

Fascism Today: What It Is And How To End It

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There are numerous points in Shane Burley's *Fascism Today: What It Is And How To End It* where I stopped, reread a passage, and with a little bit of shocked relief went "that is entirely accurate!" I don't mean to damn with faint praise. In this last year's stampede of everyone suddenly writing about fascism let's just say that accuracy has broadly diminished. So many people have next to no familiarity with the subjects they try to write about, either missing critical details and context or just going in half-cocked. So it must be said that in this context I found Burley's book studiously and refreshingly boring — in the way that sanity is boring.

Fascism Today, for the most part, operates as a book-length summary of the academic consensus on fascism and a survey of antifascist morphologies. It offers a whirlwind of very brief but meticulously correct summaries, with almost no deviations. It's pretty much a staid textbook for a 101 class; there's not much remotely controversial unless you're the sort to watch a lot of flat earth youtube videos. Burley footnotes the shit out of everything and loses his voice to just step through the expert consensus.

Fascism is palingenetic nationalism. A nationalism that hungers for a cataclysmic and violent return to a mythologized past. Modern fascism is usually anti-capitalist and racist. It can happily exist without a state. It tries to establish essentialist "natural" identities — whether through pseudoscience or mystical narratives — to bind people together in community and discard compassion for outsiders.

Fascism isn't best conceived of as a tool of capitalists or the state, but rather emerges from reactionary forces outside and often hostile to both. It's not a precisely defined ideology but is also not purely a matter of history. And the modern antifascist consensus is one of a Three Way Fight — where the fascistic reactionaries of ISIL or the Traditionalist Workers Party are seen as a distinct enemy, not to be reductionistically folded into our existing battle against the authoritarian establishment.

Yet it somehow now needs to be said that fascism is not a stage of capitalism, fascism is not communism, fascism is not civilization, fascism is not a psychosexual disorder, fascism is not hyper-statism, fascism is not hyper-modernity, fascism is not a distant historical moment in Europe with no timeless ideological content, fascism is not objectivity, fascism is not gay people having rights, fascism is not street violence, fascism is not vegetarianism. I've heard so many people drop so many wingnutty, inane, or ridiculously dated theories of fascism over the last year

— often disingenuously trying to pry apart fascism and nationalism — that I can't recommend Burley's *Fascism Today* strongly enough as a corrective.

If there is a sweeping failing to *Fascism Today* — and I don't think it ultimately counts as one — it's that Burley doesn't take chances making original points. He has one vaguely noteworthy political stance, that antifascism should be broad-based as a *movement*, but he never really develops this in more than the most anodyne fashion. His call for inclusion is itself formulated to avoid repelling or provoking people on any side. But — and maybe this is too much of an insight into my own psyche — if you're not pissing someone off I'm not sure you're really saying anything substantive.

Maybe the few shitbags still going to the mat for ITS will bristle about his brief mention of them. Or those who think nationalism is a-okay when it's "indigenous" will get provoked by his touching on the national-anarchist Vince Rinehart. And I suspect a number of antiquated marxists will throw temper tantrums about very conventional modern analyses like, "if the left wants to effectively oppose fascism it needs to view it as generally separate from the state and capital." But one can't sneeze without pissing such people off.

Pretty much the only personal touch I noticed in *Fascism Today* was Burley giving a relatively large — albeit still brief — space for discussions of antifascist heathenry. I know this is Burley's wheelhouse, but it's weird to see specific antifascist efforts cited there but not in a number of other places when talking about entryism or crossover. Of course, I know *Fascism Today* is meant as a 101 book and not a comprehensive survey, although I maintain that it would be cool to see a more comprehensive book covering all the different antifascist efforts across disparate milieus. In any case, I did find Burley's centering of the "value" of spirituality and faith communities somewhat irritating. He repeatedly makes the standard leftist dodge, claiming that not all variants of faith, identity, and community are reactionary. And while there certainly is a pragmatic point to be made about our priorities given the very real way that lesser variants of such operate as a psychological crutch for many folks under the boot of more pressing oppressions, I think any anarchism that doesn't consciously set itself against all forms of faith and nationalism is doomed from the get-go. Basically, you'll pry "no gods, no masters" from my cold dead hands and I continue to be worried about anything that erodes that cornerstone. Further, while obviously atheism is not a religion per se, it feels weird that Burley goes on about religious entryism and resistance while entirely ducking the intersections of the alt-right with atheism/rationalism as well as resistance efforts within atheist/rationalist milieus.

But this is the sort of slim pickings for objections that *Fascism Today* offers.

It should be high praise that, in a book crammed with few paragraph summaries of incredibly complex subjects, literally the only line I found to be factually misleading or contestable was, "*The violence of the 3%ers is not just rhetoric, and there are numerous examples, including the 2015 shooting of Black Lives Matter activists in Minneapolis.*"

While I certainly don't contest the violence of 3%ers, I find this particular line jarring because everything I'd previously read on Scarsella and his accomplices tied them most strongly to racist chan culture rather than more conventional militia organizing.

Burley cites a passage from Spencer Sunshine that quickly groups 3%er adherents and sympathizers, in turn referencing a *Washington Post* article that broadly speculates on one of the shooter's racist affinities. Specifically, it details how Scarsella met the other attackers through 4chan, noting that the police described him as having "sovereign citizen" views among others, and then lists some of the reactionary shit he liked on his facebook, including the 3%ers page.

This is, as far as I have been able to dig, the sum of his known connection to the group. Scarsella shared confederate and nazi imagery and liked a number of militia pages. He was by all indication a dorky channer nazi playing at being tacticool, which I feel is better framed as saying quite a lot about the horrific lethality of dorky channer nazis.

It's fascinating that Scarsella crossed over from 4chan culture to militia culture to any degree, whether as a casual follower, wannabe, or actual member. But, in the absence of better proof, it stands out as a poor example of 3%er violence. At least on its own. Sunshine gave a longer list of examples of violent people in 3%er orbit that I think establishes a pattern better than the isolated example of Scarsella. I recognize it's not like there's a centralized 3%er membership roster to query against, but when all you've got is a facebook like and there's another documented source of racist motivation it's weak proof.

This imprecision or perhaps unjustified leap regarding Scarsella is worth highlighting because Burley quite rightfully points out later that while antifa groups are usually very precise and professional in their exposes, this stands in stark contrast with "anti-antifa" efforts that think literally anyone who likes a facebook page or shares antifascist memes is a member of an antifa org. And I quote, "individuals in diffuse social networks can appear to them as dedicated participants." Given that Scarsella actually shot people, it's not like he was lacking abstract "commitment," but that's not the same thing as close organizational affiliation or participation.

In any case, I've dwelled on this single phrasing or citation issue for far too long. And it's definitely to Burley's credit that there's nothing more serious to object to in terms of factual claims.

Indeed I raked Alexander Reid Ross a bit over his sloppy inaccuracy when he referred to or tried to summarize libertarians and neoreaction in *Against The Fascist Creep* (errors he said he has changed in the newer print runs), but Burley is accurate and knowledgeable on both. This is, of course, reflective of their varying focuses, Ross on history, Burley more on present-day movements. Still, I was delighted to note Burley's accuracy and fairness.

However, just because Burley is highly accurate in his factual claims and disinclined to provocation in his more normative points, just because most of the book is just a survey of the consensus among scholars, doesn't mean there's no non-trivial arguments in *Fascism Today*.

Because my post-leftist individualist ass long found Burley's line about "building antifascism as a mass movement" troubling, I thought I'd end up disagreeing with a fair bit of his prescriptive analysis or commentary. But I agreed with just about everything, finding it all consistently nuanced and attentive to almost every issue and concern. On just about every topic where I worried one or another point would come at the exclusion of another, Burley threaded the needle. Just to give one example, he consistently paints corporate censorship of neonazis in the context of wider activism and social pressures while still nailing the extreme dangers of such hierarchical and centralized internet infrastructure to radicals on our team.

Burley's picture of a "mass movement" in *Fascism Today* looks more like the broad community support apparatuses necessary for specialized antifascist groups to operate. Which is something I surely do not deny.

One framing I do take issue with can be found in the line, "Antifascist work is a piece of the larger mass working-class struggle for survival and progress, and it should come out of the experiences and needs of the class rather than the ideological imposition of experienced organizers."

Charitably, I agree that antifascist work should be situated within an ecosystem of struggle for a better world, and that it should remain engaged with such social context rather than being

exclusively controlled by insular elite activists. However. I take issue with so many of Burley's specific word choices in that sentence. Most notably the worship of "mass" and the centering and idolization of "working-class." There is nothing particularly valorous or even strategic about the fetishization of organizing large numbers of people, nor is the "working-class" the only source of valid resistance. We're not interested in democracy's legitimization through numbers, we're instead interested in anarchy's liberation through dexterity. Personally, I'll take the lumpen over the proletariat any day, but also let's not pretend that a sizable fraction of activists and organizers don't come from strata above the working class and their insights, instincts, experiences, and work, while sometimes annoyingly shaped by that privilege, are no less valuable.

The horrors of class society and the construction and subjugation of the working class specifically are things anarchism absolutely must address. But I am hostile to any attempts to reduce our sweeping efforts to a class struggle or our philosophy to merely a class vantage point. Such Black Flame style reduction would do violence to just about everything of substance or potency in anarchism.

More specifically, *why should* all antifascist efforts position themselves as working class? Why should we specifically ally with socialists but not with liberals or libertarians? All three suck, all three will fuck over your organizing if you're not careful, but all three can sometimes — with the right precautions — be useful allies.

Fuck it. Burley cites a lot of the Twin Cities IWW General Defense Committee's work, but one thing he astonishingly leaves out is their successful collaboration with GOP members to get neonazis kicked from a Republican rally, one of the sharpest defeats of alt-right entryism in the last year. Obviously, reactionaries of any stripe — including most socialists, liberals, and libertarians — are not serious long-term allies, and we must be mindful of our ultimate endgame. But I'll fucking work with a goddamn William F Buckley if it helps systematically undermine the Birch Society.

This kind of pragmatism sits poorly with Burley's call to build a patchwork of analyses and diverse communities with varying focuses and tactics but some measure of shared values and aspirations. Burley does a good job surveying the rich and interrelated ecosystem of projects broadly aligned together against fascism. But when he correctly notes that it's important to think critically about what we allow into that patchwork — giving the example of Deep Green Resistance as something that is obviously reactionary albeit not directly emergent from the right-wing — I'd encourage both more expansive pragmatism and a lot more criticism. There is no very clear boundary between the *good* patchwork and the outside reaction. What we — as anarchists — should instead focus on is our values and then be clear-minded about the pragmatic concessions we make when it's strategic to briefly collaborate with republicans or maoists, just as we should ALSO work to exclude them. I know that Burley is certainly no fan of tankies, but authoritarian communists do constitute a very real and rapidly metastasizing reactionary creep.

One of the problems with the notion of a "movement" is that it inclines us to think of a relatively sharp inside-outside boundary. There are the good people and there are the bad people. Friends and enemies. I would be remiss as an individualist if I didn't point out the dangerous simplifications that such concepts encourage. Most people are friends AND enemies, to varying degrees, in various directions and contexts. In extreme situations like "national anarchists" or ITS the lines we must draw are very clear, but many situations are more complicated.

I'm very much of the "anarchists must stand alone and say what only anarchists can say" tradition. Which is not remotely to suggest that antifascist groups should be stripped of non-

anarchist members, or some kind of starkly partisan litmus test be applied to anarchism. But that, as anarchists, we should focus on the *values* of anarchism, and judge coalitions explicitly in terms of their deviation from these values. Something as abstract as the “working class” is mutable as fuck and a bad starting premise for these kind of considerations.

Of course, I’m being a little unfair and leaping at pet bugaboos. What Burley is primarily focused on by his use of “movement” is a longstanding debate within antifascist discourse between limiting “antifascism” to the very tight and professional small groups doing high-risk work and broadening the mantle of antifascism to a much wider and supportive social context.

Burley is, in fact, constantly attentive to and considerate of more “liberal” perspectives in *Fascism Today* — although these would hardly be conventionally defined as “leftist” or the voice of the “working-class” — precisely because he’s interested in building big expansive support for antifascism. An ecosystem of diverse activism and culture.

Such movement building is of course valid and not at all inherently in tension with the professionalized cells found in the Torch Network, for example. Such antifascist groups never dispute the need for broader community engagement and culture building, and have often led such work. But there are of course still tensions in how exactly the balance plays out. *Fascism Today* would be a more interesting book to me if Burley had tackled the nitty gritty of such open questions and conflicts. But it would also be dramatically less accessible.

Don’t get me wrong, Burley again and again steps up to the plate and hits home runs. The necessity of some less-militant organizations. The importance of free speech and the classic antifa position “we are not opposing the free speech of fascists, what we are opposing is the organizing of fascists.” The absolute necessity of popularizing and making accessible the science that disproves racist pseudoscience. The various complexities of the shift from responding to underground neonazi organizing to more diffuse recruitment of young millennials online. All while detailing ways that militancy has been effective.

After a year that has seemed so utterly topsy-turvy, where I find myself trapped in absurdly disconnected conversations again and again, from all corners — including newly self-made supporters of antifascism — *Fascism Today* is a breath of sanity. It showcases the plumbline consensus of antifascists in a nuanced and detailed way. It’s a great 101 text, but in the process it tiptoes diplomatically around issues that deserve more direct engagement.

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