

Review Essay

Derailing Fascism

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Connolly, William E. 2017. *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. £6.99, pp. 142.

Gandesha, Samir, ed. 2020. *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives*. Pluto Press: London. £24.99, pp. 304.

I

On June 3, 2020, United States Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican from the southern state of Arkansas, published an opinion essay in the *New York Times* calling for the army to stop the riots after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. “Rioters have plunged many American cities into anarchy”, he explained, while “some elites have excused this orgy of violence in the spirit of radical chic”. “The American people aren’t blind to injustices in our society”, Cotton continued, but looters and “antifa” – a recently coined term for antifascists – were using this emotionally charged moment for their own ends. Normally, the police are responsible for maintaining law and order; in this state of exception, the president should invoke the Insurrection Act to deploy the army to “restore order to our streets” (Cotton 2020). President Donald J. Trump tweeted: “we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts”. Liberal observers could be excused for thinking that the far-right wants to use these protests as an excuse to assert even more control over

American life in the same way that the Nazis did in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire in 1933.

One could find similar examples from around the world, of right populists acting in ways that resemble the European fascists of the 1930s. In December 2019, the Narendra Modi government in India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act. This law helps “persecuted minorities” such as Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Christians, or Buddhists – but not, pointedly, Muslims – from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Bangladesh become Indian citizens. Critics say the Act violates the Constitution of India, international human rights law, and the very notion of a secular state where everybody, regardless of religion, is equal before the law (Mansoor and Perrigo 2019). People across India, including at schools like Delhi University and Jamia Millia Islamia, took to the streets to protest, and were met with police tear gas and truncheons. When Modi was chief minister of the state of Gujarat in 2002, Hindu mobs killed an estimated 2,500 Muslims in broad daylight, and people have long noted the affinities between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and German and Italian fascism (Roy 2019a). Arundhati Roy tweeted that the Act would destroy India’s secular, liberal democratic Constitution. “Are we going to stand in line once again, obediently, and comply with this policy that eerily resembles the 1935 Nuremberg Laws of the Third Reich? If we do, India will cease to exist” (Roy 2019b).

There are parallels in American and Indian politics. Men who claim to speak on behalf of ordinary people against elites and the riff raff. An indifference or contempt for liberal norms of ordinary politics and due process. A celebration of violence. Thinly veiled racism, casteism, or religious discrimination. But not a full embrace of the most heinous of the fascist policies, including industrial scale murder. And, there is a major difference between the politics of the 1930s and today. In the 1930s, the fascists called themselves national socialists in Germany, and their leadership in Italy often had a leftwing background. Today, far right governments around the world endorse neoliberalism, the doctrine that markets should allocate resources in many spheres of life. Latin American dictators, for example, see no problem combining political brutality and economic ultra-neoliberalism (see Vladimir Safatle’s essay in Gandesha 2020, 179–90).

The two books under review – *Spectres of Fascism*, edited by Samir Gandesha, and *Aspirational Fascism*, by William E. Connolly – help us make sense of this historical moment. Neither book argues that Trump, Modi, or other far-right populists around the globe are the same as Hitler or Mussolini; in fact, both books warn against overusing a term that does not exactly fit today’s politics. But both books maintain that there are some affinities between today and then, and that it is incumbent to study the rise of fascism in order to stop it before it turns into a violent, irrational force that overcomes the rule of law, liberal norms, and human decency. This essay will consider how each book defines fascism, speculates on its origin, anticipates dangerous

developments, and offers advice about how to forestall fascism. Then, I encourage researchers to investigate the kinds of micropolitical actions that cultivate a pluralist, rather than a fascist, sensibility.

II

Populism is a kind of politics in which a powerful leader claims to speak for the silent majority against the elites and their beneficiaries (Müller 2015). A left-wing populism could mobilize the poor against the rich. The most prevalent kind of populism, however, is on the right, where charismatic politicians wage war on behalf of the authentic people against elites, a somewhat nebulous category that includes professors, lawyers, journalists, human rights activists, liberals, and, in a different corner of the polity, welfare recipients. Trump, Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Hungary's Viktor Orbán all seem to fit into the category of populists.

Populists can veer towards fascism when they take a step away from liberal democratic norms. This can occur when politicians call for extralegal violence, say things that are explicitly or implicitly racist, stir up the passions and abjure reasoned argument, ignore constitutional provisions or norms, stifle critics, and refuse to cede office when they lose an election.¹

Fascists write books and make arguments, but ideology might not be the distinguishing feature of fascism (Hobsbawm 1996, 117). Jaleh Mansoor shows that the Italian Futurists and the German Nazis believed in opposite things (Gandeshia 2020, 44–66). The Nazis glorified the past, wanted to see the ideals of classical antiquity triumph again, and celebrated agrarian and proletarian identities. The Futurists vilified history, mocked Italy's Roman imperial past, and praised modern city life with its speed and excitement. The lesson for today is that we should not be too surprised if fascist energies bind “Silicon Valley, libertarian accelerationism, corporate nihilism and reactionary masculinist white supremacy” (60).

One defining feature of fascism is a style of leadership, one that trades in affective contagion rather than discursive reasoning. Connolly quotes Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: “I gradually so transformed myself into a speaker for mass meetings, that I became practiced in the pathos and the gestures which is a great hall with its thousands of people demands”; “If he suspects that they do not seem convinced of the soundness of his argument, repeat it over and over with constantly new examples” (cited in Connolly 2017, 9). How do you know that fascism may be brewing in your country? If leaders host raucous rallies that glorify national identity, target enemies, and repeat claims that may or may not have any basis in truth.

Fascism grows in the culture as and before it appears as a full-fledged political movement. Connolly and Laura U. Marks both cite Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, a book that analyzed the diaries of German members of the *Freikorps* after World War I. Theweleit documents how the German military

used bodily drills and behavioral demands to fashion a certain kind of subject. The soldier is taught to obey orders from above without question, and to rule mercilessly over those below him in the military and civilian hierarchy. The soldier is trained to repel females and the feminine. “So the Freikorps soldier became ascetic, grew armor; effectively killed that part of themselves that desires” (Gandesha 2020, 112). Misogyny primes soldiers for fascism.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the twentieth century French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari respectively, thought about how micro-fascism preceded and sustained fascist politics. Gary Genosko applies Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy to make sense of the Trump presidency. “Anxiety finds an institutional base in the Republican Party and gains hundreds of thousands of followers across social media. In ego surrender to a leader with whom one identifies, the resonance of multiple kinds of alienation is captured in a highly sharable scapegoating of enemies” (Gandesha 2020, 174). Fascism both creates and briefly heals the wound that draws people to it. People feel anxiety in the modern world, and they look to fascists to provide a story, a home, in which to identify friends and enemies.

Conservative populists around the world speak on behalf of the authentic people against cosmopolitan elites. What turns populism into fascism is enthusiasm for violence and illegality.

III

To derail fascism, it helps to know what powers the train. *Spectres of Fascism*, according to my notes, identifies over a dozen possible causes of fascism, including propaganda, racism, the culture industry, the legacy of colonialism, the pressure of ecological catastrophe, and an ontological need for a connection to Being. One benefit of the book being an edited volume is that the reader may hear about many reasons why fascism germinates, but the downside is that each thesis would need greater expansion to be persuasive. A good explanation would have to shed light on many political phenomena, including but not only the rise of fascist and fascist-like regimes in the past century. If you examine one cause in one country in one time period, then you may draw lessons that are not applicable across multiple cases. For example, Theweleit’s analysis of armored masculinity might be a historical artefact rather than a universally true account of masculinity (Gandesha 2020, 116–18). That said, *Spectres of Fascism* presents two basic kinds of explanation for the growth of fascism: economic and psychological, Marxist and Freudian.

In “On the Jewish Question”, Karl Marx argues that capitalist society divides human nature in half. On one side, human beings are citizens, free to participate in politics, the economy, and social life as far as their money will go. On the other side, human beings are economic actors, bound into certain roles and routines depending on whether they are owners or workers. For Marx, the divide between universal *citoyen* and particularistic *homo economicus* could only be

healed by communism. What, then, explains the rise of fascism? Marx provided the blueprint for an answer in his essay, “The Eighteenth Brumaire”. Louis Bonaparte put together a coalition – including the *lumpen proletariat* and the bourgeoisie – to thwart the Parisian proletariat. The bourgeoisie had a certain distaste for Bonaparte’s crude style, but they tolerated it because he had the political smarts and popular appeal to rule, and they did not. *Specters of Fascism* often recurs to “the classical Marxian” account of fascism as “the bourgeoisie’s response to a militant working class” (Gandesha 2020, 7).

The problem with the classical Marxist account of fascism is that it does not explain why people – including members of the proletariat – are attracted to figures like Bonaparte. Researchers have turned to Sigmund Freud to help explain the psychological mechanisms at work in the turn to fascism. Adorno held that the root of fascism was in Oedipal father-identification; Theweleit argued that it was the “pre-Oedipal fear of dissolution into the mother” (Gandesha 2020, 110). Wilhelm Reich contended that families, schools, and churches socialized children and produced sexual repression that led to sadism (Gandesha 2020, 38).

In *Aspirational Fascism*, Connolly offers his own economic-psychological account of the rise of fascist impulses. On the one hand, the white working class has a list of real grievances. In the mid-twentieth century, white men who worked in Michigan car factories made enough money to support a middle class family; now, that is no longer the case. Connolly evinces sympathy for the white working class that is struggling to make ends meet. Unfortunately, “aspirational fascists” deploy “affective contagion” to turn the working class into Trump supporters. In other words, Fox news, conservative talk radio, professional sports, country music, gun culture, animus towards Hilary Clinton and other coastal elites, and a host of other factors have turned Michigan from blue, signaling a majority of Democratic Party voters, to red, signaling a majority of Republican Party voters.

IV

In 2017, I attended a conference at the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai and happened to attend a lecture about B.R. Ambedkar. I learned of recent incidents of caste Hindus stripping Dalits naked, tying them to a car, and beating them in public. In addition to being outraged, I wondered how this could happen in a country that wanted to be part of the international global economy. Give capitalists credit where credit is due: they do not normally advocate racist or casteist violence in the streets.² In India and the United States, capitalist societies flirt with fascism to garner popular support without destroying the global capitalist infrastructure.

Ajay Gudavarthy and G. Vijay have shown how the BJP has embraced market-oriented reforms in education, public health, gender empowerment, and training and employment programs. In 2000-14, the United Progressive

Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress party passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Here is an excerpt from the action plan of the NITI Aayog, the think tank associated with the BJP:

The Right to Education (RTE) Act stresses on inputs, causing resources to be focused on things like building schools, hiring teachers, having playgrounds and libraries while learning outcomes have steadily dropped since the introduction of the Act. The RTE needs to be modified to actually become a Right to Learning, instead of being, as it currently is, a Right to go to School [...] Gujarat has already shown the way with its rules and regulations for the RTE Act. These rules assign the bulk of the weight to student performance when considering continued recognition of a school. (cited in Gudavarthy and Vijay 2020, 7)

This action plan looks familiar to scholars of education policy (Tampio 2018a). The equity paradigm holds that schools for the poor should look like schools for the rich, with well-trained teachers, beautiful campuses, healthy food, small class sizes, and so forth. The equity paradigm is associated with the education philosophy of John Dewey, who believed that all children should have the opportunity to develop their own talents and learn to express themselves in public. The excellence paradigm, on the contrary, emphasizes outputs rather than inputs. In practice, this means that the state may underfund public schools (inputs) and instead put pressure on schools to raise standardized test scores (outputs). The excellence paradigm was largely developed by economists at the University of Chicago, whose main concern was that schools produce human capital for the economy (Spring 2015). The BJP's education plan is straight from the neoliberal education playbook.

At the same time, the BJP leads a militant right-wing populism, or “authoritarian regime with fascist tendencies” (Gandeha 2020, 224). One thing that fascists do is try to silence their most articulate opponents, who often happen to be academics. Thus, the BJP is trying to break the hold of the social elite in institutions of higher education including JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University), UoH (the University of Hyderabad), and the IITs (the Indian Institutes of Technology). The BJP, overtly and covertly, wants to control or eliminate “the supposedly ‘privileged spaces’ occupied by an elite and marked by the life of the mind and the aspiration to question everything instead of expressing solidarity and loyalty” (Gandeha 2020, 233). In reality and for the optics, the BJP seems pleased to crack down on dissent at universities when they protest things like the Citizenship Amendment Act. Part of what makes the BJP so powerful is its careful manipulation of “instincts, gut feelings and perceptions” (Gandeha 2020, 234)

One way that the BJP has prevailed in electoral and cultural politics is through its appeal to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The Congress Party drew its support from the upper castes, Dalits, and Muslims. The BJP, on the other hand, has targeted the OBCs, a broad political category that includes *jatis* with various degrees of wealth and social standing. Today, “the OBCs are the backbone of the BJP.” “Their social location combined with their habitation in

rural hinterlands in proximity with Dalits and the Muslims make them the ideal social force for the BJP-RSS combine to ‘deploy’ them as the foot soldiers to the project of building a muscular Hindu Rashtra” (Gudavarthy 2019). Gudavarthy’s analysis is reminiscent of Marx’s in “The Eighteenth Brumaire”. The OBCs *could* join forces with the Dalits, Muslims, people often not very far from them on the social and economic ladder. Instead, the OBCs are drawn to Modi’s charisma and the promise that if they join the Hindu Rashtra, they will be able to kick the people below them on the social ladder. The fascist tendency in India is most apparent when the Hindutva movement mobilizes the OBCs to lynch and beat Muslims and Dalits in the rural regions of the country. This way, Modi and the BJP ride a wave of support, and coastal elites don’t have to see it.

The United States, lest anyone doubt it, is a country run largely by and for the rich. In response to the pandemic and its effect on the economy, the Trump administration proposed measures such as a capital gains tax cut, a payroll tax cut, and legal protection for business owners if their employees get COVID-19 on the job. All of these proposals immediately help the rich and might eventually raise the tide for everyone else, but maybe not. In response to an incipient recession, the Trump administration has advocated policies that prioritize helping the top 1 percent of income earners over millions of people who have lost their jobs (Lopez 2020).

Why does the white working-class support Trump and the Republican party? I doubt that it is because of a principled commitment to a certain body of ideas. In an eye-opening essay, Joan Braune studies the ideas espoused by Steve Bannon, the chief executive officer of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and the White House chief strategist early in the Trump presidency (Gandesha 2020, 207–22). Braune shows how Bannon espouses a kind of catastrophism that draws from the Italian fascist esotericist Julius Evola, Jean Raspail’s 1973 racist propaganda novel *The Camp of the Saints*, the 1990 bestseller *The Fourth Turning*, and the Hindu notion of the *Kali Yuga* (The Age of Kali). Braune’s essay explains the behavior and propaganda of Bannon and other Traditionalists who normally prefer to post on the Internet than appear in public, with the notable exception of the 2017 Unite the Right march in Charlottesville. Still, only a few dozen, maybe a few hundred, people attended that march. People can overstate the influence of far-right ideas on the rise of the Trump presidency.

In *Aspirational Fascism*, Connolly explores the bodily practices that lead people to attune to, rather than intellectually agree with, fascist energies. He reflects on his own experience playing football, where players subtly learn how to carry themselves in a masculine, aggressive way. He also suggests that “military aggression and competitive sports form an almost seamless intertext” (Connolly 2017, 49), a point that holds when one discovers the origin of football in the late nineteenth century “muscular Christianity” movement. Large crowds gather throughout the fall and winter in the United States – on

Fridays, in high schools; on Saturdays, at colleges; on Sundays, in professional football stadiums – to lose themselves in a crowd cheering their team on to victory.³ Connolly’s book prompts one to wonder about all of the ways culture shapes people before and when they act politically. For instance, how are battle royal first person shooter video games like Fortnite educating millions of young people around the world to become citizens (Tampio 2018b)?

For a long time, Connolly has wondered how the two branches of the Republican party coalesce: Main Street, that includes whites, workers, evangelicals, and people who live in the center of the country, and Wall Street, the term to denote people who live on the coasts, sometimes work in finance, and are often well-educated and socially liberal. Connolly’s answer is that the two factions “resonate”, in particular, in their hatred for New Deal liberals and their plans to redistribute wealth to address things like the historical legacy of racism. In *Aspirational Fascism*, Connolly suggests that there are “possible resonances between the existential resentments and bodily disciplines of ‘armored males’ in pre-Nazi Germany and many alpha males relaying messages from Trump to sections of the white working class in the United States today” (Connolly 2017, xxiii). If Connolly is reading the mood of the country correctly, then it is possible that Americans will see an uptick in fascist behavior, including people not questioning their superiors and bullying their family, friends, employees, and vulnerable populations. Nazi Germany and Trump’s America are apples and oranges, but you can still learn things by comparing them (Connolly 2017, xvii–xviii).

V

What can be done to stop fascism from growing in society? How can the left, committed to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, present an alternative to the neoliberal-fascist political assemblages ruling in many countries? One task at hand is to “cancel *and* preserve aspects of the very liberal democracy targeted by the far-right” (Gandesha 2020, 16). The left is committed to the ideal of making freedom real rather than simply preserving equality before the law. The left is not just interested in diversifying the ruling class; the task is to create a society in which everyone has sufficient opportunities and resources to live a full human life. Liberal democracy is not sufficient, but it is necessary, and it is worth fighting for. Free speech is not the end all and be all, but it is crucial to defend this liberal value when it comes under sustained populist and fascist assault. Until and through the time when the left can fashion a competitive alternative to the neoliberal-populist resonance machine, the left needs to defend the ideal of free speech.

Ajay Gudavarthy and William E. Connolly, in the Indian and American contexts, offer useful advice about how the left can confront the fascist threat in the present moment. In a word, both think that the left needs to form a coalition that can peel constituencies away from the BJP and the Republican

Party. Pluralism “is noble in itself and provides a vaccination needed to help insulate democracy from drives to a hostile, fascist takeover” (Connolly 2017, xix). Neither Gudavarthy nor Connolly are optimist about this happening, but they do sketch a way that left pluralist assemblages may counteract hard right populist movements.

According to Gudavarthy, the old parties of the left have alienated their base. Once, Congress could count on popular support for its welfare programs, but since the late 1990s, the party is correctly associated with dynasty, patronage, and corruption. “A new Congress would mean representation from the OBCs and intermediary castes, Dalits and Muslims. It also requires new and younger faces to appeal to the nation” (Gudavarthy 2020). How precisely can the Congress create a compelling alternative to Hindutva and pull back Dalits, the OBCs, and Muslims back into the fold? Political leaders should look for what political scientists call cross cutting cleavages that could lead to a realignment in Indian politics. In other words, look for issues that could compel constituencies to leave the BJP for another party or political identity.

In the American context, Connolly thinks that the Democrats need to address class inequality, because it is the right thing to do, but also because the Democrats cannot win national office if they cannot make inroads in “the flyover states”. Connolly also thinks that Democrats ought to be careful about identity politics because it can alienate constituencies that a big tent left needs to include within it. Under no conditions should the left tolerate racism or sexism, but “a spray gun approach to accusation and condemnation insulates the accusers from seeking ways to transfigure antagonistic identity assertions into an ethos of relational pluralism” (Connolly 2017, 74). In other words, the left needs to think about how to reconnect with the base of the New Deal: the white working class, rather than blaming them for the sins of other people who look like them. In the 2020 presidential primary, Connolly thinks that Bernie Sanders could have been that candidate to pull the working class back to the Democratic Party.

Could humor work to bring people back to leftist political parties? Maybe. American comedians such as Steve Colbert, Sarah Silverman, and Jimmy Kimmel mock President Trump, and the young in America tend to lean left. “Satirical repetitions bring out [...] how Trump works his crude magic on the visceral register of chosen constituents” (Connolly 2017, 17). Yes, but I could see this backfiring. Who wants to be made fun of for instinctively liking a guy? In the fall of 2018, an artist made Trump statues that dogs could pee on in Brooklyn, New York.⁴ I think that this kind of guerrilla art could spread *hilaritas* in Brooklyn, but it could also confirm to Trump supporters that elites want to pee on him and them.

Connolly’s main argument, and one that he has been making his whole illustrious career, is that the left needs to combine respect for diversity along multiple registers while working to redistribute resources so that different ways of life have a chance to flourish. Contrary to Democrats who emphasize an

identity politics at ease with neoliberalism, Connolly suggests that “a cultural ethos of egalitarianism with respect to income, job security, education prospects, retirement opportunities, and cultural dignity must be injected deeply into democratic pluralism if it is both to thrive and to provide the most effective antidote against a hostile fascist takeover” (Connolly 2017, xxiii). Connolly does not think that Trump support runs too deep. If Democrats propose good policies that benefit the working class – including increases to the minimum wage, a single-payer health system, and stronger unions – then they will exit the Trump crazy train. He doesn’t mention this fact, but it’s important to remember that 9.2 percent of Obama voters ended up voting for Trump (Cohn 2017). Democrats need to win them back.

Spectres of Fascism and *Aspirational Fascism* both do an excellent job diagnosing the current political dynamic in India and the United States, exploring the causes of fascistic appeals to core constituencies of the ruling parties, and identifying the ways that Trump and Modi, the Republican Party and the BJP, cultivate subjectivities that live within neoliberalism but that can explode into acts of illegality and violence. If there is a grid here (Left/Right, Policy/Bodily Practices), one of the quadrants is nearly empty: the bodily techniques that people can do before and outside of politics to cultivate a pluralistic egalitarian disposition. In *Aspirational Fascism*, Connolly alludes to local initiatives to rebuild bikes, volunteer efforts to place solar panels on the roofs of low-income families, and farmers markets (Connolly 2017, 112). All of these are good, but I would like to learn more about what micropolitical actions could change Trump supporters back to Obama supporters. Likewise, I would like to ask Ajay Gudavarthy about what can be done to lessen the emotional appeal of Hindutva to the OBCs. Will it take charismatic actors, religious conversions, or “love marriages” between people of different castes and religions?

If people are going to derail fascism over the long haul, then societies will need to change how they cultivate political sensibilities. But this will be difficult when neoliberals and hard right populists control governments, schools, businesses, and other corners of social life. Be that as it may, leftists need to start making headway on the micropolitical question as best they can.

Notes

- ¹ In *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, Jason Stanley identifies patterns in how fascists fabricate a mythic past, employ propaganda, are anti-intellectual, insist that they are the real victims, express sexual anxiety, and dismantle unions (Stanley 2018). However, Stanley cites no Frankfurt School authors who wrote on fascism as it was unfolding, offers glib readings of authors such as J.S. Mill and James Madison, and relies heavily on stories that have gone viral on social media. Stanley also ignores

the warning that calling opponents fascist can confirm that the speaker is partisan and has lost all perspective.

2 In the stage of primitive accumulation, in its imperialistic ventures, in its policing of the slums, capitalism is incredibly violent. My point is that in a modern capitalist economy, the wealthy do not want to see shooting or beating in the streets.

3 My step-father shares a story of attending Harvard football games where the crowd would cheer whenever Yale had the ball: “Repel them! Repel them! Make them relinquish the ball!” The joke is that football is a game for raucous, vulgar cheering, a chance, in Freud’s terms, to lose one’s ego in the crowd, not use big words.

4 Ajay Gudavarthy shared this story with me, and I am sharing my concerns about it.

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