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Review Essay



Samir Gandesha, ed. *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2020). – xii, 291 pages. – ISBN 9780745340630.

Lawrence Grossberg, *Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right* (London: Pluto Press, 2018). – xv, 165 pages. – ISBN 9780745337920.

David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right* (London: Pluto Press, 2019). – 280 pages. – ISBN 9780745338170.

David Renton, *Fascism: History and Theory* (revised edition of *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, 1999) (London: Pluto Press, 2020). – 192 pages. – ISBN 9780745341194.

Mike Wendling, *Alt Right: From 4 Chan to the White House* (London: Pluto Press, 2018). – vi, 294 pages. – ISBN 9780745337951.

The titles listed above are all published by the London-based Pluto Press, a radical anti-capitalist, internationalist and politically independent publisher. Originally founded in 1969, Pluto Press is one of Britain's oldest radical-left publishers. Over fifty years on, their concern is to remain relevant, not to hark back to the past of 1960s radical protest, but to make timely interventions in the present. Nonetheless, past struggles remain a major source of inspiration for the publisher: 'fascism and racism are on the rise. Refugees are fleeing authoritarian regimes and war. Tensions between corporations and workers are increasing, fuelled by austerity policies and deepening inequality. The world needs a Left Book Club for the 21st Century', Pluto's Managing Director declared in 2018.¹ Without doubt,

1 Kit Caless, 'Inside the UK's Most Radical Indie Publishers,' *Huck*, June 6, 2018, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/books-art-and-culture/inside-uks-radical-indie-publishers/>.

the publication of these five titles constitute a timely intervention. Collectively, they merit review as a sample, or 'taster' of how the radical left currently views fascism and the resurgent right. But the timing of this intervention aside, do they hold any special significance for the academic analysis of fascism today? For 'At this moment', as David Renton concedes in *Fascism: History and Theory*, 'there is hardly any theory which is less fashionable among historians of fascism than Marxism' (p. 45).

The first title, Samir Gandesha's edited volume, *Spectres of Fascism*, is the outcome of a free school hosted by the Institute for the Humanities at British Columbia's Simon Fraser University in 2017. The context for it, of course, is all too familiar: the continued electoral successes of radical right-wing populism in Europe and beyond; Brexit; and the November 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as forty-fifth President of the United States. This temporal context has attracted a variety of epithets from 'post-fascism', 'late-fascism' to 'fascist creep' (the notion of 'creep' calling attention to a worrying process of convergence between the conservative and the far right, see Renton, below). However, Gandesha opts for a different term altogether: 'spectres of fascism', that is to say, phantom-like forms of fascism that haunt us in the present day.

Gandesha, a Marxist (and someone who is particularly taken by Bonapartist theory), posits that the problem with ideological readings of fascism as an ultra-nationalist, revolutionary response to an existential crisis of meaning is that these readings fail to understand fascism 'within a class analysis situated within a larger understanding of the socioeconomic crisis of capitalism' (p. 7). How then does Gandesha navigate working-class support for the far right when fascism is supposedly the bourgeoisie's response to working-class hostility to capitalism? According to Gandesha, interwar Western Marxists, in particular Georg Lukás and the Frankfurt School, did fully understand the 'subjective dimensions of the crisis that made the working class susceptible to the siren song of fascism' (p. 7). Fascists used imperialism, displacing class with national identity, to garner the support of the 'lower petite bourgeoisie and the Lumpenproletariat, or those classes whose social precarity renders them particularly insecure and susceptible to xenophobia and extreme forms of nationalism within the context of an imperialist project' (p. 8).

But what of today's 'spectres of fascism'? If twentieth-century fascism offered a solution to economic crisis by accelerating surplus-value extraction through imperialism and the destruction of working-class institutions; in the twenty-first century, fascism returns as the 'authoritarian populist translation of economic insecurities into cultural anxieties against the backdrop of the prospect of ecological collapse' (p. 13). This is not an anti-working-class alliance between industrial capital and the petite bourgeoisie in the context of

imperialist rivalries and capitalist crises of overproduction, as in 'classic fascism', but now, after neo-liberalism's defeat of organised labour, twenty-first century fascism directs its appeal to neo-liberalism's 'abandoned subjects', those confronted with inequality, austerity, insecurity, global migration flows, and global climate change.

There is much to muse on here, and we are offered the tantalising prospect of a thoroughly interdisciplinary volume that delivers a conceptual framework for understanding these 'spectres of fascism'. This collection is eclectic, drawing from art history, communications, philosophy, political economy, political science, psychoanalysis and sociology. The geographical span is also extensive, covering Europe, North America, Latin America, and India. There are moments of genuine insight in this text, and readers can decide for themselves on the chapters that speak most to their interests. However, the overarching limitation with this book is that it lacks a sustained focus on contemporary developments. Too many chapters simply do not engage with 'post-fascism' and there is no overarching conclusion that distils a conceptual framework from each multifaceted account. As a result, the volume struggles to add up to much more than the sum of its parts.

While *Spectres of Fascism* is global in its reach, Lawrence Grossberg's *Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle of the American Right* is particularist. For those us who subscribe to the notion that that fascism should be genericised, the tone of Grossberg's opening comments do not augur well, 'we should resist the all-too-common temptation to start by assimilating the specific to the general, making Trump into the U.S. version of something that is happening in many parts of the world. . . . These are often described as formations of demagoguery, authoritarian populism, neo-fascism, or illiberal democracy . . . it is more productive to start by examining the specificity of the contemporary U.S. context' (pp. 4–5).

According to Grossberg, Trumpism is best understood as a hybrid form of conservatism that originates from two native conservative traditions: the first is the neo-liberal New Right, the second is the populist reactionary conservatism of the Tea Parties. Where does the 'alt-right' feature in all this? In Grossberg's reading, the 'alt-right' constitutes the extremist wing of the reactionary conservative tradition. Two main factions define the 'alt-right': Yiannopoulos-style 'post-libertarians' (tech-savvy, subversive hactivists and trolls); and those, such as Richard Spencer, who are or come 'very close to neo-fascism, most clearly in the forms of white supremacism and anti-Semitism' (p. 76). What defines Trumpism, then, is a particular configuration of US conservatism that combines nationalism with popular sovereignty (populism).

As a cultural studies scholar, Grossberg's methodology is heavily indebted to conjunctural analysis (a multidimensional context whereby historical, political, economic and affective dimensions intersect and make possible a cultural war of positions). The present conjuncture in the US is 'reactionary counter-modernity', where the nation has been reduced to the affective landscape of identity, and what defines the 'white' nation is corporate culture with Trump its symbolic figurehead. This not the totalitarian fascism of the 1930s, but an 'alt-fascism' where the corporation becomes the nation and the state (p. 140). 'Alt-fascism' is, for Grossberg, cultural nationalism governed by popular corporatocracy. It is therefore incumbent on socialists to expose the paradox in people's continued trust in corporations despite their history of corruption and failure; and to re-imagine a state and democratic political culture freed from the grip of corporate capitalism.

This book, engaging as it is, makes for a provocative response to Trumpism. However, for scholars of 'fascism studies', there is little that pushes the conceptual field forward (although his stimulating chapter on affective landscapes certainly grabbed my attention). The notion of 'alt-fascism' (the prefix 'alt' denoting rebellion against tradition while remaining essentially part of it) still locates fascism in the reactionary conservative right, rehearsing a standard Marxist position.

This brings me to BBC journalist Mike Wendling's *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House*. Narrower in focus, this book is aimed at those who want to get a handle on a movement that rose to prominence during Trump's 2016 election campaign. Its purpose is to 'define, demystify and declaw the alt-right, to find out where the movement came from and where it might be going' (p. 16). Published in 2018, and now bettered by more recent publications (such as the volume by Patrik Hermansson et. al, which locates the 'alt-right' in a wider international perspective), Wendling's account is US-centric and aimed more at the general reader than the specialist. He breaks the 'alt-right' down into the now familiar groupings of the 'alt-light' and the harder white ethno-nationalist core. 'The alt-light plays down the extremists; the hard core uses the relatively more attractive and "moderate" wing to draw people further towards its side' (p. 12). This makes for an interesting case study of the connections between the radical conservative right and the extreme right. What Wendling reveals is that this relationship has always been uneasy, contradictory, and from the time of Trump's inauguration, the cause of intra-movement conflict. For Wendling, this conflict represents both the primacy of the 'alt-right's' more extreme elements (white ethno-nationalists, conspiracy theorists, and neo-Nazis) and the cause of its unravelling.

This is not a theoretical-conceptual exposition; there is no attempt to locate the 'alt-right' within the structures of contemporary capitalism. In fact, Wendling is even critical of radical-left antifa protest as 'often counter-productive' (p. 221). As for responses, Wendling's suggestion is hardly revolutionary: the most likely scenario is that this 'Frankenstein of a political group will continue to fall apart, with energetic elements shooting off in all sorts of directions' (p. 223). In the meantime, the left should rediscover humour and poke fun at the 'alt-right': 'For all its genuine rage, the alt-right's broad appeal was built around humor, irony and mockery – and they're not the only team that can play that game' (p. 222).

Radical historian David Renton will be a familiar name to students of generic fascism (see Renton's contribution to the debate on Trump and fascism in this volume). Following a flurry of publications at the end of the 1990s/early noughties – including a co-edited volume with the author of this review – Renton left academia to pursue a career as a barrister. Although still working in the legal profession, he has made a welcome return to publishing fray over the last few years. In 2019 he published *The New Authoritarians* with Pluto Press, and in 2020, Pluto Press published a new and updated edition of his *Fascism: Theory and Practice* as *Fascism: History and Theory* as its companion volume.

Renton opens *The New Authoritarians* by declaring that 'The right has changed: it has embraced the ideas of its outliers' (p.1.). Indebted to the work of the late Scottish Marxist historian Neil Davidson, Renton distinguishes between three right-wing traditions which can be conceptualised by how far they are willing to go to defend capitalism. For conservatives, the best way to defend capitalism is through the maintenance of existing social relationships; for the non-fascist far right, it is about restoring lost relationships; and for fascists it requires a counter-revolution to purge the nation of its enemies. So, for Renton, fascism is a specific form of reactionary mass movement that seeks to 'advance capitalist technology while restoring society to the class peace it wrongly associates with the years prior to 1789' (p. 16). Meanwhile, the 'non-fascist' far right, which we might otherwise define as radical right-wing populism, seeks power democratically, retains a long-term commitment to electoral politics, does not worship the state, and does not seek to transcend class. Where Renton differs from Davidson, however, is in his insistence that boundaries are not fixed in 'ideal-types', but move: 'What happens when the boundaries move and the component parts of the right are reordered? What happens when parts of the right, which are usually distinct and hostile, begin to co-operate? What kinds of left-wing strategy will be most effective against today's aggressive and authoritarian but non-fascist right?' (p. 19).

Renton's thesis is that in the period 2016–17, conservatives increasingly converged with the non-fascist far right. In part, this was a consequence of two key long-term dynamics: the legacy of September 11 having diminished the collective memory of 1939–45, and the ways in which postwar far right reinvented itself, breaking free from its fascist predecessors. The more immediate catalysts behind convergence were the demise of welfare spending (austerity) after the economic crash of 2007–8, and the declining legitimacy of globalised free trade.

So where does this leave twenty-first century fascism? For the moment, it has been rejected by the far right. But this might change, Renton warns. The structural weakness of the non-fascist far right is that it is ideologically vague (anti-Muslim racism is no substitute for anti-Jewish racism when it comes to explaining the 2008 crash; anti-socialism has been replaced by antipathy towards social liberalism). 'This is why fascism may yet return; because unlike the non-fascist far right, fascism has a clear goal' and since Renton predicts further economic crisis ahead, 'the supporters of the right will increasingly need one' (p. 225).

The solution to defeating convergence on the right, Renton argues, is for the left to a) expose the racism and discrimination that underpins the convergence of right and far right; b) to break the alliance between the right's parliamentary politics and the far-right's street politics by exposing the incompatibility between the two; c) to defend itself through popular protest; d) to provide a real alternative by being serious about wealth redistribution and having the credibility to win office; and e) by challenging all forms of oppression, not only in rejecting neo-liberalism but also in rejecting misogyny and racism. As Renton puts it, 'The way to defeat the right is for the left to offer more, better wages, cheaper homes, greater benefits, as well as sustained hostility to the racism and sexism and other ideas of the right. The left needs to go through its own process of reconstruction and renewal' (p. 22). It is hard to disagree with Renton that the left needs to renew itself, and *The New Authoritarians* does make a strong case for rejecting any return to a Blairite 'Third Way'. But what of the left's response to ecological crisis? Renton does not touch upon this (cf. Gandeshi, above) but this must surely factor in its renewal too?

Renton's *Fascism: History and Theory* offers a very accessible and engaging exploration of the Marxist theory of fascism through three sub-theories: the 'left' theory (fascism as an elite movement, the puppet of the capitalist ruling class); 'right' theory (fascism as a mass movement autonomous of capital control); and a 'dialectical' theory (a combination of the 'right' and 'left' theories, which understands fascism in terms of the contradiction between the

radical demands of its mass base, and the reality of power where fascism sides with capital). Renton argues that this third theory 'reached a more accurate appreciation of fascism, not just than other Marxists but than anyone else in the interwar years' (p. 5). It was the contradiction at the very heart of fascism, Renton says, that was source of fascism's 'spectacular success, its hubris and ultimately its doom' (p. 159). For Renton, then, *fascism is a specific form of reactionary mass movement*.

Renton remains as critical as ever of those who subscribe to 'New Consensus' school (although he fails to mention that this term is now rather passé). He once again revisits his long-held argument that fascism is not simply a set of ideas; that the defining feature of fascism was the combination of reactionary goals and an aspiration to build a mass movement; that its distinguishing features relate to fascism's style, and to one distinguishing feature in particular, the use of violence; and that the role of the historian of fascism is to be critical towards fascism (rather than simply viewing fascism through the views of the fascists themselves). 'Those who adopt the New Consensus remain trapped forever looking at the past only through the eyes of the intellectuals who shilled for fascism. Their approach prevents them for ever seeing fascism through the eyes of its victims' (p. 38). As a historian of fascism and anti-fascism, who finds an ideological reading of fascism more compelling than a Marxist one, I must be the exception then because I am capable of viewing fascism from the perspective of anti-fascists. The idea that non-Marxist historians of fascism are blind to the suffering of its victims is a tad offensive (a jibe that probably reflects Renton's third vocation, that of seasoned anti-fascist activist).

In the end, we need to ask: does Renton's revised edition make more of a contribution than the first? It still provides an excellent introduction to the Marxist theory of fascism – this text should be first port of call for students wishing to understand its various nuances. It has been updated, incorporating reference to much literature that has been published since the first edition; it has also removed much of the material on the revival of fascism after 1945 which is an area better explored in *The New Authoritarians*. Taken together, these two books do make for a valuable contribution, demonstrating the extent to which the radical left has become more open to nuanced perspectives, especially regarding the 'non-fascist' reactionary right (Renton, for example, accepts that Franco's regime was not fascist, p. 143). Yet, at the same time, they reveal a dogged refusal to cut the Gordian Knot – the impossibly tangled knot – that still binds to the Marxist method whereby fascism must be understood through its relationship to class and capital (fascism exists to solve the problem of working-class hostility to capitalism). For Renton, then, the

essential character of fascism is *reactionary* (fascism as the antithesis of 'progress' whereby 'progress' is defined in Marxist terms as increasing equality and the abolition of capitalism). But in the end, it is this basic ideological premise – that fascism can never be genuinely revolutionary – that needs to change for the radical left to enrich the field of comparative fascist studies any further.

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