

Boris Buden

# With the Blow of a Paintbrush: Contemporary Fascism and the Limits of Historical Analogy

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e-flux journal #76 — october 2016 [Boris Buden](#)  
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Is there such thing as contemporary fascism? Our major difficulty in trying to answer this question is that we rely almost exclusively on historical analogy. We are like dogmatic philosophical descriptivists who believe that the meaning of the word “fascism” was defined long ago by a certain set of descriptive features, and we now meticulously explore reality in search of similar ones. While these days reality, for its part, offers ever more socioeconomic, political, and cultural points of resemblance to historical fascism, they never fully converge. As a result we must constantly abstain from naming the condition under which we live “fascist.”

Take the right-wing regimes flourishing in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, in countries like Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia. These regimes legitimate their rule with the most extreme nationalist rhetoric, purge their countries of minorities, wage racism-fueled wars with their neighbors, follow the logic of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) in their cultural policies, actively erase the memory of anti-fascist struggles, rename their streets and squares after notorious fascists and Nazi collaborators from the Second World War, rewrite their school textbooks from a pro-fascist angle ... and yet, all this somehow fails to justify calling these societies fascist. The people living in these countries enjoy many liberal freedoms and democratic rights. They get their information from various independent media sources, vote in democratic elections, and freely choose their parliamentary representatives and governments. These nations are even admitted into the European Union. So our talk of “fascism” in these places remains limited to a vague historical analogy. In light of this, is there any reason to still use the word “fascism” today?

In fact, this kind of comparison can productively enhance our understanding of social reality, but only if we refuse to be led astray by naive optimism, in both the historical and conceptual senses.

When it comes to history, this naive optimism consists in the belief that the worst is behind us. But there is a distinct possibility that what happened less than a century ago in Europe was no more than a fascist proof-of-concept, and that a much worse form of that evil could lie ahead. This rarely occurs to us, which tremendously restricts the value of the analogy. We understand fascism only retrospectively, making us blind to the fascism to come.

The analogy also has a conceptual shortcoming. There is a danger in thinking that an accurate, objective *analysis* of the fascist tendencies in a given society will make us aware of their threat to the very survival of people and society as such. What we have learned from

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In the 1940 movie *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin plays Adenoid Hynkel the ruthless dictator of the tomainian regime, here depicted playing with an inflatable globe.

historical fascism is that those who studied it – who understood fascist ideology and the political and psychological mechanisms of its realization – were not only weak when it came to confronting its challenges. They also failed to recognize its danger in time, even though the fascists never hid their true intentions. The best example was provided by Mussolini in 1922, in his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*: “The democrats of *Il Mondo* want to know our program?” he snarled in response to an inquiry from *Il Mondo*, a liberal newspaper. “It is to break the bones of the democrats of *Il Mondo*.” People were openly told what would happen to them but, for whatever reason they were still unable to prevent it from happening to them. This is to say that when we think about contemporary fascism as analogous to historical fascism, we should focus on the conditions of its subjective misrecognition. In short: it is not a question of what in our social reality resembles fascism from the past, but rather what deceives us into failing to recognize its coming from the future.

This contradiction is clear whenever we are told to take fascism seriously. Quite the contrary: fascism is a phenomenon most likely to be misrecognized by taking it too seriously. One cannot account for it, that is, without accounting for fascism’s intrinsic ridiculousness. This is what any serious analysis of its contemporary forms should consider. Unfortunately, the social sciences are poorly equipped to reflect on social life from the perspective of comedy. Not the arts, however. Think of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*. Or of Hannah Arendt when she took as the motto for *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a few verses from Bertolt Brecht’s famous 1933 poem “O Germany, Pale Mother,” of which one reads: “O Germany – Hearing the speeches that ring from your house, one laughs.”

There is no reason not to laugh while analyzing fascist tendencies in our contemporary societies. Even when it comes to one of the most important topics of such analysis – the class composition and sociopolitical dynamics that give rise to and foster these tendencies – we need not abstain from laughing. Contemporary parallels to the historical burlesques of Hitler and Mussolini make us laugh while simultaneously confirming the looming fascist threat.

## I.

Let us imagine a Don Quixote of our time who is a painter, a male painter of course, and a quite famous one, at least locally. He has already been added to his nation’s art historical canon, admitted to its Academy of Art and Sciences, declared emeritus of the local Faculty of Fine Arts. His oil paintings feature prominently in the

permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Modern Art. His drawings decorate the Parliament building and the living rooms of the local elite. He also enjoys a comfortable life in a villa in the wealthy district of the capital, as well as many forms of cultural and social recognition, from national awards to honorary positions. Local media regularly ask for his opinion on issues other than fine art, so he is also considered a sort of political person. And yet this otherwise successful and prominent person is in fact deeply unhappy. All his glory and even his very identity as an artist miraculously evaporate beyond the boundaries of his national culture. Abroad, in what he calls the “misty bubble” of the global art scene, he is simply a nobody.

However, he does not quietly accept this. He regularly vents his hatred for the international art world, calling it decadent, corrupt, and aesthetically irrelevant, and he accuses his fellow artists, who enjoy a measure of international recognition, of not only having sold their souls to the global art market and its fashionable trends, but also of having betrayed their national cultures. Although he would normally speak with disgust of any sort of artistic performance or activist art, he went so far as to stage a sort of performance of his own. He attended the opening of an international exhibition in the capital wearing a T-shirt with the slogan: “An artist who cannot speak English is still an artist.” He verbally harassed the female curator. The audience didn’t take him seriously and even laughed at him, which is why he is now considering more radical acts like destroying artworks by his internationally recognized colleagues. But his old friend, a local poet – himself deeply disappointed by the marginalization of his national language and its poetry within the globalized culture of a younger generation – strongly advises him against it. Tilting at windmills, says the poet, would make him even more ridiculous.

Our painter, however, is not Don Quixote until he finds his Sancho Panza, that little angry man who lost his job after the factory he worked for moved to another side of the world, and who now, watching his country being flooded by cheap migrant labor, cannot hope for a new one. It is true that he has never been rich and famous like the painter, but now he is even poorer and more irrelevant than ever. This is why, despite all their differences, these men have something strong in common: memories of a better past and the will to restore it. It is a past of which they were the heroes, one as a painter and the other as a worker, two historical figures of a local industrial modernity who perfectly epitomized its social order: above, the cultural elite responsible for the ideological reproduction of society, and

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Frequent flyer jet set artists may recognize the condensation of ice crystals outside the airplane window.

below, the working class, providing its economic reproduction. Both were unified within the political frame of a then more or less welfare nation-state. This was the perfect world of their youth – transparent, manageable, stable, and safe. Not only did they both know their proper place in society and the world as a whole; they were also able to clearly discern the three main dimensions of linear time as one and the same history: yesterday was a bad past, today is a good present, and tomorrow will be a better future. Their life in this world was undoubtedly unique, but it was at the same time universal – in other words, absolutely translatable and commensurable. They lived in their own society, their own nation-state and culture; they spoke their own language, painted their own history of art, and worked in their own Fordist factories. As did, ostensibly, everyone else in the world. And so they shared something crucial, both among themselves and with the whole world: a deep feeling of national belonging – that is, of belonging to an imagined community bound by a common narrative full of great rulers, tragic heroes, glorious events, and priceless cultural achievements. While the painter truly believed in this story, the worker believed that the painter knew best what to believe in.

But one day they realized that this world had gone and that they were both – each in his own particular sphere – left behind. Now they watch helplessly as their language crumbles into a premodern vernacular, their culture gets trashed by their own kids, their jobs are taken away, and their future becomes worse than their past. Yet they haven't given up. They have stayed put, each in his sphere, angry but self-confident because they have survived their attempted deconstruction by the most advanced anti-essentialist theories and by the neoliberal experiments of their "glocal" elites; they have survived precarization, globalization, gentrification, flexibilization, the banks, terrorism, multiculturalism, the European Union, and even the final victory of liberal democracy.

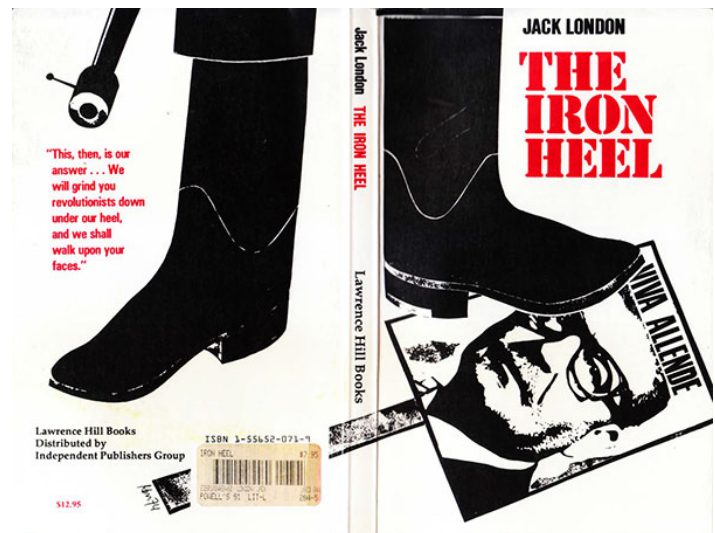
Cervantes's Don Quixote had a lunatic obsession with chivalric romances, and this makes for a nice parallel with our painter's desire for authenticity and his identification with the great heroes of his national culture. Even the former industrial worker playing Sancho Panza might recover some functional identity again, at least culturally. And it seems that they can stay there, each in his particular sphere, forever. Unless someone brings them together.

For this we will need a third figure: a politician promising a better future, if only in the form of a restoration of a better past. In this case, the adventures of our painter and worker won't be any less funny. But they will evoke a

certain sense of real danger. This danger still won't be the danger of fascism, however. For this, a fourth figure is needed, one that will back the politician's promises with the material power – that is, with capital.

In his *The Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism*, Alfred Sohn-Rethel clearly demonstrated how the monopoly forces of a crisis-ridden German capitalism backed the Nazi Party in order to establish a new regime of accumulation that would allow them to transfer their losses to society by means of the state – a bailout, in today's parlance. This is what essentially paved the way for fascist dictatorship. It offered a solution to the economically generated crisis of the system. Thus, what first brought fascism onto the stage of modern history was its ability to manage the weaknesses of its political partners.

If that is so, there is no reason why fascism shouldn't be able to do it again, helping those two pitiful creatures left on the sideline of history by bringing them together and giving them each a role in its own story. Don Quixote will be given the chance to tilt at windmills again, but no longer as the hero of a burlesque. This time the painter will crush the rotten windmills of our democracy ... with a single blow of his paintbrush.



This curious cover design of Jack London's 1908 book *The Iron Heel* references the military coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende.

## II.

Although this historical analogy might successfully laugh us into a proper recognition of the fascist tendencies in our contemporary era, it alone cannot prepare us for fascism's real threat. Something more is needed, a certain purely subjective predisposition.

This is a problem with which George Orwell



dealt long ago. In March 1940, he published a review of the English translation of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in *New English Weekly*.<sup>1</sup> It was the second British edition of the book. The first, which had been published only a year earlier, was edited, as Orwell states, "from a pro-Hitler angle." Thus in 1939 – the year when WWII officially started – Adolf Hitler was still a respectable German politician in Great Britain. In the preface to the second edition, the publisher admits to trying "to tone down the book's ferocity and present Hitler in as kindly a light as possible." The property-owning classes, as Orwell writes, were willing to forgive him almost anything. For the Right – and also for many on the Left – National Socialism was at that time merely a version of Conservatism.

What is even more frightening about this story is that the radical change Hitler's public image would undergo (from a conservative politician to a dangerous fascist) had nothing to do with any change in his ideas. On the contrary! Orwell stresses that by 1939, Hitler's opinions and political aims had hardly changed for more than fifteen years: "a thing that strikes one is the rigidity of his mind, the way in which his world-view doesn't develop." But for Orwell in March 1939 it is already perfectly clear that the Russo-German pact represents no more than an alteration of a timetable. The plan that Hitler laid down in *Mein Kampf* was to smash Russia first, and England afterwards: "But Russia's turn will come ... that, no doubt, is how Hitler sees it." All that is necessary for Orwell to recognize the fascism coming from the future is to read the words of a fascist intent on making this future. There is no need to invest in a rhetoric of the "sober-analysis-of-contemporary-realpolitik" variety. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is for Orwell "the fixed vision of a monomaniac and not likely to be much affected by temporary manoeuvres of power politics."

When it comes to the logic of fascist *realpolitik*, the so-called realist approach is worse than ill-advised, it is complicit. After the war, in spring 1946, Orwell wrote an article about the American philosopher and political theorist James Burnham, who had published multiple books and numerous articles during the course of WWII.<sup>2</sup> In the article, Orwell highlighted Burnham's many failures to predict the real historical unfolding of the war.

In his book *The Managerial Revolution* – written partly during the second half of 1940, when the Germans had overrun Western Europe and were bombing Britain – Burnham prophesied a German victory, a postponement of the Russo-German war until after Britain was defeated, and the subsequent defeat of Russia. Then in a note written for the British edition of the book at the

end of 1941 – when the Germans were in the suburbs of Moscow – Burnham declared that Russia's defeat was inevitable. In a short article written for the *Partisan Review* in 1944 – soon after the signing of a new Russo-Japanese treaty – Burnham predicted that the Soviets would join forces with the Japanese against the United States. Then in the winter of 1944 – when the Red Army was advancing rapidly in Eastern Europe while the Western Allies were still held up in Italy and northern France – Burnham published another *Partisan Review* article predicting that the Russians would conquer the whole world ... and so on. "At each point," writes Orwell, "Burnham is predicting a continuation of the thing that is currently happening." This, for Orwell, represents "a major mental disease," the roots of which lie "partly in cowardice and partly in the worship of power." In each case Burnham was obeying the same instinct: to bow down before the conqueror of the moment and to accept the existing trend as irreversible. Such an attitude toward historical and political events – which, according to Orwell, prevailed among intellectuals at the time – is at the very core of the historically catastrophic misperception of the fascist threat. It shows, for Orwell, the damage done to any sense of reality by the cultivation of what is called "realism," which is but an effect of a total submission of one's own common sense, not so much to the logic of objective reality, but rather to the existing power relations of which this so-called objective reality is a reified expression.

But not all thinking people succumb to such "realism." In contrast to Burnham, Orwell identifies Jack London as an intellectual who was sensitive to the dangers of fascism. Reviewing his 1909 book, *The Iron Heel*, in the spring of 1940, Orwell argues against the opinion, common at the time, that London's novel forecasted the coming of Hitler.<sup>3</sup> For Orwell, it was merely a tale of capitalist oppression. London had accepted the main ideas of Marxism, but only intellectually. Orwell emphasized that, temperamentally, London was very different from the majority of Marxists. "With his love of violence and physical strength, his belief in 'natural aristocracy,' his animal-worship and exaltation of the primitive," Orwell reasoned, London, "had in him what some might fairly call a Fascist strain." Yet far from making London susceptible to fascism, "this probably helped him to understand just how the possessing class would behave when once they were seriously menaced." The writer of this science-fiction novel succeeds exactly where, for Orwell, the majority of Marxists, or as he calls them "Marxian Socialists," have fallen short. They "failed to see any danger in Fascism until they

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themselves were at the gate of the concentration camp.” But Jack London, Orwell is convinced, would not have made the same mistake: “His instincts would have warned him that Hitler was dangerous.”

Returning now to the question of what subjective predispositions are required for a proper recognition of the fascist threat, we might draw a provisional conclusion, one that is sobering and deeply disturbing:

A person who has some sort of affinity toward fascists or shares with them certain character traits will be more likely to properly perceive the danger of fascism than someone who is clearly different from them. Being civilized, tolerant, and reasonable won’t help us much in recognizing the fascist threat. Quite the contrary: a “wild” person will more quickly react to such a threat than a civilized one. Someone with an aggressive, radical character, a sort of extremist, will better deal with fascism than someone who is peaceful, tolerant, and conciliatory.

When it comes to fascism, our intellectual abilities confront their own limits. A purely intellectual attitude toward fascism is a handicap. A rational insight into the “real state of things” is useful only insofar as it prepares the will to openly confront it, even if this will is completely irrational. The same applies to so-called objective political analysis, whether it follows some verified socio-scientific paradigm or is based on critically examined historical experience. Here, knowledge or wisdom are less reliable than instinct or childish naïveté.

We also shouldn’t forget about ordinary cowardice or the opportunistic worship of power. Both are mostly to blame for our blindness toward fascism, if only because they are so common.

And finally, there is the widespread fascination with fascist ideas and visions, even though they are often thoroughly ridiculous. Together with Orwell, one can only laugh at Adolf Hitler’s vision of “a state of 250 million Germans with plenty of ‘living room’ (stretching to Afghanistan or thereabouts), a horrible brainless empire in which, essentially, nothing ever happens except the training of young men for war and the endless breeding of fresh cannon-fodder.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Orwell showed no interest in Hitler’s visions, he was deeply impressed by his image, by the picture of an acutely suffering man, a martyr, Christ crucified, the self-sacrificing hero fighting against impossible odds. “One feels ... that he is fighting against destiny, that he can’t win, and yet that he somehow deserves to,” writes Orwell, openly admitting that he has never been able to dislike Hitler. Yet he

immediately adds: “I have reflected that I would certainly kill him if I could get within reach of him.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, Bertolt Brecht said the same; directly after the verses quoted above, Brecht wrote: “But whoever sees you, reaches for his knife.”

Drawing analogies between contemporary fascism and historical fascism is far from our worst analytic tool for confronting the dangers of today’s crisis-ridden global capitalism. So we might as well make productive use of it, but only insofar as we have another tool at hand – a knife.

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- 1  
Available in George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 2 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968).
- 2  
Ibid., vol. 4.
- 3  
Ibid., vol. 2.
- 4  
Review of *Mein Kampf*.
- 5  
Ibid.