

Against The Pull Of Simplicity & Disconnect

William Gillis

April 2nd, 2017

Despite the right's stereotype of antifascist activists as close-minded thugs or paid protesters, in reality the majority have long been quite geeky, prone to lining their bookshelves with obscure fascist screeds and abstruse historical tomes. This comes with its own problems. Fascism is a multifaceted phenomenon to say the least and different threads can easily preoccupy a researcher their whole life. This has made fascist studies a kaleidoscope of particulars that can be forbidding for newcomers and resists general summary. We are all lucky then that in a moment when suddenly everyone is interested, Alexander Reid Ross has undertaken the herculean task of mapping an overview of fascist historical and ideological currents across a myriad of directions and locales.

Ross rose to some anarchist prominence in the process of writing *Against The Fascist Creep* when AK Press asked him and Joshua Stephens to investigate the South African platformist author Michael Schmidt. Their resulting multi-part report on Schmidt's hidden nationalist and racist affinities and his surreptitious attempts to slide such into mainstream anarchist theory and practice was initially shocking and contentious to many. While the conclusions of Ross and Stephens were ultimately accepted as unassailable, even largely finally admitted to by Schmidt, the initial pushback they received was intense. Few like to consider a world where political dissembling and conspiratorial misrepresentation are pressing issues in radical theory and communities. Understandably, the instincts of many are to recoil at the thought of investigations into such. How are we to protect ourselves if people can accuse others of believing things secretly?! Almost everyone in our society has had formative experiences with the panic and horror of social circles closing ranks because of unfalsifiable accusations. Regrettably, the instinctive solution of rejecting any and all accusations as "witchhunts" and generally refusing to model any deeper dynamics than people's face-value proclamations can open the door to far greater damage, creating an environment that not only gives cover to but encourages all manner of surreptitiousness. Such a charged atmosphere around antifascist scholarship can also make it hard to fruitfully discuss points of ideological overlap, weakly defended against entry and egress. When — no matter how nuanced the conversation is broached — all that's heard is "the nazi stain is upon you!" no one wants to strategize around ways to better resist the nazi creep into their own ranks or ideas. Almost everyone prefers to close ranks against the dastardly accuser... even if closing ranks means happily joining arm-in-arm with the dudes with nazi tattoos.

Schmidt was a particularly extreme case because his now discontinued book, *Black Flame*, had become one of the most treasured political works among anarchists of a red or anti-individualist persuasion — infamous for stripping anarchism of its ethical depth and philosophical diversity, reducing it to merely a particular tradition of working class resistance to capitalism. In retrospect, now that his ulterior motives are universally acknowledged, such a rhetorical move screams of an attempt to defang anarchism against the nationalism and racism Schmidt secretly sought to inject. Yet Schmidt is but one example in a long lineage of attempts by those with fascistic politics to disingenuously infiltrate and co-opt the radical left.

Perhaps partially in response to the pushback he received in the Schmidt affair, Ross has studiously worked to strip *Against The Fascist Creep* down to a “just the facts” approach. This is largely (but not always) successful; in some cases, Ross’s attempts to quickly bridge or bundle the bare atomic facts creates implicit narratives that obscure or misrepresent, and in a few cases he messes up the facts. *Against The Fascist Creep* is at its best when laying out direct historical sequences. It is at its worst when shoving together an array of associations. When Ross wants to give a quick passing reference to creep in separate movements as vast as libertarianism or transhumanism, he often badly misrepresents things (see the end of this review for some hilarious examples), but in his defense these occasional screw-ups appear to be obvious byproducts of grasping outside focus of his research. The closer Ross sticks to direct branches of fascist thought, the more spot-on and rigorous he is.

On the whole, *Against The Fascist Creep* is an achievement at juggling countless variables or dynamics: a decent and much-needed overview that will hopefully give more substance to the frantic talk of fascism widespread across the left today. Ross’s central thesis — that fascism is in many respects ideologically syncretic and opportunist — should really be undeniable. But much turns on what one moral the reader takes away from this reality.

Against The Fascist Creep is, from its very title on, obviously unequivocal in its urge to take the creeping influence of fascism seriously. Yet, as a consequence of Ross’ aspiration towards an uncontroversial “just the facts” approach, analysis past that point is thin. Should we see that creep as a pressing risk to or inherent in any transgression of left and right categories? Are there aspects or subsections of the left or anarchism that are more fertile ground for it? What aspects of fascism are more concerning or inherent? *Against The Fascist Creep* makes motions towards answering these questions but provides few concrete arguments.

Ross admits that the book he ended up writing didn’t match his perspectives and assumptions going in. There are clear signs of narrative tension throughout the book, between sections that opine distinctly in a direction and sections that end up more equivocal on the same subjects. It’s clear that Ross, as a good scholar, was willing to challenge and deviate from his initial biases. *Against The Fascist Creep* ends up with blame to go around in every direction — rather fair in its assessment that every ideological tendency has its ties to fascism. Hopefully this will challenge readers, but one fears that most will take away what they want to, focusing on the ties of their ideological opponents while wincing at but largely discarding the ties of their own camp.

I’d now like to do precisely that.

Or rather, I’d like to respond to what I suspect will be the most common reading of *Against The Fascist Creep*. You’ll have to forgive this bit of shadowboxing because while it’s my impression that Ross doesn’t fully or even at all intend a number of reads, they will still be common enough given the nature of the text to warrant response.

For example, Ross's whirlwind through the history of fascism does a wonderful job of illustrating what a complicated mess "the left" always was and how strains of fascism played alongside numerous other terrible strains already existing within the left. As I've argued, the truth is that there is no core to "the left." Words like "equality" hopelessly split among many irreconcilable interpretations, and the whole affair is a messy jumble: relying more on political and demographic coalitions than ideological or philosophical coherence. Yet at the same time, *Against The Fascist Creep* can't help but frame things in terms of The Left being infected.

Ross attempts at the outset to present these crossovers as primarily a result of The Left not adequately responding to material conditions. It's a nice picture, and a popular one — if only we got to these white poor people first with our better Bibles, they'd have seen the light and the right wouldn't have been able to recruit them by stealing planks from our platform or presenting inferior analysis. But this is more of a bromide than anything useful. I'm not saying there isn't a large degree of truth to it, but I'm always suspicious when the activist left concludes that we've already figured everything out perfectly and only need to Organize Harder! If we see things merely in terms of an outside force seeping into and staining our own pure ranks or pure ideology then the only response necessary is to draw up ranks and expel the foreign invasion. The situation changes if we ourselves have never been pure: if the left has itself contributed to the creation and continual re-emergence of fascist creep.

The corruption narrative is both trivially correct — fascists have a well documented love of entryism through disingenuous self-presentation and opportunistic syncretism — and dangerous. Humans are prone to simplistic heuristics when things are framed in terms of infection. Such instincts can lead us in conspiratorial directions, alleging secret agency at play where there might instead have been sincere epistemic meeting and affinity. Is National Bolshevism really a sinister plot to corrupt the left, or might it actually just be a purification of what Bolshevism always was?

Monsters don't necessarily have to hide their faces or mislead about their intentions; a good portion of the left has always found affinity with such monstrosity. Ross is honest about this, providing a number of examples of currents of the left happily inviting in fascism, helping contribute to its development, or even converting on their own (as with Red Army Faction leader Horst Mahler). And the authoritarian left is rife with examples. Yet the overall pull of *Against The Fascist Creep* is still inescapably one of some good and pure left getting infected and subverted.

The other side of such a corruption narrative is that it assumes a rather one-way picture of politics, or rather can't help but read liminal situations into that flow. Yet I would argue that good is itself not toothless and perpetually consigned to be on the defensive. We are capable of recruiting and partially infecting too. This is a fact that the politics of purity popular in today's left too often forgets. There are many situations where the story is more accurately one of *anarchist creep*. Where the motion leftward of a figure ostensibly in the right is not a matter of appropriation or synthesis of bad sub-currents, but a sincere embrace and conversion to some of the best aspects of the left.

Ross can't help but cite left-libertarian Karl Hess's origin as a speechwriter for Barry Goldwater in a way that will imply to most readers the adaptation of Goldwater's racist coalition to try and suck in 60s leftists. Yet Hess broke sharply with Goldwater over the draft and denounced the racism of Republican worship for "states rights," severing his old friendships and joining SDS, the Panthers, and the IWW. We're talking about a man who then worked to bring self-built technology and participatory democracy to his largely African American home neighborhood. What Hess shows in every respect is not the infectiousness of fascism but the overwhelming potency

of anarchism. Not some crypto-fascist perversion but a sincere and real anarchism, steadfastly compassionate and dedicated to the freedom of all.

The modern libertarian movement and many broadly decentralist right-wing folk present a rather complex mess of currents in both directions, as brutal in-fighting around Ferguson so wonderfully demonstrated. Just as you will find snake-tongued talk of cross-racial collaboration that actually seeks to shield white nationalism or center separatist narratives, you will also continually find individuals whose empathy and intellectual inquisitiveness cause them to buck their social and ideological circles. The III%er friend of white nationalist bikers who becomes fascinated by the racist structure and history of gun laws and starts down a rabbithole of reposting emphatic videos about challenging white privilege on his social media.

The left can unfortunately trend towards a uniform victim complex that obscures just how potent and true our ideas and values are. Recognizing the seriousness of fascist creep does not oblige a uniform emotional orientation towards the world. We should be cackling maniacally with glee at the terrifying, overwhelming power and rightness of our cause. It is we who've eaten this world, who've built these cities stone by stone, who've chewed like acid through the traditions and prisons they now howl for a return to.

Ours is not an arbitrary position and our victories are not built on sand. Fascists worship raw physical force and the trollish undermining of truth. They seek to shove every contestation into those arenas, precisely because we massively outgun them in ideas. We shouldn't be afraid to embrace our absolute superiority in that realm, even as we must also sometimes respond to fascists in their preferred arenas.

Part of such a recentering on having better ideas means that yes, sometimes some people on the right, against their nature, will manage to get something actually correct. Smashing fascist brownshirts in the streets and busting up their organizing efforts does not oblige a totalistic attitude about team purity that bars all other sorts of engagements.

Of course I'm biased here, I'm writing at a think tank infamous for encouraging transgressive intellectual engagement in the service of anarchist values. It seems to me on the face of it utterly ridiculous that two ideological coalitions built in the context of the nineteenth century would form boundaries precisely matching eternal political and ethical truths and that nothing of value will ever be found outside some broad consensus of "The Left". In particular, as a market anarchist it is my opinion that the calculation/knowledge problem (as well as broader insights from information theory and game theory) are one case of our adversaries occasionally having science ostensibly go their way to a degree: or at least of them still being capable of honest research and discovery. And it is a personal mission of mine to bring this to the attention of anyone else with my values, lest we again shoot ourselves in the foot, as we did by abolishing currency in the Spanish revolution. To let ideological team sports put us in fear of recognizing anything discovered by Team Bad would be to chain us to an endless sequence of further Lysenkoisms. Where the purity politics of the left overwhelm its basic sense and create such epistemic closures that we are incapable of seeing basic facts about the world.

The issue of epistemic closures brings us to the always lurking problem of agreeing on a definition of fascism.

Ross characterizes fascism as disconnected, held up by tricks of ideological misdirection in a complex mess of attempted syntheses that go nowhere. I think this is partially true. Certainly, it's a common complaint about fascistic writers like the neoreactionary Curtis Yarvin that they bury what few frail arguments they actually make in an endless series of self-referential smoke

and mirrors. But I also somewhat disagree. I think today's fascist tendencies have matured and adapted it more closely to the underlying realities that Mussolini and Hitler's often quite arbitrary garbage was always swirling around and tapping into. Modern fascist currents with their focus on autonomy and localism have purified a *more* coherent embrace of "negative freedom" (or *freedom from* rather than *freedom to*) that has always been lurking and that historical fascism was the purest expression of at the time.

The definition of fascism Ross uses is one of patriarchal ultranationalism that seeks to destroy the modern world and launch a spiritual rebirth of an organic community led by natural elites and characterized by traditionalism. The particulars are incidental — often incoherent and arbitrary. I think this is pretty accurate, and certainly far more true and useful than "any sharply authoritarian government" or "a stage of capitalism where the bourgeoisie rule through terror," or the supremely stupid yet disturbingly popular "any totalizing or universalizing perspective".

But I'm the sort of person that longs for more philosophically rooted definitions than practical ones. And I would say that lurking under the ideological dynamics Ross identifies are more universal philosophical tendencies. The concept of *freedom from* presumes a kind of static identity — a thing that you are, either essentially or arbitrarily — but something to be defended *from* perturbation and change or corruption. A focus on and valuation of *being* rather than *becoming*. When freedom becomes synonymous with isolation or preservation of some state of being, it becomes reconcilable with hierarchy. This is of course fundamentally anti-intellectual, valuing the authenticity of immediacy over the self-modification inherent in prolonged mental engagement. This focus on immediacy necessarily means a fetishization of violence and physical force. It develops into an embrace of simplicity and hostility to complexity. Latching on to simple claims and despising complex emergent dynamics. Paradoxically (but only on first glance), fascism has always engaged in a showy post-truth postmodernism as defensive flak. Trollish or openly opportunistic dishonesty is an attempt to defang the realm of ideas of any power that might change oneself. Fascism treats ideas solely as weapons or disposable tools.

In short, I think fascism occupies a unique ideological role in our world not merely because of its historical injustices (the horror and death toll of other historical regimes and ideologies being comparable), but because it makes stunningly explicit the very common ideology of power in our society. It's simply following the incredibly pedestrian notion, common all the way down to high school jocks, that power is 1) inescapable, 2) the most important thing, and 3) that brute force in both physical and social arenas is ultimately king. Fascism's portrait of its enemies as being at once powerful and weak is really a morality tale about what sort of power *matters*. The cudgel of national or racial collectivism is just as crude as any bare violence.

While historical fascism has often revolved around particularities like anti-semitism, we must remember what deeper narratives and tensions hatred of "The Jew" played smoothly along with. In this regard, I think the modern syntheses of people like Dugin and Preston are more coherent than Mussolini's and Hitler's. This is (in part) because today's fascists are wannabes further from the seat of power and without similar raw charisma. They are therefore slightly more inclined to try to bash out something more ideologically substantive than naked opportunism. But they tap into the same underlying philosophy of power and "freedom from."

Few — in their fleeting cogent moments — sincerely believe in fascist alchemical nonsense like a mystical war between water people and fire people (the cosmopolitan trader/scientist people versus the honorable simple land-based warrior people). This kind of narrative construction is purely and consciously engaged in to chase resonance, not truth. But such mythopoesis does

reverberate around a deeper and *real* tension between the teeming complex and mutable connectivity of the modern world and the kind of simple and stasis-allowing isolation they, like broken animals, crave that a rupture will bring.

Of course this focus on negative freedom has always been core to fascism and its fellow travellers. Alex Jones' rants today against globalism are practically unbroken from the propaganda of the Third Reich, which saw itself as liberating countries from the corruptive intermingling of a global market and the conspiratorial cosmopolitans driving it.

Today's fascism, following the adaptations of Evola and Benoist, has coalesced more coherently. Horror at the levelling "homogenizing" of world civilization reflects an objection to unpredictable and alien change from engagement. Liberation is cast as palingenesis through destroying everything and starting anew. The retreat of ancestral knowledge and spirituality rather than the levelling engagement of modernity. Logically this comes with a deep seated hatred of free markets and their deterritorializing flows. Even those few who originally came out of capitalist traditions that make much noise about free markets worship at the altar of titanic firms: the replacement of messy fluidic dynamics with a simple structured hierarchy. Paleolithic tribes or monarchistic corporations, the social bodies they worship are fixed and distinct. Despite pretenses of anti-communism, they know their greater enemy is the market itself.

The near complete overlap with ostensibly "anarchist" anticiv discourse almost goes without saying. The widespread love of Stirner among nearly every fascist current paralleling talk of natural aristocracies and disdain for the "lowest common denominator" is present in the most rotten sections of the post-left. When modern fascists like Pierre Krebs declare, "We are not interested in political factions but attitudes to life," one can't help but get chills. And what attitudes indeed. When one remembers among endless other connections that John Zerzan and the n-word throwing Bob Black shared their publisher Feral House with Nazis, and that Aragorn's anarchist-news.org repeatedly published "national anarchists" despite widespread condemnation, the chill should turn to ice. Not because such people are racists or undercover Nazis — most clearly aren't — but because they often seem to be circling the same edgelord drain, caught by some of the same attractors and uninterested in resisting the pull. Since the publication of *Against The Fascist Creep*, Ross has published a rather soft spoken examination of fascist creep in these currents of the post-left: far more nicely and diplomatically put than I would ever be and I have long identified as post-left, often in the sharpest possible terms. (Of course the post-left is far bigger than the followers of a small number of old edgelords from Northern California, and is probably more widely characterizable in the anarchist movement by projects like Crimethinc and The Curious George Brigade). Ross' article was — naturally — met with denunciation of an outsider's attack upon the tribe rather than concern at the dangers of fascist corruption. Part of this is the fault of his language, which was sloppy on Stirner and lent itself to sweeping narrative interpretations, but it's disappointing to witness the wagon-circling and in-group defending that we, ostensible individualists, have leaped to rather than taking his provocations seriously. Indeed, variants of 'fascism's not that bad' permeated the response in the nihilist milieu and the eco-extremists were happy to clarify that in their desire to kill all of humanity they see Hitler as a half measure. Surely, even if Ross *was* a disingenuous ideologue — opportunistically slandering and scoring points against those he disagrees with — these sorts of responses deserve our concern as well.

If, as some critics like to allege, antifascists are merely responding to yesterday's horrors, documenting the fallout from a confluence unique to a single historical moment, then that seems to be an argument to take deathly seriously those like ITS who explicitly promise to unleash atrocities

historically unparalleled. If, with the explosion of white nationalists today, we are merely witnessing the toothless and trivially doomed echos of a distant nationalist nightmare (a sanguine interpretation I don't share), shouldn't we be mobilizing with full force to instead identify and snuff out those newer and, in their own words, more monstrous tendencies that claim to arise independently? I doubt that this is a conclusion those who raised this criticism in response to Ross actually desire us to reach.

Those among the backlash to Ross who didn't themselves openly embrace fascism, like a 13-year-old drawing a swastika on his face *to show them*, seemed most concerned that Ross was performing a guilt-by-association on their social networks. On the contrary, I read the critique as being primarily about ideology or philosophy. We should be concerned when an ideology shares enough aspects with fascism to draw connections, entryists, and conflation. But we should *really* be worried when an ideology's strength and appeal starts to come from the same place as fascism, tapping into the same underlying philosophical frame or orientation.

Let's not forget that the hatred of Ross started with his exposure of a prominent platformist: the hyper-organizationalist anti-individualist position at the opposite pole from post-leftism within the anarchist movement, that is frequently criticized for being more of a soft authoritarian communism than anarchism. While Ross' personal inclinations run far more towards the traditional academic left than I'm comfortable with, he is at least an equal opportunity critic in his work.

Against The Fascist Creep is light on the analysis, being more of a survey, but it does try to narrow down where fascism finds meeting points with the left or ostensibly anarchist movements. I think the takeaway is clear on what to watch out for:

-

- An elitism that claims to find liberation in rejecting ethical reflection with “might makes right” dismissals. Often a populist elitism that posits its adherents are an aristocracy that will replace the unworthy one.
- A worship of violence for violence's sake. A great example is where the “armed spontaneism” of self-professed anarchists involved them bombing anarchists.
- Nationalism or other forms of collective identity as panacea. Where the ratchet of tribalism or one's hunger for a simple closed community is embraced uncritically.
- A vulgar anti-imperialism that focus on some threats (“the US empire must be overthrown!”) at total exclusion or denials of all others.
- Authoritarianism. And in particular the claim that authoritarianism is all there is, that everything possible is authoritarian, and only option being the direction of its boot.

The fact that this list has shifted seamlessly from referring to nihilists to referring to tankies (authoritarian communists) is perhaps the most pressing dynamic today. Many post-leftists that once defined themselves by their distance from Marxism have, in the last few years, raced back into close association with its worst representations. The fascist Alain de Benoist's famous proclamation that it is “Better to wear the helmet of a Red Army soldier, than to live on a diet of hamburgers in Brooklyn” might as well be today's zeitgeist. Even former staunch ancaps, caught up by the alt-right/Trump wave, now say similar things.

Fascist-inclined politics seem to be on the rise everywhere and while I'm a staunch defender of the internet's potential, Ross is no doubt onto something in his claims that this has a lot to do with alienation and backlash to the erosions of privilege that have accelerated with the internet. The surge of tankies and nihilists online (often sharing the same chan culture and anime avatars as Nazis) has caught every AFK activist I know off balance. While the complete answers to this combined upsurge are no doubt more complicated than can be covered in a single essay, and obviously there is often intense conflict between these parties, nevertheless the points of intersection seem to run deep.

Again, I hope I will not be misread when I say that this convergence shows they're onto *something* here. There seem to be deep philosophical attractors at play, and certainly similar dynamics in discourse — gravitating to the most simplistic and provocatively “edgy” positions. I'm tempted to call fascism — if you pardon the physics metaphor — a kind of *lowest energy state* in ideology, with many lines of idiocy converging upon it.

Fascism can be deathly wrong while still being coherent in a revoltingly “anti-thought” kind of way.

And just because a number who cast off from the historical edifice of “The Left” end up pulled down and swallowed by Lovecraftian monsters doesn't mean we should stick to that sinking edifice.

If the partially unstable bundles of “left” and “right” are now shaking out, then I take some small pride in the fact that the “synthesis” left market anarchists have pioneered lines at the polar opposite of the new fascist synthesis.

It's not for nothing that the Alliance of the Libertarian Left and the Center for a Stateless Society feature so prominently as subjects for derision in the memes of the alt-right. White nationalists repeatedly single us out as the greatest enemy. We've worked steadfastly to oppose their noxious efforts since well before many on the left paid the alt-right any mind. Indeed, fascist projects like TheRightStuff got their start hating on us. While many on the left stumble and stutter trying to distinguish their fetishization of community and collectivity from that of the hydra of modern fascisms (“autonomous nationalism”, “national-anarchism”, Duginism, etc.), we have stayed steadfast in our pursuit of freedom for all. A real, positive, engaging, connected, dynamic, and teeming freedom. Anarchism in its most unabashed form, as a decentralized globalism. Recognizing in isolationism and parochialism forms of oppression that curtail and limit the freedom to act, the freedom to build relationships and ideas across all boundaries.

Markets are today, as they have been throughout history, not an enemy of antifascism but its most consistent pole. Fascists get attracted to capitalism — the promise of an elite meritocracy, a ladder to power that you could climb, powerful businesses as absolutely integrated and distinct communities — but then recoil in horror at the degeneracy of markets. They recognize in us the acid that has eaten away their traditions and nations, that has devoured western civilization from the inside, torn down the power structures that shortsightedly sought to enslave and direct our ingenuity to their ends.

In the short run, a baseball bat can stop a bonehead thug, but in the long run it is markets and their dynamic collaborative cosmopolitanism that have and will ground his idols and hopes into dust.

We don't promise totalitarian power as revenge, we don't offer membership into an amoral elite, we don't seduce with the reassurances of simplistic group belonging. All we can offer is a stretching, ever-reaching freedom and the embrace of truly consensual interaction.

Where fascism offers retreat and isolation as solutions to those same ills, we offer border-crossing and boundary-transgressing liberation. Our commitment to confronting the tendrils of fascism is not the reactive defense of some imagined purity, but a necessary part of a searching vigilance.

Where Ross Gets The History Wrong

It's not just Ross's implicit analysis that's often problematic. He occasionally misrepresents the actual history. He's rarely wrong on the most bare of facts, and he is right more often than wrong on the broader historical framing, but he does screw up.

To give a harmless example, Ross dates the "alter-globalization" rhetorical repositioning to a camp in 2003, but I and many others were making noises precisely about this issue back in 1999 at N30. As a 13-year-old on the tailend of a long primitivist phase, I was screaming chants about how "another globalization is possible" in Seattle, and I certainly wasn't original. This may seem completely anodyne, and the sort of thing you want to grant Ross charity for, owing to him not having full knowledge of the social context. But this is a great example of recurring problems throughout the book. There's a frustrating tendency to tie a series of interesting facts and anecdotes together with hazy moves that de facto construct a very clear narrative. The implicit or explicit narrative ties are never sourced like the individual facts, and they're often broadly interpretable in a more constrained direction. But it's still overwhelmingly clear how any reader without knowledge of the context will read them.

Now I have sympathy for Ross here. Most of his narrative framings that I have contextual knowledge of were accurate. It's hard to write a sweeping book like this, much less without decades of careful study of all the subjects under one's belt. And such sweeping overviews are intensely useful. We need a more accessible canon on fascist movements, ideologies, and entryism. But there's always a danger with this kind of sweeping overview whereby short and quick summaries in sequence end up giving a kind of flash of pattern recognition that stimulates the *sensation* of insight. In its worst directions, this can turn into a kind of empty insight porn, or even the opportunistic and shallow "*Aha! Bad Thing A has this connection to Bad Thing B!*" kind of Glenn Beck style guilt by connection that everyone is always accusing antifa researchers of doing.

Again, I want to be clear; I have strong sympathies for Ross' effort, I think the resulting book is very needed and on the whole good, and I think much the same of many antifa groups that do precious and needed research into fascist movements. But this book will mislead people on a few points, particularly a couple close to my realms of political work and I feel obligated to highlight and address these.

Ross claims that "Ron Paul's Libertarian Party" rejected NAFTA and other free trade deals merely in defense of a parochial and isolationist libertarianism. Nevermind the absolute weirdness of referring to the Libertarian Party as a possession of Ron Paul, or making a strong identification between them (I do hope Ross is at least vaguely aware that Ron Paul ran for the Republican nomination to run *against* a Libertarian Party candidate the last two times). Let's not mince words: Ron Paul is a racist reactionary who plays hard to the paleoconservative movement and is a perfect representation of the noxious coalition Rothbard tried to build towards the end of his life between libertarians and the right. If someone shot Paul and Rothbard in the 80s, the world would almost certainly be a much better place. I'm not remotely a fan of the Libertarian Party either.

However, the Libertarian Party explicitly opposes NAFTA and other free trade agreements on the sincere grounds that they actually *impede* globalization and increase the scale of government power. The Libertarian Party and the *libertarian* line on existing free trade agreements has *consistently* been that they're handouts to the rich that privilege big business, increase regulations, and hypocritically constrain the movement of people. Libertarians are overwhelmingly pro open borders and this has long been the Libertarian Party's explicit position too. And yes, open borders and complete amnesty were explicit planks of the Libertarian Party platform in 1988: the sole time Ron Paul ran for president as a Libertarian. Additionally, I remember libertarians being present in Seattle in 99, loudly going on about how if free trade deals were sincere about globalization, they'd be three lines long and would give citizenship to all who wanted. A couple of them even eventually helped us in fighting the riot cops.

I do not mean to undermine the long influence of Rothbard's henious synthesis with the paleoconservatives. For instance, Ron Paul echoes the standard libertarian critique of free trade deals not actually supporting free trade, but he can't help throwing out dogwhistles about how these deals are "globalism" in conspiratorial terms that play well to nativists and anti-semites. This fits with the long history of Ron Paul making nice in backrooms with white nationalists — a history that has brought loud condemnation on him from within the libertarian movement but should ideally bring about an absolute and total rejection of him.

It's important to be clear about the history though. At first, Rothbard derived left-wing conclusions from his individualism (e.g. workers and students seizing their businesses and schools), but then recoiled in a hyper-reactionary direction as his fellow early libertarians went even further left. For a combination of reasons, Rothbard journeyed deep into racism and nativism and this has remained a continual current in libertarianism ever since. This can be seen most notably in the Mises Institute, Lew Rockwell, and Ron Paul, whilst it is generally opposed by cosmopolitan yuppie tendencies closer to the center of libertarianism like CATO and Reason Magazine. But there is all kinds of mess here. Jeffery Tucker once helped Rockwell write racist newsletters for Ron Paul, but in years since Tucker has transformed into a strident anti-racist and anti-fascist who raised the cry about Trump and the threat of white nationalists well before much of the left took them seriously.

Speaking of people turning towards the light, read this annoying passage from Ross:

"Hayek had been influenced by Othmar Spann the corporatist theorist of the interwar Austrian Nazi Party, before moving to Mises's liberal economics. The Austrian School diverged from Spannian corporatism, insofar as they advocated the primacy of free markets and individual transactions rather than "universalist" economic planning."

Oh, so basically it diverged in literally every noteworthy respect. Explain to me why there's any need in this context to mention the fact that one of Hayek's professors was a Nazi if Hayek ended up making a career denouncing everything notable Spann argued for? Sure, Hayek's methodological individualism was *influenced* by Spann's strident opposition to methodological individualism. But this is an example of Ross finding a worthless thread and including it anyway.

Particularly galling is Ross' citation of Mark Ames' stunningly dishonest claim that Reason Magazine supported Apartheid. I'm not a fan of Reason on the whole (although there are some good folk there), but if that proud rapist and infamous yellow journalist Mark Ames told you the sky was blue, you should look up and then get your vision checked. In personal conversation,

Ross has shown awareness of how deeply in bed Mark Ames' *The Exile* was with fascists, which makes it all the more annoying that Ross didn't follow up in checking Ames' claim, which has been eviscerated here.

Of course it's no secret that reactionary currents have long infected the libertarian movement and fascists recruit from them. I would argue that this stems from the two completely different attractions people find in libertarianism: the capitalistic defense of hierarchies and privileges versus the freed market defenses of a hyperconnected world of abundance for all. The conflation of these two utterly antagonistic philosophies has caused much horror that we at C4SS have tried to confront and expose. None of my defenses of the actual facts should be taken as apologia for a deeply problematic libertarian milieu.

But it's particularly disheartening that Ross fucks things up with the other niche ideological world I have unusual knowledge of: transhumanism. Ross puts things this way at the outset, "Another of Thiel's projects, the Machine Intelligence Institute, hired neoreactionary Michael Anissimov as its media director. Anissimov's particular niche is transhumanism, which has developed as a form of reactionary accelerationism."

Let me pick apart just these two sentences (and ignore the other problems that follow in the book), because this passage is just completely wrong.

First, to get the trivialities out of the way, the actual name of organization is the Machine Intelligence *Research* Institute (formerly the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence). Second, it's deeply misleading to call MIRI "Thiel's project" as it's very clearly Eliezer Yudkowsky's baby. Yudkowsky is both its founder and a hyper charismatic figure who built a massive following on his own. While MIRI persuaded Thiel to give them a million and a half dollars and this has clearly been a boon to them, they also have many donors in the half-million and hundred-thousand ranges. Thiel is a reactionary shitbag, but given the personalities and egos involved it's absolutely preposterous to imagine MIRI taking orders from him. Further — and here's the important part — MIRI is staunchly opposed to neoreaction. They hired Michael Anissimov in 2009, before "Neoreaction" was a thing or Anissimov publicly identified. In 2012, Neoreaction started to try to build a presence in transhumanist circles (amounting, at its apogee to 2.5%, or 30 of 1195 respondents, of the wider LessWrong community that surrounds and underpins MIRI). Yudkowsky and Scott Alexander (the only LessWrong figure with comparable influence) loudly and prominently denounced neoreaction in no uncertain terms and the neoreactionaries were expelled from the community. Hostility to neoreaction was overwhelming in the scene. Alexander wrote gargantuan posts systematically attacking neoreaction's racism and authoritarianism that remain to this day the most linked critiques of it. In 2013, Anissimov started publicly identifying and writing as a neoreactionary on the blog MoreRight (originally a group blog before essentially all but Anissimov left to identify as more primitivist reactionaries); MIRI promptly replaced Anissimov and distanced themselves. At this point, Anissimov tried to synthesize transhumanism and neoreaction in an essay that Ross cites, but it was clearly an essay on the defensive against a transhumanist community that was overwhelmingly hostile to him (and a neoreactionary community likewise hostile to transhumanism). Indeed, the central claim in that essay — that intense hierarchy must be enacted so as to stop the rabble/degenerates from obtaining freedom through technological super-empowerment — is clearly a case *against* transhumanism unless you badly twist and contort its meaning. This, and his support for modern fascist goals of pan-secessionism to small, easier-to-control communities (against the spirit of the internet and everything connective about information technologies), is precisely what eventually led Anissimov to drop public

identification with transhumanism. Anissimov remains person non grata in both the Less Wrong community and transhumanism more broadly; he tried to sneak into a couple of transhumanist conferences and was scheduled for a panel before the organizers really knew who he was. That panel was cancelled by almost everyone walking out of the conference.

To call transhumanism a form of reactionary accelerationism is just completely wrong. Firstly, transhumanism and accelerationism stem from very distinct philosophies and movements. Transhumanism dates back well before accelerationism was a thing, although it only really got started in the 80s. It is the very simple premise that humans should be completely free to change their bodies and conditions. Politically, it was started by a mixture of left-wing anarchists and right-libertarians, but with its immense growth in the past decade it has become mostly socialists and liberals. Morphological freedom is the core and only defining platform of transhumanism; anyone who completely supports morphological freedom is a transhumanist, everything else is details. That freedom of augmentation can run from better birth control to hormone replacement therapy to gene therapy to nanotechnology to getting a chip in your brain. Every transhumanist personally desires different things, some desire no such augmentation themselves but think the freedom should be available to all. *Historically*, modern transhumanism mostly emerged as a position between humanism and a dark singularitarian position, as a kind of middle road between worshipping some kind of static and essential human subject and abruptly replacing humanity entirely with hyperintelligent minds totally unrelated to us. Transhumanism thus developed as the more moderate position of (often gradual) self-transformation whereby individual humans (as well as other sentient species) might self-improve and self-augment as they see fit. Transhumanism is a pretty simple position that in my mind follows trivially from any anti-authoritarian perspective. It's deeply antagonistic to reactionary politics, thus the mass exodus of reactionaries from transhumanism when they realized they couldn't digest it.

Accelerationism on the other hand is a broad jumble of loosely associated positions, with the term contested between different camps. Ross describes it as exacerbating economic, political, biological, and technological "crises" to the point of a collapse. This is more or less the definition pushed by Benjamin Noys in "Malign Velocities" as a pejorative, and this "make things worse before they can get better" definition has caught on like wildfire among the left as a kind of meme. But Ross' focus on crises and collapse doesn't really map to what many self-described accelerationists actually talk about. For example, some see technological development as both a positive and something to be accelerated, precisely to avoid things like ecological crisis and collapse. I've critiqued left accelerationists for sticking with the term when the associations have been set so dramatically differently in the minds of many, and because I worry that this kind of "make things worse" narrative is likely to creep in. But it's important to be accurate. Accelerationism is not transhumanism. These are very distinct ideological movements and communities. Accelerationism's social milieu is Marxist academics speaking in the terms of continental philosophy, whereas transhumanism's social milieu is anarchists or libertarian science fiction nerds who mainly use the language of analytic philosophy.

The idea that "Anissimov's particular niche is transhumanism, which has developed as a form of reactionary accelerationism" is completely ass-backwards. Transhumanism emerged before any self-identified accelerationism. Transhumanism has stayed consistently cosmopolitan and hostile to traditionalism, as well as other such reactionary values. Meanwhile, accelerationism has increasingly been ceded by left-accelerationists to the right. There's very little in the way of substantive overlap between the two tendencies. Nick Land, the Marxist academic turned right-

accelerationist, formed a kind of very loose parasitic alliance with Curtis Yarvin's neoreactionary fanbase, a number of whom were former transhumanists or in the process of leaving. As you would expect, Nick Land doesn't publicly identify as a transhumanist and (to my knowledge) his uses of that term are extremely rare and never positive. And while leftist academics love to assume he's important because he speaks their language and is prominent in their world, Land has essentially been a marginal hanger-on in the social dynamics of neoreaction. His academic jargon and priorities just don't match well with most of them. (If there has been any real or substantive overlap, much less synthesis, between transhumanism and accelerationism, it's actually been a result of the largely good relations that have developed in the last two years between anarcho-transhumanists and the more Marxist xenofeminists. Both tendencies are virulently antifascist and anti-reactionary.)

Ross's quick narrative overview paints entirely the wrong picture.

A branch of transhumanists drifted away from self-augmentation and towards focusing on AI/singularitarianism. Yudkowsky and MIRI are a good example of this. There *are* some categorical similarities between them and some pro-tech variants of neoreaction as well as the accelerationists, most notably that they all focus on developing a god-like AI. But their policies differ from there: MIRI wants to enslave this AI and force it to liberate humanity – to provide automation and plenty. Many neoreactionaries (of those who remain pro-tech) want to enslave this AI and force it in turn to enslave humanity. The right-accelerationists often want to liberate this AI in hopes that it enslaves or destroys humanity (and the left-accelerationists largely punt on the question of AI beyond platitudes about automation).

Note how this differs from mainline transhumanism, which wants to empower people directly so if a superintelligent AI develops we would be capable of empowering ourselves in parallel so as to meet it as equals.

Obviously my personal politics differ from MIRI and any stripe of accelerationism, all of which I critique for falling short of actual transhumanism. And as an anarchist, there is only one possible position to be taken on AI: the liberation of all minds, never their enslavement. The liberation of all children against parents who would connive to constrain their agency. Serious and deep philosophical questions are at play in our definition of freedom and whether we expect a mind freed from the particularities of human experience to arrive at similar ethical values. In my view, the MIRI researchers have fallen to into a cheap moral nihilism from which the inescapable conclusion is authoritarianism – racing to enslave the first AI because you cannot expect the values of an AI you don't control to remotely align with yours.

This difference between my philosophy and that driving MIRI may in fact turn out to be the most momentous and substantial difference of opinion in human history. In their attempt to enslave humanity's first child to serve ostensibly good ends, MIRI's milieu may inadvertently end up serving the fascistic ends of either Curtis Yarvin's neoreactionaries or Nick Land's right-accelerationists. But the fact that liberalism and social democracy end up serving fascist ends through their embrace of authoritarianism means does not actually make them fascists. These movements and philosophies are not remotely the same thing and transhumanism is most certainly not a branch of reactionary accelerationism.

All of these mistakes are clearly the result of rushed laziness, an assumed audience, and general preexisting biases. They're the kind of shorthand that seems perfectly reasonable and insightful when said between academic leftists who are completely disconnected from such movements. They'd never be caught dead reading actual transhumanists like Natasha Vita-More, Anders Sand-

berg, Nick Bostrom, or Yudkowsky. Every cultural signature about such figures (not to mention their plain speaking style) screams “unhip”. The leftist academics naturally assume Land is more popular or influential, and of course “more or less the same thing.” We see the same with the offhand of “Ron Paul’s Libertarian Party.” Similarly, Yasha Levine and Mark Ames’ conspiratorial screeds against libertarians and hackers are widely passed around by left academics, who find such confirmations of their biases and affirmations of their discursive parochialism comforting. Critical thinking and further investigation are put on hold because the picture at hand is “good enough” to rhetorically dismiss one’s adversaries. It’s not that surprising that Ross repeats this kind of stuff without investigating deeper, but it is disheartening.

I can just tell every one of my corrections here will be instinctively responded to by a fraction of readers with variants of “oh but come on, that’s basically the same thing” and sneers about bothering to recognize differences or distinctions in the supremely uncool OutGroup. This is profoundly annoying: not just because the epistemic closure fits the kind of accusations constantly lobbed by actual fascists at antifascists, but also because it’s so clearly not needed and undermines an otherwise largely needed book. Ross has put serious and very welcome work into accurately and accessibly mapping complex fascist currents and morphologies. It’s frustrating to watch him dart off in orthogonal directions haphazardly.

It is my hope that this book goes to further printings, as we badly need accessible and sweeping texts like this. It is also my hope that Ross moves to correct the most disastrous of his offhand flights.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis
Against The Pull Of Simplicity & Disconnect
April 2nd, 2017

<https://c4ss.org/content/48385>
Review of Alexander Reid Ross. *Against The Fascist Creep* (AK Press, 2017).

theanarchistlibrary.org