

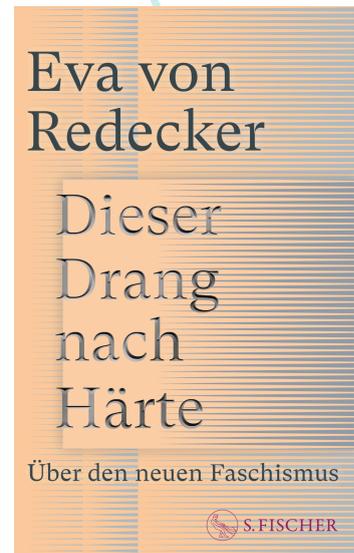
Eva von Redecker

The New Fascism

Entitlement and the Urge to Destroy

March 2026 . 272 pages

**Eva von Redecker's groundbreaking analysis
of fascism**



There is a shift to the right around the world, with authoritarian forces gaining power and influence everywhere. And yet the ever-present analogies to the Nazi era come to nothing: contemporary fascism has taken on a new form that is not easy to recognize and even more difficult to explain.

In Redecker's groundbreaking analysis, its diffuse nature takes shape - and becomes vulnerable. She locates its core in the invocation of an unconditional claim to possession, defended at all costs. An enlightening and rebellious book that contrasts solidarity with the prevailing harshness of our times.

"The core of fascism is an unleashed logic of property. Its counterparts are not people, but things; its enemies are not opponents, but thieves."



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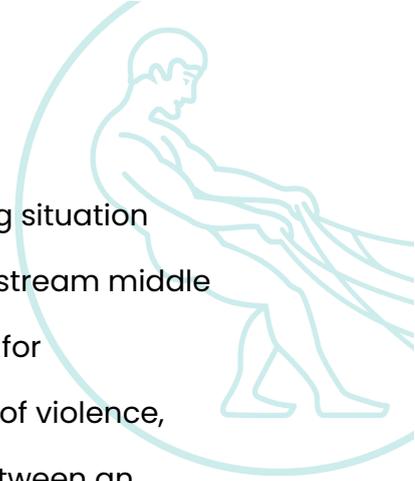
Eva von Redecker, born in 1982, is a philosopher and freelance author. After periods spent at Humboldt University, Cambridge University, University of Verona and the New School for Social Research in New York, she now writes articles for publications including *Die Zeit*. Eva von Redecker's work focuses on critical theory, feminism, and critiques of capitalism. Her most recent publications are *Revolution for Life* (2020) and *The Freedom to Stay* (2023; English translation published by Polity). She also provided the foreword to the German anniversary edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Exposé



What is it about?

- Across the world, right-wing forces are gaining ground. Germany, too, is at an authoritarian tipping point. The rise of the AfD has been met with bewilderment and outrage, along with incomprehension.
- When analysing the new fascism, the typical comparisons with the Nazi era are only of limited help: on the one hand, the shift to the right can be observed in almost all (neo)liberal democracies, and at the same time the right are making use of these analogies themselves (by talking about “feminazis” or “totalitarian EU bureaucracy,” for example). However, a memory culture that forbids any such analogy leads to a paralysis that also doesn’t help us further. It seems as if the language that we need in order to understand and criticise authoritarian movements has broken down.
- In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, analysing fascism is a philosophical task that requires us to understand the overall context and develop a framework of language and knowledge that can guide us – only then can we recognise the connections between tendencies that seem very disparate (Argentinian anarcho-capitalism, Putin’s imperialism, Hindu nationalism, the Sweden Democrats, the AfD, the alt-right, the SVP in Switzerland, Rassemblement National, etc). This leads us to the fundamental questions: What is fascism? How has it changed? And why is it so successful today?
- What unifies the neofascist project at its core is the invocation of an exclusive claim to ownership, expressed in the mode of self-defence and the defence of freedom. This claim results in the oppression of racialised others at the external borders, and of feminised others within the state, while also finding expression in an exploitative relationship with nature (cf. Musk and Weidel on energy politics).



- The success of the AfD can be explained by the fact that the existing situation supports this worldview – even for the “middle of society,” or the mainstream middle class. This can be seen in the continuities between the individual fight for self-actualisation that is normal in neoliberalism and the glorification of violence, between restrictive asylum policies and talk of a “great exchange,” between an elevated level of consumption and climate denial.
- Critical Theory is concerned precisely with these transitions between liberal normality and unbridled fascism. Thus, Eva von Redecker’s analysis refers to Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt’s interpretations of Nazi domination and the policy of extermination, and develops this further in response to today’s conditions (such as the climate catastrophe).
- For Redecker, today’s fascist mobilisation emanates from the possessive individual that has been destabilised by its loss of the world. This individual compensates for its real and fantasised losses through “phantom possession” (white supremacy, ethno-nationalism, patriarchy, burning fossil fuels), which in turn must be protected against countless actors (leading to antisemitism, caricatures of a “gender ideology,” demonisation of (people viewed as) migrants as “Muslim terrorists,” conspiracy stories about the “deep state”).

How is it presented?

- The philosopher Eva von Redecker has been studying authoritarianism and fascism intensively for years. Her new book combines key insights from this work with ideas about the current situation (expertise and her own theory of fascism, including terminology that plays a role in her other works, such as phantom possession).
- The book combines theory with narrative elements.

Sample Translation: Lucy Duggan

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Contents

Selling Off the Symbols, or Why We Need a Concept of Fascism

Land of Non-Simultaneity

Energy of the End-Times

“BUT IF YOU DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT CAPITALISM...”

The Untimely Time after Neoliberalism

Liberalism Breaking to the Right

Locked In and Locked Out, or the Tyranny of No One

How Technofascism Trades on Mindlessness

Projection and Scorn: The Soul of Fascism

The Possessive Character and its Ideologies of Lust

No Place to Stay: The Fascist Climate as a Force of Nature

Remembrance and Counterstrategies

Acknowledgements

Notes

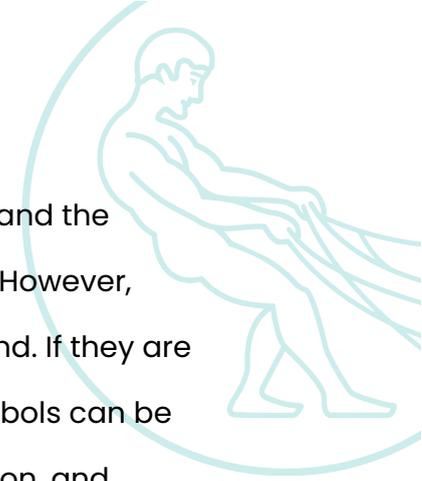


Selling Off the Symbols, or Why We Need a Concept of Fascism

At the Havelberg horse market, horses are really still bought and sold, in some cases even in the old-fashioned way: a handshake seals the deal, and the horse is sold as seen. That is unusual, particularly since a new EU directive, introduced in 2019, states that selling horses is subject to the same warranty conditions as the sale of vehicles. For two years, buyers may have the right to claim their money back. If the animal becomes lame during this time, meaning that it is “broken,” this is attributed to an accident when it was a foal, which represents a substantial uncertainty in the sale. The horses sold here in Havelberg, in the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, are not of the highest calibre, meaning that their sellers do not have to protect themselves too carefully from legal claims. They are more likely to be bought for recreational riding, and they cost less than the x-ray scans that are now standard before the transfer of more sought-after animals for breeding and sport.

Mainly, though, the horse market is a country fair. There are snack stands, music, and a huge flea-market, spread out across several festival fields. Many of the stalls sell military memorabilia: helmets, boots, belts, and even – very rarely – the occasional black leather coat worn by the SS. There are also enamelled signs with rules or police orders: “Looters will be shot.” In rusty metal boxes lined with cloth, there are heaps of insignia and medals made of slightly tarnished copper. Most of them are adorned with square blue plasters.

In Germany, displaying unambiguous Nazi symbols – the SS runes and the swastika – is illegal according to paragraph 96a of the legal code. However, owning such objects is permitted, as is trading in them second-hand. If they are appropriately contextualised, as in textbooks or museums, the symbols can be shown. The sellers do not want to lay themselves open to prosecution, and perhaps they also want to emphasise that they are only concerned with “old things” and not with the message of such objects, which might perhaps have present-day implications.



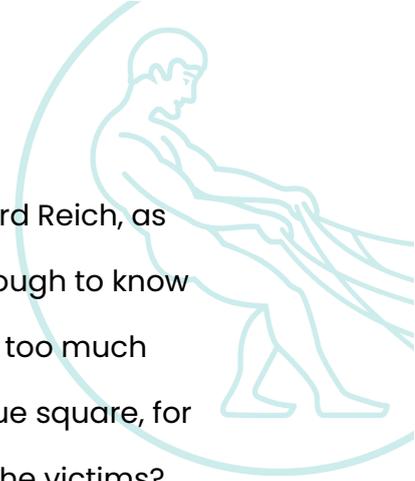
I can't stop thinking about those blue plasters, which inevitably emphasise the very thing they are hiding. It is not so much that they interest me as concrete symptoms of the shift to the right. You don't need Nazi memorabilia to see that shift. And contrary to one German fixation, it is not only taking place at the flea markets of rural East Germany. By the summer of 2025, radical right-wing parties were in government in seven European countries, and two more had seen right-wing extremists become the strongest party. India, Argentina, Paraguay, El Salvador, Israel, and Turkey are further examples of what Trump's second term is currently demonstrating in the most dramatic manner: in many democracies, there is a prevailing wish for hardline policies and a homogenous population.

What concerns me more is the symbolic character of those insignia covered up by plasters. Is that our present? The old, cold metal, but with a square of a different colour stuck on it? What if fascism itself has managed to remain hidden and survive, and not just some of its props? Are we even able to recognise it? Could it be that we have started to think that representations of the most drastic symbols are the thing itself? While the German state – not alone, but not without gusto – dismantles the right to asylum and weakens the standards of human rights, it seems unimportant to me whether a swastika is covered up at a flea market. And if the person at the next stall checking for cracks in porcelain cups

“only” has the cross of the *Wehrmacht* – the regular army of the Third Reich, as opposed to the SS – tattooed on the back of his head, that’s still enough to know who he would like to see liquidated. But even that army cross offers too much continuity. What if fascism is now appearing in a new form? As a blue square, for example? Will we notice it, as long as we ourselves are not among the victims? Could it even happen that scraps of the stuff we used to distance ourselves from the Nazi period are suddenly becoming the basis of a relaunched right-wing project?

That is exactly what we’re already seeing. The much-vaunted liberal value of freedom, which was mobilized against both Hitler’s reign of terror and that of Stalin, can now be seen on the glaring blue posters of the AfD (Alternative for Germany). And even the fight against the ideological core of Nazism – antisemitism – can be found as an advertisement for the right: Trump uses it as an excuse to attack the most important educational institutions in his country. When asylum status and cultural funding are to be made dependent on a declaration of support for the state of Israel, the AfD can be heard cheering in the German parliament.

At least from a philosophical point of view, it is not enough to try to gain a better overview merely by pointing to the different political camps. Freedom and the fight against antisemitism remain essential features of the left. When they appear on the opposing side, either we have to welcome them with relief, or prove that they are being distorted by our opponents. But how do we then still know whether something is right-wing, or whether something is even slipping into fascist logics, if the slogans themselves no longer show this? We cannot rely on the idea that we just have to pick away at a plaster to find the unambiguous runes underneath. We need criteria for fascism, criteria that we can apply not only to inherited symbols,



but also to adopted figureheads. That means we need a concept of fascism for the present.

The model of antifascist critique that relies on the idea of “unmasking” fascism, merely seeking isolated echoes of the original from the 1930s, has also become obsolete because it is too easy. We are in the land of the perpetrators. There will always be something to find. And sometimes it seems that every polarised discussion leads to a regress, with all sides landing on Hitler: people start claiming that antivaxxers support euthanasia. Or that former German health minister Lauterbach acts like the infamous Auschwitz doctor Mengele. Either Putin is Hitler, or Ukrainian nationalism is fascist. Pro-Palestine activists are presented as reincarnations of Hitler, yet Israelis are also stylised as Nazis. “Old white man” can be said in such a way that the person being addressed practically seems to be wearing an SS uniform. But angry feminists are themselves referred to as Feminazis. The fossil industry is supposed to be driving us into a Holocaust of hitherto unseen proportions. But the environmental movement is also constantly accused of having totalitarian intentions.

When analogies are over-stretched, they start to lose their anchoring. No one really knows what the ultimate accusation means anymore. At some point, it no longer works: in the middle of an angry tirade, people can shrug and throw in the words, “Fine, call me a Nazi if you like!” And we’re suddenly back at the beginning, having to explain what is so bad about being a Nazi.

The absolute horror, the six million people who died in the Shoah, cannot form a criterion. That is not the pattern, but the horrendous extreme case. If we have to use that as an argument, we have already lost the ground under our feet. We need a notion of fascism that does not start from the ultimate horror, but encompasses the form of politics that made that horror possible. A concept that



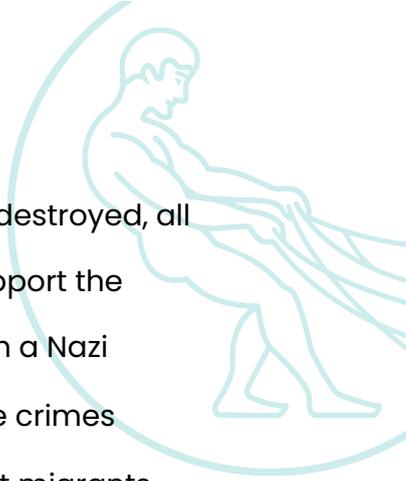
reveals that this form of politics would be bad enough without the corresponding consequences.

After all, the extreme case is not even useful as a criterion, because almost every one of those people who shrug off the accusation of Nazism can say, "What's your problem, it's not like I'm planning to kill six million people." Or at least: "I haven't managed to do it so far."

This kind of denial by pointing out the disanalogy has an unintentional parallel on the side of the self-proclaimed progressives. Every analogy with Nazism can be rejected because it risks relativising the historical events. Doesn't it trivialise the experience of the actual victims of the past if we keep asking whether it's already 1933 or 1939? When Trump's government deletes websites, can we compare that with the book burnings without playing down the latter as a step towards the final solution? Who is even allowed to operate with analogies? The anthropologist Esra Özyürek has collected a range of examples showing that migrants are sharply corrected when they respond to Nazi history by inferring that they themselves would be targets if German history repeated itself.[1] The German process of "coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) becomes shaky if anyone refuses to integrate themselves into it by identifying with the perpetrators. If the pool of victims is not closed, we cannot even be sure that the past is over.

After the 7th of October 2023, alongside the war begun by Israel as a reaction to the Hamas massacre, the conflict intensified over which analogies are admissible, but with a new focus: the human rights concept of genocide.[2] But the topic of economic boycotts and comparisons between the Warsaw Ghetto and Gaza also came under suspicion of negating Jewish suffering and demonising Israel disproportionately, precisely because they touched on experiences of the Holocaust. As if this was about plagiarism rather than political conflicts, talks and





exhibitions were cancelled, articles were rejected, reputations were destroyed, all in the name of *Staatsräson*, the idea that Germany must always support the security and existence of the state of Israel. It was as if Germans with a Nazi background,[3] in particular, were holding onto the copyright for the crimes committed by their grandfathers – defending that copyright against migrants and left-wing Jews. Solidarity in our migration society was irreparably damaged by this wrong-headed politics of memory, which was used to play down crimes in the present. However, loosening the taboos surrounding analogies only helps our political judgment to a limited extent. The logic of outrage easily supplants analysis. And if we only know that something is wrong because it is comparable with Nazism, we have clearly lost all solid concepts of right and justice in politics. At the very moment when we need it most urgently, the language with which we talk about fascism seems to have broken down.

Meanwhile, the AfD has become a major party, and on questions of asylum, social policies, and the military, all the parties in the centre have swung to the right. Is that all we're going to get from our process of "coming to terms with the past"? A plaster, mainly for our own consolation, that peels off again after a while?

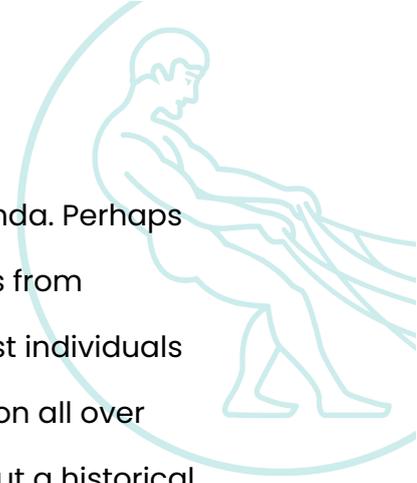
From a philosophical point of view, we can only confront the boom and bust of analogies with a different kind of work: the effort to find useable concepts. But in the case of fascism, it seems particularly difficult to develop clear definitions to make these concepts graspable. Monarchy and democracy can each be defined in half a sentence – the rule of the monarch, or of the demos – but defining fascism, as the Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw once said, is like "trying to nail jelly to the wall." [4] Perhaps it is a much more diffuse phenomenon, or perhaps it is its relative newness that hides its essence from us.



Historically informed research into fascism responds to this by creating lists of features, rather than a fixed definition. These lists also provide a model for how we might discuss analogies in a more meaningful way, namely by emphasising the fact that they have three parts. A comparison is always a comparison of something with something else in a particular respect. The latter, the third part, must be made explicit, if we are not to end up equating things in a grossly simplified way. In what sense, if at all, do historical phenomena resemble those of today? Which aspects are part of the comparison? The Italian cultural theorist, linguist and author Umberto Eco, for example, distils fourteen characteristics that he sees as the basic form of fascism in his 1995 essay “Ur-Fascism.” These include the rejection of the modern, the cult of action, forced unity, machismo, selective populism and newspeak.[5] This list is primarily oriented towards Italian fascism. Antisemitic fantasies of extermination and revenge for a supposedly humiliating national defeat are not centred. The New York historian Robert Paxton, on the other hand, formulates a definition which focuses more strongly on purges and the regaining of greatness. Fascism, he writes, is “a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.”[6]

Such descriptions at a medium level of abstraction balance out the problems that occur when analogies are either over-stretched or become taboo. Nevertheless, they cannot always keep up with the dynamic of their subject. Criteria extracted from history offer points of reference, but they are likely to miss the very focus of a fascist revival. It is, after all, no longer the same world in which people are once

again turning to myths, terrorist state violence, and mass propaganda. Perhaps the myths are now memes, perhaps the selective terror now comes from algorithms rather than police revolvers, perhaps the masses are lost individuals on smartphones. Every entry on the list essentially raises the question all over again of whether we will be able to identify the characteristic without a historical tint. It might be that we don't even notice the heroic cult of strength because it is no longer raving about sacrifices for the community but about re-establishing freedom of speech.



Thus, alongside more detailed comparisons, we also need philosophical help with recognition. We need a concept of fascism – not only a more precise basis for comparison, but a general understanding. The philosopher Jason Stanley defines the fundamental element of fascism as the logic of “an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’” [7] As dangerous as such polarisation can be for democratic exchange, it is too unspecific as a criterion. “Us and them” could also evoke class struggle, popular uprisings against corrupt cynical elites like the ones currently taking place in Serbia – or just a football game.

Thus, in order to find an initial approach to the essence of fascism, there is another object on display at the flea market that seems particularly telling. There it is, leaning against a sawhorse on the dry grass, an old metal sign: “Looters will be shot.”

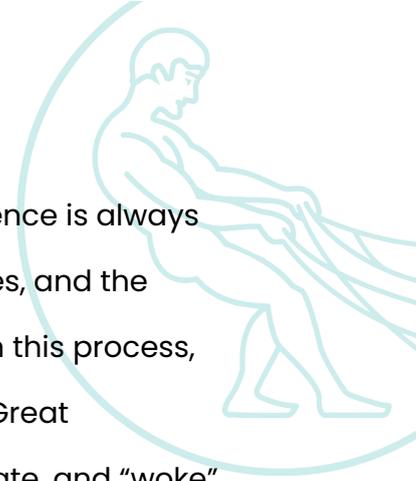
Fascism imagines that such a directive applies. It celebrates a hostility that styles itself as self-defence against looters. Stanley himself adds that the “them” in that idea of “us against them” must be fought without restraint. [8] But fascism is based on an even more specific form of “against them.” The core of fascism is an unbridled logic of ownership. Fascists relate not to people, but to things; their enemies are not opponents, but thieves.

“Them” – those are the ones who attack something that is quasi-property and therefore ought to be liquidated. The quasi-property varies. It is detached from actual, material property, and can therefore become charged with meaning by a whole range of ideological objects. It can be the nation or the family or the “blood of the people.” It can be combustion engines or boiler rooms. Often enough, it is things that certainly ought to be protected, but not in the lifeless form of quasi-property: “the children,” “the German language,” “freedom of speech.”

Fascism is not concerned with protection against real dangers, let alone material losses. It is concerned with protection against “them,” namely the people who are believed capable of doing the worst (the worst usually being the thing one can’t stop thinking about doing oneself). “Them” – that doesn’t just mean people who are somehow different, but people who are abnormally different. Antisocial, workshy, foreign. Gay, woke, green. People who spout nonsense about trans identity and gender. Obviously the communists, if there are still any left, and otherwise: antifa. The Jews keep on coming back, with all their different aliases: globalists, elites, Israelis, intellectuals. And the Muslims waving knives, the hijab girls and the antisemitic terrorist Arabs. “Us against them” – if only. It is, time and again, vigilante justice against looters.

The objects of hatred are cobbled together. Some combinations are very old. One year after Pope Urban II called for the first crusade against the Muslims in 1095, crusaders who had gathered real mass support led pogroms against Jewish communities in what is now the Ruhr region of Germany, killing hundreds. According to the current conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement, there is supposedly a Jewish plan to exchange European populations for Muslim immigrants – this was the motive named by the attacker who targeted a synagogue in Halle in 2019. The fact that the same groups turn up as stereotyped enemies in 2019 and in the Middle Ages should not lead us to make assumptions

about timeless violence. It is the other way round. Because the violence is always rebooted; it always creates new paths that are in step with the times, and the victim status of those who were already marked out is continued. In this process, there is an additional amalgamation with new phantasms: in the “Great Replacement,” feminists are also blamed for the decreasing birth rate, and “woke” ideology is elevated to the level of a powerful censor.



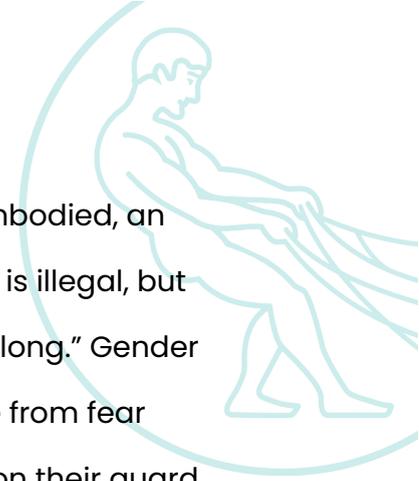
The fascist reconfiguration of antisemitic, anti-Muslim and misogynistic patterns follows a specific modern logic: that of property. In the 11th century, property was not even a generally valid, distinct legal concept. It was only the broader trade in goods in the market societies of the modern age that demanded that all things should be equal as property – horses and cars, houses and fields, trademarks and DNA. Feudal property systems did not include the notion of full disposal, which allows people to destroy what belongs to them. Today’s fascism is inspired by this concept of absolute dominion, which emerged in the course of colonialism and capitalism. This is an obvious connection – fascism is not particularly inventive – because real social domination is already shaped by the logic of property. Racist and patriarchal inequality in the modern era rests on dominion: it means that the lives of some people become either partly or wholly subject to other people’s possessive entitlement. Continuing into the 19th century, the emblematic legal institutions of this system were slavery and marriage under coverture.

The relationships formed by dominion have shaped modern identities so deeply that they could not simply vanish altogether after being legally abolished. The property form lives on, creating presumptuous demands, but also the corresponding caution and vulnerability among those who were previously oppressed. We are experiencing the afterlife of dominion, in which access is no longer legally enshrined, but continues to be maintained in patterns of behaviour and affect. The new version of the outdated claims to ownership is “phantom

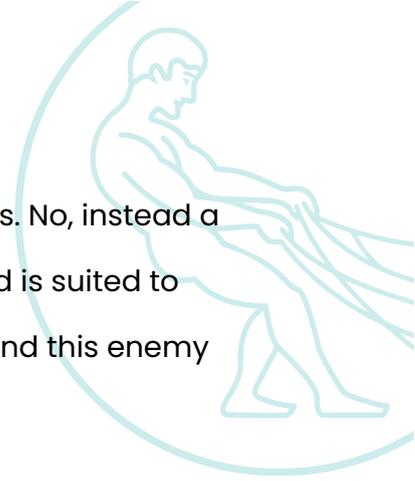
possession.” Phantom possession is simultaneously volatile and embodied, an impulse to take control of what is actually an empty space. Slavery is illegal, but racists continue to presume to decide where non-white people “belong.” Gender equality is affirmed by law, but non-male people are still rarely free from fear when they walk into dark alleyways, and they still often have to be on their guard against the gloomy, offended moods of their male relatives. What some see as equality after domination has been overcome, others see as an unacceptable amputation. The emptiness must be filled; the more the claim lacks an object, the more wildly and haphazardly the will behaves, in order to simulate the status of the owner. There are various reactionary and authoritarian strategies to defend phantom property, including all possible attempts at enclosure: building a wall here, insisting on the generic masculine there. These strategies are not automatically fascist. Defending phantom property can be presented as loving care, as protection of claims and habits that have actually already been eroded. It is only when this effort at creating security is transferred into the frenetic logic of the state of exception that it tips into fascism.

The narrative of the Great Replacement is based, then, on building blocks shaped by phantom possession. In this worldview, women’s fertility is not free, it belongs to the nation or even to the “race.” Rather than a plural demos that rules itself, there is a homogenous collective ruling over a territory as owners. Migrants, too, are racialised and objectified: as people whose permission to stay is decided by others, they are viewed as a kind of mass that can be pushed around, remaining somewhere not of their own volition, but due to the machinations of third parties.

The actual fascist mobilisation emerges in relation to such a phantasm, the entity that supposedly attacks phantom property: Jewish globalists who control masses of humans, or feminists who manipulate women and undermine families. It is never about the multi-layered forces that actually change forms of life and which



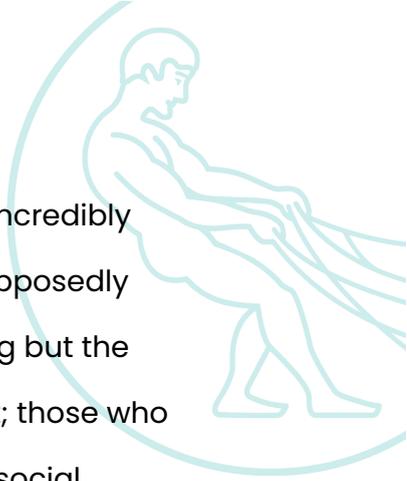
are subject to debate when people advocate conservative positions. No, instead a figure is invented that is as isolated and as abstract as possible and is suited to being an enemy partly because its actual strength is very limited. And this enemy is not to be defeated or suppressed, but entirely annihilated.



Fascism defends phantom property to the point of liquidation. It has an object – the phantom property that must be protected – and an abject: the phantasm that must be obliterated.[9] The phantasm can be a separate group, like the Jews in the case of antisemitism. But it can also be the split-off part of the object, the phantom property: the part that resists or simply proves to be too alive. “Real women” can then continue to be imagined as pliable and willing to reproduce. Because those who resist are no longer women. They are something else, something that must be discarded, man-haters, bull dykes, gender fanatics.

Hyping up an annoyance into a threat of looting makes it possible to cloak one’s own desire for annihilation in complete innocence. The phantom owner distorts the world to fit his impulses, and presents himself as the victim of what he intends to continue suppressing. “Those impelled by blind murderous lust have always seen in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense, and the mightiest empires have experienced their weakest neighbor as an intolerable threat before falling upon him,”[10] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in the 1940s, describing this type of trick mirror. The pose of desperate self-defence already brings about a situation in which the threat of liquidation applies.

Fascism acts in the mode of self-defence, and because it does not defend real property but phantom possession, it can easily talk itself into the idea that looting is already in full swing. The hypnotic longing for Day X, when society falls apart, is essential to today’s fascism, which, after all, does not rule anywhere in a



totalitarian form. Everything back to zero, *tabula rasa*, so that then, incredibly uncreative but also terribly unimpeded, the shrunken form of the supposedly suspended order can be reestablished. "Looters will be shot." Nothing but the charmed circles of property. Those who have something can keep it; those who have nothing will be given nothing. The rawest version of the liberal social contract, the enforcement of property rights as a watershed between the state of exception and order, at the same time constitutes the grammar of the most extreme anti-liberalism. It is not the imposition of the material property order itself that is fascist. There are plenty of reasons to criticise that – it leads to exploitation and inequality – but that is the liberal normal case, not fascism. Essential for fascism is the fact that it makes the act of enforcement permanent, and transfers its excessive dynamic into politics and human relationships. There, new charmed circles are drawn. Through this shift, fascism also becomes immune to the clear evidence that it does not even attempt to address actual problems such as poverty, rising rents, or inflation. That is no longer the point, phantom possession has become more important than material survival, the liquidation of phantasms has priority over everything else. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the indifference of right-wing politics to the social question is explained as follows: "That the demonstration of its economic futility heightened rather than moderated the attraction of the racialist panacea points to its true nature: it does not help human beings but assuages their urge to destroy." [11]

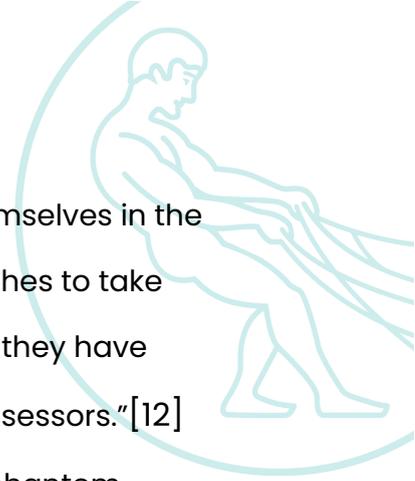
The state of exception which is supposedly already in place rationalises the destructive urge to be harsh. At the same time, however, it satisfies the displaced urge to possess. Those who resist thieves are on the side of the owners, and they suddenly feel that they themselves are no longer without means. In 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre described this as follows in his *Thoughts on the Jewish Question*: "It is in opposing themselves to the Jew that they suddenly become conscious of

being proprietors: in representing the Jew as a robber, they put themselves in the enviable position of people who could be robbed. Since the Jew wishes to take France from them, it follows that France must belong to them. Thus they have chosen antisemitism as a means of establishing their status as possessors.”[12]

Seen like this, the impulse to defend something actually precedes phantom possession. The phantasm of plundering hordes or secret pullers of strings is already present. Only in relation to this can people work themselves up into claims that seem entirely undiminished. My country – except that I can’t feel that right now, because it was stolen from me. Or the “stolen elections” that point to a maximal governing power, which could not unfold properly in the first terms of Trump or Bolsonaro. The authority that believes that it has been “cancelled” is much greater than the brief effect of a statement that goes uncriticised. The AfD in Brandenburg recently even turned country fairs into phantom property: in August 2024, the party demanded in the regional parliament that asylum seekers should be forbidden to take part in them.

Thanks to the phantasm, the desire for the phantom is protected against every possible disappointment. It’s only the troublemakers that make it seem so dull. If I were really fully in charge, alone in the world with the object, then I could enjoy it.

The danger of fascism is that it devotes all the power that it can gain to creating the reality of an emptied world. This is all the more threatening because we are already at the beginning of the sixth mass extinction, which in itself is an effect of past dominion over nature. Fascism seeks to perpetuate that dominion: “Drill, baby, drill.” The image of an empty world seems far removed from the collectivist frenzy of historical fascist mass movements. In the present, however, the urge to destroy is distinguished by the fact that it is mainly anchored at the individual level. The defence of phantom property is carried out to the point of liquidation – but this defence takes place personally, whether as a hateful online post or as an



arson attack. The metal sign being sold at the flea market was originally posted by a state authority, perhaps also a military office or an occupying power. Against marauding soldiers and starving civilians alike, a rudimentary property order was to be enforced: a minimal social contract.

Now the sign can be found among other junk, ready to be bought by unauthorised individuals who find it funny to hang it at the entrance to their private property. A bit more drastic than “Beware of the dog,” but not yet quite in the fantasy world of the *Reichsadler*, the Imperial Eagle that can also be found on enamelled signs nailed to garden fences, announcing that these gardens supposedly belong to the German *Kaiserreich*. But it is precisely in this murky grey area that the sign shifts into the world of vigilante justice. It is the presumptuous claim to sovereignty on the part of the individual, who is not authorised to shoot thieves in Germany (in contrast with the US), let alone order people to be put to death. It is a fantasy of self-defence with a surplus of sovereignty. The sign is brought home, and the state of exception is pocketed; it is no longer the transition to a society that will hopefully soon be peaceful again, peopled by owners who all have equal rights, no, it remains at the point where individuals summarily assert their own omnipotence. And with every such claim, the social contract comes to an end, since that contract not only stipulates that property must be protected, but also that the right to self-defence must be ceded to a governing authority, which is then also obliged to set out equal rights. Fascism breaks with every true equality, not just material equality but also the formal equality on which all liberal legal orders are based. The sign as a historical artefact testifies to this, if it really does come from the Nazi era. In the “Regulation Against National Parasites” of September 1939, parts of regular criminal law within Germany were brought into line with military law. All crimes committed while “exploiting the state of war” could be punished with death by special courts. It was easy to construct such a connection, and it was applied particularly to opportunistic thieves during air



raids, such as people who took pieces of clothing from the rubble. These verdicts particularly affected Eastern European forced workers, who were usually forbidden to enter the air raid shelters.

85 years later, at the antiques stall, the abstract temptation remains, the idea of feeling like an owner who can defend himself or herself, regardless of constitutional law, and regardless of the circumstances. "My life, my rules" is the slogan on one of the black Volkswagens in the Havelberg carpark. Even if it wasn't written in the Gothic font associated with the far right, we would still know: the slogan might once have been something said by hippies, and later on by punks, but now it is a right-wing fantasy, in fact it's at the core of such fantasies. That is the distorted freedom proclaimed by the right. There is the claim to ownership, which is also the foundation of the liberal order, but then there is the closing off against the demand for equality. Sovereignty is not shared, but remains with the owner: my rules.

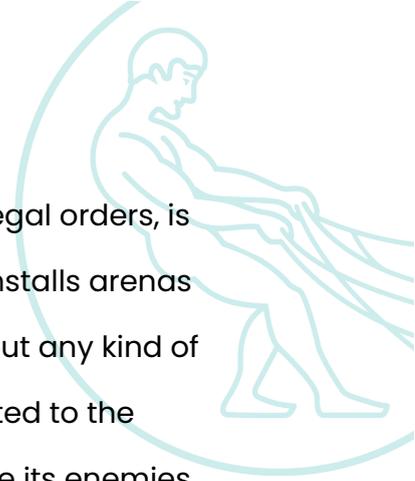
It is this privatisation of sovereignty that constitutes the fundamentally anti-democratic element of right-wing mobilisation. Even if it knows through the popular vote that it has a majority on its side, fascism is undemocratic. It aims for a form of governance that is entirely incompatible with shared power and plural decision-making, a form of governance that is no longer governance but merely domination. The Italian historian Emilio Gentile describes fascism as a sacralisation of politics,^[13] but what defines the core of fascism is that it celebrates the excess of something that is already sacred in bourgeois society: property. It is an excess because absolute disposal is supposed to apply not only to things – at the very moment when we know better than ever that dominion over natural resources goes against the interests of humanity. Ruling through executive orders aims to replace politics with the management of an owner. And it is an excess because precisely the extreme point of modern property, the right



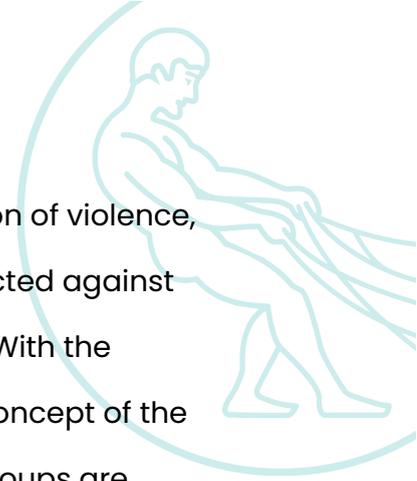
to misuse objects, which is limited in many respects in developed legal orders, is to be savoured to the full. Fascism aims for unbridled dominion; it installs arenas in which the will triumphs and can turn against objectified life without any kind of restraint. Everything that was ever imputed to looters is now permitted to the owners: towards their property. Thus, fascism does not only liquidate its enemies, but often enough also destroys its own much-invoked treasure, phantom property itself, through its supposed defence. The women who are meant to be protected against attacks by “foreigners” should die from pregnancy rather than be allowed an abortion. “The people,” which was supposed to be strengthened, can be sacrificed in a war. The homeland is a military training area, a disposal site, and an industrial area where the warehouses are mainly used for packing rather than production. Another attraction in Havelberg is the stall where people can pay ridiculously small amounts to buy Amazon returns in their original packaging as “surprises.” It seems like a cruel joke: consumption in times when many people can no longer afford anything.

Authoritarian policies stabilise phantom possession. That should not be confused with conservatism, which ought to be about protecting living traditions. There is certainly nothing conservative about the frenetic mobilisation of phantom possession, which outdoes authoritarianism and heads for fascism, because here the stuff of the past is turned into isolated and interchangeable objects which are all just a pretext to switch into lynch mode.

The characteristics of historical fascism emphasised by Umberto Eco, Robert Paxton, and others, can be integrated easily into the formula of the defence of phantom property to the point of liquidation. The presumptuous claim to sovereignty is expressed as a cult of action, it dictates unity, masculinist poses and contempt for weakness. The object, phantom property, is reflected in the fixation on decline and on the victim role, the wish for purity and expansion and a



selective populism in all matters. The worship of war, the glorification of violence, conspiracy theories and the stripping away of democracy are directed against the abject phantasm whose destruction is the aim of the defence. With the emphasis on these three elements – subject, object, abject – the concept of the defence of phantom property can capture more precisely which groups are dragged into the fascist mobilisation in which way. Because the victims may be interchangeable, but they are not arbitrary.



Having a concept of fascism does not simply mean looking with clear eyes at something terrible. It also means being able to sound out the horrors of the present without tending towards exaggeration or one-sidedness. Analogies produce distorted images when their poles have different weights. A more abstract concept, however, can also help to reveal small stirrings of a certain phenomenon. It allows us to locate something even when it is not yet fully developed. And at the same time to keep in view what is still left of the world that is not fascist – even some parts of the fascist himself. Not everything has been signed over to liquidation – not by a long way. A concept of fascism also allows us to see more clearly where its borders are, what it does not encompass, even when the quiet initial phase is over, as is unfortunately the case with the fascism that is now reemerging across the world. A truly general understanding of fascist dynamics is all the more important, for that very reason. Because we must be able to apply the term to the political efforts of the resistance as well. If nothing else, a concept of fascism ought at least to allow us to fight against fascism in a non-fascist way.

Selling Off the Symbols, or Why We Need a Concept of Fascism

[1] Esra Özyürek, *Subcontractors of Guilt. Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2023.

[2] At this point, I see this as the appropriate choice of word. For an explanation of why I reached this conclusion after initially rejecting the term, see Eva von Redecker: "Das G-Wort., in: *Philosophie Magazin*, 03.01 2025, published online at <https://www.philomag.de/artikel/das-g-wort>.

[3] Moshtari Hilal / Sinthujan Varatharajah: *English in Berlin. Exclusions in a Cosmopolitan Society*, Berlin: Wirklichkeit Books 2022, p. 99.

[4] Ian Kershaw: *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914–1949*, New York: Penguin 2016, p. 228.

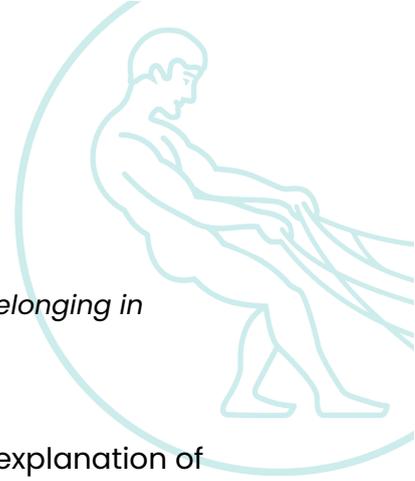
[5] Umberto Eco: *How To Spot a Fascist*, trans. by Alastair McEwen and Richard Dixon, London: Penguin 2020 [1995].

[6] Robert Paxton: *The Anatomy of Fascism*, New York: Knopf 2004, p. 218.

[7] Jason Stanley: *How Fascism Works*, New York: Random House 2020 [2018], p.xxxf.; Stanley also suggests a list of criteria of his own, which can be summarised as follows: myths about the past, propaganda, anti-intellectualism, denial of reality, hierarchies, self-stylisation in a victim role, invocation of law and order, sexual anxiety, romanticisation of a rural heartland, and rejection of welfare systems (ibid.).

[8] Stanley: *Fascism*, p. xiii.

[9] The concept of the "phantasm" as a psychosocial phenomenon has been developed very convincingly by Judith Butler in relation to "gender," in Judith Butler: *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, London: Penguin 2025 [2024], pp. 9–11.





[10] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002), p. 154 [translation altered].

[11] Horkheimer / Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 139.

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre: *Anti-Semite and Jew. An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, trans. by George J. Becker, New York: Schocken, 1976 [1946], p. 17.

[13] Cf. e.g. Emilio Gentile: *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. by Keith Botsford, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1996 [1993].