

On Fascists & Microfascists

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a review of

On Microfascism: Gender, War, and Death by Jack Z. Bratich. Common Notions, 2022

97-year-old Irmgard Furchner does not fit the stereotype of a murderous fascist. The diminutive German woman was slumped over in a wheelchair, cane in hand, when she was sentenced in court last December for her part in the murder of over 10,000 people during World War II.

Furchner's trial reminds us of the reach of fascist ideology under Nazism. She was a teenager when she started working as a secretary at the Stutthof concentration camp in Poland, dutifully counting incoming detainees as they were sent to their deaths.

She reminds us that Nazis weren't all young, blonde, athletic men with guns—they were women and girls, grandparents, and regular people from all walks of life. And, they still walk among us, including those, like Furchner, who were directly involved in the most horrific of Nazi atrocities.

Furchner's trial should also remind us that the fascist ideology that gave rise to the atrocities at Stutthof is, like the last survivors of Furchner's generation, still with us, as well. The fascist past gave rise to the neoliberal present, and we have inherited many of its ideological and political structures.

We bear witness to this fascist inheritance in the faces of terrified children stolen from their parents and locked up at the U.S.-Mexico border, in the latest revanchist attacks on women's health and reproductive freedom, and in the devastation wrought by the ongoing imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East.

In *On Microfascism*, Jack Z. Bratich asks us to look beyond these statist manifestations of fascism in order to explore a microfascist cultural politics—the ways of being and understanding the world that precede the fascist state and its violence. At the heart of Bratich's analysis is the concept of autogenetic sovereignty, a kind of "hyper-individualist" masculinity.

Autogenetic sovereignty means that the microfascist subject must disavow his (and they are always male, it seems) ties to his mother and social obligations in order to claim a king-like total autonomy, without the encumbrances of family or community.

Bratich's protagonist is this would-be autogenetic sovereign, an anonymous white male, hiding behind a computer screen until the occasion presents itself for him to lash out in violence directed at women, minorities, or liberals in real life.

We follow this protagonist through chapters on gender, war, and death (or "necrotics," in Bratich's terminology). Bratich covers a lot of ground in these short chapters, addressing issues as disparate as the connections between misogyny and "sovereign subjectivity," the quasi-mythical war bands called *mannerbunde*, dreamt up by fascist philosophers, and the anti-COVID lockdown protests of 2020.

An ancient, primordial gender politics forms the foundation of *On Microfascism*, in which woman comes to signify life and social bonds. Patriarchy emerges as the impulse to divorce oneself from these entanglements through initiation rites, warrior bands and religion, in order to achieve auto-genetic sovereignty and claim power over life

and death. Bratich explores how this pre-modern patriarchy gives rise to today's right-wing insurgency, in the form of practices like redpilling, internet trolling, and misogynistic violence.

The most glaring problem with all this is that this supposed primordial state of things isn't based in reality, but in the fantasies of 21st century fascist philosophers like Mircea Eliade and Julius Evola.

The anthropological and archaeological record actually tells a story of diverse gender relationships across different cultures and societies, of male and female initiation rites that often served to reinforce social obligations rather than sever them, of women warriors fighting alongside their husbands and brothers, and of religions based on the veneration of motherhood and female sexuality.

On Microfascism touches on a vast array of scholarship and critical theory, but the sheer breadth of Bratich's source material means that many of these complex and challenging concepts receive what amounts to only superficial treatment. Sovereignty, for example, is a key concept for Bratich, but he takes it at face value, literally, to indicate a kind of king-like autonomy, ignoring the complexity and significance of the concept to anarchist thought.

As an example, for Situationist Raoul Vaneigem, the sovereignty of life is the overarching moral principle, in opposition to the notion of individual rights that imbues the capitalist state with its moral justification.

Noam Chomsky understood "popular sovereignty" as the essential feature of democratic governance—the freedom of people to govern themselves—under threat from growing globalist corporate power.

Anthropologist and anarchist activist David Graeber's understanding of state power rested on his rather starker view of sovereignty as the state's exclusive claim to the use of violence, whether in the form of the ritual violence of ancient kings or the execution chambers and police tasers of the 21st century.

The result is that Bratich's autogenetic sovereign winds up as a kind of shape-shifting straw man. He makes appearances as creepy pick-up artists, hapless "incels," "inspo-shooters," "packs of black holes," and internet trolls. In focusing on such a convenient microfascist villain, I fear we may lose sight of the bigger picture of the mainstream fascist resurgence that is already upon us.

Bratich explains that for Julius Evola, the "primary authority-making mechanism" of fascism lies not in nationalism, patriarchy, or racial supremacism, but in "the state and its autotelic sovereign." If this is taken to mean that the state exists for itself and its own ends, and holds the exclusive power to use violence, then we are already living under fascism by Evola's definition. The hapless "autogenetic sovereigns" we encounter in *On Microfascism* are not responsible for the new fascism. That responsibility falls on ruling elites and the state apparatus that serves their interests.

These concerns notwithstanding, *On Microfascism* will be a valuable resource for readers seeking a comprehensive account of current writing on microfascism. It also succeeds in bringing together a commendably wide range of perspectives on fascism, from Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault to Judith Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, and Silvia Federici.

The final chapter, on anti-microfascism, offers some original and compelling strategies of resistance. Bratich proposes, for example, creating spaces for ex-fascist confessionals, and appropriating some of the signature strategies of micro-fascism to use against it, such as humor, internet memes, and anti-fascism's own recourse to a mythical past.

I'm left wondering, where does the next generation of Irmgard Furchners fit into this? The masses of ordinary citizens who will find themselves in service to the new fascism on the rise today?

It's hard to imagine they will be motivated by revelations brought on by redpilling or mythical warrior bands. Rather, people will be motivated by a culture that values conformity and economic productivity above all else, by feelings like patriotism and fear, and by the desperation wrought by four decades of neoliberal economic policies.

The new fascism is a vast and amorphous force, and we will need all the tools at our disposal—including those developed in this book—to resist it.

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