MYTH WAS EVERYTHING to the fascists. Fascists stressed how myth was the key to explain the world and, most importantly, their motivation to change it. For Mussolini fascism created its own myth. Myth was “a faith and a passion.” Even if at first myths were not part of reality, fascism would turn them into a “complete reality.” In fascism, myth imposed itself on reality and therefore reality could not represent an obstacle to myth. The mythical nature of fascism was equally defined by the imposition of peculiar boundaries between fascist truths and the fake nature of the enemy.

Fascists stressed the mythical dimensions of power. They believed that the myths of their leader embodied and carried over previous myths of civilization, the nation, and the people. And yet, the myth or, rather, the myths of fascism belong to the long history of the modern political imagination. These myths are and were related to previous classical myths, but at the same time they were starkly different from them. Fascists pushed political mythology to a political edge never witnessed before in history, fabricating myths to an extent never seen before.

In my work I have addressed these mythical dimensions of fascism. I have studied its different contextual and ideological
variations in the development of fascist myth in politics across the Atlantic, especially the years of the age of fascism, between 1919 and 1945.

Adopting a more specific antifascist angle, this book delineates the national and transnational paths that led thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Jorge Luis Borges, who lived and wrote during the processes of ideological construction and practical execution of the myths of fascism, to ponder the conceptual and practical relations between the victims of trauma and the ideological myths of their perpetrators. In other words, in this book I propose that Freud’s and Borges’s oeuvres can be approached so as to consider the most radical ideological and mythical dimensions of fascism and the Holocaust. I also analyze the key work of the German Nazi thinker Carl Schmitt, who contributed a long, if generally neglected, chapter of this history of the myths of fascism.

Thus, complementing and expanding on my previous works on fascism, dictatorship, and the ideological lies they engender, I emphasize the interpretative perspectives of Freud and Borges and other critical thinkers in relation to the processes of victimization driven by the fundamental mythologies of fascist politics. More specifically, I stress the need to consider these processes as part of a broader spectrum of mythical and traumatic encounters. In these encounters, the sacrifice of the body—either in the form of self-sacrifice or as a direct sacrificial action toward the Other—obeys the mandates of a radical mythical ideology. This ideological situation represented a marked displacement from the classical myth of the hero to the modern mythification of the leader. For this ideology, there were no distinctions between myth, power, and violence.

Fascism is a philosophy of political action that ascribes an absolute political and mythical value to violence and war in the political realm. It conceives of the political field as rooted in primordial instincts and violence. In other words, in fascism the
The legitimacy of myths is the basis of politics. Violence in its purest form is presented as the foundation of political power. Fascism conceives it as the actualization of a sort of mythical unconscious that lives in man, and that moves throughout history but also transcends it. In this context, the mythology of an inner I, at the same time essentially violent and political, replaces history as the legitimation of action. Fascists believed that true politics was based on the modernization of myth. In a fascist key, this modernization represented a notable actualization of the classical myths. As we will see, this political secularization of the classical heroic myth constituted the myth of fascism.

Fascists of diverse origins and trajectories, from the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones, shared this perception of the mythical as a new form of politics. They saw it as modern renewal of mass politics, legitimizing an extreme form of authoritarian rule where popular sovereignty was conflated with classical images of the mythological hero as well as with dictatorship as the ultimate expression of the people, the leader, and the nation.

This ideology of myth distills from the infinity of fascist sources across the Atlantic and beyond. For them, the mythical becomes the subject of adoration but also a key source of political legitimacy and mobilization. If, for fascists like Carl Schmitt, this mythical conception cannot be unpacked because it represents a sacred whole, it is the incipient gaze of critical antifascists thinkers in the 1920s and 1930s that reconstitutes the mythology of fascism: from myth to concept, from subject of faith to object of analysis.

Sigmund Freud was one of the first interpreters to explore the mythical dimensions of fascism. He saw it as a mythical reformulation of death and violence that presented them as directly linked to the unconscious. Fascism rejected the Freudian call for building self-reflective bridges between the conscious and the unconscious. Fascist ideology actually put forward the idea that,
somehow through a direct connection with the inner self, death and primordial violence would become sources of political power. Freud and also Borges were especially insightful in noticing and analyzing this key dimension of fascism. The book is especially focused on both authors’ interpretations of the ideologies and theories of the inner self that fascism read through a mythical prism and why and how that made possible the emergence of fascist genocidal violence.

These discussions often present a history of parallel affinities that as in the cases of Borges and Freud (or even Schmitt) do not present explicit links with each other. However, in many other cases these discussions converge and the actors read and debated each other across the political spectrum. In particular, throughout the interwar and war years, many significant fascists and antifascists read Freud to think, use, or deny his theories about norms, politics, and the unconscious. They did so in a transatlantic context that included antifascists like José Carlos Mariátegui and Ernst Cassirer and fascist ideologues from the Brazilian fascist leader Plinio Salgado to Mussolini and many others. Despite absolute political differences, more precisely defined by the anti-Enlightenment meaning of fascism, many fascists and antifascists stressed the deep relations between fascism, political myth, and leadership. From different positions they all stressed the fascist desire to embrace the power of myths. Or to put it differently, they all stressed that fascists regarded mythical assertions as being more significant than empirical demonstrations.

For antifascists such as Borges and Freud, of course, it was critical that one could not accept the ahistorical premises of fascist mythologies. Fascism demonstrated that the world changed rapidly, from secularism and reason to faith. This was not a mere return of old myths that, in fact, had served a different function. Modern fascist myths promoted dehumanization, obedience, and the rejection of pluralism and autonomy in politics and history. Classical myths or religion no longer played a role in
sustaining ethical positions or norms. In this sense Hannah Arendt observed in 1951 that “Whether we like it or not, we have long ceased to live in a world in which the faith in the Judaeo-Christian myth of creation is secure enough to constitute a basis and source of authority for actual laws.” For Arendt, the mythical understandings of history “have one characteristic in common: they assume that something was there, given, already established before human history actually began; that, in other words, the direction of history was beyond human effort, that its laws sprang from a transcendent source (or event) and could only be obeyed or disobeyed.” This was for Arendt a key dimension behind the crimes of the “tragedy of our time.”

For thinkers like Arendt, the mythical breaking-down of reason was an act of self-deception. But Arendt did not sufficiently address why and how myth worked in the first place. In this context, it is especially in the cases of Borges and Freud where we can see a major attempt to think the mythical from within, without subscribing to its transcendental assumptions, fantasies, and imaginary elements. In contrast, the mythological thinking of Carl Schmitt presented a complex illustration of thinking the mythical while rejecting reason. As I will show, the result of this attempt was a critical consideration regarding the limits and reach of the dichotomy between myth and reason and how the emphasis in this dichotomy was central to the ideology of fascism. In our own present, where myth and political lies have returned to the center of politics, the antifascist critiques of Borges and Freud acquire a new force. Their critique of the myth of fascism provides us with tools to fight the new dangerous mythologies of the present.
Fascist Mythologies