

Star Wars: The Rise of Fascism

POL 325: Language in Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Captivating multiple generations for almost fifty years, *Star Wars* has imprinted itself into popular culture and movie screens since its release in 1977. Spanning nine films, countless episodes of television, and various other forms of media, the franchise has become a mainstay in modern media while also providing inspiration to filmmakers and writers alike. The films capture the child-like wonder of science fiction fantasy, while also weaving together themes of personal growth and perseverance, encouraging the viewer to never give up; never stop believing in what you think is right. *Star Wars* is the quintessential story of hope, and how hope can overthrow evil and lighten the darkness, even in the most difficult of times. How Luke Skywalker topples a galactic empire that rose from a dying republic is central to the story of *Star Wars*. Despite this, underneath all the themes of hope and love in the galaxy, and how those two ideas work in tandem for the betterment of ourselves and each other, are the politics of a dictatorship and autocracy, and how an empire grew beneath the watchful eyes of the so-called republic. Where there is *Star Wars*, there is fascism.

A major plot point of *Star Wars* shows the path of a fascist dictator, and how that individual gains power through politics and influence. The films showcase the downfall of a republic and how that democratic society transforms, subtly giving up their rights during wartime for a leader with supreme power. While the image of *Star Wars* is still that of swashbuckling space wizards coupled with intense space battles of large starships, the politics still play an integral role in advancing the story. *Star Wars* is fascist. Not to be taken literally, in the sense that the franchise puts forth the notion that fascism should be the only functioning ideology in the world, but rather, the politics that are depicted at various points in the films are inherently fascist ideas and actions. The machinations of how Palpatine slowly convinced the Galactic Senate to

give up their powers, and, in turn, slowly consolidating his own. The slow turn of the Republic into the Galactic Empire is reminiscent of historical fascist regimes. This essay will look closely at *Star Wars*, and will link ideas of real world historical fascist regimes and ideologies to scenes and moments in the films, looking only at the main six, Episodes I through VI, dissecting the politics. Other media outside of the main films may be cited, however they will not be relied on. Though controversial, the quality of the films will not be pulled into discussion, but rather how the films depict fascism, and how it rises in a democratic society. The politics in *Star Wars* show how one person's manipulation overthrows a thriving republic; it depicts the death of democracy through fascism.

FASCISM: A DEMOCRACY'S DOWNFALL

Defining fascism is key in understanding the politics behind *Star Wars*. This is somewhat of a difficult task, being that it is a very complicated ideology. Having emerged in the early 1920s after the first World War, Benito Mussolini's election in Italy started the first forms of fascism (*Fascism*). This ideology is fairly new, barely over a century old. The reason why fascism itself is hard to define is also because it did not emerge from free thinkers during the times of the renaissance. There are no concrete set of rules that one follows in order to be called a fascist; the term is overused and overexaggerated in a number of cases, leading one to use it as an insult when one may not truly be a fascist. Another obstacle in defining fascism is the lack of countries with a fascist government regime ruling over their citizens; the last countries to have been fully fascist were Italy and Nazi Germany, both during the time of the second World War. It is difficult to define fascism in just a few short sentences. Because of this difficulty in creating a concrete definition of fascism, a different route must be taken to understand this ideology. Fascism can be looked at through two different lenses: those being the characteristics and goals of

said ideology, as well as the steps the ideology takes in undermining a democratic society.

Looking at the different characteristics of fascism allows for ease of identification, while looking at the steps which fascism takes in order to undermine a democracy is essential in developing a nuanced understanding of the ideology. In the case of *Star Wars*, to understand Palpatine's ascension to the role of emperor in the galaxy, one must also look at the characteristics of real world fascist regimes and the steps they took in order to undermine their democracy.

As stated, it is very difficult to give fascism a concrete definition in a few sentences. A much easier method of understanding it is through its characteristics. Fascism itself has numerous characteristics, each involving layered meanings as well. In Griffin and Feldman's book titled *Fascism, The Nature of Fascism*, they write about a description of the ideology which has many components. A table titled "Typological Description of Fascism" outlines the main points of fascism. Section A gives the ideology its main characteristics and goals:

Creation of a new nationalist authoritarian state not based on traditional principles or models ...

Positive evaluation and use of, or willingness to use, violence and war

The goal of empire, expansion, or a radical change in the nation's relationship with other powers. (2004, pg. 258).

While there are other goals which they outline in the table, only these three are essential within the scope of this essay. The first goal is a description of the final image of a fascist governmental regime. Traditionally, and equating to historical examples of fascist governments, the "traditional principles and models" that those regimes are changing are the democracies which uphold society today (2004, pg. 258). The democratically elected government by power of the citizens they govern; the use of cooperation to help lead a single nation; these are eradicated, and

replaced by an authoritarian government who wields absolute power. The next goal explains their use of militarization to enact the absolute power: “positive evaluation and use of, or willingness to use, violence and war” (2004, pg. 258). The military is used as an extension of the government itself. They become the force used to help govern and to conquer the countries which they control. Because of this, the regime is willing to use any means necessary to enact control and to dominate their opponents; they are the only regime who deserve a place in government, and they want to make that known. Further along the table, the authors describe how the regime presents itself:

Attempted mass mobilization with militarization of political relationships and style and with the goal of a mass party militia

Emphasis on aesthetic structure of meetings, symbols, and political liturgy, stressing emotional and mystical aspects ...

Specific tendency toward authoritarianism, charismatic, personal style of command, whether or not the command is to some degree initially elective (2004, pg. 258).

Fascist governments are organized to look like a threat, using their aesthetic to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies. A large amount of focus is placed on its image: the charismatic leader heading a militarized state who wants to enact dominant control. The way the military is presented is also key: they must look menacing. After all, they are the ones who are acting out the will of the leader. These are the goals and visual aspects of a fascist government. In short, a government led by a charismatic individual, organizing a militarized state in order to expand their country and dominate their opponents. Strictly speaking, these are only a few aspects of fascist governments. What also must be understood is how they rise to power.

While a fascist government wishes to wield a military to crush their political opponents and to dominate other states, this cannot happen by revolution or overthrowing the current governmental regime by force; it must be from within. Robert Paxton writes about how fascism rises in an article titled *The Five Stages of Fascism*. Examining previous regimes, he writes about how they rise and cripple the government from within. The first stage is: “fascisms take their first steps in reaction to claimed failings of democracy” (1998, pg. 12). Fascism falls on the belief that the current government is weak, and needs to be replaced. A way that fascists look at current governments is that they believe the regime is weak: “the Klan constituted an alternate civic authority, parallel to the legal state, which, in its founders’ eyes, no longer defended their community’s legitimate interests (1998, pg. 12). While this quote was written with the context of examining the Ku Klux Klan, they are still widely considered as a fascist organization. Their core beliefs are not being represented by the current democracy, thus their creation. Fascists believe that their way of thinking and views on politics are what should be the current regime; there is no other alternative. The second stage is: “rooting, in which a fascist movement becomes a party capable of acting decisively on the political scene” (1998, pg. 12). Hitler’s creation of the Nazi Party in Germany before World War II reflects this. This creation of the party was the stepping stone in ensuring Hitler’s rise to power. Founded in 1919 as the German Workers’ Party, but was later rebranded to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party in 1920 (*The Nazi Party*). This rise to power of the Nazi Party is stage two of fascism, as they are slowly gaining recognition in political dealings of the state (Paxton). Stage three is “the arrival in power” (Paxton, 1998, pg. 16). Historically, fascists have never taken their place as the head of government through force, but rather by democratic means: “[Hitler] was invited to take office as head of government by a head of state in the legitimate exercise of his official functions, on the

advice of this conservative counselors” (1998, pg. 17). This process was entirely constitutional, under the basis and belief that the new leader would be able to control the population as well as government. Hitler did not take his role by force, but instead was requested to become the next leader of Germany. After the arrival in power, comes the fourth stage “the exercise of power” (1998, pg. 17). Unlike authoritarian rulers who wish to enact their complete control over the state, fascists use their power differently: “authoritarians would prefer to leave the population demobilized, while fascists promise to win the working class back for the nation by their superior techniques of manufacturing enthusiasm” (pg.19). Headed by a charismatic leader, the regime takes control of the government and convinces their citizens of the good they will do in their interests. In other words, they trick the citizenry with empty rhetoric. The regime needs to convince the citizenry in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the state. This was done before World War II with Hitler’s Nazi Party, as he gained legitimacy through his charismatic speech and rhetoric. The recorded speeches of Hitler show his expert linguistic talents; he convinced an entire nation to trust him, which in turn gave him complete power. The fifth and final stage of fascism is “fascist ‘dual power’ can evolve in either of two directions: radicalization or entropy” (pg. 20). In the case of Hitler’s Nazi Party, he evolved into radicalization. His wartime decisions allowed for dominant control of Europe, which helped him to radicalize Nazi Germany into an antisemitic state that it was known for at the height of the second World War. These steps of fascism are essential in understanding how fascists rise to power: not through revolution or overthrowing of one’s government, but rather as a result of using politics to their advantage and slowly gaining absolute power. These were the steps that Chancellor Palpatine took to become Emperor of the galaxy.

PALPATINE’S RISE: LOWLY SENATOR TO DOMINANT EMPEROR

Palpatine’s rise to power can be closely linked to fascism itself through his actions and political dealings. Using this rhetoric and political influence to become emperor are key moments within the *Star Wars* franchise: “the person exercising this influence in the *Star Wars* films is the emperor, who plays a key role in the ideological and political discourse of the series ... the most effective oppressor is one who can adopt, accept, love, desire, and identify with them” (Serter, 2021, pg. 5). Palpatine has the most political influence out of all the characters in the *Star Wars* franchise; he is the central political figure in the galaxy. His politicking and rise is reminiscent of historical fascist regimes. Throughout the prequel trilogy, media apart from the films were released, showing how the Republic was failing, “these pieces often highlighted the corruption and weakness of Republic in the face of the machinations of the Sith Lord Darth Sidious, who was actually Senator ... Palpatine’s alter-ego, ” and “the picture painted of the Republic’s internal politics across the prequels is one mired in bureaucratic red tape, sclerotic inaction, and perhaps even corruption” (Kempshall, 2023, pg. 11 and Casey and Kenny, 2021, pg. 227). An important detail of the politics of George Lucas’ *Star Wars* is how it is structured. A setting that is visited frequently in the films is the Senate Chamber on the planet of Coruscant. It is a gathering place where political leaders discuss the ongoings of the galaxy they lead: the Republic. They are all democratically elected, as well as being heads of state of the planets they come from. While also being heads of the state they govern, they are also headed by a leader called the Supreme Chancellor. These details are important in understanding how Palpatine rises.

The introduction of Palpatine in the *Star Wars* timeline was during *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. Just a lowly senator from the planet of Naboo, he is on Coruscant for a senate meeting discussing the current political dealings of the galaxy, the premise of which is

unimportant for the scope of this essay. For clarity's sake, Naboo is occupied by a third party because of the changing of Republic laws. In his first pieces of dialogue, he chastises the current Republic, in essence calling them weak: "there is no civility, only politics. The Republic is not what it once was. The senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates" (Lucas, 1999, 1:22:55-1:23:02). Here, Palpatine is in the first stage of fascism: calling out the current democracy for their weakness, claiming that they are failures (Paxton). Palpatine no longer trusts the current democratic government, looking to change this type of government through his own action. As the film progresses, the audience is shown the weakness of the senators of the Republic: they are individuals guided only by bureaucracy, looking only for political correctness and willing to disregard the lives of its citizens in exchange for extended power. Later in the film, Senator Palpatine is elected to Supreme Chancellor: "Senator Palpatine ... persuade[s] Queen Padmé Amidala into calling for a vote in the Galactic Senate of 'no confidence' in the sitting Supreme Chancellor, ... having expressed – markedly, in terms of fascism – the need for 'a new chancellor, a strong chancellor', achieve election to the role" (Grist, 2018, pg. 101). *The Phantom Menace* sees Palpatine take the first two steps of fascism as he rises to power: his distrust of the current government, looking to see it change, as well as ascending to the Supreme Chancellery in order to enact his control over the galaxy. Being that *The Phantom Menace* shows how fascism starts, the closing moments of the film and its music show what the Republic will become. The film ends with the celebration of the liberation of Naboo, as well as Palpatine's election to the Chancellery. The musical piece that plays during this celebration is titled *Augie's Great Municipal Band and End Credits*, composed by John Williams in 1999. In this piece, one can hear the same musical motifs Williams used in the original trilogy of *Star Wars*, more specifically, a track titled *The Emperor*, composed in 1983. *Augie's Great Municipal Band and*

End Credits follow the same rhythmic structure and musical notes as *The Emperor*, albeit in a different key signature. Because Palpatine becomes the Emperor of the galaxy later in the franchise, the musical motifs and rhythm used in his theme can be found during the end celebration of *The Phantom Menace*; it signals the start of an empire, as well as the beginnings of a fascist regime under a single leader. Palpatine, as well as fascism, has begun its rise into the Senate.

Episode II: Attack of the Clones sees the foundations of the future Empire being created. In this film, the Republic Civil War has begun, pitting the Republic systems against the Confederacy of Independent Systems (CIS), or better known as the Separatist Alliance, or the Separatists. Palpatine has already been Supreme Chancellor for almost ten years, and his place in the Senate is secured. One of the central conflicts of this film occurs within the Senate. The growing threat of the Separatists is something the Senate can no longer ignore, so they propose that the creation of an army is what will help quell the threats. The opening moments of the film show the Jedi counseling the Chancellor, encouraging him to hold off a vote. However, Palpatine retorts, saying: “I will not let this Republic that has stood for a thousand years be split in two” (Lucas, 2002, 4:36). Here, it may seem as though Palpatine has skipped to stage four of fascism, that of using this rhetoric to gain the trust of the body he governs. However, he makes a promise to the Jedi, stating that he, as the leader of the Republic, will not let the Separatists destroy democracy. In other words, he will not let his political opponents topple the Republic. While Palpatine is barely in the film, his words carry weight. The next time he appears on screen is during a Senate meeting, in which Representative from Naboo Jar-Jar Binks, in place of Senator from Naboo Padme Amidala, proposes that Palpatine be given emergency powers because of the growing threat of the CIS. What Palpatine says in accepting these new powers is haunting:

It is with great reluctance that I have agreed to this calling. I love democracy; I love the Republic. The power you give me, I will lay down when this crisis has abated. And as my first act with this new authority, I will create a Grand Army of the Republic to counter the increasing threats of the Separatists. (2002, 1:34:42-1:35:00).

In this scene, the Galactic Senate is none the wiser, believing every word coming from the mouth of the Chancellor. This scene is step three and step four: Palpatine now has all the power which he needs, as the emergency powers have granted complete control over the Senate. Not only that, but now he is exercising the power he has been given. The Senate believes that the creation of the Grand Army is what will solve the threat. He has tricked the Senate into buying into his rhetoric, believing that he will unite the Republic through his leadership in times of war and crisis, as well as trusting that he will give up his powers once the war is over. The closing moments of the film show the Grand Army in full. Palpatine, along with key members of the Senate look onto the formation of the army. Visually, they are organized into blocks, standing side-by-side, awaiting orders. Much like the ending of *The Phantom Menace*, over top of the militaristic visuals before the film ends, are the motifs of the future empire. However, it is not as subtle as the ending of the previous film. As Palpatine looks on at the Grand Army of the Republic, it is not a time of triumph or celebration, rather, it is the creation of an empire. The track that plays during this scene is called *Confrontation with Count Dooku and Finale*. What is extremely important in this scene are, again, the motifs. *The Imperial March*, the theme of the Empire, plays as the army takes their positions. The Republic is no longer what it once was, as now it has taken the role of a militarized state, looking to destroy their political opponents through force. War time has begun in the form of the Clone Wars.

By the time of *Revenge of the Sith*, the Clone Wars are almost at an end. Palpatine has now manipulated the Senate, using the war to his advantage. Based on the previous two films, the change of the Republic to the Galactic Empire is only a change in name. In this film, when Palpatine refuses to give up his emergency powers after the leader of the CIS is destroyed, the Jedi, who are the protectors of the peace, go to arrest him. Throughout the three films, the Jedi are the keepers of the peace turned generals fighting for the Republic in their war. In their attempt to arrest the Chancellor, Palpatine kills them. It is here that the empire truly forms. Branding the Jedi as enemies of the state because of their ‘attempted coup’, Palpatine orders the military to kill the Jedi, thus starting a purge of the religion, evening slaughtering the children, and ensuring its death. The enemies of the Republic, the CIS, are then killed under Palpatine’s orders. After all this has transpired, Palpatine addresses the Galactic Senate:

The remaining Jedi will be hunted down and defeated. The attempt on my life has left me scarred and deformed, but I assure you my resolve has never been stronger. In order to ensure the security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire, for a safe and secure society (2005, 1:34:18-1:36:10).

The fifth stage is complete: Palpatine has radicalized the Senate into believing that the Jedi are evil, rebellious traitors of the Republic who need to be killed by any means necessary. They are no longer a democratic society, but, as Palpatine puts it, a Galactic Empire. As of that moment, he is no longer a Supreme Chancellor, but an Emperor. Emperor Palpatine has succeeded in turning the Republic into a fascist state, disregarding democratic processes for autocratic behaviour and military might, using it to crush their enemies. As the film reaches its climax, the last hope for the Republic, Yoda, duels the Emperor in an attempt to save it. The visuals of this duel reflect the power which Palpatine holds. Hurling the seats of the Senate Chamber at Yoda,

Palpatine is literally destroying democracy. The Senate is at his disposal, no longer needing it, but instead using it as his weapon to wipe out his enemies. The Republic is now a military state under the rule of its fascist leader.

THE GALACTIC EMPIRE OR NAZI GERMANY?

In Episodes IV-VI, the full might of the Empire is on full display: they have evolved into a stronger military state under an autocracy. Their style and organization is very reminiscent of Nazi Germany, and how they operated in their political dealings: “totalitarian visuals and stormtroopers, for example, in both *Empire* and *Jedi* continued to link the Empire with fascism in general and with Naziism in particular” (Lancashire, 2002, pg. 239). On imperial bases, the stormtroopers make up the military, organizing themselves in blocks, readying themselves for orders, just as soldiers in the Nazi regime did. Around the bases are imperial insignias draped from the ceilings, as well as flags which show allegiance to the Empire. Though not swastikas which show their alignment, but rather symbols of the Galactic Empire. The military might of the Empire strikes fear into the galaxy, knowing that any attempt to overthrow them will lead to certain death. The Empire is an example in film of how a democracy is tricked into becoming an autocracy led by fascist ideals.

The Empire in *Star Wars* can be closely linked to the historical National Socialist Party in Germany. Even the way the Emperor carries himself is reminiscent of Adolf Hitler “he does not follow already existing rules; he creates new ones. He is a revolutionary who does not accept the existing order but sets up instead an order of his own. His authority is not a delegated authority but one residing in himself” (Gerth, 1940, pg. 518). The leader is supreme, and they are placed at the forefront of all dealings. Simply put, without the leader, the Empire fails. As Hitler was considered a man above all else, so too was Palpatine. In the films, he ‘survived’ the attempt of

the Jedi in taking his life. To his constituents, it made him seem invulnerable. Like Hitler, Palpatine used his rhetoric and position to make others believe that he should be the man above all others. Even in the ways they came to power, as well as their treatment of it is similar: “once Hitler had seized control of the party machine, he never again relinquished it, despite several attempts to challenge his authority.” (Abel, 1986, pg. 64). Once Palpatine had all the power he wanted, he refused to give it up. Nearing the end of the Clone Wars, the Senate continued to vote and give him more emergency powers (Lucas, 2005). As Hitler wanted to keep his power, so did Palpatine, doing everything he could to maintain his position, even if that meant killing people who sought to take that away from him. Hitler’s Final Solution could also be linked to Palpatine’s Order 66. In short, Order 66 brands all Jedi as traitors to the Republic, who must be destroyed by the strength of the military. As Hitler sought to exterminate the Jews, Palpatine sought to exterminate the Jedi. Hitler also attempted to cover up the killings: “[the Jewish Sonderkommando’s] first task was to wash away the blood and refuse before they dragged out the dead. ... For a long time the Nazis tried to throw a veil of secrecy around these mass exterminations” (Grossmann, 1955, pg. 65). Palpatine covered up the killings of the Jedi, convincing the Republic that they are enemies of the state because they want to overthrow the Republic through forceful rebellion. He accomplished his goal, in that the galaxy believed the attempted coup. Hitler’s Nazi regime and Palpatine’s Galactic Empire are closely related: they both show how a democracy dies and then transforms into a militarized state. The rise of a charismatic leader, looking to overthrow the current democratic regime, and in turn transform the nation into a militarized state.

Star Wars, as a franchise and story, show the workings of a fascist dictatorship. The story of how Palpatine rises is similar to how Hitler headed the Nazi Party in Germany during World

War II. Through his actions, Hitler killed democracy, as did Palpatine with his manipulation. Throughout the films, the viewers see the literal death of democracy through Palpatine's calm, yet forceful approach through politics. It must be known that Palpatine did not overthrow democracy through brutality, but rather rose up from within, and transformed it. His calm manipulation of the Senate is what allowed him to kill any sense of democratic processes in the galaxy. His rhetoric in creating enemies of the Republic, and subsequent destruction are what truly changed the Senate through fascist ideals. The ways in which the Emperor organized the military are fascist ideals, and the goals which were outlined were achieved by the then-Republic turned Empire.

CONCLUSION

The politics of *Star Wars* show the downfall of a democracy, and how that democracy is slowly turned into a fascist, militarized state. Under the stunning visuals and heroic journey, is a story of political manipulation and death of democracy. The Republic within *Star Wars* was not transformed through revolution, but rather, as all fascist dictators have in the past, through political leverage and charisma. Palpatine's journey to becoming the Emperor shows how a democracy dies, and how it becomes an autocratic fascist regime.

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