

Department of History

Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs



"Fascism Then and Now: What are the Meanings for Today?"

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"All history is contemporary history," wrote Benedetto Croce in the late 1930s. "The true image of the past," Walter Benjamin reflected at around the same time, is the one that "flashes up in a moment of danger." Together, these aphorisms are Eley's taking-off point. He asks: how might the history of fascism in the early 20th century help us with an understanding of politics today? Eley proceeds to explain that these are two very different times, so we can't expect our analysis of the one to map directly or straightforwardly onto our analysis of the other. But there are nonetheless some similarities we can draw out. In his talk he will try to accomplish two main moves. First, Eley will historicize fascism as carefully as possible to the very specific conditions of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, what was different and particular about that earlier 20th century context? But second, he explores how we might abstract a concept of fascism from this history that's portable for other places and times? What theory of fascism might we be able to take away for use elsewhere, including today? It's this double task of "historicizing" and "abstraction" that describes the historian's role and responsibility, and enables us to contribute most constructively to contemporary debate."

GEOFF ELEY is the Karl Pohrt Distinguished University Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Michigan, where he has taught since 1979.