Introduction: The Returns of Fascism

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This project first began to be conceived in the months after Donald Trump's victory in 2016, and this introduction was written the year following his removal from office, in 2022. In the interim, we, the coeditors, found ourselves increasingly immersed in the development of the so-called alt-right and white nationalism more broadly. We quickly realized that we were seeing the emergence of an assemblage of individuals, movements, ideas, memes, and motifs that was worldwide in its reach, scope, and significance. American white nationalists and self-described national socialists were showing up in neo-Nazi videos in Greece, writers belonging to the Nouvelle Droite in France were receiving standing ovations at conferences of white nationalists in the United States, and an idea like "the great replacement" was clearly able to travel from a fourteenth-century castle near the Pyrenees in France to Christchurch, New Zealand, and to Pittsburgh, El Paso, and Buffalo in the United States.

As we continued our expansive research into contemporary forms of the far right, we also, not surprisingly, began to delve more and more

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into the literary, political, theoretical, and philosophical archives of Euro-American fascisms of an earlier era. As our research and teaching acquired this new direction, and as we began to realize the enormity of the political, social, and cultural transformations underway, we also confronted with some dismay the seeming indifference of our profession to the catastrophes unfolding in the world around us, reflected in a whole series of evasive and self-destructive tendencies, many of them mutually contradictory—"post-critique" sentimentalism, big-data-obsessed digital humanities, a renewed hyperspecialization, and "new formalism," to name just a handful. We began to recognize that the New Right's attack on critical humanities scholarship (which extends beyond its crusade against critical race theory and queer theory) has accompanied a longer institutional turn toward defunding and eventually eliminating humanist study as the failing (degenerate) arm of the ascending corporate university brand. These aligned shifts within our profession and beyond expose how a late capitalist veneration of an all-knowing market serves to conceal the forms of patriarchal white supremacy that continue to shape our political and social world. Paul Bové takes on this crisis of the academic literary profession directly in his contribution, but this special issue as a whole is the contributors' collective response to this situation both in the profession and in the wider world.

Since the emergence of the Trump coalition in 2015, *fascism* returned to the political vocabulary of the times suddenly and without much intellectual preparation. As events hurtled us forward—or was it backward?—toward some indiscernible catastrophe, many seemed to grasp spontaneously at this relic in the hope that it might deliver an understanding of the present and how we got here, or at the very least give us a stability of orientation as we tried to survive this unsettling and dangerous historical process. But this return of an old concept immediately raised the possibility that this hoary specter from and of another time could easily lead to intellectual paralysis and political ineffectiveness, leaving us permanently lamenting the return of the 1930s in the 2020s. (The meme-makers of the white nationalist Right have a mocking name for this ubiquitous feature of center-left culture—"the current year.") The fact that this concept has entered the political landscape does not guarantee its analytical effectiveness, but it does mean that this efficacy (or lack thereof) is itself a genuine and viable object of analysis. The group effort here is not concerned with developing a global definition of fascism, a concept to encompass a wide range of far-right politics around the world or even just in the Euro-American world. But some things it ought to be possible to say. Between the "fascist maximum"

of a radical and militarized state and what Robert Paxton (2005: 206) calls the "elusive 'fascist minimum'" lies a broad landscape of ideas, individuals, movements, political parties, and even state forms. The rush to identify the fascist nature of the Trump phenomenon has sometimes produced facile results—the spectacle of his political rallies being seen through the lens of Nuremberg, for instance, and even through Walter Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics. But in various actions and statements before and after his ascent to the presidency, and in various elements of his movement, aspects of the classic fascism complex have been clearly discernible: both authoritarian and (in Max Weber's sense) "charismatic" leadership of the movement, the followers' cultlike veneration of the person of the leader, the populist identification with "the people" against variously defined elites—Trump as the "blue collar billionaire"—the presence of a frankly white nationalist element—anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic—within the base of the GOP's electoral coalition, to list merely the most obvious ones.

But what has also begun to be clear over the course of the last six years is that far-right and white nationalist culture in Europe and the United States now not only takes organized political form but also extends across vast areas of culture and society, forms of extension and dissemination made possible by the ecologies of the new media landscape and the growing precariousness of more and more lives lived in the wealthiest zones of global capitalism. From social media forums such as 4chan, 8chan, Stormfront, Reddit, Gab, and the Russian messaging service Telegram to textual and graphic science fiction in all its online variety, an enormous cacophony now characterizes the culture of the far right. Until very recently, far-right content was also available with complete impunity on more mainline platforms like Facebook and YouTube and still often manages to evade their algorithmic restrictions. (And outside the Global North, nationalisms and fascisms of the most violent sort—far-right Hindu nationalism, for instance—still seem to have near complete impunity on these global platforms.) Ideologically, this space is some sort of soup-kitchen slop of anti-liberalism, anti-modernism, white supremacy, Southern nationalism, neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism, "social nationalism," Holocaust "revisionism," white nationalism, white "advocacy," white "identitarianism," "race-realism," anti-feminism, "anti-poz" homophobia, heterosexual and homosexual "manosphere" misogyny, traditionalism, varieties of mysticism, "alt-right" hipsterism, "Orthodox nationalism," and Nordic paganism, to name just some of the more prominent tendencies. In addition to these ideological contents,

however, questions of style and form are equally important in understanding this cultural space—irony, parody, satire, and a generalized self-conscious assertion of "joyfulness" and jouissance are among the preeminent stylistic tendencies in this space in which varieties of racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia can be freely expressed in mocking repudiation of the pieties of what is derided as "woke" liberal political correctness and multiculturalism.

The ongoing debates about the applicability of the concept of fascism to our historical moment must not only take all these aspects of the contemporary reality into account but also address the retooling of nativist, settler colonial, and blood and soil narratives of white supremacy. This special issue is meant as a small contribution in this direction and proposes to put on a firmer *conceptual* as well as *historical* footing the possibility of understanding the present political and social crisis as the "return" of the far right as a political culture across the Euro-American world—the United States, Western Europe, Russia—but also in India under the rule of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Wherever possible, we are also interested in examining the links between these regional spaces, links that are organizational, ideational, historical, or socioeconomic, or combinations of several of these. In many cases, from the (now defunct) Traditionalist Worker Party or the Proud Boys in the United States to Génération Identitaire in France, Skandza Forum in the Nordic countries, Jobbik in Hungary, Golden Dawn in Greece, and neo-Eurasianism in Russia, these far-right groupings increasingly see themselves as not merely fraternal organizations but rather as local elements of an assemblage of "white" advocacy across the world, even if the racial concept is often concealed within explicitly territorial, linguistic, or cultural imaginaries. But this growing sensibility and experience of "a worldwide white nation," as the late French neofascist thinker Guillaume Faye (2012) put it in front of an American audience in 2012, is at least in tension with the ubiquitous political and social imaginary of the "ethnostate," which revives the term coined by Wilmot Robertson (1992) in his book of that name. Some of Faye's most influential work is an attempt to defuse this tension and bridge this contradiction. This much ought to be clear: this political and cultural space marks distinct and powerful tendencies in contemporary society that have survived Trump's loss in the 2020 election, and the struggle against them is just beginning. In what ways can an antifascist Left be created and mobilized against this diffuse movement and social imaginary, which (for now at least) eschews institutional state politics, preferring the symbology of tribal and occult rites, con-

spiracies about high finance and the deep state, the social possibilities of the commune, and the organicism of ethno-nationalism as the ideological foundations of its alternative to the liberal international order? The possibility of an organized and popular Left that is adequate to this historical task at different levels of society remains, we fear, very much an open question.

Many of the analyses of fascism that come to us from the early decades of the twentieth century—for instance, those by Emmanuel Levinas, Georges Bataille, Arthur Rosenberg, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Wilhelm Reich, Hannah Arendt, and even Erich Auerbach, to name only some of the most well-known cases—perform various balancing acts between historical explanations and what we might call transhistorical ones, such as psychological (and psychosexual), ethical, or civilizational-spiritual accounts. Against the brutal contextualism and "vulgar" economic determinism of the official Comintern position—"Fascism is the power of finance capital itself"—these early observers of fascism offer deeper indictments of the historical development of the Western bourgeois world over the *longue durée* and its collapse into barbarism in the twentieth century.

But, of course, no analysis of fascisms as historical formations can bypass the question of their relation to the crises of capitalism, a broad question which can itself be reconfigured into a number of more circumscribed ones. With regard to our contemporary moment and to the attempt to reanimate the concept of fascism for analyses of present-day politics, this means at the very least a reconsideration of neoliberalism as a set of economic theories and policy positions and the structural arrangements that have emerged from the interaction of the theories (and theorists) with policy around the world over the last several decades (see Mirowski 2002; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Slobodian 2018). It hardly needs pointing out that the two biggest moments in the history of the far right over the last century coincide exactly with the two biggest crises of world capitalism in the same time period, namely, the Great Depression and the Great Recession (the latter taking the form of an outright depression in some regions and countries). Trump's protectionist expostulations during his first campaign and some of the policy decisions that followed during his term in office, such as the abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) and the "cold" trade war with China and even the European Union, led some commentators, including such fervent Trumpistas as Patrick Buchanan, to declare too early the end of neoliberal "free trade" and "Washington Consensus" globalism. In this ideological inversion, the GOP, whose base now consists of the white nationalist Right in the country, appears as the party of the (white)

working class, whereas the party of the center-left, namely, the Democrats, appears as the party of "special interests" and neoliberal globalization.

The truth of course is quite otherwise, namely, that a host of major policies of the Trump administration and his party in Congress—the relentless (if mostly failed) attacks on Obamacare, the multipronged attack on (primary, secondary, and tertiary) public education, the massive transfer of wealth to the super wealthy through the signature tax bill, and perhaps most catastrophically of all, the chaotic outsourcing of the pandemic response to the private sector, reducing states, cities, and even hospitals in the same city to ruthless competition with each other for the most basic medical supplies, to name just a few of the most disastrous policies—are instances of neoliberal consolidation par excellence in their brutally unrelenting worship of market-centered politics. Against all the talk of antiglobalism and disdain for multilateralism, it would be more accurate to speak of alternative forms of globalization, less multilateral, certainly, but all the more committed to neoliberal arrangements of economies and states. The successful packaging of perhaps the most ostentatiously corrupt crony capitalist and huckster in America as a man of the people bent on clearing out "the swamp" at the nexus of business and politics is a remarkable historical event that needs to be understood in deep sociological, semiotic, and psychological terms, and Donald Pease here offers us a path to such an understanding in his contribution. And Trump's uncanny ability to mobilize a crowd to attack the Capitol and send senators and representatives of both parties scurrying for their physical safety makes crystal clear that he remains at the head of the right-wing mob. Only a fool or a charlatan would now deny that fascism is a mass presence in this country, even if it is not as yet a mass movement.

Much of the post-2016 literature on fascism has taken up the logic of definition and diagnosis, counterposing a schematic ordering of populist and authoritarian movements against the possibility of their creative capacities of reinvention (see Burley 2017; Griffin 2018; Reid Ross 2017; Snyder 2017). Thus, while fascism appears immediate and present in a series of spectacular events—from the Charlottesville rally and riot, resulting in the murder of the young antifascist Heather Heyer, to the massacres perpetrated by white nationalists—it also, at the same time, remains peripheral, unorganized, ever-flailing, and failing. This is hardly a historical novelty, because ascendant fascist movements typically fabricate their mass power precisely from this structural position of peripherality and precariousness in relation to the state apparatus—from their "heterogeneity" to the market and the state, as Bataille ([1934] 1979) already argued in the 1930s. Up to

and even including the moment of the seizure of state power, they appear as exogenous to the state apparatus, taking power from the outside through a crisis of party representation, growing militarization, and, more generally, a process of economic, political, and social destabilization (see Belew 2018; Poulantzas [1970] 1979: 331–35). In our present historical conjuncture this enabling peripherality is expressed in the narrative of "white" societies' (and especially their men's) victimization under the sign of "the great replacement."

Among the recurring motifs of a great deal of the culture of the contemporary far right are cataclysm and catastrophe. The "ecopocalyptic" visions elaborated by writers of the far right in France since 1968, from Jean Raspail in *Camp of the Saints* (1973) to Guillaume Faye in *Archeofuturism* (1999) and *Convergence of Catastrophes* (2004), have available to them the work of the older avant-garde of fascio-modernism, including the Italians Julius Evola and Filippo Marinetti, and its veneration of war and a violent hypermodernity. And in the United States, the influence on the contemporary Right of such early twentieth-century proponents of eugenics and environmentalism as Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant is wide and palpable—and of course these two had also influenced the official raciology of the Third Reich through the work of Alfred Rosenberg. John Tanton, founding figure of the anti-immigrant and ecological movements in this country, was the publisher who brought Raspail's novel to English-speaking audiences and helped establish it in its present unassailable position in the literary canon of the white nationalist Right. The right-wing apocalyptic imaginary has a quality of "accelerationism" to it, the notion that the only way out of the morass of capitalism and liberalism is a speeding up of their destructive tendencies. As Benjamin Noys (2014: 98, 108) writes, accelerationism "is not merely a historical curiosity, but an aesthetic and political attitude that continues to exert a gravitational pull on the present. . . . The political vagaries of these aesthetic forms of accelerationism do not fall on the tired tropes of fascism and 'totalitarianism,' but rather on this difficult and tense imbrication with the dynamics of capitalism." Alexander Dugin's philosophical crusade in Russia against the post-Soviet incursion of Satanic Western capitalism and liberalism, while traditionalist rather than modernist in its impulses and ideological contents, also carries the imprint of accelerationism in the traces of the constitutional crisis of 1993 and Boris Yeltsin and Yegor Gaidar's violent shock therapy reforms. Leah Feldman's contribution turns to this conjuncture in Russia and its ideological contours.

A transnational approach to reading the contemporary rise of a new

right, especially in the United States and Europe, can in part be framed by two historical nodes—1968 and 1989—both crucial moments in the hegemonic institutionalization of neoliberal socioeconomic and political ideas and practices. The historiography of the intellectual scene in France after May 1968 often does not give sufficient attention to the fact that the period saw the emergence of a vibrant intellectual right as well, not just the Left, as Olivia Harrison lays out in some detail here. These new right-wing formations often saw themselves as ideologically distinct from the mid-century Right, from Catholic monarchism, for instance, and some of their thinkers, above all Alain de Benoist, were influential more than two decades later in post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s. The French New Right saw itself as a response to what it considered the "Marxist revolution" of 1968 (see Faye 2012). But it quickly became aligned with the National Front in its focus on postcolonial immigration and, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of its satellite states in Eastern Europe, turned its attention to what it correctly saw as the stunning expansion to hegemonic status worldwide of US-led neoliberalism, which its thinkers condemned for its reducing of a rich tapestry of human populations to an undifferentiated mass of producers and consumers.

In turn, the fall of the Soviet Union led to a distinct process of the rise of the New Right in its former zone—former communists morphing into right-wing nationalists in the midst of the application of neoliberal shock therapy to entire populations as a matter of routine policy. The aggravation of the class struggle that accompanied these violent economic transformations contributed to the rise of anti-liberal ethno-nationalisms in the post-Soviet world, often armed with "post-secularist" critiques of Western liberalism and secularism. To a significant extent this development of the Right alongside the Left from the late 1960s on was an international development, with resurgent neoreactionary movements and parties emerging to respond to the political, social, and cultural protest movements of the previous decade, in some cases leading to the overthrow of democratically elected progressive governments in military coups d'état more or less supported by the Western powers—Chile and Pakistan immediately come to mind.

Russia and the former Soviet states have particularly come to be associated with a resurgence of authoritarianism, which has only accelerated with Putin's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. However, despite these renewed encroachments, transformations of the right-wing and nationalist sort across post-Communist Eastern Europe have been accompanied by unexpected geopolitical realignments. For instance, despite the living

memory of the Soviet invasion of Budapest in 1956 and Putin's recent invasion of Ukraine, which has only enlivened the already persistent presence of anti-Russian sentiment in Hungary's political culture, Hungary's resurgent nationalist Right displays a marked political warming toward Russia. Viktor Orban's celebration of "illiberal democracy" is politically aligned with Putin's internal vision for Russia and his geopolitical vision of an alternative political and social axis to the forces of Western liberalism and globalism. Hungary in fact has emerged as a global beacon for white nationalists—many Americans have chosen to move there—and Arktos, the main English-language translator and publisher of the works of the European and Russian right, including those by De Benoist, Faye, and Dugin, was founded there in the second decade of this century. It briefly even drew to its senior staff a representative of the "neo-Aryan" tendency in the monarchist Iranian diaspora. The dissemination of these materials to the Anglophone reading public has played no small role in disseminating the social imaginary of "the worldwide white nation" to white nationalists in the Anglo-Saxon world. The three figures mentioned above are routinely cited by such individuals in the US alt-right as Richard Spencer, Matthew Heimbach, Jared Taylor, and Matthew Raphael Johnson as major influences.

The question for us is not whether or not Donald J. Trump, Vladimir Putin, or Narendra Modi (or even Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Alexander Dugin, Alain de Benoist, or any one of a host of other more macabre acolytes) *is* a fascist but whether and to what extent fascist tendencies in US culture and society have emerged and coalesced around Trump's 2016 campaign, then his presidency, and now his conspiracy-driven grievance crusade, and whether and to what extent these social forces are in a position to redefine aspects of social relations—race and gender relations, for instance—and of culture. What answers we find to such questions, which are the domain of the critical humanities, will also help us understand whether and to what extent these social and political forces are capable of again seizing control of the presidency or of elements of the state despite the liberal-constitutional regime of "checks and balances," which has been put under severe pressure repeatedly since 2017, although it also has clearly survived that onslaught. Fascism may not be *in power* in the United States, or in any European country, but at the very least it has been *empowered* by a whole series of political developments, including Brexit, the Trump phenomenon, Putin's invasion, the reelection of Orban, and the near-election of Le Pen. Equally remarkable and disturbingly closer to home is the apparently seamless appropriation by the far right of aspects

of the contemporary humanities—ideas linked to postcolonial critique, cultural studies, queer studies, and minority rights discourse: immigrants and their children are routinely spoken of as a colonial occupation force; whites are viewed as a marginalized minority in their own homelands; queerness is envisioned through violent ritual performances of white masculinity; and, recently, whites have even come to be referred to as stateless, peoples without a state that they can call their own. It is a fundamental task of the critical humanities in these times to understand these acts of appropriation of their ideas and formulate adequate responses to them.

As we confront this new social, cultural, and political landscape, it becomes dismally apparent that the humanities in the academy have been too often oblivious to these social, cultural, and political forces in recent years—including the appropriation of parts of their own discourse by white nationalists. Clearly, some of the most vaunted new trends in the literary profession—world literature, big-data-driven literary history, or postcritique, for instance—aim to depoliticize the practice of criticism and scholarship in their distinct ways, often explicitly so. Seeking to build a broad critical-intellectual approach to the crisis of the present moment, this special issue of *boundary 2* takes up the call outlined by Edward Said for a worldly orientation for criticism as an intellectual practice and form of writing, which he elaborated as an agile, alert, and skeptical orientation of thought in the world, seeking to expose the hierarchies of Culture and Value, on the one hand, and, on the other, the false comforts of critical-ideational systems, political or theoretical positions worked out fully in advance, merely awaiting their "application" to this or that context or body of material.

This special issue calls for such a worldly orientation to criticism as it considers the reemergence of New Right political cultures in several parts of the world. Donald Pease demarcates and analyzes the workings of the constituent power of the Trump coalition and its near complete takeover of the Republican Party. The Trumpist New Right, he argues, marks a return to a variant of liberalism initiated by American settler colonists' expansionist politics. Attending to Birtherism, the Charlottesville protests, and the January 6th uprising, Pease argues that Trump levied his attack on liberal-democratic institutions and principles by lending the insurrectionists presidential-institutional support. Leah Feldman discusses the rise of Alexander Dugin's (2000) Eurasianist "fourth" political theory and traces lines of influence and continuity between Dugin and such movements as the French Nouvelle Droite, Hungarian Jobbik, and the US Traditionalist Workers Party. She argues that these New Right movements have gener-

ated a white supremacist neo-traditionalist politics in response to the global political and economic shifts following the collapse of the Soviet Union. She concludes by analyzing how the emergence of a conservative vanguard and its vision of neo-imperial messianism and authoritarian "neo-trad" multipolarity have shaped discourse around the war in Ukraine. Olivia Harrison turns to the post-1968 moment to expose the emergence of a fantasy of white minority status and white nativism within the French New Right as an attempt to recuperate a "reverse decolonial" politics in defense of a white nativist vision of France, revealing white supremacy's foundations in the invention of race in the colonial laboratory. The pandemic's occasioning of authoritarian state expansion further turns this issue's focus to ecofascist visions of the end of times. Through a comparative reading of ecofascist literature alongside Bong Joon-ho's South Korean thriller *Parasite*, April Anson and Anindita Banerjee attend to ecofascist literary imaginaries that are at once global and virally settler colonial, highlighting the continuities between climate catastrophe and paranoias of demographic extinction that scale at the level of the everyday and proximate.

Aamir R. Mufti draws our attention to contemporary India and the rise to near hegemony not just of the ruling party but of what he calls Hindutva power, which works through both the transformation of the exercise of sovereign power and the inculcation of a distinct habitus in more and more sectors of society. This Hindu supremacist and nationalist habitus marks a far-reaching transformation not only of democratic political culture but of religious belief and practice as well. But despite their sense of inevitability, he argues, these developments are part of a scene of contestation and the staging of pro-democracy and antifascist dissent. Finally, tracing a historical arc to the epistemological shift at the end of the Cold War and emergence of new technologies of rule within the university, Paul Bové exposes a corrosive shift in humanities scholarship amid a growing technocratic corporatization in the profession beginning in the late 1970s, which has displaced criticism for high theory-driven narratives that conceive of themselves as derived from literary study but as independent of and indeed prior to literature. This turn away from criticism was accompanied by the popularization of new jargons and subfields and "studies" from digital humanities to world literature, that is, technocratic orders tied to mainstream institutions that aimed to provide career possibilities at a moment when the state investment in the literary humanities began to wane with the end of the Cold War.

Exposing some of the ways in which the violence of neoliberal capitalism has been absorbed by our own institutions and profession in this

moment of fascist returns, like the corporatized remaking of an entrepreneurial humanities, this special issue offers a reminder of the necessity to return to criticism and to the possibilities of understanding the human through poetry and literature. By drawing our collective attention to the globalization of a New Right political culture, it seeks to call us to a skeptical and worldly criticism and pedagogy against some of the most powerful tendencies in the profession as well as the wider world.

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