

Letters

Our readers respond

Various Authors

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FASCISM WITHOUT PRIVATE PROPERTY?

Spencer Sunshine's review of John Zerzan's *Twilight of the Machines* begins promisingly enough with a brief summation of Zerzan's history and a lengthy description of *Twilight's* contents.

The turning point is Sunshine's confession that "it is difficult to understand how he conceives of the relationship between technology, civilization, and symbolic representation." Sunshine might have constructed a critique of Zerzan from this alleged lack of clarity. Instead, he offers the bizarre criticism that Zerzan has not adequately explained why his views are different from, and incompatible with, fascism.

Sunshine suggests any discussion of the "unmediated self" exposes one to the contagion of fascism. One does not have to be a mystic to recognize the validity of their experiences, however, which seem to attest to the reality, indeed, of an unmediated self. Perhaps this is a phantom limb, so to speak, of an originally unmediated community, or perhaps it's all credulity, but it seems a rather far stretch to task those who derive inspiration from Jung, say, with affinities to fascism.

Sunshine sees Zerzan's discussion of unmediated community and his contempt for "the Left" [sic] as an invitation to fascists. He does not see this discussion, to the contrary, as emptying the oxygen which fascism needs to smolder on. The appeal of fascism was squarely addressed by Arthur Miller, at least.

In his play *Incident at Vichy*, he mocks his Marxist character by noting the vast extent of support for fascism among the very workers chosen by History, supposedly, to suppress it. Might the very rejection of any discussion of mediation on the part of "the Left" help explain that support?

Sunshine says it is "easy to see why Nazis see his attack on symbolic thought as the same as their attack on the Jews who they claim are the source of alienation, decadence, and abstraction. Nazis see his championing of the unmediated community as the same as their desire for a homogenous, racially pure community, which they think will exist as a unified whole, free of fragmentation."

Maybe it's so easy for Sunshine to accept this grotesquely crude "parallel" because the Left to which he reflexively defers seldom discusses that most corrosive and fundamental agent of historical separation, the institution of Property.

Since Sunshine demands an explanation of how Zerzan's views are fundamentally different from and incompatible with fascists, I offer this formulation for his consideration: Zerzan's vision of unmediated community presumes the absence of private property and state power; clearly, fascism is inconceivable without the presence of both.

One would like to see a deeper level of criticism brought to bear against Zerzan. Alas, it will not come from those ever reluctant to cut their moorings from the familiar and commonplace. These critics contrast strikingly with Zerzan, whose long-term project of loosening our attachment to the deeper forms as well as the superficial charms of civilized culture has helped expand the anarchist critique from exploitation to domestication and from capitalism to civilization.

Dan Todd
Tucson, Arizona

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

In his review of John Zerzan's book *Twilight of the Machines*, Spencer Sunshine has much to say of Zerzan's supposed "fascist references."

It is undeniable that Zerzan has analyzed some of the concepts previously addressed by philosophers who were (sometimes very marginally) involved in the fascist movement. Sunshine doesn't neglect to point out that Zerzan is not a fascist, but this is still a guilt by association tactic, and it is absurd, as a few examples shall illustrate.

One of the so-called fascists referenced by Zerzan is Oswald Spengler. Spengler was a major influence on historian Arnold Toynbee, whose *A Study of History* laid the background for Fredy Perlman's later works. The founders of Beat poetry held communal readings of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and most of them have been considered leftists.

This cross pollination of leftist and rightist views is incredibly virulent these days. The journal *Telos* (through which Sunshine connects Zerzan to Alain de Benoist) began as an attempt to introduce the high theory of Western Marxism and The Frankfurt School (such as Adorno) to the American New Left.

Telos is open to publishing the anti-post-modern work of Zerzan and the post-modern work of, say, Jean Baudrillard. They have also republished books by German "conservative revolutionary" Ernst Jünger and Nazi legalist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt, unlike the other pseudo-fascists mentioned thus far, actually was a member of the NSDAP and after the war lectured throughout Francoist Spain.

Schmitt is best known today for being much loved by post-modern leftists like Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek, and especially Giorgio Agamben. Traces of Schmitt's influence can also be felt in the texts of France's *Tiqqun* journal which are slowly being translated into English.

It is odd that Sunshine finds Heidegger's influence on Zerzan particularly damning considering the sheer amount of people influenced or inspired by him including: Hannah Arendt, a Jewish leftist and anti-totalitarian; Jean Luc-Nancy, a deconstructionist; Jean-Paul Sartre, the much loved existentialist and Marxist (who denied Stalin's purges, by the way); Simone de Beauvoir, the mother of French feminism; and New Rightist Alain de Benoist.

Jacques Camatte, who harshly criticized de Benoist, also believed that conservative institutions preserved something "real" and "human" in the midst of modern inhumanity, as did Nietzsche before de Benoist and Camatte. Nietzsche is perhaps the most influential philosopher of modern times and was formally seen as the prototypical proto-fascist.

I mean, anyone can be maligned or made to look suspicious through this "guilt by association." Is not Adorno connected to Stalin via Marx? Post-structuralism is all about accepting the multifarious perspectives that exist, right?

Leftists and post-modernists have been influenced by rightist thinkers (and vice versa) for decades. The acceptance of every potential perspective as legitimate is the greatest strength and greatest weakness of the post-modern epoch.

Alaric Malgraith
London, Ontario

SUNSHINE REPLIES TO ALARIC M. ALGRAITH & DAN TODD

Both Alaric Malgraith and Dan Todd seem to have misunderstood my argument, and both attribute views to me which I do not hold.

Today, there is a high level of crossover between far Left and far Right movements. German neo-Nazis proclaim that they are “Autonomist Nationalists” and march in huge Black Blocs, while white separatists in the US and Australia have rechristened themselves “National-Anarchists” and joined anti-globalization and anti-Israel demonstrations. Meanwhile, Zerzan has attracted attention from the same fascist websites and journals that are part of this milieu.

For example, Zerzan’s *Running on Emptiness* was reviewed in a pagan-fascist journal a few years ago. In it, Zerzan was praised for rejecting civilization and progress (“in this regard he has more in common with voices from the so-called extreme right”), and favorably compared to racist and fascist thinkers with similar views, such as Pentti Linkola and Julius Evola. Regarding Evola, the reviewer says “the two writers are not dissimilar in the forcefulness of their critique against the modern world and their wish to shatter its very foundations, in order that something more noble might be recovered.”

As I specified in my review, it is precisely this interest in Zerzan coming from the fascist milieu itself which is so disturbing.

My review specified that there are five overlapping circumstances which have created a problematic situation:

1. Zerzan’s references to fascist and proto-fascist authors are increasing in frequency compared to his older works.
2. Zerzan publishes in a journal which also prints a neo-fascist author. (What *Telos* was 30 years ago is different from who they are now; in 2006, both Benoist and Zerzan published articles in the journal.)
3. Zerzan’s conceptual schema is structurally parallel to fascism’s, and certain theorists—specifically Theodor Adorno—have identified this structure as having intrinsic fascist properties.
4. Zerzan has failed to distinguish why his views are fundamentally different from, and incompatible with, fascism. This is different from thinkers such as Adorno, who also praised Spengler (see “Spengler After the Decline” in *Prisms*), but made sure to distinguish why their theories were different.
5. Most importantly, all this has occurred in a context of fascists expressing their interest in Zerzan and praising his works.

Malgraith pretends that I only mention the second (and maybe the third) condition, and therefore am engaging in “guilt by association”. Malgraith mentions Negri, Žižek, Camatte and Agamben as radicals who are also influenced by fascist or proto-fascist writers. But this changes nothing.

If their work structurally paralleled fascist philosophy, if they were publishing in journals alongside fascists, and—most importantly—if fascists were also openly praising them, I would challenge all of them to do the same thing I have asked of Zerzan: to philosophically separate their works from fascism and show why they are incompatible.

This is what Adorno himself did, and this is the same as I am doing with Zerzan—encouraging him to place his own works beyond recuperation by neo-fascists.

Lastly, Malgraith says that “Post-structuralism is all about accepting the multifarious perspectives that exist, right?” and that the “acceptance of every potential perspective as legitimate is the greatest strength and greatest weakness of the post-modern epoch.” I am not a post-structuralist (nor was Adorno), and the argument I am making here runs counter to how Malgraith is characterizing post-structuralism.

A true “post-modernist” view would accept this narrative (i.e., the redemption of the unmediated self from a corrupt modernity) as completely equal to any other. Against this, and following Adorno, I am suggesting that this kind of narrative has intrinsic problems; it is not just another, equally “legitimate” perspective.

On the other hand, Todd's letter portrays me as some sort of atavistic Social Democrat who believes in the historic role of the working class and the sanctity of property. First, there is a difference between discussing mediation in modern society as such and proclaiming that humans can return to a fully unmediated state, outside of language.

Second, it is the Left itself (as I understand it; Todd does not define who is part of this Left) that denounces Property. In fact, archetypical Leftist Karl Marx criticized J.-P. Proudhon on exactly the grounds that Proudhon advocates small-scale capitalism, as opposed to destroying the commodity form itself, as Marx proposed.

(Additionally, Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844—as well as the bulk of the Western Marxist tradition—all include extensive discussions regarding the possibility of nullifying mediation.) For that matter, I find little talk about “Property” in Zerzan's writings; most of his fury regards the process of abstraction and representation itself.

The problem with Zerzan's distancing of himself from the Left is that the baby goes out with the bathwater. To me, positing oneself on the Left means that, along with anti-capitalism, there is an affirmation of the best aspects of universalism: internationalism, anti-racism, feminism and queer liberation. Zerzan himself upholds these traits, but as he rhetorically distances himself from the Left, many people see him as distancing himself from these elements as well.

Certainly many nouveaux fascists do. They use the slogan “Beyond Left and Right” (although this is disingenuous, as their views are readily identifiable as far Right), and they start salivating when they hear white folks like Zerzan denounce the Left.

It should also be noted here that Zerzan has a strangely cosmopolitan view of racial/ethnic identity for someone whose hyper-decentralized “future primitive” world would undoubtedly result in reversions to identities based around tribes or bands. These small group structures would presumably have strong micro-ethnic identities. While Zerzan does not talk about this, it is not lost on the racially-obsessed far Right.

Furthermore, Todd says that “Zerzan's vision of unmediated community presumes the absence of private property and state power; clearly, fascism is inconceivable without the presence of both.” But while these elements were present in the German and Italian forms of fascism which seized State power, they are not necessarily applicable to post-war strains of fascism such as Third Position and the New Right. It is followers of these newer strains (and not the traditional Hitler clones) that are interested in Zerzan.

For example, in 1985, *Fifth Estate* denounced KKK leader Bob Miles for referring to himself as an anarchist. At the same time, Tom Metzger of the White Aryan Resistance denounced capitalism while simultaneously advocating for a white homeland in the Pacific Northwest. In doing so, his organization attracted ex-Wobblies like John Jewell.

And, it does not take much imagination to understand how this demand for a white homeland has, over the years, receded to advocating for stateless—but racially homogenous—all-white communities. Naturally, some of these advocates also wish that property be abolished within these communities. After all, there is a long history of fascist anti-capitalism, even among German Nazi party members such as Otto Strasser.

So, if there is such a great gulf between Zerzan and fascists on the basis of the State and private ownership, then why do they have such interest in him?

Whatever the merits of Zerzan's project are, considering the present circumstances, I wish that he would take precautions to counter the appropriation of his project by these other, disturbing trends, regardless of the reasons for this intersection. Despite their objections, neither Malgraith nor Todd recognize, nor address, this issue.

Spencer Sunshine
New York City

HEMP EATERS KNOW

It was a pleasure to read the FE's piece in the Fall 2009 issue on N.I. Vavilov by Geoff Hall. I just want to point out that he is not such an unknown, unsung hero in the West as your writer implies. Erudite pot-heads have long venerated him for discovering the origins of cannabis in Central Asia (near the origin-place of apples). See, e.g., *Orgies of the Hemp Eaters*, by Bey and Zug, (Autonomedia 2004), p. 633.

And, if you like Vavilov, look for the works of American geographer Carol O. Sauer, who is similarly inspiring. If I remember correctly, Sauer discovered the origin of chili peppers (Mexico); he's also a beautiful writer.

P. L. Wilson
New Paltz N.Y.

MINOR CARPING

I thought Richard Gilman-Opalsky's, "Freejazz & Other Insurrections," in the Fall 2009 FE, was outstanding.

Although I was a little bothered by the experts he relied on, I was educated by the author's distinction between conventional and radical listening, which framed a discussion of linear and less linear music. He makes a good case for the liberatory potential of fringe jazz, while cautioning on the limitations of temporary moments of freedom, such as those experienced at an avant garde concert, in that capital's forces are a constant and, to be bested, would need to be opposed by a constant radicalism.

As to experts, I don't object to the insights of Theodor Adorno, but I wonder why radicals keep looking back to that discussion of jazz and mass media's debasement of listening presented in the 1940s, when more searching accounts have been written since, such as Attali's *Noise* or (closer to home) Cutler's *File Under Culture*, this last title published by Autonomedia.

However, this minor carping on my part doesn't detract from the forceful and persuasive argument of the piece.

Jim Feast
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