A week into the Federal election campaign of 2004 I read an article by Gerard Henderson published in the Sydney Morning Herald’s Comment page (2004). The article was about fascism and the fear-mongers of the left and right who use the term without reference to its meaning. What incensed me about Henderson’s piece was that he made use of two authors I admire, Robert O. Paxton and Roger Eatwell, to argue a case about the absurdity of applying the term fascism to events unfolding in Western democracies. It just so happened that I had been reading Paxton’s The Anatomy of Fascism (2004), the day before, and with its arguments fresh in my mind, I was astounded that Henderson would draw on Paxton’s authority to argue a case in direct opposition to Paxton’s views. Henderson wasn’t just being sloppy; he was using Paxton’s good name to argue against Paxton’s own thesis. In academia you’d be hunted down for this and I didn’t see why it should go unchallenged in a major daily. Australians get to read a lot of Gerard Henderson’s views so they have a right to expect that he’s read the authors he quotes and that he uses their ideas with integrity. So I sat down and wrote a riposte to the piece and sent it into Comment. This is what I wrote:

Using the F. Word
Strange serendipity, I spent Monday morning in bed recovering from the flu that has taken over Sydney, reading Paxton’s The Anatomy of Fascism (2004). Back at work on Tuesday I opened the Sydney Morning Herald to find Gerard Henderson blithely deploying Paxton’s erudite and complex book to take pot shots at the very question at the heart of The Anatomy of Fascism — can fascism return? For Paxton: ‘there is no more insistent or haunting question posed to a world that still aches from wounds that fascisms inflicted on it during 1922-45.’ But for Henderson, even posing the question about the re-emergence of fascist formations is ‘just nuts’. He sees no danger in western democracies becoming pre-fascist states and using the term in the present context, he argues, is to lapse into historical mislabeling and ‘a total misunderstanding of democracy and fascism.’ Henderson is right: Australia is not a pre-fascist state but make no mistake; you’d be a fool to misread the historical signs as badly as Henderson reads Robert O. Paxton.

Paxton is one of a number of scholars of classical fascism who have turned their critical attention to the re-emergence of far-right movements throughout the western world. He retakes the vexed question ‘what is fascism?’ — by focusing on the processes through which fascist movements have come to power. Fascism has been notoriously hard to define because unlike liberalism, socialism and conservatism it has no articulated intellectual foundation — each fascist formation mobilises fantasies, resentments, phobias and collectively held narcissisms that enable a fascist leader to galvanise a mass following that identifies him (or her) as the repository of the truth of their national destiny. Because each fascist movement engenders fantasies specific to the national community fascist movements are nation specific. Hence, definitions of fascism flounder over details of difference.

Scholars like definitions and fascism has thwarted simple boxes. This has led some scholars simply to reject the use of the term or to limit its usage to pre-war Italy and Germany; others to construct an ideal type to which every manifestation is compared; and others to construct encyclopedic accounts of fascism, as Paxton writes — ‘like medieval bestiaries’. The problem with these critical solutions is that they fail to recognize family-resemblance and thus to allow us to talk about a range of political movements that resound in the same way. As Umberto Eco argues (2001), fascist movements resemble each other in the way family members do; not all members of a family look alike but put them all together and the affinity is clear.

In the last twenty years movements that share a family resemblance to fascism have appeared all over Europe and gained mass followings. These movements often look different from traditional fascism, they have none of its overt signs — no swastikas, war cults, or explicit anti-Semitism — but the family resemblance is unmistakable. Like their traditional forebears, Europe’s new far right movements mobilize passions and fears around an ideal of national unity through internal cleansing of foreign traits. They are organized around resentment of foreigners and displaced and stateless people.

Scholars of the far right are far from glib about the capacity of these far-right movements to win constituencies in today’s western democracies. While they quibble — as scholars are wont to do — about definitions, they recognize the alliances and affinities of these new formations with both traditional fascists and the explicitly neo-nazi skinhead communities. But denying past affinities while replaying past fantasies has proved a very successful electoral strategy.

In Romania, Corneliu Vadim Tudor’s PRM, an anti-gypsy, anti-Semitic, anti-Hungarian and expansionist party, won 33% of the popular vote in presidential run-off elections in 2000. In the same year Jörg Haider’s FPÖ entered the Austrian national government in alliance with conservative, Wolfgang Schüssel. In Italy in 1994 the AN (the reborn neo-
fascist MSI) won 15% of the vote and with the LN entered parliament with Berlusconi’s conservative Forza Italia and the same parties formed a parliament again in 2001. Most notably, in 2002 France’s Le Pen won 17% and gained second position in the second ballot of the French presidential elections (Eattwell 2003).

One wonders why, then, would any thinking person committed to democracy and democratic values speak so disparagingly about the question that haunts Europe today. Can fascism return? Henderson makes use of an old and jaded rhetorical trick to forestall a serious and much-needed discussion about democratic values and how they are endangered in contemporary society. This trick—deployed so successfully during Hanson’s giddy period of ascendancy—is to call foul when anyone uses the term ‘fascist’. Fascism becomes an F word; the only way it can be used is to denounce the user. Trundling out the old thesis that only two fascist societies have ever existed and positing this as an irrefutable historical fact established by Paxton and Eatwell—in fact both these scholars are committed to investigating the dangerous potential of the new fascisms—Henderson attempts to silence much-needed discussion over Australia’s own turn to the far-right. Had Henderson bothered to actually read Paxton he would have understood how Paxton’s thesis sheds light on Australia’s current predicament.

Paxton cuts through debates about fascist definitions in order to focus on factors such as the forms of complicity that lead to a successful fascist evolution. The capacity of a far-right movement to move into the space left vacant by a demoralized left for example, or its capacity to form alliances with centre parties willing to trade democratic values for power become defining traits of a fascist field. Fascism, Paxton argues, ‘looks more like a network of relationships than a fixed essence’. Fascism requires marriages between far-right groups and conservative forces willing to sacrifice democratic structures and values in order to hold onto power.

In Europe, far-right parties have been successful in reshaping political agendas by gaining ideological concessions from centre parties. Xenophobia is back on the political agenda guising as a legitimate response to perceived threats to national sovereignty. But nowhere have we seen such a complete moral collapse of a centre party to far-right ideology as we have witnessed in Australia since 1996.

The full extent of this collapse can be measured in two historical moments. In 1996, then opposition leader John Howard dis-endorse liberal candidate Pauline Hanson from pre-selection in Ipswich for xenophobic and racist comments; a decision which reflected a pan-political refusal to use race to mobilize popular sentiment. In 2001 the same John Howard secured electoral victory by creating a fantasy in the popular imagination about foreigners threatening Australian shores who were of such depravity that they would throw their children overboard. What had happened in the space of these few years was that a far-right party had emerged in Australia and with extraordinary success galvanized and legitimized Australia’s historic forms of racial antipathy and xenophobia.

Shooting my documentary Ordinary People in Ipswich between 1998 and 2000 I had little doubt about what I was witnessing. People spoke about Hanson as the saviour of the nation; meetings were marked by rhythmic clapping and hailing of the leader; off the record One Nation followers spoke about blowing up the boats of refugees and forming vigilante groups against the local indigenous population. On record One Nation produced an ideology of corporatism and espoused a ‘neither left not right’ philosophy of national unity. One Nation’s ideologue, David Oldfield, spoke about being at war and of One Nation as a movement of warriors. One Nation’s one million votes proved too attractive an option for a Prime Minister intent on victory at any cost.

Fantasy is what fascism is all about; that’s why it has been so difficult historically to define a social and political formation that fits itself “hand in glove” to the fantasy structures of its various national communities. When a Prime Minister enters into the fantasy field of a neo-fascist far-right party and rides it home to electoral victory we all have need to fear. That’s why we have to keep on using the F word and that’s why Henderson and the ideological apparatus of the Howard regime keeping crying foul every time the F word comes up.

Not a bad piece I thought, but the initial response of Comment’s editor was that The Herald’s readers weren’t interested in commentators debating each other. An election was in the offing and debate was the order of the day—or so I thought—but she explained that this idea of debate had gone out in the nineties. Later in the day a space must have opened up on the page because I got a far more conciliatory telephone call.

The piece was quite good, she’d like to run it, it would have to be cut back of course, and—here was the crunch—I wasn’t to make much about Henderson’s misreading of Paxton. After all, who is to say which interpretation is correct, scholars are always arguing about what an author says, and the Herald’s readers aren’t really interested in such debates.

So I spent another day cutting extraneous words and sent it off to the new editor responsible for the page the following day. I thought the piece was going to run—and after I’d cut it at their request and according to their direction—but the next day there was an ominous silence for several hours—and then a message left on my phone to explain that something else had come in, and, while they liked the piece, they no longer had room for it in tomorrow’s paper, and it would be too late to run the following day because by then it would be old news.

By this time I had a strange sense of déjà vu. A few years before I’d had a run-in with the ABC when they’d made me cut all references to fascism from my film on the One Nation movement, Ordinary People (Rutherford 2001). The ABC’s commissioning editor had insisted that these sequences weren’t relevant to a film on One Nation, that ABC audiences wouldn’t be
interested in them, and that the ABC’s audience lacked the political vocabulary necessary to understand the terms and concepts I was using — such as totalitarianism and globalisation. Ordinary People had been a four year project to create a political documentary on the far-right which the ABC (and Film Australia) turned into an ‘Australian Story’ in one week of savage cutting. Key sequences were lost which linked the rise of One Nation to the emergence of new far-right movements in Western democracies and that explored some of the more sinister events and attitudes of party-members.

‘Using the F Word’ was just a few days work, but both events told a similar story about the Australian media. In both instances powerful editors in control of central discursive spaces in the Australian media — documentary in the ABC, Comment in the SMH — revealed the same imaginary construction of an Australian readership and the same determination to censor work that broached uncomfortable interpretations of the political present. Both situations revealed a blase attitude to truth on the part of the editors — exactly the kind of relativism academicians are continuously lambasted for but are rarely guilty of. In the first case a documentary went to air with serious misconstructions of central characters; truth was sacrificed to a McKee-esque view of story. In the second, a leading commentator went unchallenged in his significant misrepresentation of an important scholar’s work. In both situations Australian audiences were constructed as incapable of nuanced political readings, uninterested in complex stories, and lacking the intellectual capacity to navigate their way through contested meanings. No doubt both The Sydney Morning Herald and the ABC employ market-researchers to assess audience response, but as everyone trained in reception theory knows, ‘the reader’ is an elusive creature; attempts to aggregate reader responses have produced at best a reader of crude dimensions.

Clearly what was in play in both situations had little to do with the unknown potential of Australian readers and viewers, and much to do with an imaginary construction of social reality. This involved the construction of an imaginary audience of stupefyingly simple dimensions, a censorial view of the ‘illegitimacy’ of intellectual debate (thereby setting in train the conditions to produce this imagined audience), and a corresponding incapacity to recognise, analyse and respond effectively to the emergence of neo-fascist tendencies in Australia. I would suggest that my experience of trying to sustain concrete empirical analysis, testimony, and dialogue within the Australia media about the new fascisms is also indicative of a far broader willingness to collapse analysis into mythical constructions of complex political realities. It is this recourse to myth that most encapsulates media responses to the emergence of Hansonism.

It’s almost fifty years since Roland Barthes (1970) — analysing the French media — argued that myth is a form of speech and yet, his analysis of myth remains germane. ‘The function of myth’, he wrote, ‘is to empty reality, it is, literally, a ceaseless blowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation’ (1970 155). Speaking about the mechanisms of mythical signification he argued that myth is a form of communication that builds a second order of signification upon ordinary signification. Caught by myth, language is reduced to a pure signifying function. His most famous example is that of a photo of a black man saluting the French flag. At the first level of signification the meaning of the image is simply a black soldier giving the French salute. But its mythical content is that France is a great empire, that all her sons without any colour discrimination faithfully serve under her flag etc. (1970, 125) What it signifies — its mythical form — is a rebuttal of the critics of colonialism. What is lost by this mythical seizure of the image is any concrete lived historical reality as the image is made to serve a mythical function and historical specificity falls away. Barthes makes the point that, because in mythical signification both the meaning and the mythical form are co-present, myth is always able to use ordinary meaning as an alibi. The first and second orders of signification flicker off and on, both present, both signifying but the mythical signification is able to be denied strategically by the assertion that the first level of signification is all that is in play. Thus myth depoliticises speech by universalising its meaning and by emptying it of its specific historical and analytic content (1970, 155).

Faced with the emergence of a far-right popular movement and a centre party willing to co-opt this movement’s fantasies and policies in order to gain electoral success, the Australian media has in large part, simply taken recourse in myth. In the first instance this involved a mythical construction of Hanson and her supporters and a marked failure to address their provenance. The success of the far-right in garnering popular support in France, Belgium, Austria and Italy has demonstrated the emergence of a political constituency, an underclass who have lost their traditional forms of political representation and who no longer identify with the traditional polarities of right and left. A class excluded from the gains of late capitalism and globalisation and yet bearing most of its consequences in job and market insecurity. And who, in the absence of any other form of political discourse to represent them, find an appeal and a point of identification in the anti-elitist, nationalist and xenophobic discourses of the far right. The rise of Hanson demonstrated the existence of this same constituency in Australia albeit with a different historical location and orientation. The media’s response to the political emergence of this constituency was to construct a mythical type. As the bearers of a primordial
racism, Hanson and her followers were situated outside the realm of both democratic and pluralist dialogue and constructed as a minority of resentful, xenophobic rednecks. As Phillip Adams wrote: 'Hanson [is] the bag lady of Australian politics. Behold the baggage – a bulging string bag full of ancient hatreds... One Nation is for anyone who believes in anything beyond belief.' (1998 20-21). Adams, like many of his colleagues, relied on the language of myth and thereby eschewed the more difficult problem of addressing the existence of an under-class who, like their conferees in Europe, were turning to the new fascisms of the late twentieth century.

This recourse to myth has facilitated Hanson's segue from reviled fish and chip shop lady (a mythical construct) to a no less mythical celebrity. When Hanson was imprisoned for electoral fraud in August 2003, readers were given blow by blow descriptions of Hanson's first night in custody, her first telephone call, her first family visits, her strip searches, her medication, her fear and trembling, her relentless bravery and her messages of comfort and courage to her supporters. They read of her sister's shock and horror in seeing the sartorially attentive Hanson reduced to a grey prison tracksuit and of the brilliant red lipstick she had been forced to relinquish. They shared the indignity of her flannelette prison nightgown and meagre toilet bag and suffered the replacement of her vermillion nail polish and hair-dye with soap and toothpaste. The media drew its audiences into an intimate encounter with the body of Hanson -- as it had in the past -- but this time to experience its visceral discomforts, its deprivation, its loneliness, its tears of anguish and all punctuated by that signature Hanson trait: defiance.

At the same time, the mythical images of Hanson's campaigns were reproduced. Hanson the Queen, draped in the Australian flag; Hanson the femme fatale, her sequined red dress glittering as she lifted her arms in an open salute to 'her people'; Hanson the Aussie battler, manning the electoral booths in her blue working man's shirt. And old stories were regurgitated: The Sydney Morning Herald responded to her jail sentence by retelling the story of Hanson's rise from bar-maid to single mother, to fish and chip shop red-head, to the political nemesis of the nation. In its headline 'Flame haired: Flame Out', not only was the myth of Hanson reconstituted but also the myth of her demise and at the very moment when her star was assured. Her return to the political limelight written in her sentence; her day of release a guaranteed headline.

There was little comparison of Hanson's sentence with similar sentences for acts of electoral or political fraud and virtually no discussion or political analysis of the party structure that gave rise to 'the technicality' of registering Pauline Hanson's support group as party members, nor any analysis of why this dual party structure had been developed, or to what end. This kind of discussion did take place in limited ways in small columns and opinion pieces in the weeks following her imprisonment but they paled into insignificance beside the headline grabbing details of strip searches, children's tears, songs of innocence, and a lady undone by a harsh and corrupt legal system. This was the real story. We were -- and I think this calls for a new neologism -- in the realm of 'Hansonella'.

Locked in her prison cell singing 'One day my Prince will come', Hanson ascended into myth; forging a new synthesis between the poor working girl in need of a prince, and the political champion of an enslaved people enslaved herself by a heartless elite in cohorts with a corrupt judiciary. Never before had Hanson achieved this purely mythical status in which Labor, Liberal and democratic politicians joined their voices with the shock-jocks to express sympathy for a lady so cruelly undone.

Now that Hanson is released from prison, the pretense of a critical engagement with the problematic field of Hanson and Hansonism has disappeared. In its place there is pure celebrity. The nation at large is dancing with Hanson and few journalists have had the bad manners to recall the F word. Only Andrew Denton has had the temerity to interview her about her politics and thus press home the point that her politics and policies haven't changed. One wonders what recourse the media will have if Hanson uses her new found celebrity - her mythos - to once again take off the mask and reassert her political agenda. Its hard to imagine the French media being so naïve as to give Le Pen the dance floor or to tolerate uncritically such a move on the part of their colleagues. But then, they'd hardly be so naïve as to assume Le Pen was just a gullible working class girl who could be transformed by a stint in jail, a chiffon frock and a pair of dancing shoes.

Endnotes
1. Influential film-writer Robert McKee has argued that arch-narrative is 'the mirror of the human mind' and therefore the most accessible narrative structure for films for mass audiences. More complex forms of narrative are deemed elitist, inaccessible etc.

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Bio
Jennifer Rutherford is the author of The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Imaginary (MUP) and the director of Ordinary People (A Film Australia National Interest Project) documentary on the One Nation Movement. Her current project is a monograph Hansonella and Other Tales (forthcoming Giramondo Press).

Mouth
Why do I have a mouth if you are nowhere near me to speak with
Why do I have a mouth now that you are so far away and can’t be kissed anymore
Why do I have a mouth when I don’t much care to smile any longer
Why do I have a mouth when I have no interest in eating anything ever again
Why do I have a mouth?
Why do I have a mouth?
Why do I have a mouth when I don’t much even want to breathe anymore and I have a persistent cold
Why do I have a mouth?
Or is it just only there for me to scream with, Sonia.

Gregory Gilbert Gumbs
Washington, D.C.

Just last year I thought it was cool to bomb Iraq; now, I’m terrified.

I ask my children, ‘Who in your class wants war? Hm? Name names. I want names.’

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