the government’s lack of honesty to the situation in Nazi Germany, but also to socialist regimes such as the Soviet Union:

“More and more I go back to the Democratic National Socialist Party, the Nazi Party; I go to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR. This is a socialist playbook (...) It’s history. This is a socialist playbook, and I have to say that it’s important for the people of this state to start having access to information, rather than having it blown off to the side and hidden for an agenda.”<sup>564</sup>

This immediately drew rejection from the other attendees. He was interrupted by Democrat Kevin J. Boyle, who said it was the first time he had heard such a comparison in that committee in ten years, and the same happened with Dan Frankel, who expressed horror and branded such comparisons anti-Semitic. The Anti-Defamation League and several regional Jewish organizations condemned the comment and praised the members of the chamber for having reacted even in moments of heated political debate.<sup>565</sup> Chris Dush went on to make further analogies with Nazism a year later, in 2021, when he claimed that the government was letting immunocompromised people die in *death camps* (referring to nursing homes), leaving

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<sup>563</sup> Cynthia Fernández, “Republicans Subpoena Wolf Administration for Documents Related to Controversial Business Waiver Process,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania/spl/business-waiver-pennsylvania-audit-coronavirus-tom-wolf-20200430.html>.

<sup>564</sup> Ellie Rushing, “Pa. Lawmaker Compares Wolf Administration to Nazis over Coronavirus Transparency,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/pennsylvania/tom-wolf-nazi-coronavirus-pennsylvania-representative-cris-dush-20200504.html>.

<sup>565</sup> Anti-Defamation League, *PA Jewish Organizations Condemn State Rep.’s Repeated Holocaust Analogies* (Anti-Defamation League Philadelphia, 2020), <https://philadelphia.adl.org/news/pa-jewish-groups-again-condemn-dush-holocaust-analogies/>.

them to die there as a cost-cutting measure,<sup>566</sup> which again attracted criticism from Jewish organizations.<sup>567</sup>

The pressure was also felt in the media, particularly against those governors who decided to adopt more drastic measures, such as Democrat Gavin Newsom, whose decision and firmness in fighting the spread of the coronavirus provoked strong protests and controversies throughout the pandemic. On April 30, Graham Ledger, host of the conservative news channel One America News, lashed out on television against California Governor Gavin Newsom: “the Hitler of the Golden State, Gavin Newsom, gives the orders, and then his blue county-level lieutenants like that guy carry them out, no questions asked. So this is the new normal. For Riverside County, which is just east of Los Angeles: Wear a mask, stay inside, don’t travel, subjugate your constitutional rights to the man in Sacramento (...)”<sup>568</sup>

These kinds of statements were common on the network, which Donald Trump widely promoted on his presidential Twitter account, helping it to become one of the most important news broadcasters at the national level.<sup>569</sup> This host would go on to make similar statements. In August, after the worsening of the pandemic situation in the country, he stated: “I wonder if in Nazi Germany in 1939, the Jews did what ‘smart/patriotic’ Californians are doing today. Did they pretend there was a way out of this fascist death spiral? Did they come up with all variety of excuses as to why they refused to leave before it’s too late?”,<sup>570</sup> and again in November when, complaining that he had been asked for information to sit in a restaurant, he again referred to “in Hitler’s California”.<sup>571</sup>

The containment measures against the coronavirus proved effective in the United States and in many other countries, although their effectiveness varied depending on the delay in their

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<sup>566</sup> Andy Paulsen, “Dush: Wolf Let Seniors Die in ‘Death Camps’ as ‘Cost Cutting’ Measure,” *WESB News*, April 26, 2021, <https://wesb.com/2021/04/26/dush-wolf-let-seniors-die-in-death-camps-as-cost-cutting-measure/>.

<sup>567</sup> Anti-Defamation League, *For a Second Time, PA Jewish Organizations Condemn Senator Dush for Outrageous Holocaust Analogies* (Anti-Defamation League Philadelphia, 2021), <https://philadelphia.adl.org/news/pa-jewish-groups-again-condemn-dush-holocaust-analogies/>; Anti-Defamation League, “Jewish-Affiliated Organizations Jointly Condemn Pennsylvania Lawmaker’s Offensive Nazi Analogy,” *Anti-Defamation League*, May 5, 2020, <https://cleveland.adl.org/news/jewish-affiliated-organization-jointly-condemn-pennsylvania-lawmakers-offensive-nazi-analogy/>.

<sup>568</sup> Noor Al-Sibai, “OAN Host Calls California’s Governor ‘Hitler’ and LA Mayor a Nazi over Social Distancing Measures,” *Media Matters For America*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/oan-host-calls-californias-governor-hitler-and-la-mayor-nazi-over-social>.

<sup>569</sup> The Economist, “The Meaning of One America News Network,” *The Economist*, August 8, 2020, <https://archive.is/20240504064026/https://www.economist.com/united-states/2020/08/08/the-meaning-of-one-america-news-network>.

<sup>570</sup> Graham Ledger, “I Wonder If in Nazi Germany...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, August 17, 2020, <https://x.com/GrahamLedger/status/1326375036966604800>.

<sup>571</sup> Graham Ledger, “In Hitler’s California...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, November 11, 2020, <https://x.com/GrahamLedger/status/1326375036966604800>.

implementation.<sup>572</sup> However, the social impact of the measures against the coronavirus was immense, and in a country marked by deep economic inequalities mediated by ethnic stratification, the damage was felt much more strongly among the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. In just a few months, the unemployment rate rose from 3.5% to 14.7%,<sup>573</sup> the highest figure since the Great Depression; GDP fell by nearly \$6,000 per capita;<sup>574</sup> the poverty rate increased by 1% over the year;<sup>575</sup> and hundreds of thousands of businesses closed their doors in the second quarter of 2020 alone—some permanently, others temporarily.<sup>576</sup> In a country without a universal health care system, those who lost their sources of income had to face health care costs and inactivity, which drove many into economic ruin.

In response to this, and seeing that from April the curve of infections began to decrease consistently across the United States—it would do so until early June—,<sup>577</sup> numerous political figures and social movements began to put pressure on state governments, the federal government, and the CDC to initiate reopening, starting with President Donald Trump.<sup>578</sup> For this reason, many governors began to relax measures such as lockdowns and business closures, allowing for some reactivation of consumption and a controlled return to work activities.

It was at this point that the partisan divide between Republican and Democratic governors became most evident, with Democrats being slower and more cautious in relaxing measures, while Republicans moved more quickly, both at the state and local levels. This resulted in a higher rate of reinfections in their areas of government. Thus, a study by Baccini and Brodeur found that, in these first months of the pandemic, the likelihood of implementing a lockdown was more than 50% higher if the state was governed by Democrats and—interestingly—40%

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<sup>572</sup> Sophia Alison Zweig et al., “Impact of Public Health and Social Measures on the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and Other Countries: Descriptive Analysis,” *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7, no. 6 (2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2196/27917>.

<sup>573</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Unemployment Rate Rises to Record High 14.7 Percent in April 2020* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-rises-to-record-high-14-point-7-percent-in-april-2020.htm>.

<sup>574</sup> U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Real Gross Domestic Product per Capita [A939RX0Q048SBEA],” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2025, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/A939RX0Q048SBEA>.

<sup>575</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Estimated Percent of People of All Ages in Poverty for United States [PPAAUS00000A156NCEN],” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2025, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PPAAUS00000A156NCEN>.

<sup>576</sup> Ryan A. Decker and John Haltiwanger, *Business Entry and Exit in the COVID-19 pandemic: A Preliminary Look at Official Data* (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2022), <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/business-entry-and-exit-in-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-preliminary-look-at-official-data-20220506.html>.

<sup>577</sup> Edouard Mathieu et al., “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases,” Our World in Data, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases>.

<sup>578</sup> Colleen Long et al., “Some US Producers, States Reopening amid Political Pressure,” *Associated Press*, April 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/health-us-news-ap-top-news-international-news-virus-outbreak-34b48ffb057099eace794342bce448e>.

higher in the case of governors who, having reached the maximum term limit, could not run for re-election, suggesting electoral interests.<sup>579</sup> In any case, it does not appear that social pressure alone drove the change in Republican policies in their respective states, since there is no clear correlation between popular demonstrations in this regard and the reopening process carried out by these governors.<sup>580</sup> The policy of early reopenings would cause a substantial increase in mortality, especially when the second wave began in June.<sup>581</sup>

### *Re-Open America!*

Since Democratic governors were more reluctant to de-escalate measures at all levels, it was they, in this second wave of comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust, who became the main targets. This is an important point, because while at the beginning of the pandemic comparisons were part of a rhetoric of warning, as the situation reached a greater degree of normality the strategy shifted. Intergroup conflict and polarization increased as the perception of risk declined. This makes sense considering the idea of *we're all in this together*, that is, COVID-19, representing a threat to the whole country, initially activated the superordinate national category more strongly than the subordinate ones—those in which intergroup conflict occurs.<sup>582</sup> The discursive strategy based on political confrontation eroded feelings of solidarity, increasing public distrust toward containment measures.<sup>583</sup> The progressive increase in ANHs is a testament to this process.

Thus, conservative and anti-government groups began organizing protests demanding an end to containment measures, the reopening of businesses, and the repeal of social distancing requirements for organizing events. The so-called “Re-Open Illinois,” a protest against Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker held on May 1, introduced ANHs in another way: not only in controversial political messages, but also on signs, statements, and even chants. It featured at least two posters evoking the memory of the Holocaust: “Arbeit Macht Frei” and “Heil

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<sup>579</sup> Leonardo Baccini and Abel Brodeur, “Explaining Governors’ Response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States,” *American Politics Research* 49, no. 2 (2020): 215–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X20978846>.

<sup>580</sup> Nara Yoon and Michelle L. Lofton, “Open for Economic Activities during the COVID-19 pandemic: Factors Related to State Reopening Policies in a Federal Policy Vacuum,” *Public Performance & Management Review* 45, no. 2 (2022): 260–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2021.1943103>.

<sup>581</sup> Ka-Ming Tam et al., “Influence of State Reopening Policies on COVID-19 Mortality,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 6 (2022): 1565–74, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01394-8>.

<sup>582</sup> Selin Toprakkiran and Jonathan Gordils, “The Onset of COVID-19, Common Identity, and Intergroup Prejudice,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 161, no. 4 (2021): 435–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2021.1918620>.

<sup>583</sup> Charlie R. Crimston and Hema Preya Selvanathan, “Polarisation,” in *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19*, ed. Jolanda Jetten et al. (SAGE Publications, 2020).

[swastika] Pritzker,” referenced by journalist Sana Saeed and by several sources<sup>584</sup> and a photo of Pritzker with a Hitler mustache, which even appeared on Fox News broadcasts.<sup>585</sup> This was condemned by the Auschwitz Museum, which responded to one of these photos posted on Twitter, calling the act a “symptom of moral & intellectual degeneration”.<sup>586</sup> This also drew condemnation from the local government, which rejected the idea that it could be considered an act of free expression or legitimate protest.<sup>587</sup>

In these protests, what would later become a sort of conjunctural anti-vaccine identity began to take shape. At the same time, California Governor Gavin Newsom faced a wave of protests against his policy of closing the state. After presenting a plan for gradual reopening at the end of April,<sup>588</sup> he promised that significant progress would be made in the following weeks. On May 1 and 7, thousands of people demonstrated in front of the state capitol in Sacramento demanding an end to the measures. The events were organized by the “Freedom Angels,” an anti-vaccine association founded the previous year, 2019, in opposition to State Bill 276, designed to limit vaccination exemptions.<sup>589</sup> In the protests, various comparisons of the governor to Hitler and references to Nazism were seen, such as a huge banner showing Gavin Newsom with a Hitler mustache and a Nazi flag in the background, along with the message “End His Tyranny”.<sup>590</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Sana Saeed, “At the ‘Re-Open Illinois’...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200502022720/https://twitter.com/SanaSaeed/status/1256396192210128897>; Maureen Foertsch McKinney, “Stay-at-Home Protests Draw Extremists Groups, Anti-Hate Group Says,” *NPR Illinois*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.nprillinois.org/statehouse/2020-05-06/stay-at-home-protests-draw-extremists-groups-anti-hate-group-says>; Amir Tibon, “Coronavirus Crisis Unleashed ‘Tsunami’ of Anti-Semitism, Trump Official Says,” *Haaretz*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/2020-05-05/ty-article/.premium/coronavirus-crisis-unleashed-tsunami-of-anti-semitism-trump-official-says/0000017f-e1ec-d75c-a7ff-fdefcfa70000>.

<sup>585</sup> Michele Fiore, “‘Reopen Illinois’ Rallies Held as Anti-Defamation League Condemns Nazi Imagery on Signs,” *Fox 32 Chicago*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.fox32chicago.com/news/reopen-illinois-rallies-held-as-anti-defamation-league-condemns-nazi-imagery-on-signs>.

<sup>586</sup> Auschwitz Memorial, “‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ Was a False...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, May 2, 2020, <https://x.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1256446016510930945>.

<sup>587</sup> Morgan Gstalter, “Auschwitz Museum Condemns Nazi Slogan at ‘Re-Open Illinois’ Protest,” *The Hill*, May 2, 2020, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/495800-auschwitz-museum-condemns-nazi-slogan-at-re-open-illinois/>.

<sup>588</sup> John Myers et al., “Some California Businesses Could Reopen within Weeks as State Fights Coronavirus, Newsom Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-28/reopen-california-businesses-gavin-newsom-phases-stay-home-order-coronavirus>.

<sup>589</sup> The Times Editorial Board, “Anti-Vaxxers Have Found a New Way to Make People Unsafe,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-05-07/editorial-anti-vaxxers-have-found-a-new-way-to-make-people-unsafe>.

<sup>590</sup> Andrew Court, “Freedom Angels’ Protesters Take to the Streets in California and Compare Gov Gavin Newsom to Hitler for Refusing to Lift Statewide Stay-at-Home Orders,” *Daily Mail*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8298733/Freedom-Angels-protesters-compare-Gov-Gavin-Newsom-Hitler-anti-lockdown-protest.html>.

In Michigan this became a constant dynamic. At an April 30 protest in Lansing against Gretchen Whitmer's *stay-at-home* order, the face mask was introduced as a symbol of submission to dictatorial power. One image showed the governor dressed in red, with a swastika and Adolf Hitler's mustache, giving a speech before a crowd of masked people.<sup>591</sup> At another protest on April 15, images appeared of the governor dressed as Hitler with a swastika in the background, declaring "American flags are not essential items," or as an SS officer with the text "No fishing for you," as well as posters with messages such as "Heil [swastika] Whitmer".<sup>592</sup> This led journalist Jeff Kelly Lowenstein, whose family experienced the Holocaust, to write an article denouncing such comparisons, arguing that they destroyed the possibility of debate and diminished the suffering of Hitler's victims.<sup>593</sup> And indeed, comparisons with Adolf Hitler would become a recurring pattern throughout the pandemic, given his archetypal role in the American mindset as the epitome of authoritarianism and a symbol of discrimination.

Shortly thereafter, the Alaska Legislature decided to initiate a new protocol requiring legislators to be tested for COVID upon entering the building for in-person meetings, receiving a sticker if the result was negative. This provoked the anger of Republican Ben Carpenter, who, in a chain of emails with other members of the chamber, compared the method to the yellow stars that Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust: "What is the screening process? How about an arm band that won't fall off like a sticker will? If my sticker falls off, do I get a new one or do I get public shaming too? Are the stickers available as a yellow Star of David?"<sup>594</sup>

After being challenged by another Republican, Grier Hopkins, —"Ben, this is disgusting. Keep your Holocaust jokes to yourself"—, Carpenter decided to continue developing his analogy: he claimed that Hitler had not acted out of white supremacy but out of fear of the "Jewish nation," and that, consequently, fear could also lead them to renounce their way of life and lose freedom. This provoked the rejection of his colleagues, who asked him to apologize.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> Eric Cortellessa, "Jewish Dems Leader Calls Trump 'depraved' for Backing Armed Far-Right Protesters," *Times of Israel*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-jewish-leader-calls-trump-depraved-for-backing-armed-far-right-protesters/>.

<sup>592</sup> Gretchen Whitmer, "US Far-Right Extremists Are Now Calling Social Distancing a Nazi Policy," *Times of Israel*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-far-right-extremists-are-now-calling-social-distancing-a-nazi-policy/>.

<sup>593</sup> Jeffrey Kelly Lowenstein, "Comparisons to Hitler, Nazis over Stay-Home Order Must Stop," *Detroit Free Press*, May 30, 2020, <https://eu.freep.com/story/opinion/contributors/2020/05/30/comparisons-hitler-nazis-over-stay-home-order-must-stop/5271169002/>.

<sup>594</sup> Ewan Palmer, "Alaska Lawmaker Slams Stickers for COVID-19 Screening Process: 'Are the Stickers Available as a Yellow Star of David?'" *Newsweek*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/alaska-lawmaker-coronavirus-star-davis-ben-carpenter-1504556>.

<sup>595</sup> James Brooks, "Alaska Legislator Compares Pandemic Safety Measures at Capitol to Nazi Treatment of Jews," *Anchorage Daily News*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.adn.com/politics/alaska-legislature/2020/05/15/alaska-legislator-compares-pandemic-safety-measures-at-capitol-to-nazi-treatment-of-jews/>.

Later, when asked in an interview, he reaffirmed his words, explaining that the analogy was appropriate because the Jews of the Holocaust were an example of those who had lost their freedom, and that “if there were more people standing up for the loss of liberties prior to World War II, maybe we wouldn’t have had the Holocaust.”<sup>596</sup>

As in other cases, the regional delegation of the Anti-Defamation League issued a statement condemning Carpenter’s comparisons, saying that he had “introduced this vile antisemitic conspiracy theory into the public conversation, has resurrected the suggestion that Jews may be disloyal citizens, and has promoted revisionist history justifying Hitler’s actions.”<sup>597</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Shut up and put your mask on

As anticipated, the reopening process in the United States took place, in some cases, against the recommendations of health authorities,<sup>598</sup> under strong political, economic, and social pressure, and without a unified federal command, with wide differences between states. In fact, several studies have shown that in many states there was no clear correlation between the timing of reopening and the number of infections, nor was a correlation with unemployment rates ever demonstrated: the most relevant variables were the existence of a prior social safety net and being governed by the Republican Party.<sup>599</sup> Some states began reopening without first imposing the use of masks, which caused a very significant increase in contagion and death rates compared to those that were more demanding, delaying reopening and doing so with greater guarantees.<sup>600</sup>

However, despite the sharp rebound in cases in June, particularly in those states where reopening was faster and with fewer requirements, political pressure continued to increase in a

<sup>596</sup> Becky Bohrer, “Lawmaker Likens Virus Screening Stickers to Star of David,” *Associated Press*, May 16, 2020, <https://apnews.com/general-news-be3329955e9cee80ab3e6d455c848b34>.

<sup>597</sup> Miri Cypers, *RELEASE: ADL Pacific Northwest Rejects Alaska Representative’s Remarks Comparing Holocaust to COVID-19 Health Recommendations*, Press release (Anti-Defamation League Pacific Northwest, 2020), <https://seattle.adl.org/news/release-adl-pacific-northwest-rejects-alaska-representatives-remarks-comparing-holocaust-to-covid-19-health-recommendations/>.

<sup>598</sup> Allyson Chiu, “Fauci Warns States Rushing to Reopen: ‘You’re Making a Really Significant Risk,’” *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/01/fauci-open-states-coronavirus/>; Jeremy Herb and Lauren Fox, “Fauci Tells Congress That States Face Serious Consequences If They Reopen Too Quickly,” *CNN*, May 12, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/12/politics/anthony-fauci-congress-hearing>.

<sup>599</sup> Mildred E. Warner and Xue Zhang, “Social Safety Nets and COVID-19 Stay Home Orders across US States: A Comparative Policy Analysis,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 23, no. 2 (2021): 176–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2021.1916031>.

<sup>600</sup> Brystana G. Kaufman et al., “Comparing Associations of State Reopening Strategies with COVID-19 Burden,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 35, no. 12 (2020): 3627–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-06277-0>; Zhang and Warner, “COVID-19 Policy Differences across US States: Shutdowns, Reopening, and Mask Mandates.” This last one demonstrates the positive impact that masks had in reducing the number of cases.

spiral of polarization, and with it the analogies to Nazism and the Holocaust. The massive use of masks to facilitate the relaxation of social distancing measures also favored the emergence of new actors and new anchoring terms for comparisons. This was perhaps the first of the coronavirus containment measures in which the traditional anti-vaccine movement and various conspiracist groups began to play a truly prominent role.

Until then, public debate had been centered on the authoritarian or excessive character of the measures taken and the lack of guarantees due to government absence—something that, as we have seen above, can be attributed to the general tendency of distrust toward the state and the individualism of the United States. In the so-called “second wave” of the coronavirus, debates about the scientific validity of measures began to gain strength. The CDC did not recognize that coronavirus was airborne until October,<sup>601</sup> and numerous rumors circulated in the media and on social networks about the total ineffectiveness of masks, suggesting the arbitrariness of their imposition.<sup>602</sup> The mask thus became a symbol of authoritarianism and state control comparable to Nazism, and would only later be dethroned by vaccination certificates and the vaccines themselves.

### *The use of face masks*

The debates and protests over the use of face masks inaugurated a discursive strategy that would also remain very present during vaccination: that of victimization. Conservatives opposed to COVID containment policies not only dedicated themselves to attacking authorities with ANHs, but also used them to construct a victim identity. This strategy is highly consistent with the dynamics of intergroup conflict, especially in situations where the common superordinate category is relevant, because its logic is focused, among other things, on generating solidarity with other groups.<sup>603</sup> It allows the in-group to produce a moral narrative that justifies its actions

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<sup>601</sup> National Library of Medicine, *CDC Says Airborne Transmission Plays a Role in Coronavirus Spread in a Long-Awaited Update After a Website Error Last Month* (National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/search/research-news/11593>.

<sup>602</sup> John W. Ayers et al., “Spread of Misinformation About Face Masks and COVID-19 by Automated Software on Facebook,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 181, no. 9 (2021): 1251–53, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2021.2498>.

<sup>603</sup> Emina Subašić et al., “The Political Solidarity Model of Social Change: Dynamics of Self-Categorization in Intergroup Power Relations,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 12, no. 4 (2008): 330–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868308323223>.

against the out-group and legitimizes demands for status improvement through internal grievance—which also increases cohesion—and external empathy.<sup>604</sup>

In this sense, we may say that ANHs play a role similar to conspiracy theories, which, according to Bertin, represent a powerful means of victimization. Conspiracy theories transform diffuse negative experiences into concrete narratives that legitimize the sense of grievance, particularly useful in situations of crisis and uncertainty.<sup>605</sup> Creating narratives that compare the situation of those opposed to coronavirus containment measures with Nazism and the Holocaust is not substantially different. In both cases, a scheme of things is being constructed in which, however fanciful it may seem, the facts fit together, the villainous role of the out-group is magnified, and the in-group succeeds in presenting itself as a victim.

For the case of opponents of face masks, that victim was the Jews during the Holocaust. Thus, at the end of April Utah had begun its reopening program promoted by Republican governor Gary Herbert, with successive expansions in May and June.<sup>606</sup> However, on June 25 the Piute County Commissioner, Republican Darin Bushman, denounced on his Twitter the authoritarianism of the government in approving requests from two counties to impose the use of face masks in public: “Hang on friends, it won’t be long before you are required to do a Sieg Heil Salute to Herbert. Welcome to Utah now extend your right arm straight at 45 degrees keeping your hand parallel to your arm and offer your ‘Heil Herbert.’” a tweet accompanied by a photo of a group of people performing the Hitler salute in Nazi Germany.<sup>607</sup>

The event caused a major stir in Utah. The state governor and various local political figures responded to the provocation, as did a well-known rabbi, Sam Spector, who invited Bushman to speak with him about the tweet, stating that “we need to educate our public officials.”<sup>608</sup> In the face of these attacks, Republican Phil Lyman, a member of the Utah House of Representatives, tried to defend him with the already well-known argumentative strategy of the *slippery-slope*, claiming that Hitler had not committed his genocide immediately, but rather

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<sup>604</sup> Masi Noor et al., “When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, no. 4 (2012): 351–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868312440048>.

<sup>605</sup> Paul Bertin, “The Victimization Effects of Conspiracy Beliefs,” *Zeitschrift Für Psychologie* 232, no. 1 (2024): 26–37, <https://doi.org/10.1027/2151-2604/a000542>.

<sup>606</sup> National Governors Association, *Utah – Coronavirus State Actions* (National Governors Association, 2020), <https://www.nga.org/coronavirus-state-actions/utah/>.

<sup>607</sup> Sahalie Donaldson, “Piute County Commissioner Compares Utah Governor to Hitler over Salt Lake Mask Rule,” *Deseret News*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2020/6/26/21304457/coronavirus-mask-mandate-piute-county-commissioner-governor-gary-herbert-hitler-nazi-salt-lake>.

<sup>608</sup> Scott D. Pierce, “A Rural Commissioner Called Gov. Gary Herbert a Nazi for Approving a Face Mask Mandate in Urban Areas,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2020/06/26/rural-commissioner/>.

“after he asked politely for people to ‘just wear the damn arm band’.”<sup>609</sup> Even violinist Gerald Elias rebuked the Commissioner for his tweet: “My father was one of those men” who had fought in World War II, “but I’m not sure he would have been as enthusiastic about liberating Europe if the mission had been to save the free world from face masks.”<sup>610</sup>

A similar event, also related to the face mask requirement, broke out a week later in Kansas. During the State’s phased reopening, Democratic governor Laura Kelly signed an executive order requiring the use of face masks.<sup>611</sup> In response, the Anderson County Review, a newspaper owned by local Republican leader Dane Hicks,<sup>612</sup> published a cartoon showing, in the background, people being forced to board a train during the Holocaust, and in the foreground a drawing of the governor wearing a mask with a Jewish star sewn onto it, below which a sign read: “Lockdown Laura says: Put on your mask... and step onto the cattle car.”<sup>613</sup>

Anderson County is a rural area of fewer than 8,000 inhabitants, yet the news, as in many of the other cases we have been recounting, attracted the attention of major newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Rabbi Moti Rieber, director of Kansas Interfaith Action, publicly condemned the cartoon, calling it antisemitic,<sup>614</sup> and Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, also devoted a tweet to the matter.<sup>615</sup> This media and social pressure led the Anderson County Review to remove the cartoon, and Hicks, after some initial resistance, eventually apologized.

In Louisiana, a mandate by the city of Shreveport, led by Democratic mayor Adrian Perkins, required the use of face masks for anyone entering a business. This measure was in line with the pandemic situation, which involved a severe increase in COVID-19 cases in the area.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Phil Lyman, “Hitler Didn’t Start...,” *Twitter* (Now X), 2020, [https://x.com/phil\\_lyman/status/1276645255694004225](https://x.com/phil_lyman/status/1276645255694004225).

<sup>610</sup> Gerald Elias, “Gerald Elias: Masks Don’t Limit Freedom, They Protect It,” in *Salt Lake Tribune*, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2020/06/29/gerald-elias-masks-dont/>.

<sup>611</sup> National Governors Association, *Kansas – Coronavirus State Actions* (National Governors Association, 2020), <https://www.nga.org/coronavirus-state-actions/kansas/>.

<sup>612</sup> Tim Elfrink, “Kansas GOP Official Apologizes for Cartoon Comparing Mask Mandate to the Holocaust,” *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/07/06/cartoon-masks-holocaust-kansas/>.

<sup>613</sup> Marcy Oster, “After Criticism, Kansas Newspaper Removes Cartoon Likening Mask Requirement to the Holocaust,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/after-criticism-kansas-newspaper-removes-cartoon-likening-mask-requirement-to-the-holocaust>.

<sup>614</sup> Michael Levenson, “Kansas G.O.P. Official Removes Cartoon Comparing Mask Order to Holocaust,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/04/us/anderson-county-review-laura-kelly-holocaust-cartoon.html>.

<sup>615</sup> Greenblatt, “To Compare COVID-19 Rules...”

<sup>616</sup> Deborah Bayliss, “Perkins Issues an Executive Order Mandating Face Coverings,” *Shreveport Times*, July 7, 2020, <https://eu.shreveporttimes.com/story/news/2020/07/07/mayor-orders-residents-wear-face-masks-says-its-matter-health/5386869002/>.

In response to this, on July 7, Danny McCormick, a member of the State House of Representatives, posted a video on his Facebook in which he appeared destroying a face mask and stating the following: “People who don’t wear a mask will be painted as the enemy, just as they did to Jews in Nazi Germany. Now it’s the time to push back before is too late.” He later told KTBS that he was not referring to the murder of Jews in the Holocaust, but to the prior process of demonization that led to the Holocaust.<sup>617</sup> The video also served to disseminate conspiratorial ideas, such as that in the future people might have chips placed in their bodies against their will.<sup>618</sup> Rabbi Sydni Rubinstein condemned the comparison, noting that it is not the same to face restricted access to food and other resources as to wear a piece of cloth over one’s mouth.<sup>619</sup> The legislator would again be the subject of controversy a year later, when he posted a meme in which Joe Biden appeared with Hitler’s mustache and the phrase “Zee needle in zee skin or Zee executive orderz again,” in protest against vaccine mandates.<sup>620</sup>

We see that in these examples the metaphors already explicitly invoke the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust. The *arm bands*, the act of *painting the “other” as an enemy*, the forced identification of people opposed to coronavirus containment measures through the use or non-use of face masks, were common anchoring points during this period, and would be much more so later, with vaccines. This speaks to the growing heating-up of the public debate over containment measures. If references to National Socialists such as the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, and the Nazis’ rise to power, as well as the mechanisms of state control over the population, were already extreme reference points, the appeal to the Holocaust represented a further step, with the open involvement of institutions dedicated to protecting the memory of the Holocaust and Jewish identity in the United States, which had already begun to intervene earlier. The enforcement of these containment measures also led to an intensification of the already polarized debates about the authoritarian character of government actions. Businesses and individuals who refused to comply with the law in this regard began to suffer the consequences primarily in economic terms and in social, political, and media censure. The rhetoric of the *slippery slope* also began to spread, the famous slide toward fascism which, in liberal thinking,

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<sup>617</sup> Gerry May, “Lawmaker Rips Face Mask Mandates to Fight Coronavirus,” *KTBS*, July 8, 2020, [https://www.ktbs.com/news/lawmaker-rips-face-mask-mandates-to-fight-coronavirus/article\\_50654594-c172-11ea-8dc6-3b8d91fe10b6.html](https://www.ktbs.com/news/lawmaker-rips-face-mask-mandates-to-fight-coronavirus/article_50654594-c172-11ea-8dc6-3b8d91fe10b6.html).

<sup>618</sup> Danny McCormick, “Masks Aren’t Bad; Mask Mandates Are,” *Facebook*, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/McCormick4LA/videos/3082918205162142/>.

<sup>619</sup> May, “Lawmaker Rips Face Mask Mandates to Fight Coronavirus.”

<sup>620</sup> Southern Jewish Life, *Louisiana Legislator in Another Controversy Over Nazi Analogy for Covid Vaccine Mandates* (Southern Jewish Life, 2021), <https://sjlimg.com/2021/09/19/louisiana-legislator-in-another-controversy-over-nazi-analogy-for-covid-vaccine-mandates/>.

implies that the State will always seek more power, and that therefore every authoritarian action must be fought and questioned.

The Democratic governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz, imposed a mandate requiring the use of face masks for all those entering commercial establishments, in response to the rise in positive coronavirus cases in the state.<sup>621</sup> In response, the local Republican Party profile of Wabasha County posted an image on its Facebook page showing an SS soldier addressing a Jew with a Star of David, in a black-and-white photo. It was accompanied by text that said, “Just put on the star and quit complaining, it’s really not that hard. Just put on the mask and stop complaining”. Several Jewish organizations immediately denounced the post, such as Jewish Community Action<sup>622</sup> and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota, both pointing out the inappropriateness and reprehensibility of the comparison,<sup>623</sup> particularly when Minnesota’s rabbis had spoken in favor of Walz’s regulation.<sup>624</sup> After the party claimed that its page had apparently been sabotaged, Jennifer Carnahan, the party leader, reported that the image had been posted by a political officeholder, whose name was not disclosed, who had to resign.<sup>625</sup> This occurred days after a couple entered a Walmart in Marshall, in the southwest of the state, wearing masks with the Nazi flag and shouting, “If you vote for Biden you’re gonna be living in Nazi Germany, that’s what it’s going to be like. Socialism is gonna happen here in America!”<sup>626</sup>

A similar analogy was made by the vice-chair of the Arizona House Education Committee, John Fillmore, who, during a protest against coronavirus containment measures held in Phoenix, in front of the State Capitol, accused government policy of being “reminiscent of the 1930s Germany, when people on their own bodies were tattooed”.<sup>627</sup> He later added that, in his view, no government should be able to tell its citizens what to eat, drink, or accept into

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<sup>621</sup> Brian Bakst, “July 22 Update on COVID-19 in MN: Walz Unveils Statewide Mask Order,” *MPR News*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/07/22/latest-on-covid19-in-mn>.

<sup>622</sup> Jewish Community Action, “Given That Minnesota Rabbis...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2020, [https://x.com/JCA\\_MN/status/1287872160267001857](https://x.com/JCA_MN/status/1287872160267001857).

<sup>623</sup> Jewish Community Relations Council, *JCRC Condemns Ongoing Comparisons to Nazis, and the Misuse of the Holocaust, to Measures Being Taken to Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19* (Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, 2020), <https://minndakjrc.org/news/jcrc-condemns-ongoing-comparisons-to-nazis-and-the-misuse-of-the-holocaust-to-measures-being-taken-to-prevent-the-further-spread-of-covid-19-2/>.

<sup>624</sup> Harold J. Kravitz, “Wearing Masks – A Communal Responsibility,” 2020, <https://www.adathjeshurun.org/blog/wearing-masks-a-communal-responsibility>.

<sup>625</sup> Yaron Steinbuch, “Minnesota GOP Official Resigns after Comparing Mask Mandate to Nazi Germany,” *New York Post*, July 29, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/07/29/minnesota-gop-official-resigns-amid-nazi-post-over-mask-mandate/>.

<sup>626</sup> Bo Eriskon, “Swastika Masks Worn at My Hometown Walmart. What’s Going On?,” *CBS News*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/swastika-masks-minnesota-walmart-customers/>.

<sup>627</sup> Allgemeiner Staff, “Arizona State Rep Criticized for Comparing COVID 19 Mask Requirement to Tattooing of Holocaust Victims,” *The Allgemeiner*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2020/09/10/arizona-state-rep-criticized-for-comparing-covid%E2%80%9019-mask-requirement-to-tattooing-of-holocaust-victims/>.

their bodies, “as the Germans did in the Holocaust in the 1930s”. A Holocaust survivor among those rescued by Schindler, Alexander White, 97, stated that for him the comparison simply made no sense: “During the Holocaust, you had to wear the armband, you had to wear the striped shirt, forty kilometers to the east of us, and they were killing people by the thousands and tens of thousands. One was something you were forced to do, and if you didn’t do it you were shot. Here, most they can do is take you to court”<sup>628</sup>

Fillmore’s comparison also drew criticism from the local press,<sup>629</sup> and years later he was still being reminded that he had made that comparison.<sup>630</sup> However, although he later admitted that, while he would not apologize, he could have used a better analogy, Fillmore had already shown some inspiration in the Holocaust as a negative reference through which to read reality much earlier: during debates on an Arizona state law to ensure that schools provided Holocaust education to children, in early March of that year, Fillmore stated that “We as Americans take for granted so many of our freedoms and our liberties and don’t understand how close to tyranny we all are when we have overbearing governments”.<sup>631</sup> In this way, we can affirm that the Republican made this analogy in keeping with his worldview, and not without thought.

### *Social distancing measures*

On July 17, Gavin Newsom again received criticism from the Republican opposition. Devin Nunes, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, released an episode of his podcast in which he spoke about his concern over what he interpreted as the advance of the city of Fresno and the entire state of California toward socialism: “Now what’s happened is that we’ve really got into this... these strike forces are reminiscent of Nazi Gestapo... last weekend many restaurants in my district were essentially raided (...)”<sup>632</sup> referring to police checks to stop

<sup>628</sup> Michael Doudna, “Arizoa Lawmaker Admits ‘Better Analogy’ Possible after Comparing Mask Mandate to Holocaust,” *12News*, September 10, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200911092457/https://www.12news.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/lawmakerehere-might-have-been-a-better-analogy-in-comparing-mask-mandate-to-holocaust/75-45baa463-490b-438b-8150-e3cdf2df8436>.

<sup>629</sup> Laurie Roberts, “Rep. John Fillmore Compares Mandating Masks to Tattooing Holocaust Victims. Really?,” *Arizona Republic / Azcentral*, September 8, 2020, <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/opinion/oped/laurieroberts/2020/09/08/wearing-mask-like-genocide-rep-john-fillmore-unhinged/5744413002/>.

<sup>630</sup> Steve Goldstein, “Holocaust Analogies Have No Place in Politics,” *KJZZ*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.kjzz.org/2022-02-08/content-1754252-crazy-lazy-and-hazy-why-holocaust-analogies-have-no-place-politics>; Bree Burkitt, “Losing Arizona: Is Rep. John Fillmore an Insurrectionist?,” *Copper Courier*, March 10, 2021, <https://coppercourier.com/2021/03/10/losing-arizona-is-rep-john-fillmore-an-insurrectionist/>.

<sup>631</sup> Bryan Bender, “The Holocaust Comes to a Vote,” *Politico Magazine*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/03/holocaust-education-vote-arizona-118964>.

<sup>632</sup> *Newsom Strike Teams: Modern Day Gestapo?*, directed by Devin Nunes, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2Vl68sDX2k>.

the illegal opening of businesses, in violation of restrictions to contain the virus. The *Fresno Bee* responded with irony that “One could result in a Fine. The other could result in the gas chamber”.<sup>633</sup>

This growing proliferation of such comparisons led to numerous articles—by journalists, political commentators, and also scholars in the field—about their pertinence or lack thereof, including in both directions—that is, not only those made toward governments but also toward opponents of coronavirus containment measures. The attitude of an important segment of Republicans in refusing to sacrifice freedom and economic prosperity in the short term for safety and the preservation of life was harshly criticized on several occasions. In one of the most striking episodes, and pertinent to our object of study, Jason Stanley, a philosopher and son of Holocaust survivors and a well-known scholar of the phenomenon of “neofascism,” reached the conclusion that the actions of the federal government could be comparable to the Nazi genocide:

Arbeit macht frei, work shall make you free. So, the idea here is social Darwinism. The idea is that only the fit survive, winning is the only thing that matters. Hitler’s book is called my struggle, *Mein Kampf*. The idea is one group has emerged in struggle victorious. We can get rid of the weak. We don’t need them. You know, a pandemic is something that’s just going to clear the weak. They have to be sacrificed for the strength of the nation.<sup>634</sup>

Despite assuring on several occasions that he did not intend to compare Donald Trump’s regime with fascism beyond forms and propaganda, he did suggest, as in the passage shown, that many of the central elements of his political strategy were heirs to fascism.

Curiously, a few months later it would be another university professor, Rob Jenkins, of Georgia State University, who offered a reflection in an academic tone but of the opposite sign. According to his reasoning, the “response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a textbook example of fascism at work,” since the loss of freedoms and State control over the means of production in the name of the common good would be genuinely fascist elements.<sup>635</sup> Jenkins points directly to the left as the author of those fascist regimes established in Western countries

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<sup>633</sup> Marek Warszawski, “Strap in, Everyone. I Listened to The Devin Nunes Podcast — so You Don’t Have to,” *The Fresno Bee*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/marek-warsawski/article244458997.html>.

<sup>634</sup> Tim Graham, “Stelter’s Reliable Head Wound: Uncorking a Seven-Minute Smear Segment on Fascist Trump,” *NewsBusters*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/nb/tim-graham/2020/08/31/stelters-reliable-head-wound-uncorking-seven-minute-smear-segment>.

<sup>635</sup> Rob Jenkins, “The Left’s Fascist COVID-19 Response,” *Townhall*, January 19, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250320042852/https://townhall.com/columnists/robjenkins/2021/01/19/the-lefts-fascist-covid19-response-n2583309>.

during the pandemic, despite the fact that as he was writing the Democrats had been governing little more than two months at the federal level.

#### 4.2.3. A Vaccine Holocaust

One of the first elements of debate over the obligation to vaccinate emerged already at the end of 2020, when the large number of people who had gone through the illness, thereby obtaining greater resistance to the virus, raised doubts as to whether such a degree of immunity could justify granting them greater freedom of action. However, scientific studies on immunity acquired by having had the disease were not conclusive regarding the duration of that immunity, and therefore it was not possible to grant certificates with an indeterminate duration which, moreover, could vary greatly depending on the person.

What we call the obligation to vaccinate is a set of private and public measures that, directly or indirectly, seem to force a person to decide to be vaccinated in order not to face social or economic consequences. Among the public measures we find: COVID passports, vaccination certificates, mandatory vaccination for those who wish to hold a public office, or restrictions on the opening of businesses, conditioning them on requiring proof of vaccination. As for private measures, these involve establishments that use their right of admission to require proof of vaccination, companies that require their employees to be vaccinated, or that require their employees to be tested weekly. This debate was marked by different lines of argument, some more and others less prone to employ references to Nazism and the Holocaust in order to legitimize themselves before the public. The first of these was the safety and necessity of vaccination, which was determined by the various waves of disinformation about the development of vaccines. The belief that vaccines had been developed too quickly and therefore without sufficient guarantees; that they had negative side effects, both short- and long-term, which were being concealed; or that there existed better alternatives, such as the treatment of coronavirus itself rather than its prevention through the use of vaccines, were key factors that help us today to understand the skepticism of broad sectors of the population toward vaccination policies. These concerns were linked to the strong presence of certain anti-vaccine beliefs and so-called "alternative" medicine among the U.S. population, which we already observed in previous sections.

Another of the most prolific lines of debate was the State's right to force, either directly or indirectly, the population to vaccinate, and whether international legislation that protects individuals against unwanted or even experimental medical interventions applied in this sense.

In this regard, countless appeals were made to the Nuremberg Code, to the abuses of medicine and science by the Nazis against those considered *untermensch* in some sense. The very mention of the Nuremberg Code, which had been designed to combat this type of precedent under Nazism, is an implicit analogy, if not a simile, and also elicited numerous criticisms from various sectors of society, including Jewish organizations.

However, it was not only vaccination itself that posed a problem for broad sectors of the U.S. population, but also the fact that, in order to make it useful and effectively verify the state of immunity of individuals, an absolutely unusual deployment of monitoring measures was required in a country where even the use of IDs for voting has been a genuine debate for decades. Some states, such as New York and its *Excelsior* program, implemented pilot measures to try to create the “COVID Passport” that was already being debated and tested in various European countries.

#### *Vaccination certificates*

One of the first targets of comparisons with Nazism was the Walmart supermarket chain. The company declared that it would carry out a partnership with The Commons Project so that individuals could carry their health records and vaccination certificates with them on their mobile phones,<sup>636</sup> and shortly thereafter it began issuing vaccination requirements for some of its employees.<sup>637</sup> Josh Mandel, a Jew, Republican Party member from Ohio who had been State Treasurer and a member of its House of Representatives, published a tweet in which he accused the company of engaging in Nazi Germany tactics: “We’ve seen this before... Nazi Germany also registered citizens. Our Liberty is under attack!”<sup>638</sup> It should be noted that the point of comparison here is not, as in other situations, an attack on the privacy of individuals’ health status, but rather even a disagreement with the very act of registering them—something absolutely common in most countries of the world. This shows us to what extent the individualist mentality and the American distrust of the State are intervening in these kinds of debates.

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<sup>636</sup> Walmart, “Walmart Empowering Individuals with Access to Digital Health Records in Partnership with The Commons Project Foundation and CLEAR,” *Walmart Corporate Blog*, 2021, <https://corporate.walmart.com/news/2021/03/17/walmart-empowering-individuals-with-access-to-digital-health-records-in-partnership-with-the-commons-project-foundation-and-clear>.

<sup>637</sup> Anne D’Innocenzio, “Walmart Mandates Vaccines for Workers at Headquarters,” *Associated Press*, July 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-health-coronavirus-pandemic-bdbba6610c582a3c03b329432a484126>.

<sup>638</sup> Josh Mandel, “Let Me Get This Straight...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210411000146/https://twitter.com/joshmandelohio/status/1374074030874038274>.

It would not be the last time Mandel made such comparisons. Later, in September 2021, after Joe Biden announced an order under which workers at large companies would have to choose between vaccination or weekly testing,<sup>639</sup> he called for civil disobedience in the following terms: “Do not comply with the tyranny, and when the Gestapo show up at your front door, you know what to do.”, a statement that was condemned by the American Jewish Committee and other organizations.<sup>640</sup> The heated debate on vaccination passports drew the intervention of numerous political and media figures, especially after it became known in early March that the Biden administration was preparing federal standards that could guide state-level solutions.<sup>641</sup> At that time, as we mentioned, there were already various initiatives, both public and private, to create the necessary certification, which led many to view the arrival of passports as something imminent.<sup>642</sup> On March 29, several Republican legislators expressed their alarm against such initiatives through Fox News. Madison Cawthorn, then a member of the United States House of Representatives, stated:

“Proposals like these smack of 1940s Nazi Germany. We must make every effort to keep America from becoming a ‘show your papers society’, the Constitution and our founding principles decry this type of totalitarianism. America faces a dangerous future when its leader’s ideology shares more commonalities with Leninism than liberalism”.<sup>643</sup>

The topic of *show me your papers*, closely tied to the distrust toward state registration of citizens we mentioned earlier, is deeply rooted in U.S. popular culture. In films such as *Casablanca*, *Indiana Jones*, etc., the phrase “papers, please” or “show me your papers” is representative of totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Therefore, we can say that this is not merely a matter of libertarian political culture, but also of social imagination and cultural repertoire.

Just one day later, the Libertarian Party of Kentucky also compared vaccination passports to the discriminatory practices of Nazi Germany, in a tweet rhetorically asking: “Are the vaccine

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<sup>639</sup> Annie Linskey et al., “Biden Announces Sweeping New Vaccine Mandates for Businesses, Federal Workers,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/vaccine-mandate-federal-employees/2021/09/09/1c1ce9dc-116b-11ec-882f-2dd15a067dc4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/vaccine-mandate-federal-employees/2021/09/09/1c1ce9dc-116b-11ec-882f-2dd15a067dc4_story.html).

<sup>640</sup> Ben Sales, “Jewish Ohio Senate Candidate Compares Biden’s Vaccine Mandate to the Gestapo,” *Times of Israel*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-ohio-senate-candidate-compares-bidens-vaccine-mandate-to-the-gestapo/>.

<sup>641</sup> The White House, “Press Briefing by White House COVID-19 Response Team and Public Health Officials,” 2021, <https://archive.is/CidJO#selection-1079.8-1079.88>.

<sup>642</sup> Dan Diamond et al., “Vaccine Passports’ Are on the Way, but Developing Them Won’t Be Easy,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/03/28/vaccine-passports-for-work/>.

<sup>643</sup> Houston Keene, “GOP Lawmakers Warn against Vaccine Passports,” *Fox Business*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/coronavirus-vaccine-passports-republicans-warn>.

passports going to be yellow, shaped like a star, and sewn on our clothes?”), which drew criticism from other sectors of the party.<sup>644</sup> Meanwhile, Cleveland baseball player James Karinchak posted on his Instagram a comparison that invoked words erroneously attributed to Hermann Goering, in which it was claimed that the best strategy for subduing the population was to instill real fear, terror, so that “you can make them do what you want”.<sup>645</sup> This phrase, a kind of paraphrase or interpretation of Goering’s actual documented words, had already been circulating for at least the previous month among various public figures on social networks, and it spread widely due to the ease with which it allowed analogies to be drawn between the pandemic situation and that of Nazism.<sup>646</sup>

Thus, references to Nazism were not made solely as an allusion to a specific historical period used as an example, but it was also functioning as a cultural repository from which a wide variety of references were drawn. One of the most striking moments in this sense occurred when Richard Grenell, who had been U.S. ambassador to Germany and National Intelligence Director less than a year earlier, published a tweet with a meme from the famous film *Inglorious Basterds* in which a Nazi officer said “You’re hiding unvaccinated people under your floorboards, aren’t you?”, thereby equating pro-vaccination measures with the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust. It was accompanied by the phrase “Speak up now. #slipperyslope”.<sup>647</sup> The media impact of this was notably limited if we take into account the political relevance of his figure, as we find very few references to it in the press.<sup>648</sup>

In Michigan, Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer refused to impose a vaccination certificate requirement, but the Republican sector of the House demanded the enactment of a preventive ban on such requirements through House Bill 4667, promoted by Representative Sue Allor. During the debates in defense of this law, several individuals were invited to speak

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<sup>644</sup> Brendan Cole, “Kentucky Libertarian Party Compares Vaccine Passports to Holocaust Symbols,” *Newsweek*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/kentucky-libertarian-party-coronavirus-passport-yellow-star-1579773>.

<sup>645</sup> Brian Koster, “Cleveland Indians Pitcher Makes Controversial Social Media Post, Then Deletes It,” *Cleveland 19 News*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.cleveland19.com/2021/04/06/cleveland-indians-pitcher-makes-controversial-social-media-post-then-deletes-it/>.

<sup>646</sup> Reuters Fact Check, “Fact Check: Hermann Goering Quote about Scaring People to Enslave Them Appears to Be Inauthentic,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-goering-falsequote/fact-check-hermann-goering-quote-about-scaring-people-to-enslave-them-appears-to-be-inauthentic-idUSL1N2LM23W>.

<sup>647</sup> Richard Grenell, “Speak up Now. #slipperyslope,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RichardGrenell/status/1376582131732770820>.

<sup>648</sup> Ben Sales, “Vaccine Passports Are Being Compared to Yellow Stars of David from the Holocaust,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.jta.org/2021/03/30/united-states/vaccine-passports-are-being-compared-to-yellow-stars-of-david-from-the-holocaust>; Li Cohen, “A Congressman Compared COVID Vaccine Cards to Nazi-Era Passes. The Auschwitz Memorial Says He’s Exploiting the Holocaust,” *CBS News*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/warren-davidson-covid-vaccine-cards-nazi-auschwitz-memorial/>.

by the Republican side, whose interventions abounded with comparisons to the Holocaust's yellow stars, the Nuremberg Code, or family members who had suffered the Jewish genocide.<sup>649</sup>

Similar comparisons arose during these debates in other states. In June 2021, Wisconsin discussed Assembly Bill 299, which had a similar purpose: preventing businesses, universities, or government agencies from requiring proof of vaccination. During the debates, which culminated in its veto by Democratic governor Tony Evers, it was argued that requiring proof of vaccination sounded like "Russia and the Cold War" (Sen. Mary Felzkowski) or like "Germany back in the '40s", according to Republican representative Timothy Ramthun.<sup>650</sup> The Republicans' position on this became clear again when, days later, one of their Assembly members, Shae Shortwell, compared the mask or vaccination proof requirement of the Central Wisconsin Children's Museum to Nazi Germany in a Facebook post: "The Gestapo wants to see your papers, please."<sup>651</sup> After receiving a wave of criticism from residents of Steven's Point (the town where the museum is located) and other parts of the state, he refused to issue an apology and doubled down on his claim, stating that he could not believe some people wasted time "to claim that this is somehow antisemitic, as if history can never repeat itself, as if somehow being able to see repeats in history is antisemitic."<sup>652</sup>

One of the biggest scandals related to the comparison between vaccination certificates and Nazism and the Holocaust was led by Marjorie Taylor Greene, who had taken office as a Republican congresswoman just a few months earlier, in January. During those months, Greene had already shown a great ability to cause public scandal, whether by suggesting that 9/11 or certain school shooter attacks were hoaxes, among other things, which had earned her a vote to expel her from two committees.<sup>653</sup> During an interview with commentator David Brody on the program "The Water Cooler", the Republican politician criticized Nancy Pelosi's demands that

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<sup>649</sup> Samuel Dodge, "House Hearing on COVID-19 Vaccine Passport Ban Includes Testimony Invoking Holocaust," *MLive*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/05/house-hearing-on-covid-19-vaccine-passport-ban-includes-testimony-invoking-holocaust.html>.

<sup>650</sup> Molly Beck, "Wisconsin Lawmakers Advance Bill barring COVID-19 Vaccine Requirements for Business Owners, Universities, Government," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 2, 2021, <https://eu.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2021/06/02/wisconsin-lawmakers-advance-bill-barring-covid-19-vaccine-requirements/7505946002/>.

<sup>651</sup> Rob Mentzer, "Assembly Representative Attacks Nonprofit Children's Museum With Nazi Analogy," *Wisconsin Public Radio*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.wpr.org/health/assembly-representative-attacks-nonprofit-childrens-museum-nazi-analogy>.

<sup>652</sup> Scott Bauer, "Wisconsin Lawmaker Compares Museum's Mask Policy to Nazis," *Associated Press*, June 8, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/wi-state-wire-wisconsin-lifestyle-travel-museums-6f4c7f3b9e5bc7317788cec135901ad0>.

<sup>653</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, "Marjorie Taylor Greene: US House Votes to Strip Republican of Key Posts," *BBC News*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55940542>.

members of the House of Representatives wear masks or show vaccination certificates before entering the building:

“You know, we can look back at a time in history where people were told to wear a gold star, and they were definitely treated like second class citizens, so much so that they were put in trains and taken to gas chambers in Nazi Germany,” Greene said. “And this is exactly the type of abuse that Nancy Pelosi is talking about.”<sup>654</sup>

Asked about this comment by 12 News journalist Bianca Buono, she stated that, just as no rational Jewish person could agree with what happened in Nazi Germany, neither could they agree with what was happening with mask mandates.<sup>655</sup> A few days later, on May 25, she reacted to the news that Food City (a supermarket chain in the country) would no longer require vaccinated consumers to wear masks, claiming that vaccinated employees were forced to wear a vaccination logo just as Jews had been forced by the Nazis to wear a gold star.<sup>656</sup> The social and political impact of her comments was largely due to her previous media notoriety, and it was felt across the country and beyond. The Auschwitz Museum responded to the congresswoman by stating that her comparisons were a “sad symptom of moral and intellectual decline.”<sup>657</sup> This turned Greene into a kind of *enfant terrible* for the Republican Party, with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy strongly condemning “her intentional decision to compare the horrors of the Holocaust with wearing masks”,<sup>658</sup> as did Chuck Schumer, Democratic Majority Leader in the Senate, Elise Stefanik, Republican congresswoman from New York, Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Adam Kinzinger, representative from Illinois, and others.<sup>659</sup> To this, Greene initially responded with a new indirect comparison, claiming that such censorship was reminiscent of the great tyrants of history.<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>654</sup> Ryan Nobles, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Compares House Mask Mandates to the Holocaust,” *CNN*, May 22, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/21/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-mask-mandates-holocaust/index.html>.

<sup>655</sup> Bianca Buono, “I Think Any Rational Jewish...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/BiancaBuono/status/1395955435128033280>.

<sup>656</sup> Marjorie Taylor Greene, “Vaccinated Employees Get...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/mtgreene/status/1397150992341377027>.

<sup>657</sup> Auschwitz Memorial, “The Instrumentalization of the Tragedy...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1397249131425501186>.

<sup>658</sup> Barbara Sprunt, “Kevin McCarthy Leads House GOP In Blasting Marjorie Taylor Greene’s Holocaust Remarks,” *NPR*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/1000129271/marjorie-taylor-greene-holocaust-remarks-blasted-by-republicans-leaders>.

<sup>659</sup> Martin Pengelly, “Fury as Marjorie Taylor Greene Likens Covid Rules to Nazi Treatment of Jews,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/25/marjorie-taylor-greene-nazi-jews-condemnation>.

<sup>660</sup> Elizabeth Crisp, “Kevin McCarthy, Steve Scalise, Others Blast Marjorie Taylor Greene for Holocaust Comments,” *Newsweek*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/kevin-mccarthy-steve-scalise-others-blast-marjorie-taylor-greene-holocaust-comments-1594659>.

On June 14 the representative issued a public apology at a press conference at the Capitol, after visiting the Holocaust Museum, in which she acknowledged that nothing was comparable to the Holocaust.<sup>661</sup> This did not rule out other comparisons she had made in previous days, when she stated that “Nazis were the National Socialist Party. Just like the Democrats are now a national socialist party.”<sup>662</sup> In fact, this did not lead to a change of attitude on the part of the Republican. After President Joe Biden issued a statement calling for greater awareness of the need for vaccination among the population, with a “door-to-door” campaign, many Republicans warned of a possible authoritarian drift of the government by pressuring people in their own homes to get vaccinated.<sup>663</sup> Greene called the employees who would supposedly carry out such action “medical brown shirts”, and rejected making people participants in a “medical experiment”.<sup>664</sup> In November she did so again, on a podcast with Steve Bannon, in which she claimed that “vaccine Nazis” were ruining the country: “I’m sorry. I know I’m using the word Nazi and everybody gets mad when I say it, but that’s exactly what they are.”<sup>665</sup>

At the end of the month a new episode occurred with John Bennett, chair of the Oklahoma Republican Party, who published a post in the organization’s Facebook group with an image of a Star of David like those Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust, bearing the word “Unvaccinated”, with a chip and a serial number, and text that read: “Limited access to travel within their State, Province or Territory. The bearer may not fly, cannot enter a pub, restaurant, club or theatre. Has limited access to either work, buy and sell goods or have access to services and healthcare. WAKE UP PEOPLE – Is this sounding familiar? Those who don’t KNOW history are DOOMED to repeat it”. The post asked the public to call Lt. Governor Matt Pinnell to request a special legislative session to address companies’ vaccination policies, since employees were at risk of being subjected to them.<sup>666</sup> The post prompted a response from a group of Oklahoma Republicans rejecting it, upholding the defense of freedom of choice

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<sup>661</sup> Melanie Zanona and Sarah Ferris, “Greene Apologizes after Holocaust Museum Visit as House Girds for Censure Fight,” *Politico*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/14/greene-holocaust-omar-censure-494441>.

<sup>662</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Greene’s Ahistorical Claim That the Nazis Were Socialists,” *The Washington Post*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/29/greenes-ahistorical-claim-that-nazis-were-socialists/>.

<sup>663</sup> Zeke Miller, “White House Calling out Critics of Door-to-Door Vaccine Push,” *Associated Press*, July 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-health-government-and-politics-coronavirus-pandemic-michael-brown-c5c9260bc083e7e9cc0e415caa43879f>.

<sup>664</sup> Marjorie Taylor Greene, “Biden Pushing a Vaccine...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/mtgreene/status/1412515350244114433>.

<sup>665</sup> Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country,’” *Times of Israel*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-blames-vaccine-nazis-for-ruining-our-country/>.

<sup>666</sup> Oklahoma Republican Party, “Please Contact Lt Governor Matt Pinnell...,” *Facebook*, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/OKGOP/photos/a.10150355619745706/10157912291920706/>.

regarding vaccination, but stating that it was irresponsible and wrong to compare the situation to the Holocaust.<sup>667</sup> Far from showing remorse for his words, Bennett doubled down in a video posted again on the platform, developing the comparison in even greater detail:

“[The Nazis] gave [Jews] a star to put on, and they couldn’t go to the grocery store, they couldn’t go out in public, they couldn’t do anything without having that star on their shirt. Take away the star and add a vaccine passport. (...) The Star of David — when they put that on the Jews, they weren’t sending them directly to the gas chambers. They weren’t sending them directly to the [incinerator]. This was leading up to that (...) it’s going to end in the same exact result as we saw when nobody stood up whenever the Jews were told that they had to wear that star.”<sup>668</sup>

It should be noted that at that time there were no such vaccination mandates and prohibitions in Oklahoma. The Jewish Federation of Oklahoma City and other organizations condemned Bennett’s comparisons,<sup>669</sup> which did not prevent him from posting a second video in which he did not retract the comparisons he had previously made and, beyond that, reproached his colleagues for a lack of political leadership and called for action against the measures.<sup>670</sup>

Throughout the month there were also scandals involving employees of state agencies and companies or in the health sector, who were the most affected by mask and vaccination requirements. Thus, on August 23 a Georgia Hospital operations technician recorded a video complaining about vaccination certificates and showing an imitation of the numbers worn by prisoners in Nazi extermination camps.<sup>671</sup> Wellstar Health System, the hospital chain that employed her, fired her, stating that they would not allow acts of antisemitism.<sup>672</sup> Likewise, on August 24, an assistant principal at a school in Germantown (Tennessee), Janna Matykiewicz, lost her job for having posted on Facebook the phrase “What’s the difference between vaccine

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<sup>667</sup> Carmen Forman, “Top Republicans Denounce Oklahoma GOP for Comparing Vaccine Mandates to Jewish Persecution,” *The Oklahoman*, July 30, 2021, <https://eu.oklahoman.com/story/news/2021/07/30/oklahoma-republicans-blast-gop-covid-vaccine-holocaust-comparison/5438423001/>.

<sup>668</sup> Jaclyn Peiser, “Oklahoma GOP Leader Compares Vaccine Mandates to the Holocaust: ‘Take Away the Star and Add a Vaccine Passport,’” *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/02/oklahoma-gop-john-barrett-vaccine-holocaust/>.

<sup>669</sup> Ron Kampeas, “Oklahoma GOP Chair Draws Fire from Party Colleagues for Likening Coronavirus Restrictions to the Holocaust,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/oklahoma-gop-chair-draws-fire-from-party-colleagues-for-likening-coronavirus-restrictions-to-the-holocaust>.

<sup>670</sup> Storme Jones, “Defiant State GOP Chairman Triples Down on Holocaust Analogy,” *News9*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.news9.com/story/610b21cfc3c5f90c0ef51f89/defiant-state-gop-chairman-triples-down-on-holocaust-analogy>.

<sup>671</sup> Michael Seiden, “JUST IN: Jessica Renzi...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/SeidenWSBTv/status/1429529491475468296>.

<sup>672</sup> Arpan Rai, “Hospital Worker Fired for Likening Vaccine Mandate to Holocaust in TikTok Video,” *The Independent*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/covid-vaccine-holocaust-tiktok-video-b1907621.html>.

papers and a yellow star? 82 years”, with her dismissal achieved thanks to a petition organized by a Jewish student.<sup>673</sup>

In fact, the phrase was not original, but rather taken from Simone Gold, an emergency-medicine physician and anti-vaccine activist who took part in the assault on the Capitol on January 6.<sup>674</sup> She had founded the association America’s Frontline Doctors in 2020, denouncing the use of masks and other coronavirus containment measures, as well as various conspiracy theories about its origin and scientifically unvalidated remedies, such as hydroxychloroquine.<sup>675</sup>

On August 25, Thomas Massie, a member of the United States House of Representatives for the Republican Party, published a tweet with an image showing a hand with a tattooed number and the text “if you have to carry a card on you to gain access to a restaurant, venue or an event in your own country...that’s no longer a free country.”<sup>676</sup> This led, the following day, to the resignation of Andrew Zirkle, one of his Congressional staffers, stating that such comparisons were highly inappropriate and that he did not want to remain professionally linked to them.<sup>677</sup> A few days later, James Pasch, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League in Cleveland, complained that it dishonored the victims of the Nazis. Rabbi Shlomo Litvin, of Chabad of the Bluegrass, an Orthodox religious center in Lexington—in Kentucky, the State Massie represented—also stated that it showed a “tremendous ignorance.”<sup>678</sup>

### *Forced vaccination*

Social backlash once again occupied a prominent place in this type of comparison, particularly in protests organized in relevant physical spaces. We must bear in mind that, by the first half of 2021, many social distancing measures had already been relaxed, and therefore the capacity for mobilization had increased considerably. In some communities, speculation about

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<sup>673</sup> Meghan Roos, “High School Assistant Principal Reassigned after Comparing Vaccine Cards to Nazi Stars,” *Newsweek*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/high-school-assistant-principal-reassigned-after-comparing-vaccine-cards-nazi-stars-1622990>.

<sup>674</sup> Owen Dyer, “Founder of America’s Frontline Doctors Is Sentenced to Prison for Role in Capitol Riot,” *BMJ* 377 (June 2022): o1533, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1533>.

<sup>675</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “How ‘America’s Frontline Doctors’ Sold Access to Bogus COVID-19 Treatments—and Left Patients in the Lurch,” *TIME*, May 19, 2021, <https://time.com/6092368/americas-frontline-doctors-covid-19-misinformation/>.

<sup>676</sup> Thomas Massie, “If You Have to Carry...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/KFILE/status/1430727522963046401/photo/1>.

<sup>677</sup> Andrew Zirkle, “1/ I Quit. I Wanted to Let Everyone...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/theandrewzirkle/status/1430978018349039617>.

<sup>678</sup> Jewish Federation of Louisville, “ADL: Massie Must Apologize for Tweet Equating COVID Safety to the Holocaust,” 2021, <https://jewishlouisville.org/adl-massie-must-apologize-for-tweet-equating-covid-safety-to-the-holocaust/>.

a government-mandated vaccination requirement led to very active civil protests. Thus, in Orange County (California), in the first days of the month, numerous parents began to protest against the Board of Supervisors for a plan of forced vaccination of their children. County authorities denied the existence of such a plan and reaffirmed that there would be no mandatory requirement for vaccination certificates imposed on citizens by the local government. However, since it would also not be prohibited for private establishments and companies to request them, the director of the Orange County Health Care Agency, Clayton Chau, announced that the government would indeed provide some form of digital solution to demonstrate vaccination status for those who wished to do so.<sup>679</sup> A week later, on April 13, during a Board meeting open to citizens, several individuals appeared wearing a yellow Star of David pinned to their shirts. A woman who asked to speak said: “This yellow star is the only thing you will ever see me put on my body. None of you have the right to tell me, and especially my children, what goes into their bodies.”<sup>680</sup> This episode, protested by the Anti-Defamation League through its regional director, Peter Levi,<sup>681</sup> was part of a trend that would be repeated in numerous later protests.

The appearance of these yellow stars in protests became a habitual occurrence, provoking various controversies in the press due to their visually striking nature. A couple of months later, KatWRKS, a hat shop in Nashville (Tennessee), was caught selling Star of David patches in the style of the Holocaust with the text “Not vaccinated” to be worn on clothing. This reached major national and international media and drew public attention to the point of protests being organized in front of the store as retaliation and several hat brands canceling their collaborations with the distributor<sup>682</sup> for what was considered an act of trivializing the Holocaust and, therefore, antisemitism.<sup>683</sup> Rabbi Laurie Rice of Congregation Micah in Brentwood said that it

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<sup>679</sup> Alicia Robinson, “OC Will Offer Digital Vaccine Record as an Option, Not a Mandate,” *Orange County Register*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.ocregister.com/2021/04/13/oc-will-offer-digital-vaccine-record-as-an-option-not-a-mandate/>.

<sup>680</sup> Roxana Kopetman, “COVID-19 Vaccine Opponents Invoke the Holocaust, Dismaying Hate Speech Experts,” *Orange County Register*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.ocregister.com/2021/04/14/vaccine-opponents-invoke-the-holocaust-dismaying-hate-speech-experts/>.

<sup>681</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “ADL OC/Long Beach in the News: COVID-19 Vaccine Opponents Invoke The Holocaust,” 2021, <https://orangecounty.adl.org/news/adl-oc-long-beach-in-the-news-covid-19-vaccine-opponents-invoke-theholocaust/>.

<sup>682</sup> Bryan Pietsch, “A Nashville Hat Store Sold ‘Not Vaccinated’ Star of David Patches,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/29/world/covid-vaccine-passport-nashville-stetson.html>.

<sup>683</sup> Rachel Tiede and Bobby Atkinson, “Nashville HatWRKS Accused of Anti-Semitism after Post Comparing Vaccines to the Holocaust,” *Fox17 Nashville*, May 30, 2021, <https://fox17.com/news/local/nashville-hat-wrks-accused-of-anti-semitism-comparing-covid-vaccinations-to-holocaust>.

was a “disservice to the memory of the 6 million Jews who were systematically murdered during the Holocaust.”<sup>684</sup>

On June 26, Republican representative Jim Walsh appeared with a yellow Star of David on his shirt while speaking at an event of the association Washingtonians for Change in Lacey, Washington State.<sup>685</sup> A fragment of this event was published on a Facebook page with the message “It’s an echo from history. In the current context, we’re all Jews.” During the video he also made other comparisons that attracted public attention, such as the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the foundations of the doctrine of racial segregation in the United States known as *separate but equal*.<sup>686</sup> This drew condemnation from the Anti-Defamation League, which described it as a “gross misappropriation of history to advance an ignorant political point of ‘freedom’.”<sup>687</sup> He later issued an apology and stated that the star had been handed to him by someone else, noting that many of those present were also wearing it.

In states such as Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, or Wyoming, practically all governed by the Republican Party, the use of COVID vaccination certificates was directly prohibited,<sup>688</sup> as would be the case later with mandatory vaccination policies. The growing governmental will to increase vaccination rates among the population led to the introduction of various regulations that indirectly sought to force the population to accept vaccines. In response, Republican opposition, increasingly radical in its anti-vaccine rhetoric, unleashed numerous protest actions in the second half of 2021. This led to a significant proliferation of comparisons between the coronavirus and the Holocaust concentrated in those months, without a doubt the most intense in the entire sample. Polarization would increase with Joe Biden’s order on mandatory vaccination in September of that same year, later struck down in 2022 by several courts.

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<sup>684</sup> Ron Kampeas, “Nashville Hat Shop Apologizes for Selling Yellow ‘Not Vaccinated’ Jewish Stars,” *Jewish Exponent*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.jewishexponent.com/nashville-hat-shop-apologizes-for-selling-yellow-not-vaccinated-jewish-stars/>.

<sup>685</sup> Jim Walsh, “Washingtonians for Change / Lacey, WA / 6.26.21,” 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/943288459098642/videos/1156491601493335>.

<sup>686</sup> Jim Brunner, “Washington Lawmaker Wears Yellow Star of David, Evoking Nazi Persecution, to Protest COVID Vaccine Mandates,” *The Seattle Times*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/state-rep-jim-walsh-apologizes-for-wearing-yellow-star-of-david-to-protest-covid-vaccine-rules/>.

<sup>687</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “ADL Condemns Washington Representative Walsh for Misappropriating Yellow Star of David,” 2021, <https://seattle.adl.org/news/adl-condemns-washington-representative-walsh-for-misappropriating-yellow-star-of-david/>.

<sup>688</sup> College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, *Vaccine Passport Bans and Apps by State* (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), 2021), <https://www.cupahr.org/wp-content/uploads/advocacy/2021-09-28-State-Vaccine-Passport-Bans-and-Apps.pdf>.

Lauren Boebert, a member of the House of Representatives, followed in the footsteps of her colleague Marjorie Taylor Greene, comparing health workers who were offering vaccination “door-to-door” to “needle nazis.” This earned the congresswoman a letter signed by dozens of representatives from the state she represented, Colorado, many of them Jewish, and a new condemnation from the Auschwitz Museum, similar to that already directed at Marjorie Taylor Greene.<sup>689</sup> This was not the first time Boebert inflamed public debate by means of comparisons with Nazism. Already in January of that year, Boebert had accused the governor of Colorado, Jared Polis, of sending his “nazi brown shirts” to ensure that lockdown orders in the State were enforced, in reference to law enforcement,<sup>690</sup> which had already drawn condemnation from the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>691</sup>

Comparisons between the sending of health personnel to private homes to offer the coronavirus vaccine and Nazism continued with Peter Feaman, lawyer and member of the Florida Republican National Committee. On his blog, “The Blackhoe Chronicles,” he suggested that “The Biden brown shirts are beginning to show up at private homes questioning vaccine papers.” Feaman had already made similar comparisons previously, such as saying that what the Democrats were doing with COVID was equivalent to the Nazi strategy with the Reichstag fire.<sup>692</sup> Previously, the Republican had also accused vaccines of being the “mark of the beast,” in reference to the biblical Apocalypse, and had called Governor Gretchen Whitmer “diabolical,” warning her that “we will not bow to your false god.”<sup>693</sup>

Also noteworthy was the case of Rosie Gallegos-Martín, chiropractor for Team USA at the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games. Shortly before the opening ceremony of the Games, which took place on July 21, Gallegos posted on her Facebook and Instagram accounts complaining about the governmental strategy that supposedly would involve sending state officials to homes to pressure vaccination: “We went from ‘Flattening the curve in 14 days’ to ‘Going door-to-

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<sup>689</sup> Ernest Luning, “Democrats Condemn Lauren Boebert’s Tweet Comparing Vaccine Outreach to ‘Needle Nazis,’” *Colorado Politics*, July 14, 2021, [https://www.coloradopolitics.com/colorado-in-dc/democrats-condemn-lauren-boeberts-tweet-comparing-vaccine-outreach-to-needle-nazis/article\\_b2f015ac-e4eb-11eb-a1d1-b7e0d8d8b0e8.html](https://www.coloradopolitics.com/colorado-in-dc/democrats-condemn-lauren-boeberts-tweet-comparing-vaccine-outreach-to-needle-nazis/article_b2f015ac-e4eb-11eb-a1d1-b7e0d8d8b0e8.html).

<sup>690</sup> Jason Salzman, “Boebert Accuses CO Governor of Sending Nazi ‘Brown Shirts’ to Enforce Health Orders in Her District,” *Colorado Times Recorder*, January 5, 2021, <https://coloradotimesrecorder.com/2021/01/boebert-accuses-co-governor-of-sending-nazi-brown-shirts-to-enforce-health-orders-in-her-district/33511/>.

<sup>691</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “ADL Condemns Congresswoman Boebert’s Reference to ‘Brown Shirts,’” 2021, <https://mountainstates.adl.org/news/adl-condemns-congresswoman-boeberts-reference-to-brown-shirts/>.

<sup>692</sup> Em Steck et al., “Top RNC Official in Florida Spreads Covid-19 Conspiracies, Calling Vaccines the ‘Mark of the Beast,’” *CNN*, August 3, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/02/politics/kfile-rnc-peter-feaman-covid-19-vaccine/index.html>.

<sup>693</sup> EMSTECK, “Peter Feaman MeWe,” 2021, <https://imgur.com/gallery/peter-feaman-mewe-deEd8yn>.

door to see your papers' ... Gotta admit, I did N-A-Z-I that one coming," after which she apologized and was sanctioned.<sup>694</sup>

A sign of the growing polarization around coronavirus containment measures was also the intervention of Republican Senator Ted Cruz. He became known for leading the opposition to the certification of the 2020 election results, even publishing a book with which he sought to leave in the public debate the clear idea of an electoral "theft." In July 2021, after Joe Biden took aim at platforms that allowed the publication of conspiratorial content and misinformation about the vaccines, and after it had been known for months that he was working with Twitter, Facebook, and other networks to censor this type of information, Ted Cruz compared these governmental pressures to sending assault troops (in reference to the German SchultzStaffel) to people's homes.

Alongside this entry of high-ranking political figures into debates over comparisons with the Holocaust, various events also occurred that accompanied an increasingly polarized public scenario. In June, an episode in Houston became known in which some 153 employees of a Methodist hospital center left their jobs or were fired for refusing to be vaccinated. This happened after a legal battle between these employees and the hospital's management, which in April had become the first institution of its kind in the United States to implement a vaccination requirement for its employees.<sup>695</sup> This led them to compare their situation to that of prisoners in Nazi extermination camps, who were subjected to cruel experiments against their will, which was criticized by the judge in charge of the case.<sup>696</sup>

In the case of these workers, they also attempted to appeal to the Nuremberg Code as protection for their right, according to their own reading of the matter, not to be subjected against their will to taking experimental medications. The issue of the Nuremberg Code became a controversy throughout the pandemic due to the publicity given to the argument by conservative media. And, since it was created in response to the abuses committed by Nazi scientists during the Holocaust, it was also one of the central elements of the comparisons.

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<sup>694</sup> Jake Seiner, "Team USA Chiropractor Sorry for COVID Protocol-Nazi Post," *AP News*, July 21, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-sports-health-coronavirus-pandemic-protocols-e3a6242ff6a618742db589e9d0371824>.

<sup>695</sup> Jamie Stengle, "Houston Hospital Workers Fired, Resign over COVID-19 Vaccine," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/houston-coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-33e9f73c5bf1afbc7e5adb96b4715f8c>.

<sup>696</sup> Emine Yücel, "A Judge Has Thrown Out A Lawsuit Brought By Hospital Workers Over A Vaccine Mandate," *NPR*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/13/1006065385/a-judge-has-thrown-out-a-lawsuit-brought-by-hospital-workers-over-a-vaccine-mand>.

In early August, David Brody, host of *The Water Cooler*, one of the best-known programs on the small television channel *Real America's Voice*, made a lengthy argument in this vein, stating that no one, not even Anthony Fauci himself, knew what the long-term consequences of the vaccines could be, and therefore they were experimental medications for which no obligation could be imposed on the U.S. population. His guest, Mat Staver, director of Liberty Counsel—a religious organization that had carried out various legal proceedings against what it understands to be contrary to the “Law of God”—<sup>697</sup> stated the following:

“We are violating the Nuremberg Code. All of these will be brought into court to raise these issues because we are repeating –this is the tragic part of this— we’re repeating the dark history of Nazi Germany, and we’re not learning the lessons that the Nuremberg Code and those Nazi experiments should have taught this generation”<sup>698</sup>

Although Brody tried in that interview to clarify that they were not referring particularly to the Holocaust, the truth is that Staver continued with the comparison. This was not a retraction, since, even clarifying that they did not intend to refer to “the Holocaust and Jews,” the Nazi medical experiments they were talking about are within the framework of the Holocaust, as they were carried out mainly—although not exclusively—on populations considered defective or racially inferior, not on healthy ethnic Germans.<sup>699</sup> This drew the attention of the press, which clarified that the vaccines were not experimental and that the crimes against which the Nuremberg Code was designed had nothing to do with the vaccination policies being carried out at the state and federal levels.<sup>700</sup>

It should be emphasized that these comparisons occurred in a context of a very sharp increase in coronavirus deaths under the emergence of new variants of the same.<sup>701</sup> So much so

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<sup>697</sup> Liberty Counsel has initiated legal proceedings against abortion, pro-LGBT rights laws, and, during the coronavirus pandemic, also against vaccination mandates. See Joanna Walters and Sam Thielman, “Liberty Counsel: O Bufete de Avogados Cuxa Misión é Defender a ‘Autoridade de Deus,’” 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/03/liberty-counsel-law-firm-kim-davis-religious-freedom-abortion-same-sex-marriage-gay-conversion-therapy>; David Sharp, “Federal Appeals Court Won’t Stop Health Worker COVID Mandate,” *Associated Press*, October 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-main-cfb38f6fbd18feb6c8ca37c7e81fae2b>.

<sup>698</sup> Media Matters, “David Brody and Liberty Counsel’s Mat Staver Liken Push for Vaccination to Nazi Germany,” 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/coronavirus-covid-19/david-brody-and-liberty-counsels-mat-staver-liken-push-vaccination-nazi>.

<sup>699</sup> Paul Wendling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 109–76.

<sup>700</sup> Matthew Chapman, “Trump-Loving Christian Broadcaster Links Vaccination Push to Nazi Death Camps in Unhinged Rant,” 2021, <https://www.rawstory.com/trump-loving-christian-broadcaster-links-vaccination-push-to-nazi-death-camps/>.

<sup>701</sup> Edouard Mathieu et al., “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths,” Our World in Data, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>.

that some of the comparers themselves fell victim to this new wave shortly after making the analogies between virus containment policies and Nazism. On July 29, Nikki Fried, chair of the Florida Democratic Party, made a call for vaccination through patriotism and to honor the memory of the fight against Nazism: “The Greatest Generation had to defeat the Nazis to preserve our way of life, you’re only being asked to get a shot. So be a patriot. Turn off the TV and get vaccinated”.<sup>702</sup> In response, Marc Bernier, a WNDB radio host who had dubbed himself “Mr. Anti-Vax,” replied by saying “Should say, ‘Now the US Government is acting like Nazi’s. Get the shot!’”.<sup>703</sup> Barely a month later, on August 28, his death from coronavirus was announced by the radio station that had hosted him for more than 30 years, with the aforementioned comparison with Nazism recalled in several media outlets along with the news of his passing.<sup>704</sup>

Scott Apley, a member of the Texas Republican Party executive committee, also died of COVID-19 on August 4. This happened after he had praised mask-burning events, called a public health official an “enemy of a free people” for sharing positive news about Pfizer vaccine trials,<sup>705</sup> and, for our purposes, posted a meme indirectly comparing vaccination policies with Nazism shortly before his death. The image showed Angela Merkel and a text that read “Germany plans to force people who won’t quarantine into camps”, accompanied by a surprised-looking cartoon figure.<sup>706</sup> His death, like that of Bernier and of other vaccination opponents, was interpreted by various media outlets and political figures as an example of the tragedy that such anti-vaccine discourses could entail.<sup>707</sup>

A similar case occurred a few months later with William Hartmann, a Republican member of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers, who for months had shared on his Facebook account memes comparing vaccination passports with Nazi Germany and who opposed

<sup>702</sup> Nikki Fried, “The Greatest Generation Had...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210729202231/https://twitter.com/NikkiFried/status/1420841987092238341>.

<sup>703</sup> Marc Bernier, “Should Say, ‘Now the US...,” 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210729202231/https://twitter.com/NikkiFried/status/1420841987092238341>.

<sup>704</sup> David Kihara, “3rd Conservative Radio Host Who Condemned Vaccines Dies of Covid,” *Político*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/states/florida/story/2021/08/29/3rd-conservative-radio-host-who-condemned-vaccines-dies-of-covid-1390555>.

<sup>705</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “A Texas GOP Leader Railed against Vaccines and Masks. Then He Died of Covid,” *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/05/texas-gop-leader-antimask-antivax-dies-covid/>.

<sup>706</sup> “Un Funcionario Murió de Covid Tras Publicar Un Meme Antivacunas Que Alude a La Alemania Nazi,” *Clarín*, August 9, 2021, [https://www.clarin.com/internacional/funcionario-murio-covid-publicar-meme-antivacunas-alude-alemania-nazi\\_0\\_vWzzJ4s6.html](https://www.clarin.com/internacional/funcionario-murio-covid-publicar-meme-antivacunas-alude-alemania-nazi_0_vWzzJ4s6.html).

<sup>707</sup> Hannah Knowles, “A Texas GOP Official’s Covid-19 Death Went Viral. Then Came Calls for Vaccination — and Bitter Divides,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2021, <https://archive.is/20211024043555/https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/08/21/scott-apley-covid-death-vaccine/>.

coronavirus containment measures. He died from the disease on November 30, with no certainty as to whether he had been vaccinated.<sup>708</sup>

August was particularly conflictive, within a summer in which the public arena of debate on the coronavirus had already been especially heated. As we noted at the beginning, the spread of the Delta variant and the increase in deaths throughout July and August led the CDC to recommend mask use for the entire population in indoor spaces, and various states, companies, and government agencies to tighten their vaccination requirements. This triggered a wave of protests across the United States against masks, vaccination certificates, and vaccination mandates.<sup>709</sup>

Numerous protests took place in which comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust became a recurring theme. In August 2021, a series of protests were held in Wisconsin against vaccination mandates in private hospitals, “Stop the Mandate”, partially organized by health professionals, including Northeast Wisconsin for Medical Freedom, and anti-vaccine organizations such as Wellness Way.<sup>710</sup> As in other states, many health service companies began to implement vaccination mandates for their employees in the wake of the emergence of the Delta variant and the rise in deaths.<sup>711</sup>

At two of these protests, one in Green Bay and another in Fond du Lac, several demonstrators carried signs such as the Star of David with the inscription “unvaccinated”, and posters like “Mandated experimental drugs is Nazism”. Several Jewish leaders, including the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center, reminded that the victims of the Nazi genocide had not had their right to protest recognized, pointing out not only the inappropriate character of the comparison with the present situation, but also how it represented a distortion of the past. Shae Sortwell, a Republican state representative whom we already saw

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<sup>708</sup> Clara Hendrickson, “Wayne County GOP Canvasser William Hartmann Dies Following Battle with COVID-19,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 1, 2021, <https://eu.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2021/12/01/william-hartmann-obituary-covid-19-wayne-county-gop-canvasser/8814707002/>.

<sup>709</sup> Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, “As Vaccine Mandates Spread, Protests Follow – Some Spurred by Nurses,” *NBC News*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/vaccine-mandates-spread-protests-follow-spurred-nurses-rcna1654>; Reuters, “Protests against Anti-COVID Measures Continue across U.S. despite Delta Case Surge,” *Reuters*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/anti-coronavirus-measure-protests-across-idUSRTXFRXGC/>.

<sup>710</sup> Natalie Eilbert, “Outside the Green Bay Packers Preseason Game, a Few Dozen Protesters Say Vaccine Mandates Violate Workers’ Freedoms,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*, August 21, 2021, <https://eu.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2021/08/21/vaccine-mandate-protesters-appear-green-bay-packers-preseason-game/8212829002/>.

<sup>711</sup> Jeff Bollier, “Prevea Health Joins Other Wisconsin Health Care Providers Requiring Employees to Be Fully Vaccinated against COVID-19,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*, August 4, 2021, <https://eu.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2021/08/04/prevea-health-green-bay-requires-employees-get-covid-vaccine-bellin-health-not-requiring-vaccine-yet/5489589001/>.

earlier making Holocaust comparisons, expressed his disagreement: “The reason I disagree is we are holding up some horrendous things and we don’t want to end up here (...) The communists were just as guilty of Holocaust not only against the Jewish people, but against a whole lot of other populations in the USSR. Totalitarianism has killed over 100 million people in the world (...) You know, Nazis and Communists, all of them exemplify how bad it can get.” This was condemned by other religious leaders.<sup>712</sup>

Meanwhile, in New York, protests took place against Mayor Bill de Blasio’s strict containment measures. During a segment by comedian Jordan Keppler, host of *The Daily Show*, he spoke with some of the activists and obtained a statement from commentator Viswanag B. Burra, vice president of the Young Republican Club, who said: “I don’t think it’s communism — I think it’s more like a dictatorship, like we’re living in a Nazi Germany and the only thing that’s missing is the camps and the gas.”<sup>713</sup>

In Missouri, several cases of Holocaust comparisons were also documented during protests. At St. Louis City Council meetings in late July and throughout August, aggressive protests erupted against government resolutions supporting vaccination.<sup>714</sup> At a meeting on August 10, one protester claimed, “This feels more like Nazi Germany, not America, land of the free (...)”, while another said, “There is no virus; it’s a scam. What did the Nazis say? The bigger the lie, the more will believe it”, as others argued that vaccines, being in their view experimental, violated the Nuremberg Code.<sup>715</sup> On August 16, the St. Louis County Executive and several Jewish leaders, such as Rabbi Susan Talve, condemned these statements, calling

<sup>712</sup> Natalie Eilbert, “‘This Is... about Hate.’ Holocaust Comparisons Show up at Protests against Hospitals’ COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*, August 13, 2021, <https://eu.greenbaypressgazette.com/story/news/2021/08/13/holocaust-comparisons-anti-vaccines/8108102002/>.

<sup>713</sup> Savannah Walsh, “Vaccine Mandates Are Nazi Communist Fascism, Anti-Vaxxers Tell Jordan Klepper,” *Vanity Fair*, August 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/08/vaccine-mandates-are-nazi-communist-fascism-anti-vaxxers-tell-jordan-klepper-daily-show>.

<sup>714</sup> Gina Harkins, “St. Louis Public Health Leader Said a Mob Called Him Racist Slurs for Promoting Masks: ‘We Are Not the Enemy,’” *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/07/29/faisal-khan-letter-racist-slurs/>; Katie Shepherd, “Anti-Mask Protesters Swarmed a St. Louis County Council Meeting. Then, an Attendee Tested Positive for Covid,” *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/02/st-louis-mask-covid-positive/>; Rudi Keller, “Delta Variant Surge Appears to Be Peaking in Missouri,” *Missouri Independent*, August 11, 2021, <https://missouriindependent.com/2021/08/11/delta-variant-surge-appears-to-be-peaking-in-missouri/>.

<sup>715</sup> Nassim Benchaabane, “Jewish Leaders Decry Comments at St. Louis County Council Comparing Mask Mandates to the Holocaust,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 16, 2021, [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/jewish-leaders-decry-comments-at-st-louis-county-council-comparing-mask-mandates-to-the-holocaust/article\\_6f70a319-0439-5c43-8c85-ab56e09961e9.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/jewish-leaders-decry-comments-at-st-louis-county-council-comparing-mask-mandates-to-the-holocaust/article_6f70a319-0439-5c43-8c85-ab56e09961e9.html).

them “overt antisemitism”,<sup>716</sup> while Community Relations Council Executive Director Rori Picker-Neiss denounced that the demonstrators had sought to use Jews as a rhetorical tool.<sup>717</sup>

The same happened on August 9 in Springfield, when the Springfield City Council approved a symbolic, non-binding resolution in support of COVID-19 vaccination. A group of about 15 people wore yellow stars on their chests: “You see, I am wearing this yellow star to remind us of what once happened and can happen again if we continue down this wrong path. You see, it all started out with just a little star. What harm can come off that, right? Last year in this town it started out with just a covering of the face for our safety and health. What can come of that, right?”, said Meke Aton, the mother of a local politician.<sup>718</sup> This provoked outrage from various figures. The editor of the Springfield News-Leader wondered what Elie Wiesel would have thought of such events, citing a striking passage from his book, *Night*.<sup>719</sup> On August 23, in response to criticism over the use of Holocaust references, Lisa Meeks, leader of the local group Lemons to Lemonade, stated that it was politicians and the media who were dishonoring the Holocaust: “We promised it would never happen again. And you are not only saying anything that’s stopping it, you are promoting it.”<sup>720</sup> This had already occurred the previous year, on July 13, 2020, when Kim Doll spoke out against mask mandates, arguing that those who did not wear them would be fined “just like the Jews”.<sup>721</sup> In response, the Auschwitz Memorial replied with a tweet stating that visitors to the institution were also required to use this preventive measure and that comparing it with the yellow star was disrespectful.<sup>722</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> Associated Press, “Jewish Leaders Denounce Comparing Mask Mandates to Holocaust,” *Associated Press*, August 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-744ce8a4e57e509ec5e136c126c4e20b>.

<sup>717</sup> Sophie Hurwitz, “Jewish Leaders Condemn Holocaust Comparisons at County Council Meeting,” *The St. Louis American*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.stlamerican.com/news/local-news/jewish-leaders-condemn-holocaust-comparisons-at-county-council-meeting/>.

<sup>718</sup> Galen Sullender, “Springfield City Council Passes Resolution Encouraging Vaccination over Vocal Opposition,” *Springfield News-Leader*, August 10, 2021, <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/10/covid-19-vaccine-springfield-mo-city-council-discourages-anti-vax-vaccination/5551648001/>.

<sup>719</sup> Steve Pokin, “Pokin Around: What Kind of World Is It Where Vaccines and Masks Are Likened to the Holocaust?” *Springfield News-Leader*, August 14, 2021, <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/local/2021/08/14/covid-19-missouri-holocaust-comparisons-face-mask-vaccine-springfield-city-council-elie-wiesel/8122285002/>.

<sup>720</sup> Andrew Sullender, “‘This Behavior Is Unconscionable’: Springfield City Council Condemns Holocaust Comparisons in COVID Debate,” *Springfield News-Leader*, August 24, 2021, <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/24/springfield-city-council-condemns-holocaust-comparisons-covid-19-masks/8249739002/>.

<sup>721</sup> Katie Kull, “Auschwitz Memorial Calls out Springfield Woman for Comment Comparing Masks to Nazi Tactics,” *Springfield News-Leader*, July 21, 2020, <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/local/ozarks/2020/07/21/auschwitz-memorial-museum-calls-out-springfield-woman-masks-nazi-tactics/3287769001/>.

<sup>722</sup> Auschwitz Memorial, “Visitors of @AuschwitzMuseum Are...,” *News-Leader*, July 17, 2020, <https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/local/ozarks/2020/07/21/auschwitz-memorial-museum-calls-out-springfield-woman-masks-nazi-tactics/3287769001/>.

At the same time, protests took place outside the Maine State House against Governor Janet Mills’s mandate that all health workers be vaccinated against COVID-19. Several hundred people, around 400, including various Republican Party members, gathered on August 17 to oppose the measure, claiming it was a declaration of war.<sup>723</sup> Among them was Heidi Sampson, then a member of the Maine House of Representatives and a well-known anti-vaccine activist.<sup>724</sup> In July, Sampson had taken part in an anti-vaccine protest that gave a platform to Robert David Steele,<sup>725</sup> a Holocaust denier<sup>726</sup> and an intense disseminator of conspiracy theories about vaccines, who died a month later from COVID-19.<sup>727</sup> This did not prevent Sampson from employing Holocaust comparisons as a political tool during the protest outside the state parliament:

“Did you know that the State of Maine is now setting discrimination and segregation? Yes, shame on you Janet Mills, and she thinks she is leading Maine. Look it up, this isn’t progressive, this is regressive (...) May I remind you of the Tuskegee experiments, started in the 1930s (...) ? Where they shot these people telling them they’re going to help them, and they made them sicker (...) Do I need to remind you of the late 1930s and 1940s in Germany and the experiments with Joseph Mengele? What was it? A shot! And they were crimes against Humanity, and what came out of that? The Nuremberg code, the Nuremberg Trials, violating that is punishable by death. So we have Joseph Mengele and Joseph Goebbels being reincarnated here in the State of Maine, I’ll late you figure out who’s in what role, but I’ll just say probably Mengele... probably we have two by the same last name and one is the governor. The other one is Anne Mills [her sister, working at MaineHealth]”<sup>728</sup>

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<sup>723</sup> Steve Mistler, “Maine Republicans Join State House Protest Against Health Worker Vaccine Mandate, Seeking to Channel Backlash,” *Maine Public*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.mainepublic.org/politics/2021-08-17/maine-republicans-join-state-house-protest-against-health-worker-vaccine-mandate-seeking-to-channel-backlash>.

<sup>724</sup> Sampson was a member of the Maine Coalition for Vaccine Choice, which almost two years earlier had promoted a referendum to expand parents’ right not to vaccinate their children, see Alyxe McFadden, “Maine’s Anti-Vaccination Activists Have Turned Their Sights on Political Office,” *Beacon*, October 9, 2020, <https://mainebeacon.com/maines-anti-vaccination-activists-have-turned-their-sights-on-political-office/>.

<sup>725</sup> Nathan Bernard, “As Cases Surge, Maine GOP Rep. Rallies with Vaccine Conspiracy ‘Superspreaders,’” *Beacon*, July 28, 2021, <https://mainebeacon.com/as-cases-surge-maine-gop-rep-rallies-with-vaccine-conspiracy-superspreaders/>.

<sup>726</sup> In his Phibetaiota blog he claimed that the Holocaust had been accepted and financed by international Zionism as a way to achieve the State of Israel, see Robert David Steele, “Mongoose: Alert Reader on Zionism / Satanism Threat,” December 16, 2020, <https://phibetaiota.net/2020/12/mongoose-alert-reader-on-zionism-satanism-threat/>.

<sup>727</sup> Stuti Mishra, “Former CIA Officer and Conspiracy Theorist Who Called Pandemic a Hoax Dies of Covid,” *The Independent*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/qanon-anti-vaxxer-dies-from-covid-b1911586.html>.

<sup>728</sup> Seacoastonline, “Maine State Rep. Heidi Sampson Likened Gov. Janet Mills to Nazi Doctor Josef Mengele,” *Seacoastonline*, August 30, 2021, <https://eu.seacoastonline.com/videos/news/local/2021/08/30/maine-covid-vaccine-mandate-healthcare-workers-heidi-sampson-gov-janet-mills-nazi-doctor-video/5656796001/>.

These and other denialist comments by several Republican leaders who attended the protest drew swift condemnation from political figures such as Democratic Representative Sam Zager<sup>729</sup>, Democratic Senator Joseph Baldacci<sup>730</sup> and the Anti-Defamation League, which stated that the comparison was “offensive, ignorant and incomparable to the events that took place during the Holocaust.”<sup>731</sup>

*Distrust toward vaccines extends to masks*

In Birmingham, the arrival of the Delta variant led the school system to require all students and teachers, regardless of their vaccination status, to wear masks during classes.<sup>732</sup> During a meeting of the Birmingham Board of Education, several anti-mask protesters shouted insults at members, while one of the parents present gave the Nazi salute and, together with two other men, yelled “Heil, Hitler!”, after which he was investigated by the police.<sup>733</sup>

Meanwhile, in Greenville County (South Carolina), conflicts arose that month between parents who wanted a mask mandate in schools and others who preferred to keep it optional. On August 24, at a Greenville County School Board meeting where these tensions were on full display,<sup>734</sup> one of the mothers claimed that the CDC was considering setting up concentration camps:

“The CDC is considering what is called the ‘shielding approach’ to prevent COVID-19, and it’s a plan to shut down schools and to use them as camps, to physically isolate women, men and children. Now, we know that concentration camps were something that the nazis did, but it can come here at any moment and we need to be aware that they can call it something other than a concentration camp. A concentration camp can be disguised as something like a Green Zone. The plan talks about the loss of freedoms and personal interactions. It talks about taking

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<sup>729</sup> Katie Shepherd, “A Maine Republican Compared the Governor to Nazi Josef Mengele over Vaccine Requirement for Health-Care Workers,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/20/maine-heidi-sampson-nazi-vaccine/>.

<sup>730</sup> Associated Press, “Lawmaker Compares Vaccine Mandate to Nazi Death Camp Doctor,” *Associated Press*, August 29, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-health-coronavirus-pandemic-54fb5dbd7444dba54fd30344150d2975>.

<sup>731</sup> Steve Mistler, “Anti-Defamation League Calls on Maine Lawmaker to Apologize After Comparing Mills To Nazi Doctor,” *Maine Public*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.mainepublic.org/2021-08-20/anti-defamation-league-calls-on-maine-lawmaker-to-apologize-after-comparing-mills-to-nazi-doctor>.

<sup>732</sup> Eric Taunton, “Birmingham Area School Systems Take Different Approaches to Masks,” *Hoover Sun*, August 26, 2021, <https://hooversun.com/schools/birmingham-area-school-systems-take-different-approaches-to-/>.

<sup>733</sup> Steve Neavling, “Nazi Salute, Insults Hurlled at Chaotic Birmingham Schools Meeting over Mask Mandate,” *Detroit Metro Times*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.metrotimes.com/news-hits/archives/2021/08/19/nazi-salute-insults-hurlled-at-ruckus-birmingham-schools-meeting-over-mask-mandate>.

<sup>734</sup> Renee Wunderlich, “Parents Clash over Masks as South Carolina School District Focuses on Other Issues,” *WYFF4*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.wyff4.com/article/parents-clash-over-masks-matters-in-schools/37389149>.

children away from their parents, families away from each other and separating everyone by their genders.”<sup>735</sup>

This was a conspiracy theory spread on the social network GETTR, known for disseminating similar disinformation, and it had no real basis.<sup>736</sup> However, the rumor had already been propagated days earlier by conservative political commentator Candace Owens on her social media, claiming that the CDC wanted to place people in camps, and that this justified all comparisons “to 1930’s Germany.”<sup>737</sup> In reality, the document—first published during the Trump administration and updated later—assessed a strategy for resource-limited countries and refugee camps as a humanitarian way to prevent infections.<sup>738</sup> The commentator had condemned Holocaust comparisons years earlier when they were directed at Donald Trump, in a tweet complaining about Jews who compared Trump with Hitler: “nothing more horrifying than the piles of skulls in a pit (...) you sicken me beyond what I could ever pontificate. In all sincerity, how dare you?”<sup>739</sup>

In the city of Chicago, after Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot announced that the city would require all its employees to be vaccinated as of October 15, there were protests by police unions.<sup>740</sup> All opposed the measure, particularly John Catanzara of the Fraternal Order of Police, who expressed himself as follows: “We’re in America, G-ddamn it. We don’t want to be forced to do anything. Period. This ain’t Nazi fucking Germany, [where they say], ‘Step into the fucking showers. The pills won’t hurt you.’ What the fuck? Nobody knows what the long term side effects could possibly be. Nobody. And anybody who says they do are full of shit.”<sup>741</sup> The

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<sup>735</sup> See the recording in Ron Filipkowski, “A Woman Reveals to the Greenville...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/RonFilipkowski/status/1430343630749843456>.

<sup>736</sup> David Badash, “South Carolina Parent Tells School Board CDC Has Plan to Use COVID to Develop Nazi-Style ‘Concentration Camps,’” *Raw Story*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.rawstory.com/south-carolina-parent-tells-school-board-cdc-using-to-develop-nazi-style-concentration-camps/>.

<sup>737</sup> Candace Owens, “Holy Shit. The CDC...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/RealCandaceO/status/1424855283755520006>.

<sup>738</sup> Ella Lee, “Fact Check: CDC Didn’t Propose Putting People in ‘Camps’ to Prevent COVID-19 Spread,” *USA Today*, August 17, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2021/08/17/fact-check-cdc-didnt-suggest-putting-high-risk-people-camps/8137749002/>.

<sup>739</sup> Candace Owens, “We All Know a Jewish...,” 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/realCandaceOwens/photos/we-all-know-a-jewish-liberal-that-tried-to-win-a-trump-argument-by-analogizing-h/1771664682904725/>.

<sup>740</sup> Mayor’s Press Office, “City of Chicago Announces COVID-19 Vaccination Requirement for City Employees,” 2021, [https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press\\_room/press\\_releases/2021/august/CityEmployeesVaccinationRequirements.html](https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2021/august/CityEmployeesVaccinationRequirements.html).

<sup>741</sup> Fran Spielman, “Lightfoot Forges Ahead with Oct. 15 Vaccine Mandate for City Employees, despite Opposition from All Four Police Unions,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 25, 2021, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/city-hall/2021/8/25/22641495/chicago-coronavirus-vaccine-mandate-october-15-city-employees-police-unions-lightfoot-catanzara>.

comparison reached national and international newspapers. Journalist Adam Serwer wrote in his column that the comparison was even worse than some others that had been made in jest.<sup>742</sup> The Holocaust Educational Foundation of Northwestern University (HEFNU) invited him to use the region's numerous educational resources to inform himself. David Goldberg, regional director of the ADL, said the comment was "deeply offensive to the millions of people and their families of people who were killed at the hands of the Nazis," and Sarah van Loon of the American Jewish Committee called it "an insult to every Holocaust survivor"; even other police officers publicly denounced the remarks.<sup>743</sup> This forced Catanzara to issue an apology, particularly for making reference "like I did to the showers, and for that I'm sorry," though he did not retract the substance of the matter. In the apology itself he again associated Lightfoot's administration with Nazi Germany.<sup>744</sup>

In September, with the death rate per 100,000 people rising at an accelerated pace, the Joe Biden administration approved a vaccination mandate that would affect 100 million people. All federal agency workers, employees of private companies with more than 100 workers, federal contractors, and healthcare workers in facilities receiving Medicare and Medicaid would have to be vaccinated against COVID-19 or present a weekly negative test.

The reactions were swift. On the same day as the president's statements, Josh Mandel, a Jewish candidate for the U.S. Senate in Ohio with the Republican Party, tweeted a video in which he said: "My voice is boiling in rage for what I've seen from the White House today, trampling on our freedom, trampling on our liberty, trampling on what I took an Oath to defend when I entered the Marine Force... Joe Biden—I'm not even gonna call him President Biden, he is not—is creating a Constitutional crisis... Do NOT comply with the tyranny. When the Gestapo show up at your front door, you know what to do."<sup>745</sup> The American Jewish Committee condemned the comparison, stressing that "[his] own people were murdered by Nazis" and that it trivialized the horrors of the Holocaust.<sup>746</sup> Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, founder of the pro-

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<sup>742</sup> Adam Serwer, "The Absurdity of Police Comparing Vaccine Mandates to Nazi Germany," *The Atlantic*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/vaccinate-police/619899/>.

<sup>743</sup> Satchel Price and Tom Schuba, "Police Union Boss Slammed for Comparing Vaccine Mandate to Holocaust," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 26, 2021, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/politics/2021/8/26/22643110/chicago-police-union-president-nazi-germany-vaccine-mandate-lori-lightfoot-john-catanzara>.

<sup>744</sup> Katie Anthony, "Fraternal Order of Police President Apologizes for Comments Comparing City Employee Vaccine Mandate to Nazi Germany," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 28, 2021, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2021/8/27/22645490/fraternal-order-police-president-apologizes-comments-city-employee-vaccine-mandate-to-nazi-germany>.

<sup>745</sup> Josh Mandel, "Do NOT Comply with the Tyranny...," *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JoshMandelOhio/status/1436143658693185537>.

<sup>746</sup> American Jewish Committee, "It's Disgraceful That...," *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/AJCGlobal/status/1436326642062925824>.

disability group RespectAbility, responded: “the Nazis DID show up at my father’s house, and they also killed most of his family.”<sup>747</sup>

But the comparisons did not stop there. When the Anti-Defamation League warned Mandel that wearing a mask or getting a vaccine was not the same as the systematic murder of a human group,<sup>748</sup> Mandel replied by calling Jonathan Greenblatt a “kapo,” in reference to concentration and extermination camp prisoners selected to supervise others, accusing him of siding with “Jew-haters.” By contrast, Mandel claimed, he was fighting with patriots to defend the Judeo-Christian foundations of the United States.<sup>749</sup>

On September 10, Kathy Barnette, a political commentator in various conservative media outlets and former Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, posted a tweet saying: “Americans are like the frog in boiling water. JUMP,” accompanied by an image of two Jewish people with a Star of David, from the documentary *The Last Days*: “People wonder ‘how is it that we didn’t do something’. We didn’t run away, we didn’t hide. Well, things didn’t happen at once. Things happened very slowly. So each time a new law came out, or a new restriction, we said, ‘well, just another thing. It will blow over’. When we had to wear the yellow star to be outside we started to worry.”<sup>750</sup>

Barnette’s reference was later repeated by Mark Shull, a Clackamas County commissioner, who on September 21 posted the same image on his Facebook page with an almost identical text. Shull was immediately condemned by the other members of the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners and the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, as well as other local political figures, including activist Ira Erbs, daughter of Holocaust survivors, who called the action “disgusting and offensive.”<sup>751</sup> In a commission session on September 21, Shull explained the reason for posting the meme as follows:

“The meme is about what happened in Germany when restriction of liberties of a certain group of people occurred over a long period of time slowly, incrementally, and resulted in the History

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<sup>747</sup> Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, “Seriously @JoshMandelOhio the Nazis...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/JLMizrahi/status/1436307241603407876>.

<sup>748</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “Being Asked to Wear...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210910182031/https://twitter.com/ADL/status/1436359477175988224>.

<sup>749</sup> Josh Mandel, “Hi @ADL, I Will Not Stop...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210910182043/https://twitter.com/JoshMandelOhio/status/1436393992959168517>.

<sup>750</sup> Kathy Barnette, “Americans Are like the Frog In...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/Kathy4Truth/status/1436301875947532291>.

<sup>751</sup> Jaimie Ding, “Clackamas County Commissioner Mark Shull Condemned after Sharing Post Appearing to Compare COVID-19 Restrictions to Holocaust,” *The Oregonian*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.oregonlive.com/clackamascounty/2021/09/clackamas-county-commissioner-mark-shull-condemned-after-sharing-post-comparing-covid-19-restrictions-to-holocaust.html>.

that we know to be the Holocaust (...) I put that on my personal Facebook page just for people to consider that when civil liberties are restricted and we don't speak up to defend our neighbors who might be affected by those restrictions then we end up with a slippery slope that could end up in a very bad situation.”<sup>752</sup>

Just two days later, Republican senator Kelly Townsend posted on her Twitter account an image saying “if you are vaccinated but you're complaining about the unvaccinated, then what you're really saying is that you don't think the vaccines work,” along with a Nazi flag with the swastika made of syringes.<sup>753</sup> In response, the regional delegation of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL Desert) demanded that she delete the tweet, calling it offensive and inflaming tensions around efforts to combat COVID-19.<sup>754</sup> Far from apologizing, Townsend urged them to “learn your history,” and shared a Nazi-era illustration aimed at convincing readers of the need to eliminate those with hereditary diseases for the common good: “Nazi atrocities began with similar propaganda. Learn history or you end up repeating it.”<sup>755</sup> Shull had already compared vaccination passports to Jim Crow laws in June.<sup>756</sup>

This was not the first time the senator had attacked vaccination by making extreme comparisons. As early as 2019, when Arizona Governor Doug Ducey refused to reduce measles vaccination requirements, she had claimed that mandatory vaccination was a communist measure,<sup>757</sup> a claim she repeated in May 2021, accusing those calling for vaccination of acting like Communist China.<sup>758</sup>

Mark McCloskey, then a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate in Missouri, stated at a candidates' forum that the way Joe Biden blamed the unvaccinated for the rise in cases during the pandemic was the same as the discrimination Nazis carried out against Jews in the past: “if we had Stars of David on our chests 70 years ago, it would be absolutely no different.” Vernon

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<sup>752</sup> *Policy Session September 21, 2021-Morning*, directed by ClackCo TV, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeBS\\_f0HX2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeBS_f0HX2c).

<sup>753</sup> Jerod MacDonald-Evoy, “A GOP Senator Likened COVID Vaccines to the Holocaust, Tweeted a Swastika and Told a Jewish Group Who Complained to ‘Learn Your History,’” *AZ Mirror*, September 13, 2021, <https://azmirror.com/2021/09/13/kelly-townsend-gop-senator-likened-covid-vaccines-to-the-holocaust-tweeted-a-swastika-and-told-a-jewish-group-who-complained-to-learn-your-history/>.

<sup>754</sup> ADL Desert @ADLDesert, “@AZKellyT Should Delete This Outrageous...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, September 13, 2021, <https://x.com/ADLDesert/status/1437517138218999809?s=20>.

<sup>755</sup> Kelly Townsend, “Here Is an Early Propaganda Piece...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/AZKellyT/status/1437761680151248903>.

<sup>756</sup> Ryan Haas, “Clackamas County Commissioner Mark Shull Faces Backlash after Comparing Vaccine Passports to Jim Crow Laws,” *OPB*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/06/01/clackamas-county-commissioner-mark-shull-compares-vaccine-passports-to-jim-crow-laws/>.

<sup>757</sup> Wilder Davies, “Arizona Lawmaker Says Mandatory Vaccine Laws Are ‘Communist’ Amid a Nationwide Measles Outbreak,” *Time*, March 1, 2019, <https://time.com/5542064/kelly-townsend-anti-vax/>.

<sup>758</sup> Kelly Townsend, “Seen in Communist China Today...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/AZKellyT/status/1390386508004089857>.

Jones, then a Republican candidate for governor in Georgia, likewise declared that Biden was acting like Hitler.<sup>759</sup>

On September 16, David Eastman, a member of the Alaska House of Representatives with the Republican Party, tweeted a comparison between Joe Biden's speech announcing new vaccination measures and a Hitler speech, quoting: "...my patience is now at an end" from September 1938, when Hitler warned of his intentions for Europe. This was in reference to Biden's statement: "Our patience is wearing thin."<sup>760</sup> Numerous Alaskan representatives, both Democrats and Republicans, condemned the comparison as misleading and harmful to dialogue. Miri Cypers, a spokesperson for the Anti-Defamation League, described this as yet another example of the increasing number of inappropriate Holocaust comparisons among politicians.<sup>761</sup> This came only days after the chamber rejected a Republican motion to reaffirm the Nuremberg Code, an attempt to officially use this legislation to protect those who preferred not to be vaccinated, treating vaccines as a sort of experimental remedy.<sup>762</sup>

Alaska Republicans were at the center of further scandals involving comparisons between coronavirus containment policies and the Holocaust. On September 29, during an Anchorage Assembly meeting to debate a mask mandate in indoor spaces, several people appeared wearing yellow Stars of David with the slogan "do not comply." They were immediately supported by the mayor, Dave Bronson, who said that wearing the yellow star seemed appropriate to him given its meaning of "never again," and that in fact it was a sort of "credit to them."<sup>763</sup> Among the protesters was Christine Hill, a former candidate for the Anchorage Assembly in 2019 and 2020. Wearing the yellow Star of David, she warned that they were living under the same oppression as Jews in Nazi Germany: "We're going down that same road, what's happening now, taking more and more of our freedom away. And that's what's happening. That's what's frightening." Hill said.<sup>764</sup> These events brought immediate condemnation from the Jewish

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<sup>759</sup> Oliver Willis, "Crazed GOP Candidates Compare Vaccine Mandates To Nazi Genocide," *The National Memo*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.nationalmemo.com/anti-vax-candidates>.

<sup>760</sup> David Eastman, "...my Patience Is Now at an End.," *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/davideastmanjr/status/1438428692275884038>.

<sup>761</sup> James Brooks, "Alaska Legislator Compares Biden to Hitler, Shares Link to Holocaust-Denial Website," *Anchorage Daily News*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.adn.com/politics/alaska-legislature/2021/09/24/alaska-legislator-compares-biden-to-hitler-shares-link-to-holocaust-denial-website/>.

<sup>762</sup> James Brooks, "Alaska House Rejects Vote on Nuremberg Code Pushed by COVID Vaccine Skeptics," *Anchorage Daily News*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.adn.com/politics/alaska-legislature/2021/09/12/alaska-house-rejects-vote-on-nuremberg-code-a-topic-cited-by-covid-vaccine-skeptics/>.

<sup>763</sup> Associated Press, "Anchorage Mayor Backs Use of Yellow Stars by Mask Opponents," *CityNews Everywhere*, September 30, 2021, <https://halifax.citynews.ca/2021/09/30/anchorage-mayor-backs-use-of-yellow-stars-by-mask-opponents/>.

<sup>764</sup> Emily Goodykoontz, "Mayor Bronson Backs Use of Holocaust Imagery by Mask Mandate Opponents during Heated Second Night of Anchorage Assembly Hearing," *Anchorage Daily News*, September 29, 2021,

community at both the national and local levels, including the Anti-Defamation League, which warned that Bronson was contributing to the pain caused by an already growing wave of antisemitism.<sup>765</sup>

Indeed, the issue of the yellow Star of David, already present beforehand, continued to be a defining feature of Holocaust comparisons. One month later, a new incident made headlines in the United States. A teacher at Berrendos Middle School (California) posted a TikTok wearing a star on her chest, saying: “In Nazi Germany, the Jews were required to wear this yellow Star of David on their clothing to identify them, to humiliate them, and to isolate them. What’s happening today is not much different in our school system.”<sup>766</sup> The teacher was likely referring to the fact that only weeks earlier California had become the first U.S. state to require COVID-19 vaccination for all children attending school in person—a requirement already in place for other diseases such as measles.<sup>767</sup> This had already sparked protests from parents opposed to the state making health decisions for their children<sup>768</sup> The case divided the community, with some organizing to support her and many others condemning her message. The teacher defended herself, stating: “At the beginning of the Holocaust Jews were forced to wear the yellow Star of David to identify, isolate and humiliate them. They lost their jobs and their houses. Today, the group of people being singled out are the unvaccinated.”<sup>769</sup>

This beginning foreshadowed what would perhaps be the most intense period of comparisons between vaccination and the Holocaust in the United States, in the months that followed. On September 22, a milestone occurred that would significantly affect social networks. Project Veritas, a far-right group known for spreading all kinds of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, published a hidden camera video in which one of its collaborators, pretending to flirt with an FDA official, released footage in which the latter joked about the

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<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2021/09/29/tensions-run-high-over-proposed-mask-ordinance-at-second-night-of-anchorage-assembly-meeting/>.

<sup>765</sup> Michelle Theriault Boots and Emily Goodykoontz, “Jewish Leaders Decry Use of Holocaust Symbolism to Protest Anchorage Mask Ordinance,” *Anchorage Daily News*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2021/09/30/a-direct-disrespect-jewish-leaders-decry-use-of-holocaust-symbolism-to-protest-anchorage-mask-ordinance/>.

<sup>766</sup> Mason Carroll, “Red Bluff Teacher Goes Viral for Comparing Holocaust to Vaccine Mandates,” *KRCR*, October 22, 2021, <https://krctrv.com/news/local/red-bluff-teacher-goes-viral-for-comparing-holocaust-to-vaccine-mandates>.

<sup>767</sup> Gavin Newsom, *California Becomes First State in Nation to Announce COVID-19 Vaccine Requirements for Schools* (Office of the Governor of California, 2021), <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/10/01/california-becomes-first-state-in-nation-to-announce-covid-19-vaccine-requirements-for-schools/>.

<sup>768</sup> Jack Dutton, “California School Walkout as Thousands of Parents Defy Child Vaccine Mandate,” *Newsweek*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/california-school-student-vaccine-mandate-walkout-1639752>.

<sup>769</sup> Fatma Khaled, “Middle School Teacher Compares Testing Mandate to Holocaust in Viral Video,” *Newsweek*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/middle-school-teacher-compares-vaccine-mandates-holocaust-viral-video-1641432>.

possibility of vaccinating African Americans with blow darts and conducting house searches in a “Nazi Germany” style against the unvaccinated, as well as keeping a record of the unvaccinated that would be similar to a “Jewish Star.”<sup>770</sup> This had a significant impact on social networks such as Twitter.

Shortly thereafter Joe Rogan shared on his social media a video created by Samuel Rivera Films that called for the defense of civil liberties while showing well-known images of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust: “As soon as you give politicians power, any kind of power that didn’t exist previously, if they can figure out a way to force you into carrying something that lets you enter business or lets you do this or lets business open, historically, they are not gonna give that power up,” in reference to vaccination certificates and mandates.<sup>771</sup>

In December, Rogan invited to his podcast, the most listened-to in the Western world, Dr. Robert Malone, a virologist and personality known for his conspiracy theories about coronavirus, who based his authority on having worked in the scientific field of vaccines and calling himself—misleadingly—“inventor of mRNA vaccines.”<sup>772</sup> In the interview, along with many other erroneous claims about vaccines,<sup>773</sup> he asserted that vaccine mandates violated the Nuremberg Code and that a similar process had led to the Holocaust:

“It was from, basically, European intellectual inquiry into what the heck happened in Germany in the 20s and 30s. Very intelligent, highly educated population, and they went barking mad. And how did that happen? The answer is mass formation psychosis. When you have a society that has become decoupled from each other, and has free floating anxiety, in a sense that things don’t make sense. We can’t understand it. And then their attention gets focused by a leader or series of events on one small point, just like hypnosis. They literally become hypnotized and can be led anywhere.”<sup>774</sup>

The general response against this podcast was enormous. 270 scientists and health professionals wrote an open letter to Spotify accusing Joe Rogan’s podcast in general, and that episode in particular, of spreading disinformation about coronavirus that could be highly

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<sup>770</sup> Project Veritas, “FDA Official: ‘Blow Dart’ African Americans with COVID Vaccine Is...,” 2021, <https://www.projectveritas.com/news/fda-official-blow-dart-african-americans-with-covid-vaccine-is-where-were>.

<sup>771</sup> Tim Marchman, “Joe Rogan Posts Video Comparing Vaccine Mandates to the Holocaust,” *Vice*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/joe-rogan-posts-video-comparing-vaccine-mandates-to-the-holocaust/>.

<sup>772</sup> Elie Dolgin, “The Tangled History of mRNA Vaccines,” *Nature*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02483-w>.

<sup>773</sup> Linda Qiu, “Fact-Checking Joe Rogan’s Interview With Robert Malone That Caused an Uproar,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/arts/music/fact-check-joe-rogan-robert-malone.html>.

<sup>774</sup> The Joe Rogan Experience, “#1757 – Dr. Robert Malone, MD,” December 31, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3SCsueX2bZdbEzRtKOCEyT>.

dangerous, given that it is the largest in the world, with 11 million listeners per episode.<sup>775</sup> Regarding the view that Nazism and the supposed blind obedience to the government during coronavirus both stemmed from a collective psychosis, several psychologists debunked the idea, affirming that such a concept had no academic credibility.<sup>776</sup>

On October 20, CNN interviewed Dr. Rashid Buttar, an influencer known for spreading false and conspiratorial information about vaccines and about Anthony Fauci. During the interview, Buttar claimed that “it could be” that Fauci took part in a conspiracy to assassinate millions of people, since, according to him, most of the deaths attributed to the Delta variant of coronavirus were actually caused by vaccination: “I don’t want to be part of this mass genocide (...) what’s going on right now will be remembered as a worst time in history compared to... World War II.”<sup>777</sup>

In Kansas, legislators from the House of Representatives and the Senate created a Special Committee on Government Overreach and the Impact of COVID-19 Mandates. The goal was to gather information to address—and, if necessary, limit—the reach of new federal mandates.<sup>778</sup> During one of the committee’s hearings, Cornell Beard, president of the Wichita district of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, accused those who refused to work with unvaccinated colleagues of perpetuating racism and turning the unvaccinated into the “modern-day Jew” and forcing them to wear a star like those Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust, to which the chairwoman, Brenda Landwehr, a state House representative, confirmed: “this is racism against the modern-day Jew.”<sup>779</sup> Condemnation of their words came from Rabbi Mark Levin, founder of Congregation Beth Torah in Overland Park, and other political authorities. This comparison was not the only one during the committee hearings. Other citizens mentioned the danger of “end up like Nazi Germany” and

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<sup>775</sup> “An Open Letter to Spotify: A Call from the Global Scientific and Medical Communities to Implement a Misinformation Policy,” January 10, 2022, <https://spotifyopenletter.wordpress.com/2022/01/10/an-open-letter-to-spotify/>.

<sup>776</sup> Gino Spocchia, “‘No Academic Credibility’: Experts Debunk Mass Psychosis Covid Theory Floated by Doctor on Joe Rogan Podcast,” *The Independent*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/covid-psychosis-theory-joe-rogan-b1989552.html>.

<sup>777</sup> Brad Reed, “‘You’re Crazy’: CNN Reporter Tells off Doctor to His Face after He Says Vaccines Will Result in ‘Genocide,’” *Raw Story*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.rawstory.com/anti-vax-doctors-2655325799/>.

<sup>778</sup> Tim Carpenter, “Kansas Legislative Leaders Create Special Committee to Rebuff Federal COVID-19 Mandates,” *Kansas Reflector*, September 27, 2021, <https://kansasreflector.com/2021/09/27/kansas-legislative-leaders-create-special-committee-to-rebuff-federal-covid-19-mandates/>.

<sup>779</sup> John Hanna and Andy Tsubasa Field, “Vaccine Mandates Compared to Holocaust in Kansas Hearing,” *Associated Press*, October 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-joe-biden-kansas-topeka-derek-schmidt-bf71306f4f6aafb8175e38838c624d32>.

that the situation was “reminiscent of Nazi Germany and the mandate for Jews to identify themselves with an arm band.”<sup>780</sup>

In Connecticut, governed by Democrat Ned Lamont, various vaccination mandates were imposed on different types of state employees.<sup>781</sup> By October 7, only 2.2% of the employees subject to this legislation had not yet complied with their obligation.<sup>782</sup> Upon learning this in a Facebook post, Anne Dubay Dauphinais, a Republican member of the Connecticut House of Representatives, reacted in a comment saying: “King Lamont aka Hitler dictating what we must inject into our bodies to feed our family!”<sup>783</sup> Steve Ginsburg, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, condemned the comparison, stating that it delegitimized the memory of the Holocaust victims. He was joined by several state representatives, including members of Dauphinais’s own party, some of them Jewish. Matt Ritter, Democratic House Speaker, denounced it as yet another example of the “trend on the far right to abandon decency, decorum, facts, and history for offensive, racist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric.”<sup>784</sup>

But Dauphinais was not intimidated by these comments. On October 9 she posted on her Facebook wall reaffirming her statement, developing an elaborate argument about why the comparison, far from being inappropriate or offensive, was very fitting. She wrote that, just as in the case of Hitler, the governor was carrying out segregationist policies “with the help of the one-party rule.” Citing sources from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Jewish Virtual Library, Dauphinais accused the governor of forcing citizens to submit to experimental remedies as the Nazis did in concentration camps; of encouraging harassment of the unvaccinated as Hitler had done with Catholics; of expelling the unvaccinated from their jobs just as Hitler had done with Jews and non-Aryans; of censoring dissenting opinions as Nazi Germany burned books; and of denying transplants and other medical care to the unvaccinated

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<sup>780</sup> Tim Carpenter, “Rabbi, Democratic Legislator Urge Kansas GOP to Denounce COVID-19 Critiques Tied to Holocaust,” *Kansas Reflector*, November 4, 2021, <https://kansasreflector.com/2021/11/04/rabbi-democratic-legislator-urge-kansas-gop-to-denounce-covid-19-critiques-tied-to-holocaust/>.

<sup>781</sup> Ned Lamont, *Executive Order No. 13D: Protection of Public Health and Safety During COVID-19 pandemic – Vaccinations Required for State Employees, School Employees and Childcare Facility Staff* (Office of the Governor of Connecticut, 2021), <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-13D.pdf>; Governor Ned Lamont, “Governor Lamont Clarifies Order Requiring State Employees, Childcare, and School Staff To Get Vaccinated or Tested for COVID-19,” Office of the Governor, September 10, 2021, [https://portal.ct.gov/governor/news/press-releases/2021/09-2021/governor-lamont-clarifies-order-requiring-state-employees?language=en\\_US](https://portal.ct.gov/governor/news/press-releases/2021/09-2021/governor-lamont-clarifies-order-requiring-state-employees?language=en_US).

<sup>782</sup> Hugh McQuaid, “2.2% of State Employees Still Out of Compliance,” *CT News Junkie*, October 7, 2021, <https://ctnewsjunkie.com/2021/10/07/2-2-of-state-employees-still-out-of-compliance/>.

<sup>783</sup> Anne Dauphinais, “King Lamont Aka Hitler Dictating...,” 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/CTNewsJunkie/posts/4324695540913400?comment\\_id=4324872980895656](https://www.facebook.com/CTNewsJunkie/posts/4324695540913400?comment_id=4324872980895656).

<sup>784</sup> Hugh McQuaid, “Lawmaker Asked to Apologize for Calling Lamont ‘Hitler’ on Facebook,” *CT News Junkie*, October 8, 2021, <https://ctnewsjunkie.com/2021/10/08/lawmaker-asked-to-apologize-for-calling-lamont-hitler-on-facebook/>.

just as Hitler denied health care to Jews. She nevertheless sought to clarify that her comparison of Lamont with the Nazi dictator referred to “Hitler in the early 1930s,” since he had not yet ordered the unvaccinated into concentration camps.<sup>785</sup> The Republican leader in the Connecticut House of Representatives, Vincent Candelora, said the comments were “offensive” and distracted from the seriousness of the underlying issues. They were also criticized by other members of the chamber, including a Jewish representative, Geoff Luxenberg, who stated that his ancestors who had died in the Holocaust would not tolerate such comparisons.<sup>786</sup> Later, Dauphinais appeared again in a video reaffirming her words: “because we know what happened in the 30s and that’s currently happening to a community of people: they were taken out of their jobs, they were segregated and discriminated, we all know about that, that’s history.”<sup>787</sup>

In those same days, during a Shawnee Heights school Board of Education meeting, in the “public comments” section, a candidate to join the board spoke against what a doctor had said at a previous meeting about “misinformation.” She claimed that, for her, a psychological war was being waged against anyone who dared to disagree with the official narrative, that statistics were being used to instill fear, and that the situation was comparable to the Holocaust: “we’re all wearing masks, where is our yellow star?”<sup>788</sup> The candidate was Christina Flaming, member of the board of directors of the Kansas Association of Nurse Anesthetists and director of the nurse anesthesia program at the University of Kansas Health System St. Francis Campus in Topeka.<sup>789</sup> She later sent an explanation to KSNT News, stating that “my statements about the atrocities of the Holocaust were my own, they were to stimulate thought and it appears my goal was successful,” and stood by her remarks: “from a brief review of the Nuremberg trials, one can find that it was doctors and nurses hanged for crimes against humanity.”<sup>790</sup>

In West Virginia, the Senate, controlled by the Republican Party, which also held the governorship, pushed a law to limit the ability of companies to require vaccination of employees,

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<sup>785</sup> Anne Dauphinais, “Today I Was Called out for Saying...,” 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/repdauphinais/posts/286372939974839>.

<sup>786</sup> NBC Connecticut and Associated Press, “Conn. Lawmaker Standing by Comments Comparing Gov. Lamont to Hitler,” *NBC Connecticut*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/conn-lawmaker-standing-by-comments-comparing-gov-lamont-to-hitler/2600215/>.

<sup>787</sup> Connecticut Dems, “Democrats Have Taken the Lead...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2021, <https://x.com/CTDems/status/1452363983340572677>.

<sup>788</sup> Shawnee Heights, “Shawnee Heights Board of Education Meetings – 09/07/21,” 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeBS\\_f0HX2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeBS_f0HX2c).

<sup>789</sup> Tim Carpenter, “Kansas School Board Candidate Compares Mask Mandate to Nazi Persecution of Jews,” *Kansas Reflector*, October 8, 2021, <https://kansareflector.com/2021/10/08/kansas-school-board-candidate-compares-mask-mandate-to-nazi-persecution-of-jews/>.

<sup>790</sup> Mark Feuerborn, “Holocaust Comparison to Mask Mandate Based on ‘Freedom of Speech’, Kansas School Board Candidate Says,” *KSNT*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.ksnt.com/news/local-news/holocaust-comparison-to-mask-mandate-based-on-freedom-of-speech-kansas-school-board-candidate-says/>.

and also added some medical and religious exemptions. Republican Jim Justice, the House speaker, spoke about the imminent arrival of the legislation announced by Biden a month earlier: “Frankly, I think this harkens back to Nazi Germany (...) Our federal government is using federal dollars to coerce the citizens in this country to be obedient to the state. Ladies and gentlemen, regardless of whether you’re for us or against us, that’s a problem.”<sup>791</sup> Beyond the condemnation of one of the Democratic representatives, who was Jewish, the episode did not receive greater attention in the public sphere.

Elsewhere, Republicans also tried to advance legislation opposing the new pro-vaccination federal law. Thus, Adams County (Idaho) passed an ordinance prohibiting any form of discrimination depending on a person’s vaccination status.<sup>792</sup> In the two meetings to discuss the matter, Chris Boyd, the sponsor of the ordinance, compared the situation to that of Nazi Germany, to slavery, and to the internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during the Second World War.

The final months of 2020 were marked by the progressive arrival of new coronavirus variants, Alpha and Omicron, as well as by government efforts to increase vaccination among younger population groups, provoking the ire of various media personalities. These new variants of the coronavirus would bring about a very pronounced excess of deaths between November 2021 and February 2022, at which point a sharp decline in both deaths and new positives gave way to a period of clear retreat of the pandemic in the country, which would be declared over a year later, in May 2023.

Pastor Rick Wiles, founder of the conservative-leaning website and channel TruNews, stated on one of its programs that those who supported vaccination were Nazis: “You are part of a Nazi propaganda operation because this is a global Nazi operation,” under the belief that those vaccinated against coronavirus would have one or two years to live at most, so that basically a quarter of the global population could die. He also issued a call to war to stop the genocide: “We went to war to stop the Nazis. We have to go to war now to stop these Nazis.”<sup>793</sup>

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<sup>791</sup> John Raby, “Wva Lawmaker Compares Federal Vaccine Rule to Nazi Germany,” *Associated Press*, October 20, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-religion-bills-legislature-d0520fb5aaacc356b630843adfd40a2>.

<sup>792</sup> Rachel Cohen, “Adams County Passes Ordinance against Federal COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates,” *Boise State Public Radio News*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.boisestatepublicradio.org/news/2021-11-09/adams-county-ordinance-against-federal-covid-19-vaccine-mandates>.

<sup>793</sup> Jenni Fink, “Pastor Rick Wiles Says Backers of COVID Vaccine Are New Nazis and We Need to ‘Go to War,’” *Newsweek*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/pastor-rick-wiles-says-backers-covid-vaccine-are-new-nazis-we-need-go-war-1656453>.

Curiously, Wiles had already been accused of spreading antisemitic information for promoting the theory that Jews controlled the United States.<sup>794</sup>

On November 29, Lara Logan, a journalist linked to conservative outlets who became known during the coronavirus pandemic for spreading misinformation about vaccines,<sup>795</sup> appeared on *Fox News Prime Time* to speak about Dr. Fauci:

“This is what people say to me, that he doesn’t represent science to them, he represents Joseph Mengele, the Nazi doctor who did experiments on Jews during the Second World War in the concentration camps, and I am talking about people from all the world who are saying this, because the response from COVID, what it has done to countries everywhere, what it has done to civil liberties (...)”<sup>796</sup>

The reaction to these comments was much greater than in other cases, probably due to the audience reach that this Fox News program already had by then; it closed out 2022 among the top three most-watched cable news shows, with 2.86 million viewers.<sup>797</sup> The Auschwitz Museum condemned the statements on Twitter as “shameful” and “disrespectful”,<sup>798</sup> while Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, also issued a weary statement rejecting the possibility of such a comparison.<sup>799</sup> The American Jewish Committee, for its part, also posted a response on Twitter emphasizing that “Josef Mengele earned his nickname [“Angel of Death”] by performing deadly and inhumane medical experiments on prisoners of the Holocaust, including children.”<sup>800</sup> Yad Vashem, Israel’s official institution for the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust, likewise condemned Logan’s words for trivializing and denigrating the memory of the victims.<sup>801</sup> On CNN, airtime was given to an Auschwitz survivor, Michael Bornstein, and his daughter, Debbie Bornstein Holinstat:

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<sup>794</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “TrueNews’ Antisemitism and Conspiracies Reach Growing Facebook Audience,” *ADL.Org*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/article/trunews-antisemitism-and-conspiracies-reach-growing-facebook-audience>.

<sup>795</sup> Jeremy W. Peters, “Lara Logan, Once a Star at CBS News, Is Now One for the Far Right,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/22/business/media/lara-logan-cbs-news.html>.

<sup>796</sup> The Majority Report, “Fox Host Lara Logan Compares Fauci to Nazi Dr. Josef Mengele,” 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN\\_W\\_FNHijk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN_W_FNHijk).

<sup>797</sup> A. J. Katz, “These Are the Top-Rated Cable News Shows of 2022,” *Adweek*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/these-are-the-top-rated-cable-news-shows-of-2022/>.

<sup>798</sup> Auschwitz Memorial, “Exploiting the Tragedy of People Who...,” 2021, <https://x.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1465547370851180547>.

<sup>799</sup> Justin Baragona, “ADL Denounces Fox’s Lara Logan for Comparing Fauci to Nazi War Criminal,” *The Daily Beast*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/anti-defamation-league-denounces-foxs-lara-logan-for-comparing-fauci-to-nazi-war-criminal>.

<sup>800</sup> American Jewish Committee, “Utterly Shameful. Josef Mengele...,” 2021, <https://x.com/AJCGlobal/status/1465704673541861376>.

<sup>801</sup> Yad Vashem, *Yad Vashem Chairman Dani Dayan Responds to Fox News Host’s Comparison of Dr. Fauci to Josef Mengele* (Yad Vashem, 2021), <https://www.yadvashem.org/press-release/30-november-2021-12-09.html>.

“Well, it’s disgusting to hear someone comparing that to Mengele, who was a doctor of Death, who killed children and experimented on twins. My father was killed in Auschwitz, my older brother... Dr. Fauci wants to save lives, there’s absolutely zero comparison. (...) I think people want notoriety, I think it’s very wrong for a TV station to air that without comments that it’s wrong. And it really hurts the Holocaust to compare it, and it hurts people because they don’t want to get vaccinated.”<sup>802</sup>

The journalist subsequently published a series of tweets in which she shared articles linking the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, then headed by Anthony Fauci, to experiments on HIV-positive children. These apparently referred to a series of clinical trials aimed at finding treatments for AIDS and HIV in which, contrary to what the articles claimed, no child died.<sup>803</sup> The articles circulated by Logan were understood as a kind of counterargument, meant to stress that Fauci, in a manner similar to Mengele, was also involved in cruel experiments on children.<sup>804</sup> Although Fox News refused to make any statements regarding the journalist’s comments—thereby attracting outrage from various groups—Logan herself stated months later that the comment had led to her being distanced from the network.<sup>805</sup>

Although the comparisons ended in 2022, January of that year was one of the most notable months in terms of comparisons between coronavirus containment measures and Nazism or the Holocaust.

One of the earliest such cases in 2022 was that of Vickie Paladino, then newly elected councilwoman in New York City. At the first council meeting, on January 5, Paladino was not allowed to take her seat because she refused to show her vaccination certificate,<sup>806</sup> as required by a municipal mandate introduced in October 2021 by Mayor Bill de Blasio—by then succeeded by Eric Adams.<sup>807</sup> In an interview with NY1, she stated that she preferred not to disclose her vaccination status for reasons of medical freedom, adding that she was not anti-

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<sup>802</sup> CNN, “Holocaust Survivor Responds to Fox News Host Comparing Fauci to a Nazi,” 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhN8OUjuEfk>.

<sup>803</sup> Angelo Fichera, “Articles Misrepresent Fauci-Linked Research Involving Foster Children,” *Associated Press*, October 29, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-410618634223>.

<sup>804</sup> Oliver Darcy, “Fox Host Doubles down on Outrageous Comparison of Fauci to Nazi ‘Angel of Death’ Doctor as Network Remains Silent,” *CNN Business*, December 1, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/01/media/lara-logan-fox-news-fauci>.

<sup>805</sup> Martin Pengelly, “Lara Logan, Who Compared Fauci to Mengele, Says Fox News Pushed Her Out,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/apr/09/lara-logan-fox-news-mengele-fauci-remark>.

<sup>806</sup> Emily Ngo, “GOP Councilwoman Refuses to Disclose Vaccination Status, Even If It Means She’s Barred from Chambers,” *Spectrum News NY1*, January 10, 2022, <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2022/01/10/gop-councilwoman-refuses-to-disclose-vaccination-status-even-if-it-means-she-s-barred-from-chambers>.

<sup>807</sup> “Mayor de Blasio Announces Vaccine Mandate for New York City Workforce,” *NYC*, October 20, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211026105040/https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/698-21/mayor-de-blasio-vaccine-mandate-new-york-city-workforce>.

vaccine but rather “anti-mandate,” concluding: “I don’t need to show you my papers. This is not Nazi Germany.”<sup>808</sup> Her words drew condemnation from Eric Dinowitz, head of the New York City Jewish Caucus, as well as other representatives of the Jewish community in New York and City Council leaders.<sup>809</sup> This led the councilwoman to apologize, while maintaining her opposition to mandates and continuing to refuse vaccination, but acknowledging that the situation was not comparable to Nazi Germany.<sup>810</sup> Ultimately, Paladino was able to take her seat in the chamber without presenting a vaccination certificate, thanks to a religious exemption, supposedly on the grounds of being Catholic.<sup>811</sup>

The first case of 2022 to truly receive national media coverage, however, was that of Warren Davidson, Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Ohio. On January 11, 2022, Washington D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser reminded citizens on Twitter that in a few days they would be required to show proof of vaccination, ID, and wear masks to enter certain establishments,<sup>812</sup> in accordance with an order issued in December 2021.<sup>813</sup> Davidson responded to the mayor’s tweet with a photo of a *Gesundheitspass* and the phrase “this has been done before.”<sup>814</sup> This type of document was used in Nazi Germany as a record of various health-related data on citizens—including diseases, disabilities, and blood type—and played a key role in the population-control system, in which mass statistics were fundamental. Entire *Gesundheitspassarchiv* containing millions of cross-referenced records were created for purposes of population management.<sup>815</sup> What Davidson failed to take into account was that this information was not protected by privacy rights and that its purpose was not merely sanitary, but also eugenic and coercive. Alongside this, he published other tweets, such as: “Let’s recall

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<sup>808</sup> Ngo, “GOP Councilwoman Refuses to Disclose Vaccination Status, Even If It Means She’s Barred from Chambers.”

<sup>809</sup> Jacob Kornbluh, “Jewish Leaders Slam NYC Council Members for Comparing Vaccine Mandate to Nazism,” *Forward*, January 11, 2022, <https://forward.com/fast-forward/480618/jewish-leaders-slam-nyc-council-member-for-comparing-vaccine-mandate-to/>.

<sup>810</sup> Ben Sales, “NYC Council Member Apologizes for Comparing Vaccine Mandates to Nazism,” *The Times of Israel*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/nyc-council-member-apologizes-for-comparing-vaccine-mandates-to-nazism/>.

<sup>811</sup> Emily Ngo, “GOP Queens Councilwoman Gets Religious Waiver from Vaccine Mandates,” *Spectrum News NY1*, January 21, 2022, <https://ny1.com/nyc/queens/news/2022/01/21/queens-city-council-vickie-paladino-covid-waiver-latest>.

<sup>812</sup> Muriel Bowser, “Remember That Starting Saturday...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220115150819/https://twitter.com/mayorbowser>.

<sup>813</sup> Muriel Bowser, *Mayor Bowser Issues Mayor’s Order on Vaccine Entry Requirement* (Office of the Mayor of Washington, D.C., 2021), <https://dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-issues-mayors-order-vaccine-entry-requirement>.

<sup>814</sup> Warren Davidson, “This Has Been Done before. #DoNotComply,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2022, <https://x.com/WarrenDavidson/status/1481216313196437504>.

<sup>815</sup> Götz Aly and Karl Heinz Roth, *Die Restlose Erfassung: Volkszählen, Identifizieren, Aussondern Im Nationalsozialismus* (Rotbuch Verlag, 1984), 103.

that the Nazis dehumanized Jewish people before segregating them, segregated them before imprisoning them, imprisoned them before enslaving them, and enslaved them before massacring them (...) Dehumanizing and segregation are underway —and wrong.”<sup>816</sup> The responses to his tweet from public figures—particularly Jewish ones—were numerous, including writer Molly Jong-Fast, musician Mikel Jollett, comic book author Aaron Meyers, as well as institutions like the Auschwitz Memorial and Yad Vashem. The following day, seeing the extent of the condemnation his tweet had caused, Davidson decided to post a text in the form of an apology:

“Bad things happen when governments dehumanize people. Sometimes, there is a next step — to systematically segregate them. Unfortunately, any reference to how the Nazis actually did that prevents a focus on anything other than the Holocaust. I appreciate my Jewish friends who have explained their perspectives and feel horrible that I have offended anyone. My sincere apologies.”<sup>817</sup>

That is, Davidson did not consider the comparison to be mistaken, but apologized for having offended the sensibilities of others. As we have seen, this is a common pattern in public apologies from those who have drawn comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust.

It did not take many days for a new scandal to arise. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who had already become known for her comparisons in the summer of 2021, again made a similar comparison on January 20, 2022, this time on her Telegram channel, where she had long been issuing various accusations of Nazism against the Democrats. Probably inspired by Warren Davidson, she published an image with a *Gesundheit* pass accompanied by a text that read: “Many Americans have been fired from their jobs for not complying with Biden’s tyrannical vaccine mandates (...) This past year the Democrat’s obsession with vaccine cards proved they are like the Nazi’s who forced people to carry ‘health pass.’”<sup>818</sup> This occurred two days after the Republican representative had also compared the segregation of Black people in the United States during slavery and much of the following century with vaccination policy.<sup>819</sup> Even with some comments from her rival, Jennifer Strahan, reproaching her that clearly her apologies from

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<sup>816</sup> Davidson, “This Has Been Done before. #DoNotComply.”

<sup>817</sup> Alyssa Guzman, “I Feel Horrible That I Have Offended Anyone’: US Representative Issues Groveling Apology after Being Blasted by Auschwitz Museum for Comparing Vaccine Passports to Nazi ID Cards,” *Mail Online*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10402879/US-Representative-issues-groveling-apology-blasted-Auschwitz-Museum.html>.

<sup>818</sup> Marjorie Taylor Greene, “Day 1 When Republicans...,” 2022, <https://t.me/RealMarjorieGreene>.

<sup>819</sup> Maroosha Muzaffar, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Compares Black Segregation to Unvaccinated MLK Day,” *The Independent*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/majorie-taylor-greene-mlk-day-anti-vax-b1995039.html>.

the previous year had meant nothing,<sup>820</sup> the impact of these remarks was much smaller than those she had made six months earlier, perhaps because they were made on Telegram, which is a more closed network than Twitter, or because people were already stunned by the sheer number of scandals that had occurred in those days.

January 13 and January 21 were significant milestones in the battle between those who supported the mandates for containing the coronavirus and those who did not. On the first of those dates, the United States Supreme Court blocked the mandate that all private companies with more than one hundred employees had to require vaccination certificates or weekly testing of their workers,<sup>821</sup> and on the second, a Federal Court in Texas blocked the vaccination requirement for all federal employees nationwide.<sup>822</sup>

On that same date, on Fox News, Tucker Carlson, one of the most prominent figures in U.S. media, commented on the event together with Robert Malone, the doctor who had been a guest of Joe Rogan and caused much controversy with his statements, and who had already appeared on the network on several occasions:

TUCKER CARLSON: I mean, I thought we had a kind of consensus on that, I mean after watching what the Imperial Japanese and the Nazis did in their medical experiments I thought that the American physicians agreed that compulsory medical care was unethical, was immoral and that it could never be imposed on anyone, when did we forget that?"

ROBERT MALONE: Apparently about a year ago, I think yesterday was when we must have forgotten (...) thank you for bringing up the Nuremberg Trials, Tucker, they are crucial, biomedical ethics matter, and this is illegal, and I'm so glad that the courts are making it clear.<sup>823</sup>

These words became part of what was perhaps one of the greatest controversies of the entire pandemic regarding comparisons. On January 23, a demonstration took place in Washington with thousands of people from all over the country protesting against the mandates for containing the coronavirus. At the rally, signs could be seen supporting all kinds of conspiracy theories, from claims that the virus did not exist to the idea that vaccines were

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<sup>820</sup> Tyler Olson, "Marjorie Taylor Greene Posts Message Comparing Vaccine Mandates to Nazi 'Health Pass,'" *Fox News*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-posts-message-comparing-vaccine-mandates-to-nazi-health-pass>.

<sup>821</sup> Kevin Breuninger and Spencer Kimball, "Supreme Court Blocks Biden Covid Vaccine Mandate for Businesses, Allows Health-Care Worker Rule," *CNBC*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/13/supreme-court-ruling-biden-covid-vaccine-mandates.html>.

<sup>822</sup> David Shortell, "Judge in Texas Blocks Enforcement of Federal Employee Vaccine Mandate Nationwide," *CNN*, January 21, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/21/politics/employee-vaccine-mandate>.

<sup>823</sup> Gustaf Kilander, "Tucker Carlson Likens Vaccine Mandates to Nazi Medical Experiments," *The Independent*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/tucker-carlson-nazi-experiments-vaccine-b1998651.html>.

weapons of mass destruction.<sup>824</sup> Some of them also contained comparisons with the Holocaust and Nazism, such as “Heil Hochül! We will not comply!”<sup>825</sup> —in reference to the governor of New York—, “Mandates = Fascism”,<sup>826</sup> “Slowly and quietly. Hardly anyone even know it’s a holocaust”, or people wearing Stars of David with the expression “unvaxxed.”<sup>827</sup> Among the speakers who addressed the crowd were several figures from the anti-vaccine movement, such as the aforementioned Robert Malone and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

This latter figure, the son of Senator and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy — brother of the assassinated president — had built a significant reputation within the anti-vaccine movement throughout the coronavirus pandemic, spreading all kinds of misinformation in numerous books, social media accounts, and even entering into litigation to defend others who did the same as him.<sup>828</sup> Over the course of his career, he had already been involved in controversies for instrumentalizing the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust. Thus, during the screening of the film *Trace Amounts*, which linked vaccines to autism, Kennedy used the word “Holocaust” to refer to the number of children allegedly harmed by vaccines.<sup>829</sup>

In November 2021, he published the book *The Real Anthony Fauci*, a compendium of the most prominent conspiracy theories about the coronavirus and vaccines at that time. In the book, he instrumentalized the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust in various ways. To begin with, he relied on the testimony of Vera Sharav, founder of the organization The Alliance for Human Research Protection (AHRP) and a Holocaust survivor who had attacked coronavirus containment mandates, considering them “arbitrary, draconian,” and comparing them to the abuses of Nazism, while also spreading misinformation about vaccines during the pandemic.<sup>830</sup>

<sup>824</sup> Katie Mettler et al., “Anti-Vaccine Activists March in D.C. —a City That Mandates Coronavirus Vaccination—to Protest Mandates,” *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/23/dc-anti-vaccine-rally-mandates-protest/>.

<sup>825</sup> Andrew Beaujon, “PHOTOS: The Anti-Vaccine-Mandate Rally in DC,” *Washingtonian*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2022/01/24/photos-the-anti-vaccine-mandate-rally-in-dc/>.

<sup>826</sup> The Washington Times, “Defeat the Mandates Rally in Washington,” *The Washington Times*, January 23, 2022, [https://www.washingtontimes.com/multimedia/collection/defeat-mandates-rally-washington/?page=12#id\\_gallery\\_target](https://www.washingtontimes.com/multimedia/collection/defeat-mandates-rally-washington/?page=12#id_gallery_target).

<sup>827</sup> Sergio Olmos, “Thread: ‘Defeat the Mandate’ Rally in Washington, DC,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2022, <https://x.com/MrOlmos/status/1485284421502746626>.

<sup>828</sup> Keziah Weir, “How Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Became the Anti-Vaxxer Icon of America’s Nightmares,” *Vanity Fair*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/05/how-robert-f-kennedy-jr-became-anti-vaxxer-icon-nightmare?srsltid=AfmBOoo4osbUlil89FxEzz4YzKuESi7jMEakvNduzxcg8yXJZPd4YQxz>.

<sup>829</sup> CBS News, “Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Apologizes for ‘Holocaust’ Comment in Vaccine Debate,” *CBS News*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/robert-f-kennedy-jr-apologizes-for-holocaust-comment-in-vaccine-debate/>.

<sup>830</sup> In a lecture given for one of the most prominent anti-vaccine institutions in the United States, the National Vaccine Information Center, Sharav linked Nazi experiments and eugenics with Anthony Fauci and U.S. health policies up to the pandemic itself, also making comparisons with the infamous Tuskegee Project, legitimizing her discourse on the basis of being a Holocaust survivor. Paul A. Offit, *Deadly Choices: How the Anti-Vaccine Movement*

Chapter 7 of the book is dedicated to spreading the theory, already discussed earlier, that the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, directed by Anthony Fauci, had conducted unethical experiments on children, particularly poor and racialized ones, with HIV medication, and it is introduced with a quotation from William Shirer on medical experiments in the Third Reich. In other chapters, alongside criticisms of the management of the coronavirus pandemic, numerous references can also be found to Nazi influence on medical research and abuses in experimentation in U.S. history.<sup>831</sup> The book made it onto Amazon's list of best-selling books of 2021.<sup>832</sup>

The essay was accompanied by another, shorter one with speeches and interviews with RFK Jr., some with a messianic tone, with one interviewer even claiming that history would divide men into two groups: those who had read the book and those who had not, and that only the former would survive. This interviewer, the CEO of Informed Consent Action Network — an anti-vaccine group active in the United States — asked Kennedy directly whether he believed Anthony Fauci was evil, to which he responded:

“Well I really try to avoid speculating about what’s going on in his head (...) it is very clear that he suffers from some kind of sociopathy (...) There’s a German word, *death killers*. During the Nazi era, there were people who worked in the death camps and they actually killed people. They put people in ovens and the gas chambers, etc. But the worst of the bureaucrats, according to people like Hannah Arendt, were the people who herded from behind desks, who did it from a distance. Who made these vast decisions which had consequences, homicidal consequences for thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of people. And then they went home and played with their children and kissed the dog and loved old people and children and all this. And they were what Hannah Arendt called those people death killers. And it’s a mystery to me about why the people end up like that. That’s Tony Fauci.”<sup>833</sup>

Kennedy made numerous references to Nazism and the Holocaust throughout his career within the anti-vaccine universe. In a speech before the Ron Paul Institute in October 2021, he also referred to the Nazi past. Speaking about efforts to silence and condemn the anti-vaccine discourse and his will to resist, he expressed himself in the following terms:

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*Threatens Us All* (Basic Books, 2015); Vera Sharav, “National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC) Conference,” *Alliance for Human Research Protection*, March 9, 2021, <https://ahrp.org/national-vaccine-information-center-nvic-conference/>.

<sup>831</sup> Jr. Kennedy Robert F., *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2021).

<sup>832</sup> Amazon, “Best Sellers in Books for 2021,” 2021, <https://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/2021/books>.

<sup>833</sup> Robert F. Jr. Kennedy, “The Real Anthony Fauci. Book Tour - A True Crime Journey,” 2024, 59, <https://archive.org/details/the-real-anthony-fauci-book-tour-robert-f.-kennedy-jr-et.al/page/n9/mode/2up>.

“My father told me when I was a little kid. He read *The Diary of Anne Frank* to me and my siblings and he said (...) at that point of history a lot of people were talking about the Nazis and how the German people, how this could have happened to them. And my father said, you know, this has nothing to do with German, we all have this disease [blind obedience to the government], it can do this to any of us. And he said: ‘you, kids, have to ask yourselves, if this ever happened in the United States, would you be the people who hid Anne Frank or would you be the people who turned her in?’ And, you know, you guys all answer to that question. You’re the ones who would have hidden Anne Frank, and you need to be proud of that.”<sup>834</sup>

In other words, Kennedy was comparing the situation of anti-vaxxers, their cause, and the public censorship of it to the persecution of Jews during Nazism, as well as likening those who followed vaccination guidelines to the Dutch collaborators who would have betrayed Anne Frank. It was not the last time he did so. In his speech during the aforementioned rally, where he spoke on behalf of the organization Children’s Health Defense, dedicated to protecting children “by eliminating toxic exposure” — whether in vaccines, “wireless radiation” such as 5G, fluoride, or others<sup>835</sup> — he spoke of the “controlled demolition” of the United States, censorship, government abuses against private property, and the alleged lack of scientific support for the measures taken against the coronavirus, among other things. At one point in the speech, he claimed that the helplessness of U.S. citizens in the face of this wave of abuses of power was worse than that of Jews in Nazi Germany:

“We are watching something now that I never believed that I would see in my lifetime, and I read Orwell and Kafka’s, these dystopian science fiction novels that one day the United States would be overtaken by fascism — which, incidentally, is defined, Mussolini defined it, as a merger of state and corporate power — and orchestrated a Tony Fauci. (...) It’s been the ambition of every totalitarian state from the beginning of mankind to control every aspect of behavior, of conduct, of thought, and to obliterate dissent. None of them have been able to do it, they didn’t have the technological capacity. Even in Hitler Germany, you could cross the Alps to Switzerland, you could hide in an attic like Anne Frank did. I did it in 1962, East Germany, with my father, and met the people who would climb the wall and escape. So it was possible. Many died, truly, but it was possible. Today, the mechanisms are being put in place that will make it so none of us can run and none of us can hide.”<sup>836</sup>

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<sup>834</sup> RFK Jr Podcast, “CIA and Totalitarianism Speech to Ron Paul Institute in D.C.,” October 22, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0yv0eT8BnG4VcLTkSpXPSM>.

<sup>835</sup> See its website, <https://childrenshealthdefense.org>.

<sup>836</sup> News2Share, “Robert Kennedy Jr. Full, Controversial Speech at ‘Defeat the Mandates’ – 4k Documentary Video,” 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joilT2IT2qQ>.

Here Kennedy was making a qualitatively different comparison than before, as he was not only equating his situation with that of Jews during the Holocaust, but claiming it was worse, since they could at least flee. This, naturally, drew the attention of numerous civil society actors. The U.S. Holocaust Museum dedicated a thread on Twitter to refuting Holocaust comparisons, emphasizing the grave and tragic nature of the genocide and condemning any possible parallel.<sup>837</sup> The Anti-Defamation League, Yad Vashem, and the Auschwitz Memorial also reacted with outrage against Kennedy,<sup>838</sup> who later had to apologize for having offended Holocaust survivors.<sup>839</sup>

Scott Jensen, Republican candidate for governor of Minnesota, attended in April an event organized by Mask Off Minnesota, a state organization opposed to coronavirus containment mandates. During the event, Jensen warned his fellow citizens about the supposed loss of freedoms they were witnessing in the following way:

“Go back to World War 2. If you look at the 1930s and you look at it carefully we could see some things happening. Little things that people chose to push aside, ‘it’s going to be okay’. And then the little things grew into something bigger. Then there was a night called *Kristallnacht*, the Night of the Breaking Glass. Then there was the book burning, and it kept growing and growing, and a guy named Hitler kept growing in power and World War 2 came about. Well, in a way, I think that’s why we are here today. It’s because you sense that something’s happening and it’s growing, little by little.”<sup>840</sup>

Criticized by his political rival, then-Governor Tim Walz, Jensen insisted that he considered it a legitimate comparison and did not issue an apology. Ethan Roberts, director of government affairs for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, condemned the comparison, saying it was “historically inaccurate” and asserting that nothing except genocide should ever be compared to the Holocaust.<sup>841</sup>

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<sup>837</sup> US Holocaust Museum, “1/ Making Reckless Comparisons to the Holocaust...,” *Twitter (Now X)*, 2022, <https://x.com/HolocaustMuseum/status/1485617327722876931>.

<sup>838</sup> Michelle R. Smith, “RFK Jr. Remarks on Anne Frank, Vaccines Draw Condemnation,” *Associated Press*, January 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-the-holocaust-anne-frank-51ff5b36a8d30636184ef3e6d2dce198>.

<sup>839</sup> Michelle R. Smith, “RFK Jr. Apologizes after Condemnation for Anne Frank Comment,” *Associated Press*, January 26, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/rfk-jr-apology-anne-frank-comments-9a6855403b91f5debf98f23c6db90551>.

<sup>840</sup> Scott Jensen, “Mask Off Minnesota Event – With Matt Birk and Scott Jensen,” 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3277041642531019>.

<sup>841</sup> Steve Karnowski, “Minnesota’s Walz Hits Rival Jensen for Holocaust Remarks,” *Associated Press*, August 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-covid-health-the-holocaust-state-fairs-99c0b58510346bf8d6a55220a9ff8521>.

In 2022, the decline in infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, along with the consequent relaxation of coronavirus containment measures, also witnessed a sharp decrease in comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust. On February 25, the CDC updated its guidelines, stating that 70% of Americans could stop wearing masks and would no longer need social distancing.<sup>842</sup> By April, many states had already begun to end their own mandates as well.<sup>843</sup>

### 4.3. Case study: the debate over vaccination on Twitter

The social network Twitter is far from being a majority platform among the U.S. population. According to the Pew Research Center, only 23% of adults in the country reported using it in the years covered by our study, compared to 40% for Instagram or 69% for Facebook,<sup>844</sup> and among them young people with higher education, middle- or upper-class background, and sympathizers of the Democratic Party were more common.<sup>845</sup> In addition, a strong representation of men, urban dwellers, and ideological extremists has been found,<sup>846</sup> and geographical distribution data are not always reliable in this regard,<sup>847</sup> making it difficult to treat Twitter as a population analysis tool with representative samples.

However, this low demographic representativeness does not correspond to its media, political, and social impact, particularly in the U.S. In the 2016 elections the social network was the main communication channel used by both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.<sup>848</sup> When the latter became president, he made Twitter his preferred battlefield against political opposition, becoming at least as important as traditional institutional communication channels, which Pain and Chen called the “technological performance of populism”.<sup>849</sup> Political debates in the U.S.

<sup>842</sup> Apoorva Mandavilli, “New C.D.C. Guidelines Suggest 70 Percent of Americans Can Stop Wearing Masks,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/health/cdc-mask-guidance.html>.

<sup>843</sup> The New York Times, “The U.S. States That Are Ending Mask Mandates,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/health/cdc-mask-guidance.html>.

<sup>844</sup> Shradha Dinesh and Meltem Odabas, “8 Facts about Americans and Twitter as It Rebrands to X,” *Pew Research Center*, July 26, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/26/8-facts-about-americans-and-twitter-as-it-rebrands-to-x/>. However, we must take into account that tweets are not only read by users of the platform; they are also frequently reproduced in the news media.

<sup>845</sup> Stefan Wojcik and Adam Hughes, “Sizing Up Twitter Users,” *Pew Research Center*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users/>.

<sup>846</sup> Pablo Barberá and Gonzalo Rivero, “Understanding the Political Representativeness of Twitter Users,” *Social Science Computer Review* 33, no. 6 (2015): 712–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314558836>.

<sup>847</sup> Andreas Petutschnig et al., “Evaluating the Representativeness of Socio-Demographic Variables over Time for Geo-Social Media Data,” *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information* 10, no. 5 (2021): 323, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgi10050323>.

<sup>848</sup> Luca Buccoliero et al., “Twitter and Politics: Evidence from the US Presidential Elections 2016,” *Journal of Marketing Communications* 26, no. 1 (2020): 88–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2018.1504228>.

<sup>849</sup> Paromita Pain and Gina Masullo Chen, “The President Is in: Public Opinion and the Presidential Use of Twitter,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119855143>.

increasingly developed in this digital environment,<sup>850</sup> and, as we mentioned, some of the most influential movements of the last decade —BLM, Alt-Right— are directly native to these digital spaces.

Twitter is a particularly fertile ground for political polarization, which clearly increased between 2016 and 2020.<sup>851</sup> This is consistent with what the Social Identity Approach literature shows. Online identity is highly performative, because users have the possibility of controlling most of the information about themselves that others see when they visit their profiles.<sup>852</sup> Thus, social *cues* are few and controlled, which simplifies social categorization. This facilitates the avoidance of out-group members (blocks, unfollows), thereby generating *echo chambers*, highly endogamous environments in which users hardly receive social influence from groups with which they do not identify, favoring polarization.<sup>853</sup> This does not mean that social networks are the cause of a polarized society. Rather, pre-existing polarization is accentuated. People who move in circles where information about the out-group is aggressive increase their own aggressiveness, which in turn reinforces the phenomenon.<sup>854</sup> For this reason, Twitter and similar social networks are an ideal environment for the proliferation, in contexts of heightened confrontation, of analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust, since we have already seen that these are evident signs of intergroup confrontation.

### 4.3.1. Methodology

#### *Problem overview*

The social network Twitter is what is known as an *online micro-blogging platform*. This means that it consists of a website in which each user may have their own profile, with identifying elements such as a picture, a background, a description field, and other optional personal

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<sup>850</sup> Jamie E. Settle, *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>851</sup> James Flamino et al., “Political Polarization of News Media and Influencers on Twitter in the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential Elections,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, ahead of print, March 13, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01550-8>.

<sup>852</sup> Although on social networks there is also other information that users do not control, because it is provided by the platform (followers, interactions), this remains more relevant in determining the impression of proximity, see Yi Mou et al., “Evaluating a Target on Social Media: From the Self-Categorization Perspective,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 49 (August 2015): 451–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.031>.

<sup>853</sup> Robin L. Wakefield and Kirk Wakefield, “The Antecedents and Consequences of Intergroup Affective Polarisation on Social Media,” *Information Systems Journal* 33, no. 3 (2023): 640–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12419>.

<sup>854</sup> Swapnil Mane et al., “You Are What Your Feeds Make You: A Study of User Aggressive Behavior on Twitter,” *Applied Intelligence* 55, no. 6 (2025): 385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10489-025-06286-8>.

information; the possibility of publishing short text fragments of up to 280 characters —*tweets*— accompanied by images or videos to which others can react by means of *likes*, *retweets*—which involves sharing the tweet on one’s own profile—, *replies* underneath the tweet, or *mentions*— original tweets from other people in which the tweet in question is cited and displayed in miniature; following other users so that their *tweets* appear in one’s personal *feed*; and exploring the general publishing trends through *hashtags*—keywords that represent a topic and are placed within the *tweet*. User profiles may be public, so that anyone can see what is published and interact with it, or private, in which case the user decides who can and cannot see their content.<sup>855</sup> Those who opted for the latter option in the United States were a minority during the pandemic years, which made the social network much more suitable for scientific analysis.<sup>856</sup>

The procedure we followed to carry out this part of the analysis is usually described as a *mixed-methods* approach. That is, it combines content and thematic analysis with statistical analysis techniques.<sup>857</sup> The phases of this analysis were as follows:

- 1) Collection of tweets (*data retrieval*) through the Twitter API, while it remained active.
- 2) Cleaning of the resulting dataset to ensure that the tweets collected were suitable for the purpose of our analysis.
- 3) Application of different techniques for coding tweets.
- 4) Hypothesis testing by means of descriptive statistics and non-parametric association tests.

### *Data retrieval*

When facing the problem of collecting tweets for any type of analysis, there are fundamentally three ways to obtain a valid dataset: direct access to the platform’s databases; obtaining data directly from the website; or the use of pre-collected datasets available on the Internet.<sup>858</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> This brief description corresponds to the form of the social network Twitter during the pandemic, between 2020 and 2023, as in the latter year several changes took place that substantially altered its appearance and functioning. To consult the old version of the platform it is necessary to do so through the *Internet Web Archive*.

<sup>856</sup> Emma Remy, “How Public and Private Twitter Users in the U.S. Compare — and Why It Might Matter for Your Research,” *Pew Research Center*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/07/15/how-public-and-private-twitter-users-in-the-u-s-compare/>.

<sup>857</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.

<sup>858</sup> Katharina E. Kinder-Kurlanda and Katrin Weller, “Perspective: Acknowledging Data Work in the Social Media Research Lifecycle,” *Frontiers in Big Data* 3 (December 2020): 509954, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2020.509954>.

The most suitable method for scientific research is usually the first, since it allows direct access to most of the information, requires less cleaning and adaptation of the data, and guarantees reliability. In addition, unlike the other two, this method also provides stronger usage guarantees, as it is carried out in dialogue with the developers and owners of the social network in question. Access to Twitter's databases requires the use of an *Application Programming Interface* or API, a means of communication with the platform's servers that mediates external access to its data. Such access is subject to several limitations regarding volume, time frame, and diversity of the information that can be accessed, making it necessary to communicate the purpose of its use and adhere to one of its plans. Until February 2023, the social network offered an exclusive access for researchers —known as the *Twitter Academic API*— free of charge and with broad coverage, for which an application was required. This was the only form of access that could serve our research, as it allowed access to any date within the databases —for us, the pandemic years— and the extraction of a practically unlimited number of tweets. Unfortunately, with the discontinuation of the service by the company's new owners from that date onwards, such access was eliminated, and today it is necessary to pay tens of thousands of dollars per month for a more limited and insufficient option.<sup>859</sup>

Access to the Twitter API was, therefore, the only acceptable way of obtaining data for our research. Once access was granted, we developed a three-phase plan: 1) testing several search *queries* —standardized search instructions that indicate what terms to search and how— until finding the most suitable one through partial extractions; 2) downloading and cleaning all tweets that met our criteria; 3) *refreshing* the tweets by obtaining contextual information of interest —replies, mentions, etc. The research could only be completed partially due to the closure of the API access mentioned earlier.

Thus, after conducting several exploratory analyses, we decided to begin our research by focusing on the element of the pandemic that seemed to trigger the most comparisons: vaccination mandates. The query we developed was the following:

("holocaust" OR "shoah" OR "auschwitz" OR "anne frank" OR "dachau" OR "nazi" OR "hitler" OR "Nazism" ("covid" OR "coronavirus") ("vaccine" OR "vaccination" OR "vaccinated") -survivor)<sup>860</sup>

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<sup>859</sup> Ryan Murtfeldt et al., "RIP Twitter API: A Eulogy to Its Vast Research Contributions," arXiv:2404.07340, preprint, arXiv, April 10, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2404.07340>.

<sup>860</sup> The exclusion of the category "survivor" is due to the detection of many news reports and reactions to deaths or vaccinations of Holocaust survivors, which biased our sample.

This search instruction is divided into four blocks: 1) references to Nazism and the Holocaust, mixing generic terms —*Holocaust, Nazi*— with those that emerged as most frequent in previous exploratory analyses —*Auschwitz, Anne Frank, Hitler, Dachau*. Communicated to the Twitter API through the “*academictwitterR*” package in the R programming environment, and limiting the temporal scope of the search to the dates of the pandemic’s onset and the time when we were then conducting our research, it resulted in a dataset of 26,992 tweets and another of 78,115 retweets between 11/03/2020 and 05/05/2023, the start and end dates of the COVID-19 pandemic according to the WHO.<sup>861</sup>

### *Data cleaning*

The datasets extracted from Twitter required an intense cleaning process to reach a reliable and manageable result. To begin with, it was necessary to eliminate duplicate tweets, since they usually belong to bots or trolls, two types of automated users —one machine-driven, the other humans— who, commissioned by someone, dedicate themselves to spreading information or carrying out campaigns in support of or against people of interest to whoever creates or hires them. The application of standardized methods to eliminate absolutely identical duplicates was not possible because tweets usually undergo some kind of modification that allows their authors to evade bot detection algorithms. Instead, we used the Damerau–Levenshtein distance, which calculates the minimum number of changes needed—addition, deletion, substitution, or transposition of characters—for two text strings to be exactly the same.<sup>862</sup> After several tests, we concluded that a distance of less than 100 was enough to consider two tweets equivalent, while maintaining the functionality of the operation and avoiding too many false positives. This first polishing reduced the volume from 26,992 to 6,027.

Another challenge we faced was cleaning out those tweets that did not correspond to the United States. As we already mentioned, the intense debates about vaccination were not exclusive to this country, but also took place in other English-speaking states such as Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia. That, combined with users from other countries who frequently express themselves in English—politicians, journalists from international media,

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<sup>861</sup> World Health Organization, “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic,” 2025, <https://www.who.int/europe/emergencies/situations/covid-19>.

<sup>862</sup> The explanation of this technique can be found in Fred J. Damerau, “A Technique for Computer Detection and Correction of Spelling Errors,” *Communications of the ACM* 7, no. 3 (1964): 171–76. It was executed through R, using the functions contained in the “*stringdist*” package, see Mark Van der Loo, *Package ‘Stringdist’* (2025), <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/stringdist/stringdist.pdf>.

academics, etc.—generated a significant number of tweets referring to other contexts and situations. Since we focused on the U.S. case, it was important for us to have some guarantees that what we were analyzing corresponded to our object of study. It was not feasible to achieve this through tools such as geolocation of tweets or users' declarations about their place of residence in their profile biographies, since those are incomplete and unreliable data. Instead, we started from the hypothesis that the probability of a tweet's author being from the United States is directly proportional to the number of keywords related to this country they use, and inversely proportional in the case of those related to other countries. This led us to design a classification system for tweets based on an algorithm that assigns them points depending on the mention of media outlets,<sup>863</sup> well-known figures, politicians, cities, or states—adding them if they are associated with the United States and subtracting them if they belong to other countries. From this, the tweets were divided according to the score obtained, and we carried out several exploratory codings, starting with the most restrictive and moving toward the minimum threshold of more than 3 points as the exclusion criterion, resulting in a dataset of 835 tweets.

The final dataset consisted of basic identifying data: the author and tweet IDs, the text, and the date it was published. On this we carried out the coding of 5 categorical variables. As is well known, coding consists in the process of adding categories or codes to different fragments of discourse to group them and thus conduct quantitative analyses that have a certain degree of traceability and reproducibility. The coding process can be theoretical-deductive or emergent-inductive.<sup>864</sup> In the first case, the researcher designs their own categories based on the research questions and the theoretical framework to follow, and applies them to the discourse in question. In the second case, by contrast, the researcher extracts the categories from the discourse itself through research questions, which allows analyses that are more faithful to the internal logic of the discourses, though less linear. In both cases, coding usually involves several layers: an initial coding to test theoretical categories or extract emergent ones, and successive re-codings to group very similar categories, split others, create or eliminate them. Our coding was mixed, with three theoretical-deductive variables and two emergent-inductive ones, applied in four phases.

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<sup>863</sup> This is of maximum relevance, since a majority of tweets shares some news. If the news belongs to a non-US operating media, it is more likely that the user is also foreign.

<sup>864</sup> See, for example, Theophilus Azungah, "Qualitative Research: Deductive and Inductive Approaches to Data Analysis," *Qualitative Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (2018): 383–400, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-D-18-00035>.

The first consisted in differentiating tweets that met our requirements from those that did not. All those that did not show some type of opinion, whether implicitly or explicitly, that were not understandable, that showed consistent signs of not being American, or that did not deal with matters related to the United States or the COVID-19 pandemic, were excluded. This left 465 tweets for the final coding. In a second phase we carried out a descriptive coding, based on two theoretical variables: “antimand”—binary, if the tweet showed an attitude against vaccines and/or other containment measures—and “statement”—categorical, multi-label, expressing whether the tweet involves some type of comparison or condemnation of them and, if so, with what degree of complexity. Third came content analysis, with a theoretical categorical multi-label variable, “topic”—the subject of the tweet, whether it—and two emergent or inductive variables based on open coding: “historical”—the historical elements related to Nazism and the Holocaust that are mentioned in the tweet, if any—and “antagonist”—in the case of tweets that antagonize, who they are directed against. In a fourth phase, these last two then underwent a recoding process to refine the emergent categories obtained.

### 4.3.2. Main findings

#### *Chronological distribution*

Since we are studying the entire pandemic process in the United States and believe that the publication of tweets related comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust may be linked to public debates on the matter, we decided to perform a lagged Spearman’s rank correlation. The choice of this statistic is due to the fact that the data are non-parametric and chronologically ordered, where correlation does not necessarily appear in the same month. It is plausible that, for example, a political event occurring in the last days of one month continues to have an impact on Twitter at the beginning of the following month. The results confirm that there is indeed a very significant correlation between political events and the publication of tweets within the same month ( $\rho = 0.531, p < 0.001$ ), somewhat subtler but still significant in previous and subsequent months ( $\rho = 0.436, p < 0.01$ ). In Figure 1 this association can be seen more intuitively, with the summer months of 2021 and January 2022 standing out. This shows that prominent events, such as the comparisons made by Rep-R Marjorie Taylor Greene, the appearance of Rep-R Jim Walsh with a yellow star on his chest, measures taken by Gov. Cal.-D Gavin Newsom, debates on mandatory vaccination later promoted by the Biden administration

in September, and the Defeat the Mandates demonstration in 2022 in which R. B. Kennedy Jr. participated, influenced publications on Twitter.

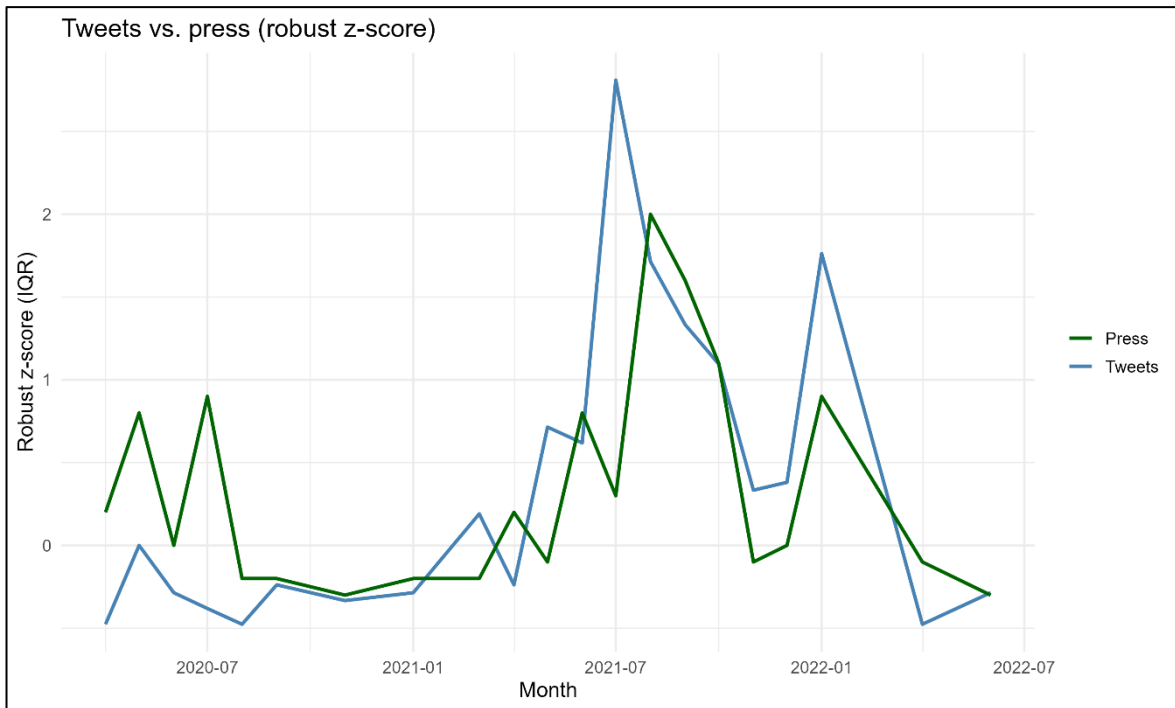


Figure 1 Correlation between press coverage of the analogies and the number of tweets on the matter.

Beyond this, it is also possible that the very situation of the pandemic was related to these waves of tweets, by prompting more containment measures and, consequently, more political and social backlash. To measure the urgency of COVID-19 at each moment, many measures could have been used, but we considered hospitalizations caused by the disease to be the most appropriate.<sup>865</sup> This seemed better than the number of new COVID cases, since that measure depended at any given time on the number of tests performed. Moreover, what really had a socioeconomic impact and influenced government decisions was not the number of people diagnosed, but the saturation of hospitals. The mass vaccination of the U.S. population reduced hospitalizations by reinforcing the immune system against the pathogen.

In the figure 2 we can see this trend, in which all peaks in hospitalizations correspond to an increase in the volume of tweets published ( $\rho = 0.445, p < 0.01$ ). With the exception of the summer of 2021, this occurred during the colder seasons, when different governments and

<sup>865</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-NET: COVID-19-Associated Hospitalization Surveillance Network* (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025), <https://www.cdc.gov/covid/php/covid-net/index.html>.

institutions tightened their measures in anticipation of, or in response to, the surge in infections and hospitalizations, which explains this sociopolitical response.

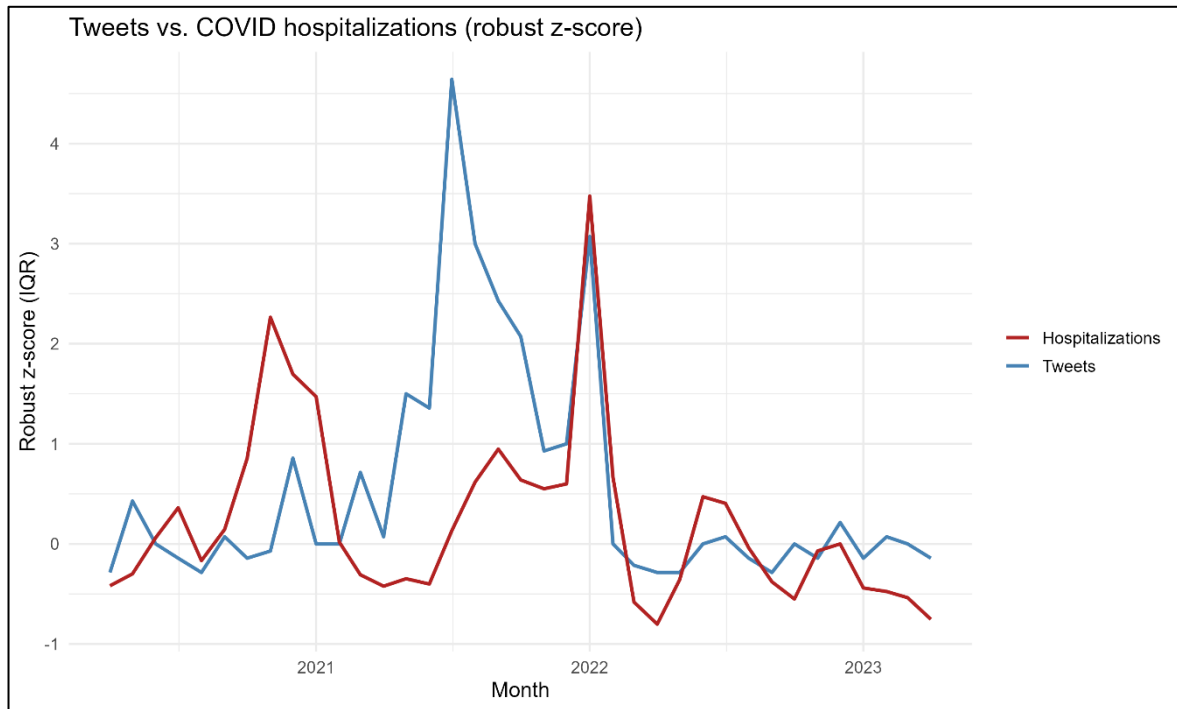


Figure 2 Correlation between COVID-19 hospitalizations and the number of tweets related to the analogies.

*Contents of historical representations*

As explained above, the dataset underwent several processes of coding and recoding in order to understand the origin of tweets more intuitively and to process them statistically. Of the tweets collected, 65% were comparisons with Nazism and the Holocaust, while the remainder condemned or denied such comparisons. More than 3/4 of the comparisons were made in protest against vaccination mandates, and the rest consisted of attacks against those who opposed them. Since we were only able to collect original tweets, and not conversations, the vast majority are reactions to political events or statements rather than to other users.

In general, the historical references used in these comparisons were predominantly Nazi-themed, with the Holocaust appearing in only 19.6% of observations. We refer here to explicit mentions, since we have already explained that the idea of Nazism implicitly carries the idea of the Holocaust, which at the same time is what gives the comparison its immoral dimension in the eyes of society. In expressions such as the already discussed “show me your papers,” the coding was complex, since the phenomenon of registration and surveillance of citizens was used

to carry out the Holocaust, but not exclusively, which is why we decided to include it in a broader category.

Its use by supporters of mandates was practically residual, occurring in only 3 observations, aimed mostly at labeling the alleged irresponsibility of Republican leaders and Donald Trump in managing the pandemic as a genocide:

Well I think of the former Nazi Fascist Donald Trump killing 500,000 people while his Nazi Fascist Governors in Texas and Florida, Trump's Covid mini me deniers, assist in this genocidal murderous rampage! Deathsantis and Abbott fully vaccinated and booster shot and Regeneron flush! <https://t.co/T6gnuwruCh>

[The tweet is quoting another one referencing Ron DeSantis's statements criticizing Joe Biden's handling of the pandemic]

At the time of this tweet, in late August 2021, DeSantis and Abbott had expressed their rejection of measures such as requiring proof of vaccination to enter establishments or for employees. Both had already banned “vaccine passports” in April 2021 by means of executive orders.<sup>866</sup> The user's interpretation compares the possible deaths resulting from this way of managing the pandemic with the indiscriminate killings of Nazism and fascism in history.

The use of this metaphor by opponents of vaccination mandates followed mainly two paths: the rejection of vaccination certificate policies and, to a lesser extent but still significantly, the safety of the vaccines themselves. Assumptions about the latter went so far as to consider them potentially dangerous or directly lethal. Rumors such as their causing blood clots and other illnesses, or being designed for mind control, spread across social media and conspiracist media outlets. Bill Gates was one of the most targeted figures in these conspiratorial narratives, given his involvement in the development of vaccines and digital certificates. On one occasion he referred to the “Final Solution” to COVID-19, which activists employed to link him to the Holocaust (the well-known *Endlösung*).<sup>867</sup>

if I understand this, Bill Gates & his wife want to roll out the vaccine for Covid and treat the elderly, the black community, native Americans & people with underlying health conditions first. Does this sound like the second round of Auschwitz? #effbillgates #billgates #socialist

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<sup>866</sup> “Texas Governor Bans Mandated COVID-19 ‘Vaccine Passports,’” *AP News*, July 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/public-health-state-governments-coronavirus-pandemic-greg-abbott-texas-23258aae7f8bd7df98a4b93834d62d88>; Office of the Texas Governor Greg Abbott, “Governor Abbott Issues Executive Order Prohibiting Vaccine Mandates By Any Entity, Adds Issue To Special Session Agenda,” Office of the Texas Governor, n.d.

<sup>867</sup> *Bill Gates: The Vaccines Offer Americans A Chance To Return To Normal Life*, directed by The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLQt7EC0QjE>.

Pfizer to seek regulator OK for third COVID-19 dose to boost protection against delta variant  
#NewsBreak <https://t.co/0k7A1oIUm8> #sheeple lining up for the #finalsolution #vaxxed  
#cnn #msnbc #Fascism #Nazi #fascistleft #NaziChina #ChinaJoeBiden

As CDC’s involvement in the COVID Biological attack on the USA & followup genocide vaccination, the CDC used NAZI policies to invade American privacy & freedom to force us to participate in this GLOBALIST operated genocide plan. <https://t.co/pZCzw3Fal4>

THE COVID SCAMDEMIC PUSHED BY THE WHO, WEF, BillGates, JohnsHopkins AND GOVERNMENTS AROUND THE WORLD HAVE KILLED MORE PEOPLE THAN STALIN AND HITLER TOGETHER, WITH VACCINE AND MEDICAL METHODS. ...AND SOME PEOPLE LOVED IT!

Underlying these claims was the belief in the existence of a secret plan to exterminate part of the U.S. or global population. This was not an invention of the COVID period but had already spread in the context of debates on sustaining global population growth and degrowth proposals for reducing climate risk. Bill Gates himself had been misinterpreted in early 2021, when a video circulated in which he claimed during a TED Talk that it was necessary to reduce population growth by 10–15%.<sup>868</sup> In historiographical terms, we can see here that the function fulfilled by the Holocaust as a symbol follows the process described for any comparison or metaphor: in both terms of the comparison, some characteristics are highlighted while others are minimized or omitted. In this case, what is concealed is precisely what makes the Holocaust distinctive from other mass killings: its ethnic-racial character. In these comparisons, the Holocaust is a reference point for systematic and large-scale extermination, without considering that the people murdered were selected based on supposed racial belonging, and not personal decisions—which, if that were the case, might make it comparable to the exterminations of Communist China or the Soviet Union.

This aspect was also dominated by the belief, less conspiratorial than the previous one, that vaccines were *experimental*, and that their long-term effects were unknown. This was a very widespread idea in anti-vaccine movements which, as we have seen, played an important role in protests against vaccination mandates. Among the most common arguments was that, in a partial interpretation of the Nuremberg Code, forcing the population to vaccinate would mean forcing citizens to become subjects of experimentation, as Nazi Germany did with Jewish prisoners—and many others.

<sup>868</sup> Ali Swenson, “Bill Gates Never Said ‘3 Billion People Need to Die,’” *AP News*, 26//, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-checking-9917566788>.

realDonaldTrump GovStitt govkristinoem <https://t.co/PQQWSYgXth>  
<https://t.co/WbQkeMEOSA> People like Bill Gates & Fauci from the WHO & health departments & CDC & UN want to experiment on people as guinea pigs with the vaccines to kill like Hitler did to the Jews in Germany.

FitzroviaNews COVID CON.. Nazi Germany pulled the same thing when it vaccinated everyone against a disease which did not exist. Many Jews, i.e. Mike Nichols, were used for medical experimentation. When (again fancifully) numbers became high people were summarily locked up in ghettos

The argument of the Nuremberg trials leads us to references to Nazi medical crimes. Although they referred to the general universe of beliefs about Nazism, they overlap considerably with the Holocaust, since although the victims of Nazi experimentation and programs such as Aktion T4 came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Jews suffered them in particular and are often placed in relation to the genocide.<sup>869</sup>

NAZI “VACCINE / IMMUNIZATION EXPERIMENTS” DURING WW2 ...and  
Reminder: “Operation Paperclip”, we brought those Nazi Scientists to America after WW2.  
#WW3 #WW2 #WW1 #Hitler #Ye #Kanye #KanyeWest #OperationPaperclip #Nazi  
#Nazis #COVID #Vaccine #Vaccines <https://t.co/4TvU1XYjRM>  
<https://t.co/VqBknj6SFa>

<https://t.co/tjcZLt2TtD> Several nurses who worked for Sidney & Lois Eskenazi (emphasis on the Nazi) Hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana have been terminated over their refusal to submit to the hospital’s mandatory experimental Covid injection.

FitzroviaNews COVID CON.. Nazi Germany pulled the same thing when it vaccinated everyone against a disease which did not exist. Many Jews, i.e. Mike Nichols, were used for medical experimentation. When (again fancifully) numbers became high people were summarily locked up in ghettos

The second line of reference to the Holocaust was the reference to the Stars of David that all Jews in Nazi Germany were forced to wear, or the tattoos given to prisoners at Auschwitz:

VACCINEgate: It doesn’t get worse than the COVID-19 vaccine <https://t.co/YEGsBID22p>.  
Remember the Nazi Doctors and medicalized killing of undesirables, replete with digital cutaneous certificates rather than tattoos. RoystonPotter DrMartyFox HenryMakow JimFetzer.

<sup>869</sup> Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Michael H. Kater, *Doctors Under Hitler* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Ask for COVID-19 vaccine proof, face a \$5,000 fine in Florida — Thank you Governor, the Democrats are like Nazis, you will be wearing a Yellow Star, just repeating history (Via WINK News) <https://t.co/LoYES6H8X4>

The point of comparison here is the act of identifying and marking part of the population, equating the situation of unvaccinated people with that of Jews during the Holocaust as victims. This was closely connected to the general trope of “show me your papers,” and to the U.S. imaginarius regarding state control, which is why references to Nazism were sometimes accompanied by references to Communist China or the USSR.

Among the references to Nazism in its various forms, we distinguished between those referring to members of the Nazi Party or the word “nazi” as an adjective (NAZISM), those alluding to the German dictator (ADOLF HITLER), and those referring to the regime imposed by the Nazis in Germany, its norms, characteristics, and protagonists (NAZI GERMANY). The distinction was not always easy, since by the very nature of the topic all codes in the “historical” category share thematic affinity. Nevertheless, this division best served the statistical analyses and proved most useful for coding the tweets.

To begin with, we can draw a first distinction between those that actually contain historical content and those in which the word “nazi” has a meaning already detached from the historical figure, and those in which Nazism is treated as a past reality. The first use of this category was among the most common among those who supported COVID-19 mandates against those who did not, representing an attack on Trumpists, who were labeled “nazis”:

If EVERY abysmally-ignorant Trump-worshipping NAZI goof who refuses 2 get vaccinated OR wear a mask were 2 die 2day, it would be a net gain 4 all humankind. Let them suffocate in their own shit. #Trump #Biden #COVID #BLM #ACLU #EqualJusticeForALL #Terrorists<sup>870</sup>

254 Michigan Americans exterminated yesterday by the Russian Republican nazi trump cult leader Donald lies! With 12,649 new cases of COVID-19 infections in two days! Get smart enough to be vaccinated, if not for you and to save your life. Get vaccinated to save your neighbor’s life <https://t.co/jy5KE3e2VM> [The tweet includes a FoxNews screenshot detailing the coronavirus situation in Michigan]

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<sup>870</sup> **Transcription:** If every abysmally-ignorant Trump-worshipping nazi goof [fool] who refuses to get vaccinated or wear a mask were to die today, it would be a net gain for all humankind. Let them suffocate in their own shit. **Refs to:** Donald Trump, Joe Biden, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, American Civil Liberties Union, motto “Equal Justice For All”, Terrorists.

In these tweets the authors are criticizing a group of people for rejecting COVID-19 vaccines or spreading conspiracy theories about them, but the label “nazi” does not derive from this condition, but from being right-wing people, followers of Donald Trump. The absence of any other reference to historical Nazism and its use as a mere epithet, without occupying a central place in the argument, leads us to consider this a “dehistoricized” use of the word. In neither case do we clearly find the main purpose of metaphor, which we outlined in earlier sections, namely “to interpret one situation in terms of another.” In these cases it is simply a pejorative term. This was also applied by activists against vaccination mandates, speaking of “COVID nazis,” “vaccine nazis,” or “nazi vaccine,” using the word “nazi” as equivalent to authoritarian. The pejorative nature of this adjective in language also crystallized in expressions such as “Bill DeNazio” or “I did NA-ZI this.”

Other categories, however, do usually contain explicit historical references. There are three codes for references to Nazism as a historical phenomenon, and each points to a different facet: the personal, the contextual, and the systemic. Regarding the first, NAZHIT is the code we used to categorize those tweets in which Adolf Hitler is mentioned implicitly or explicitly. In this dataset, Hitler usually fulfills two functions. On the one hand, he is a point of comparison in himself to attack leaders whom the author considers to be taking overly authoritarian measures, as was the case of governors or mayors who imposed restrictions on unvaccinated people, such as in New York, Chicago, or the states of Colorado or California, or —obviously— Joe Biden himself. But he was also used against Republican governors who, as mentioned above, tried to ban measures such as vaccination certificate requirements:

“NEWSOM YOU ARE A MODERN DAY HITLER! I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU DODGED THE RECALL BULLET! FORCING “ANYONE” TO GET VACCINATED IS OUTRIGHT TYRANNY! I CAN’T WAIT 4 YOUR EXODUS! GavinNewsom Newsom Announces COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for Schoolchildren <https://t.co/4dGJ0JxpP8> via YouTube”

Hitler is alive and well in California and his name is Gavin Newsome. Los Angeles sheriff stripped of his enforcement power after he refused to make his staff get vaccinated despite county-wide mandate <https://t.co/cacyy6liko> #SmartNews

#FloridaGOP in particular #RonDeSantisFL & #PFeaman sound more like Adolph Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, & Josef Mengele aka Nazi leader and propagandist, using #RepMattGaetz #SenRubioPress as their lackeys. #DeSantisDeathSquad <https://t.co/ncydU0EUjz>

Florida Gov “Lil’ Hitler” DeSantis won’t order vaccine for kids because “Covid vaccines are inappropriate for kids!” Parents will have to go out of state for vaxxes for their kids! “Free State Florida” sucks! #Republicans

However, Hitler is hardly ever described or attributed personal characteristics as a historical figure. In most tweets he is nothing more than a symbol, a way of invoking Nazism in its various forms, interchangeable with the word “nazi” itself, mentioned to refer to supposedly dangerous actions against democracy or civil rights. We hardly find, unlike what exists in popular culture, references to his psychology, image, or life path. Yet from this we can extract a trait of U.S. collective memory already discussed: the personalization of guilt in the figure of the German dictator. If the concepts of “Hitler” and “nazi” are interchangeable, it is because the former embodies all the characteristics of the latter. That is why tweets speak of “Hitler’s extermination plan,” “authoritarianism (...) showcased notoriously by Hitler,” “Hitler’s playbook,” “Hitler’s mindset,” or “Hitler tendencies.” The process of organizing the Nazi movement, its rise to power, and the Holocaust itself are thus reduced to the individual agency of Adolf Hitler.

Now then, even if implicitly, the reference to Hitler goes hand in hand with his conceptual universe, crystallized in collective memory through the cultural referents we discussed in earlier sections. *To understand someone in terms of Hitler* is necessarily a form of out-group derogation, and therefore a sign of polarization and social conflict. The aim is not simply to create greater symbolic distance to reinforce the positive attributes of the in-group, but to denigrate the enemy, turning them into a figure alien to any possible framework of dialogue. Hitler is buffoonish, caricature-like, authoritarian, genocidal... ultimately, a representation of absolute evil with which no one can identify.

If this is a strategy that allows for the personal framing of the enemy, NAZGER —the code we used to refer to references to Nazi Germany as a country— appeals to the contextual, spatial-temporal, and group dimension. That is, in this case the enemy is no longer signaled directly —though indirectly it is—, but rather a context is created in which to understand their actions. *Framing* is one of the most important functions of metaphors and discursive comparisons, because it makes it possible to change the interpretive rules of reality and direct attention to those elements most relevant to the speaker. In the case of the pandemic, this is especially significant, because many of the measures adopted to reduce COVID-19 infections required citizens’ trust in the goodwill of government leaders and, above all, in the accountability mechanisms of U.S. democracy.

Nazi Germany persists in the U.S. collective memory as the result of a degeneration of the Weimar Republic and the loss of civil liberties, the so-called *slippery slope* that we saw so frequently in political statements. In fact, in March 2020 HBO released the miniseries *The Plot Against America*, based on Philip Roth's 2004 novel of the same name, whose plot involved the fall of the U.S. into a fascist-style dictatorship, partly inspired by the 1930s novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Thus, connecting the pandemic situation to Nazi Germany implies questioning the intentions of government leaders and the reversibility of restrictive measures affecting rights such as freedom of movement or vaccination certificate policies.

i live in nazi germany — the absolute worst evil people; here it is VAX PASS EVIL BS

Sunday Morning thoughts. New York Governor has already red-lined parts of New York (think Nazi Germany). Is he purposefully lining the state with military? What other plan (that I'm sure has been in the works for months) will he try to put in motion once COVID vaccine arrives?  
<https://t.co/IKy19I9MDk>

If you think mask enforcers are bad, just wait until you're hounded for your barcode.  
#biggovernment #Coronavirus #Democrats #Holocaust #NaziGermany  
#NewYorkCityNYC #politics #tweet #vaccine <https://t.co/Twc910geRW>

The days of slavery when blacks couldn't travel off of the plantation without a pass or, more recently, when Hitler's Germany wanted to see "your papers," are coming back! COVID-19 Vaccine Passport? You Might Need It To Travel In 2021 – CBS Boston  
<https://t.co/IQtt5NBPoC>

This fall into fascism also entails a strong attack on U.S. national identity. Thus, the situation is read not only in terms of realistic conflict —loss of rights, possible worsening of living conditions— but also in symbolic terms. The United States ceases to be what it is — remember its individualistic and anti-statist culture— to become something else, an alien and "foreign" dictatorship —German, Russian, or Chinese. The conflict generated by disagreement with COVID-19 containment mandates transcends the level of political discussion and reaches the existential level. It is a strategy of activating the self-defense mechanisms of the group that fosters the *depersonalization* of its members, leading to greater intra-group cohesion and more stereotypical readings of the out-group.

Please tell me this is BS. Do not allow us to become Nazi Germany. There will be a revolt against this. Where do you stand?? realDonaldTrump MikePence FLOTUS RobertKennedyJr  
NJAssemblyGOP NJGOP

MILITARY vaccine mandates? Dept. of Defense purchasing 500 million ApiJect syringes to inject every person in America with coronavirus vaccine – <https://t.co/1NcbR7QeBN>  
<https://t.co/MQEj2smDec> BULLSHIT! This is Nazi Germany, not America!

Sieg Heil! It’s Nazi USA 2020! Simply flabbergasted by how widespread authoritarianism has swept across, not only America, but the globe. Wake up Sheeple, we fought World War I & II, Korea, Vietnam, Cold War, Terrorism to eradicate totalitarian fascism!  
<https://t.co/K6rVLgTlcx> <https://t.co/BNiA42BRAE>

Biden administration working with companies to develop ‘vaccine passports’ to track vaccinated Americans <https://t.co/mrxqyjQOB1> Nazi America forcing people to get a vaccine even if you’re allergic or terrified!!

Metaphors with Nazi Germany are also the richest in historical references. Beyond authoritarianism, which we already discussed, the most highlighted aspects of the Nazi regime were propaganda —figures such as Goebbels, the idea of the “Big Lie,” and the media serving the regime—, militarized bodies such as the “Nazi brownshirts,” population surveillance and control through the Gestapo, “health passports” or “punchcards,” and related phenomena such as resistance, “anti-nazi folks,” or collaborationism —for which both IBM and Bill Gates were accused.<sup>871</sup>

### *Patterns of representation*

All the categories we have just reviewed are distributed throughout the dataset, with none of them being exclusive to one type of user or another. However, the distribution is not homogeneous, and our coding revealed robust associations between categories. The division we established from the outset between supporters and opponents of coronavirus containment mandates is key here. Since they defend opposing causes and direct their tweets against different people or groups, we should expect the type of comparisons to vary.

For this purpose, the codes of the “historical” category must be contrasted with those of the “antagonist” category; the “antimand” category, which is simply a binary category describing whether users are for or against the mandates; and the “topic” category, which represents the motive for protest, either against mandates or against those opposing them.

The “antagonist” codes —see Table 1— are based on two criteria: support for or rejection of vaccination mandates, and statistical representation. For instance, figures such as Marjorie



<sup>871</sup> To see the relations between historical references and specific antagonists, check Figure 3.

Taylor Greene or Bill Gates had clear positions on the mandates and could have been classified accordingly, but their strong presence in the tweets justified separate treatment. Moreover, support or rejection was also divided according to whether the actors were political figures, non-partisan figures, or institutions and companies, since the coding revealed distinct treatments depending on these conditions.

BILGTS	Bill Gates
DONTRP	Donald Trump
JOEBDN	Joe Biden
OPMAND	General opposition to mandates
OPREP	Republican opposition to mandates
RONDST	Ron DeSantis
SUPDEM	Democratic support for mandates
SUPMAND	General support for mandates
SUPNINA	Institutional and corporate support for mandates
MARJTG	Marjorie Taylor Greene

Table 1 “Antagonist” codes used for statistical analyses (only significant ones are included)

Figures 3 and 4 are heatmaps showing the standardized residuals from a Chi-Square test of statistical significance applied to a contingency table. In other words, they measure the strength and significance of the association between pairs of codes. On the Y-axis we find the “historical” codes, and on the X-axis the “antagonist” codes. Any value of  $z$  greater than 1.96 is considered significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Thus, in Figure 4 we see that the use of comparisons with “Nazism” —remember, the reference to the word “nazi,” often dehistoricized— is highly consistent among those protesting against opponents of coronavirus containment mandates (*antimandates*), while the latter tend more to use references to historical elements of Nazi Germany or the Holocaust.

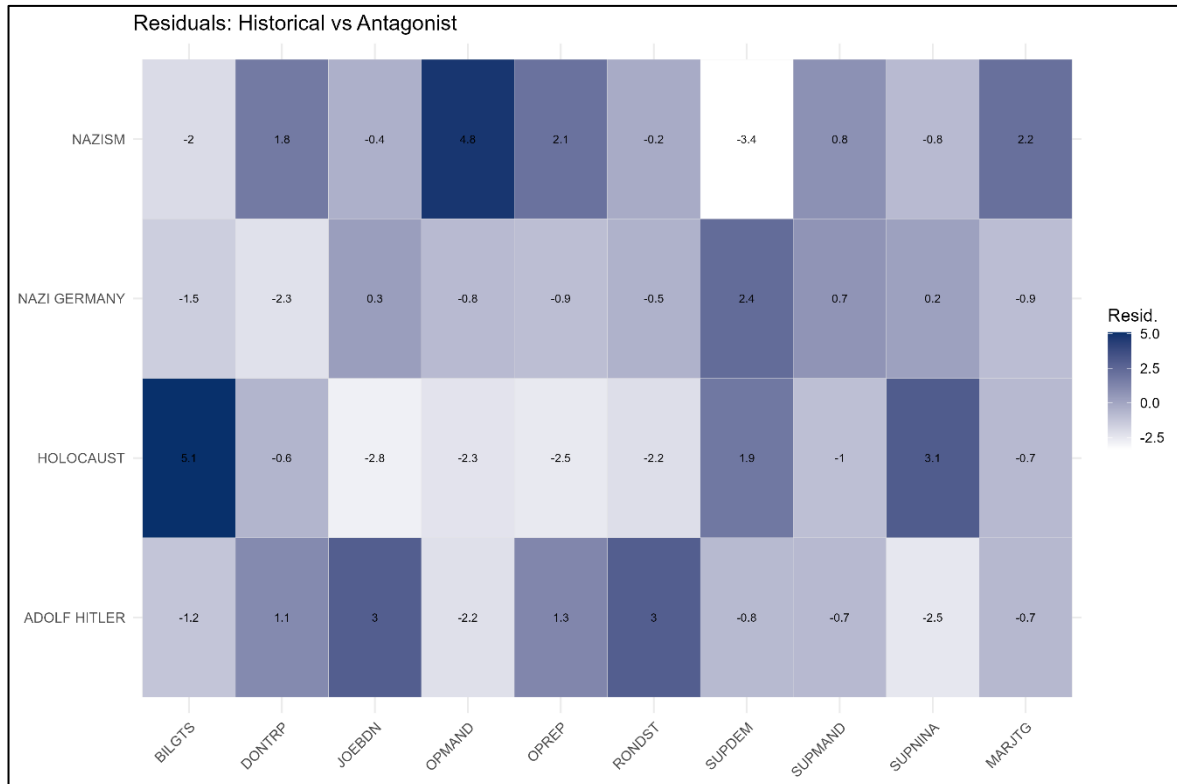


Figure 3 Heatmap showing statistical correlations between “historical” and “antagonist” codes.

Consistently with this, when we examine who these comparisons are directed against, the division is the same, albeit with some nuances. Nazism is clearly and strongly associated with opposition to mandates among non-partisan actors, with weaker associations with Donald Trump and partisan opposition. The fact that these last associations do not reach statistical significance may be due to the smaller number of observations that result from dividing anti-mandate actors into more categories. In the case of references to authoritarianism, propaganda, and other elements of Nazi Germany (code NAZI GERMANY), the clear association is with Democratic politicians, which makes sense since many of these protests were directed against mandates established by state governors and mayors. The Holocaust, as we noted earlier, is strongly associated with Bill Gates and institutions that supported vaccination (such as the CDC or pharmaceutical companies), given the analogies drawn with Nazi medical crimes and conspiracy theories about genocide. There is also a notable association with Democratic politicians, stemming from criticism of vaccination certificates and parallels drawn with the Star of David. As for Adolf Hitler, he shows very significant associations with criticisms of Joe Biden and Ron DeSantis, but not with more collective categories such as SUPDEM or OPREP. This

supports our earlier interpretation: metaphors about Hitler tend to be formulated more personally.

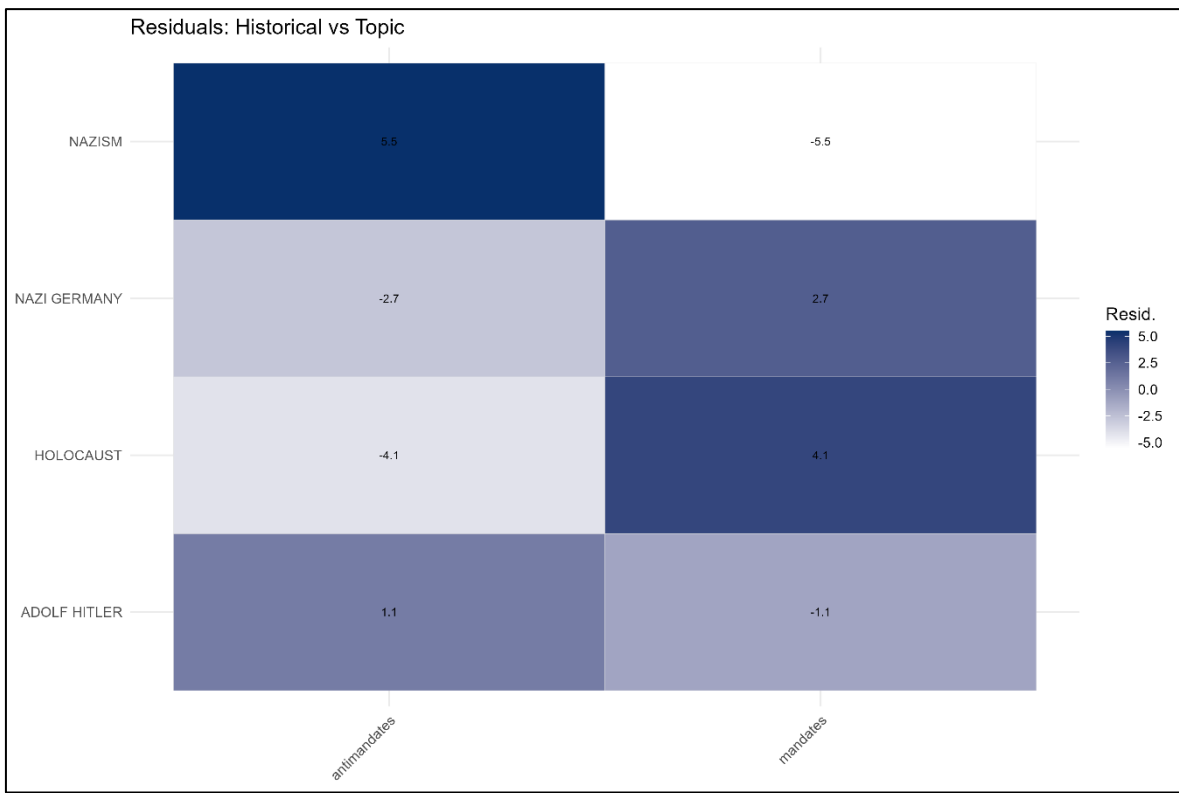


Figure 4 Heatmap showing statistical correlations between "historical" and "topic" codes.

*Condemning the comparisons*

So far we have focused on the comparisons, but a very important part of the dataset, about one-third, consists of condemnations of these comparisons. As in the other cases, these are all reactions to statements by political figures unhappy with coronavirus containment mandates. The analysis of these condemnations reveals three types of strategies or reactions to the comparisons. In most cases, however, the tweets include several of them.

The most common reaction was to deny the comparison (23.75% of observations). In some cases this was not accompanied by further argumentation, since these were implicit denials —taking for granted the erroneous nature of the comparison— or simple denotative expressions such as “the vaccine is not anything like Nazi experimentation” or “this is so wrong for many reasons.” In other cases, however, reasons were given as to why the comparison was inaccurate, usually through a strategy of pointing out the most emotionally striking or



quantitatively significant components of the Holocaust or Nazi ideology to highlight the asymmetry with the pandemic situation:

Will the ahistorical comparisons between 1942 Nazi Germany and 2022 North America ever stop? It’s simple — murdering millions with Zyklon-B gas is not the same as Covid vaccine administration. <https://t.co/jh7fuVhvdZ> via jtanews

House Republican compares D.C. vaccine mandate to Holocaust <https://t.co/Pcq4O2tmWo> thedailybeast Look, Davidson, the Holocaust was a wholesale killing of a religious minority as well as several other political minorities. Mandating a vaccine in a deadly pandemic is not the same.

Marjorie Taylor Greene invokes Nazi-era medical code in opposing Biden vaccine mandate <https://t.co/bSlc6YyEMW> So, requiring Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19 is the same as Mengele doing “medical” experiments on Jews usually without anesthesia?

Here we have several examples of such arguments. One highlights a spatial-temporal issue (1942 Nazi Germany vs. 2022 North America), another the deliberate nature of the killing and the quantitative aspect (murdering millions). The second and third tweets point out qualitative differences: the discriminatory character of Nazi crimes, targeting people on religious and ideological grounds, and the fact that the experiments invoked in the comparisons were unlike the way COVID vaccines were developed and administered, since they were performed on people according to racial ascription, without anesthesia and without scientific safeguards.

This type of reaction is among the most informative about Holocaust knowledge, not so much for what is mentioned, but for what is omitted. The elements present, although factually correct—in reductive and superficial terms—, result from a stereotyped vision. The murder of millions and the cruelties of experiments on Jews were late phenomena, mainly from 1941 onwards, when the long Holocaust process had already been underway for more than half a decade, and did not begin with mass killings. Although this does not discredit these arguments, we can say that the implicit view of the Holocaust is reduced to the “Final Solution,” with no deep reflection on the nature of this historical process. This is to be expected given the medium in which these statements are expressed and, above all, the type of debates we are analyzing.

This effort to counter-argue or deny comparisons is closely linked to another common reaction: assessing the motives behind them. While the former identified the comparison and tried to counterbalance it, in this second scenario it was taken for granted that it was wrong and the focus was on questioning the reasons behind such statements. The responses can be classified into two types: those that blamed the ignorance of the authors of the comparisons —

they made them because they did not know they were wrong— (19.16% of the total) and those that assumed a dishonest intent (6.51%). In the first case, calls predominated for politicians to educate themselves, to read, to listen to Holocaust survivors or read about it. This stems from a view similar to that of those who denied the comparisons: it would be enough to show these people the reality and gravity of what happened to discredit their statements. This was what prevailed in the famous case of Marjorie Taylor Greene, who —let us recall— was sent to the Holocaust Museum to learn, which led her to retract... only to repeat the same comparison shortly afterward. The second type of speculation about motive gave a more polemical reading: it was assumed that the authors of the comparisons knew of their inaccuracy, and were lying deliberately to spread anti-vaccine propaganda. In this case, the argumentation was almost nonexistent, being closer to simple negative evaluations or conspiratorial speculations. Paradigmatic examples of both responses can be found here:

Marjorie Taylor's bunion Greene, once again, proved she's as ignorant as she is homely, when she likened showing proof of vaccination to the Jews being made to wear stars in Nazi Germany. It's like saying a Covid vaccination is like a lethal injection because both use a syringe&needle!

I think the GOP needs to educate Marjorie Taylor Greene, if that is even possible... given the source, I am doubtful. McCarthy, Stefanik, Scalise rebuke Marjorie Taylor Greene's comparison of COVID-19 vaccine rules to Holocaust <https://t.co/AP26TjWhja> via YahooNews

House Republican Compares D.C. Vaccine Mandate to Holocaust #SmartNews. They are desperate and will say anything to push their agenda, what next for the GOP? They are fear mongers. They don't believe in the truth and the rule of law. They are a set of lies. <https://t.co/g0cgOOQCue>

Kinzinger rips fellow GOPers who invoked Nazi-era imagery to pan Biden vaccination push <https://t.co/mMF0KalN6f> Russia paid terrorists to kill Americans in war zones and it seems like Republicans are getting Russian bounties for pushing lies that will kill Americans with covid.

After trying to demonstrate their falsehood or questioning the motives behind them, a third reaction was to evaluate them. That is, not necessarily debating them in factual terms, but pointing out their low moral content in different respects. This can also be subdivided between those consisting of unspecific assessments of the moral baseness implied by the comparisons and those pointing out a clear reason. Among the former are those that appealed to their “offensive” nature, in general terms (16.09%), or that expressed an emotional impact or incredulity (8.81%), although both are closely connected. These generally involved appealing to

the lack of values of the authors of the tweets, showing surprise at the comparison, magnifying its erroneous character, or directly insulting them with common epithets.

#MTG’s Star of David vaccine protest is offensive not just to Jews but to all good Americans. Ironically, like Nazis, those now wearing are expressing their desire to harm and kill others. Patriotism is for the good of society, not to harm it. #GAPOL <https://t.co/6g1ZIWBQg>

House Republican leaders condemned Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R–Ga.) for repeatedly equating COVID-19 vaccination & mask-wearing rules to the Holocaust, which killed 6 million Jews. Why do they feel the need to be so specific? Everything she says is offensive!

The amount of people flat out refusing to get a COVID vaccine is staggering. Like what do you tell someone who believes that Bill Gates is using the vaccine to microchip all Americans? Or that America is becoming Nazi Germany by advising people to get vaccines? Just unbelievable.

Yes — Michigan Republicans R real sophisticated... DEAR WORLD: Please know we R not ALL dumb hicks here! House hearing on COVID-19 vaccine passport ban includes testimony invoking Holocaust <https://t.co/AO0n5UrgD1>

The more specific assessments appealed to the “irresponsibility” of comparing vaccines with the Holocaust (11.49%), for discouraging vaccination and causing the death of citizens; also “racist” or “antisemitic” (7.66%), for minimizing Jewish suffering during the Nazi dictatorship; or appropriative or trivializing (6.51%), for *politicizing* something of such gravity. Of these assessments, the last two are especially relevant, because they shed light on U.S. perspectives regarding the implications of using the Holocaust and Nazism in political discourse, beyond simple condemnation.

Some of these users are descendants of Holocaust victims or survivors, and use this as an argument of grievance to point out that the authors of the comparisons are diminishing the memory of their ancestors or of Jewish history. The strategy consisted either of stating that Jewish suffering was being “appropriated,” or of contrasting the hardships experienced by Holocaust victims with the seemingly trivial act of wearing a mask or taking a scientifically tested vaccine. The label “antisemitic” followed the same logic, pointing out that the difference was so vast that the mere comparison implied minimization of suffering, implicitly assuming this was done because it was part of Jewish history and, for racist reasons, was given less importance than it deserved.

Any comparison of the Holocaust and the COVID vaccine is wrong and irresponsible. I expect better from state party leadership as should every Oklahoman. <https://t.co/7PmwN47t0R>

Man Joe Rogan knows no bounds. Comparing COVID vaccine mandates to concentration camps in the Holocaust. You disgustingly missed the mark, dude. And proving anti-Semitism is real. Discrediting the horror and the pain many Jews and other vulnerable populations experienced.

Wowww the shop Hatwrks (Hatworks) in Nashville proudly sells yellow stars with the words “Not Vaccinated”... My grandparents’ entire families were killed in the Holocaust. Their bodies incinerated. That’s **NOTHING** like COVID precautions.

Another horrific abuse of trivializing the Holocaust and the lives lost by COVID-19 by officialOKGOP. Meanwhile, in neighboring Arkansas, 80,000 doses of the vaccine are about to expire. Anti-vaxxers endanger all of us. #DeltaVariant #CovidIsNotOver #GetVaccinatedNow <https://t.co/7LSejm53s4>

In identity terms, these condemnations could be interpreted, on a superficial reading, as a mere sum of individual reactions to what is considered a political scandal. That is, while the authors of the comparisons would be using them as a form of out-group derogation, drawing on the past in dynamics of intergroup conflict, the condemnations would act as a counterweight, perhaps attempting to emphasize the moral boundaries that should be set to social competition. However, there are several elements to consider before reaching such a conclusion. First, we saw that these tweets are generally responses to political statements made by concrete and identifiable individuals. That is, generally —even if there are exceptions— they are not responses to a “social murmur” of comparisons, but refer to specific declarations, such as those by Marjorie Taylor Greene or Warren Davidson. Yet many of them quickly extend their condemnation not only to these individuals, but to the entire Republican Party and to opponents of vaccination mandates, overlooking the many occasions when Republicans themselves distanced from their colleagues for making such comparisons. If we recall the principle set forth by Tajfel and Turner, the interpretation of social interactions in individual terms goes in the opposite direction to their interpretation in collective or group terms. In this way, we know that many condemnations are in fact performing a group- and identity-oriented reading of the comparison and its condemnation.

Coast to coast and top to bottom the GOP has lost its mind. Notice he put on the star because the audience was wearing them, but then doubles down. The base drives electeds now RadioFreeTom matthewjdowd monacharen MaxBoot JimBrunner AustinJenkinsN3 <https://t.co/uYS3g6bS5e>

Marjorie Taylor Greene’s comparison of vaccination to Nazi brownshirts and kevinomccarthy says people who criticize racists are like the KKK. GOP has a metaphor problem? Or is it in an inescapable stupidity spiral begun about the time their Party boss called COVID a hoax?

“This is the current state of the Republican party, bitter white men pretending to be victims. Oklahoma GOP leader defends comments comparing vaccine mandates to Jewish persecution <https://t.co/cdLEYEJ4M1> via theoklahoman”

This goes hand in hand with numerous epithets and the emphasis on censoring the comparisons. These condemnations are by no means merely a form of social pedagogy or an expression of anger. Their content seeks to attribute certain characteristics to Republican Party supporters that fit in with in-group stereotypes: racist, ignorant, poorly educated, rustic whites... A pattern that extends to anti-vaxxers, due to the identity overlap between the two, labeling them as a “danger” to society, as irresponsible, or even as “stupid.”

This spirit of intergroup competition is carried out, as usual, from the terms of the immediately superordinate category, namely national identity. The constant appeals that Republicans are “killing Americans,” that they “know nothing about American or world history,” that they “cannot imagine any American politician invoking anything like this,” or that “there is no place in American political conversation” for this, as well as the many doubts raised about Republicans’ ability to govern, suggest a questioning of out-group prototypicality in favor of in-group prototypicality. Anti-vaccine Republicans would be attacking the very idea of America, while Democrats leading the pandemic containment efforts would represent the opposite: safety, inclusion, truth, and seriousness.

## Conclusion

The first of the questions (Q1) that we set out to answer in the initial objectives referred to whether ANHs were employed as a tool for intergroup conflict, while the second (Q2) asked us about differences between groups. The answer must take into consideration two elements: which groups we are referring to and how we know that the comparisons were used as attacks. As we saw at the beginning, identities can be contextual, because groups are not fixed entities but rather the product of social categorization. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., there was a partial overlap between identities that managed to shape the diffuse categories of pro- and anti-mandates. The vast majority of anti-mandates were understood as conservatives and Republicans, and this was expressed both by those who condemned the ANHs and by those who—as we saw in the Twitter dataset—attacked anti-mandates for their positions. Moreover, on numerous occasions we saw Democrats, who held the most rigorous position on mandates, compared to Nazis by anti-mandates. The existence of a gray area in which anti-mandates attacked Republican politicians, breaking intragroup solidarity and cohesion, is also beyond doubt, but it suggests that not all of them were politically aligned, that there were still intragroup differences—subgroups—or that in some cases the salience of the anti-mandate category outweighed the conservative one. However, it is evident that Republicans were the main protagonists of the ANHs, and Democrats their principal targets. Their hostile use is visible in conceptual metaphors that attempted to portray legislators as Nazis and, through a victimization strategy aimed at garnering solidarity, anti-mandates as Jews.

The most common referents used for both terms of the analogies (Q3) were few and easily predictable. This is due to what Lakoff calls *structural mapping*, that is, the need to make the attributes and relations of the source domain and the target domain correspond. There must be some kind of plausible—though not correct—relationship between the two for the resulting metaphor to be effective, and this is what makes metaphorical-conceptual systems follow an internal logic. Consequently, masks first, and certificates later, became Stars of David connected with the symbolic universe of Jewish discrimination under the National Socialist regime and with population control—“show me your papers!”. Vaccines and the mandates that sought to promote them were understood as leading either to the domain of Nazi experimentation—Aktion T4, Mengele, etc.—to authoritarianism—“needle Nazis”, brownshirts—or, from the most misinformed and conspiratorial perspective, to the Holocaust itself—genocide, crimes against humanity, Auschwitz, etc. As was predictable, one of the most common associations

was between political leaders, such as certain governors or even the president, with Adolf Hitler, with wordplays such as Little Hitler, He-Hitler, or Hitler Scott. Ultimately, the word “Nazi”, without accompanying adjectives, could only be understood as a conceptual metaphor in a very restricted sense, since its use at times appears so dehistoricized that it may not fulfill the function of transferring the object into the conceptual domain of Nazism.

Finally, there is no doubt that a considerable part of the American society reacted to these comparisons (Q4), and in such a way that a large part of the media controversies we saw corresponded precisely to the responses. These were usually based on highlighting the ignorance of the emitter and the need to educate them or to become informed, but also on simple offense, unreasoned denial, and moral condemnation or direct vituperation of the authors. The most active institutions in this respect were the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and other smaller ones, as well as international institutions such as the Auschwitz Museum and Yad Vashem. These generally adopted a condemnatory and pedagogical attitude, centered on the moral problem of the comparisons. However, given the granularity of the cases we examined, we also saw involvement from civil society, with rabbis, local politicians, journalists, and teachers expressing themselves in the press and on social media against this use. Many responses also formed part of intergroup hostility dynamics, using the fact of the analogies as a means to question the morality, capacities, or dignity of their political enemies, while contrasting themselves with *life-saving vaccines*. The accusation of antisemitism was frequent, which in itself constitutes a form of invalidation of the victimization strategy established by those who employed the ANHs, by turning them into racists and therefore victimizers. However, it should be noted that not all responses were directed in a conflictive sense, since while they highlighted the wrongness of the ANHs, some did not engage in disqualification of the authors or reinforcement of the pro-mandate position.

In sum, we find a complex scenario in which the most polarized actors dominated public discourse, particularly in aspects that involved the ANHs. The predominance of the two large groups—pro-mandates/Democrats and anti-mandates/Republicans—should not distract us from the existence of less identifiable groups, such as anti-mandates and pro-mandates not necessarily aligned with political organizations, or individuals and civil institutions whose activity was limited to condemning the analogies and protecting the memory of the Holocaust. Those were generally simple and predictable, without great historical depth, and in many cases lacking even references to the past.

In interpretive terms, this leads us to some more general conclusions. First, the standardized and dehistoricized use that we saw in most ANHs seems to support the hypothesis that there is a dimension of Nazism and the Holocaust that is no longer purely historical. They have become broader cultural referents that draw from popular culture and have been incorporated into everyday political vocabulary. At the same time, there exists a set of actors, an institutional, academic, and media network, that strives to preserve, if not the historical weight, at least the moral component of these referents, condemning them when they do not fit within the standards of dignity and respect for victims, descendants, and Jewish identity in general, under the labels of *Holocaust distortion* and *trivialization*. The moral judgment passed on the analogies generally maintains the convention of *Holocaust uniqueness*, that is, the Holocaust—and by extension Nazism—as a phenomenon without comparison that cannot be situated alongside any other, not even rhetorically. The simplicity of the analogies and of many of the condemnations also reveals that neither is necessarily related to actual historical knowledge. In fact, in the Trump-era section—the antecedents—we saw that even professors specialized in that period were capable of making them. What predominated in the debates was, in any case, morality.

With regard to social identities, this case study reveals a particular dimension of intergroup relations. The ANHs functioned as a means of victimization and out-group derogation. But what is interesting is not mere stereotypical behavior, but the symbolic projection of out-groups toward the past—or of the past toward the present. That is, the exclusion of the out-group from the superordinate category, destroying its prototypicality, did not occur only in terms of social competition, but by associating a present out-group with a past out-group, and the same with the in-group. This implies, in fact, a form of social creativity, because although competition and hostility remain, the scenario in which this takes place is transformed into a more favorable one. That is, the terms of the comparison are different because the scenario is different, one in which the in-group has guaranteed supremacy, because it is a historical moment whose outcome the parties already know. This tactic of excluding the out-group from the national superordinate category by equating it with Nazism—that is, with the epitome of evil—speaks to a particularly acute political and affective polarization, which is consistent with the available data. The value of this research is that it offers a new way of understanding collective memory, which not only functions as a belief system to favor intragroup cohesion, but also as a narrative framework that can serve as a substitute for the present in order to develop intergroup competition.

The research had severe limitations, particularly in the area of social media, which is where we could have accessed reception of these comparisons more directly. The circumstances under which this occurred—the closure of access to Twitter databases—have already been explained. Nevertheless, it would have been a highly relevant part of the research to have been able to extract complete conversations, since within the dynamics of interactions we would have many more data and networks to understand the debates. Moreover, future research should formulate these conclusions as hypotheses and test them experimentally in order to elaborate models that are more formalizable and better integrated into empirical discussions on belief systems and social identity.

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The COVID-19 pandemic marked a moment of intense social polarization in the United States. While part of the population strove to promote mask wearing and mass vaccination, others considered that governments were abusing their power. In the heated debates that followed, analogies with Nazism and the Holocaust proliferated, a practice already common in U.S. politics that then gained renewed prominence. This dissertation examines this phenomenon as an expression of the multiple ways in which societies relate to the past and of its role in social conflict. Drawing on the interpretative framework of Social Identity and Collective Memory, it analyzes its impact on the U.S. press and on the social network Twitter, while tracing the history of polarization and the historical imagination of the American republic.