

**AESTHETIC CRITIQUE OF FASCISM
AND HUMANIST EXPRESSION**

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Introduction to Issue 16

“If Fascism promises beginnings of the day, representation exposes the interests of the middle of the day; then the owl of Minerva, flying at dusk, may reflect on the remains of the day—the ruins of the morning’s hope, the actuality of the broken middles.”

Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle*

“For 20 years you adored me and feared me, as a god. Then you madly hated me, you desecrated my corpse. Now, tell me, what was the point? Look around you... We’re still here.”

Mussolini: Son of the Century

The present issue of *Problématique* marks the relaunch of the graduate outlet of York’s Department of Politics. This sixteenth issue appears after a significant break in the publication’s life, which has been on pause since 2013. This revival, first conceived during the COVID pandemic, interrupted in solidarity amid the CUPE strike, and carried out despite institutional limitations imposed by the austerity of neoliberal academia, is meant to keep alive the scholarly platform for the distinct tradition of critical thinking that this department has been known for. The department is globally renowned for its politically engaged and rigorous scholarship, as well as for introducing wholly new ways of thinking within the Marxian tradition. It cannot afford not to have a graduate outlet.

The choice of Fascism as the theme of this journal’s revival testifies to a growing concern about the possible resurgence of politics best described by that epithet. This concern is exemplified by recent academic publications and debates on the topic (Paxton 2021; Traverso 2017; Griffin 2022, 2024; Gordon and Webber 2024). Fascism is most commonly defined as anti-communist and anti-liberal, and as involving mass mobilisation and paramilitary violence. It is organised around a coherent ultra-nationalist ideology and a charismatic leader (Griffin & Feldman 2004; Griffin 2018; Paxton 2004; Eatwell 1995, 2006). Classical Marxist accounts of Fascism, developed during the interwar period, viewed the phenomenon as a counter-reaction of the middle classes during an extended

period of imperialist economic crisis (Zetkin 1923; Trotsky [1931–1932] 2011; Gramsci 1921). This tradition acknowledges that as long as there is a struggle between labour and capital, punctuated by crises of capitalist accumulation, there remains a looming threat that capital will resort to forms of direct domination beyond purely economic measures. The Fascist tendency to suspend the rule of law, on which capitalist stability itself depends, is one reason why Fascism has historically prevailed in its struggle against labour. Thus, even prior to Walter Benjamin's famous formulation that "behind every Fascism lies a failed revolution," Marx himself discerned a proto-Fascist tendency in the politics of Bonapartism. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes how, following the failure of the French Revolution of 1848 and the ensuing crisis of political power, a grotesque farce entered history: a militaristic buffoon emerged on the political scene and staged a mythical spectacle to "unify" the nation and its warring classes.

The catastrophic state of emergency that Fascism turns into the rule itself, as Benjamin famously proclaimed, could be countered by a messianic "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (1989, 262). The emancipatory Jewish commandment to remember the oppressed past evoked by Benjamin, *Zakhor*, has been mutilated in the catastrophic farce of the present. For the orchestrated genocide in Gaza represents an instrumentalisation of

the memory of the Holocaust to perpetrate the annihilation of Palestinians, ideologically sustained by Hebrew Fascism. Emerging in the interwar period, Hebrew Fascism was not an accidental fringe phenomenon but a conscious engagement with European Fascism. As Dan Tamir (2018) demonstrates, sections of the Zionist movement actively studied and adopted fascist political styles. In the 1930s, Revisionist Zionism under Ze'ev Jabotinsky drew strategic and ideological inspiration from Mussolini, embracing what Roger Griffin (2018) calls an "organic nation," characterised by militarised unity, charismatic authority, and a mythic national destiny. Revisionist Maximalists and the Brit HaBirionim faction went further still, openly advocating for a Jewish Fascist state and borrowing heavily from the authoritarian models of Italy and Piłsudski's Poland. Irgun and Lehi operationalised these principles through fascist paramilitary organisation and political violence, enacting the action-oriented, leader-centred style that Roger Eatwell (2006) identifies with Fascist movements. Lehi's overtures not only to Fascist Italy but even to Nazi Germany exemplify what Robert Paxton (2004) describes as Fascism's "mobilising emotions": the veneration of "natural chiefs," the sanctification of violence, and the belief that national rebirth requires brute force.

These fascist threads only intensified with the founding of the Israeli state. After 1948, and especially following the territorial expansion of

1967, Hebrew Fascism entrenched a political tradition committed to domination, racial hierarchy, and maximal territorial claims. Kahanism, extremist settler movements, price-tag attacks, and the sacralisation of land all reflect the authoritarian impulses identified by Paxton (2004): reverence for strong leaders, contempt for minorities, and the normalisation of violence as a national duty. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 was not an aberration but the crystallisation of these tendencies. By the 1980s, Hebrew Fascist parties such as Kach, HaTchiya, Morasha, and Moledet had steadily expanded their base, transforming racist doctrines into viable electoral platforms. Hebrew Fascism is visible today in the remarks of Knesset ministers during the genocide in Gaza: calls for a Gaza Nakba, musings about nuclear options, proposals to bar Palestinians from harvesting their own olives, and open celebration of Gaza's destruction. This is not simply extremist rhetoric; rather, it is a Fascist political style embedded within state institutions.

By contrast, the very act of raising the problem of Fascism in the North American context, from which this call originated, inevitably produces a certain alarmism. In societies with no historical experience of Fascism comparable to that which plagued Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, common sense suggests that Fascist tendencies may exist but remain marginal. The problem is further compounded by the absence of a comparable history of

socialist mobilisation, the kind of force that historically provoked European Fascism. And yet, North America is no stranger to phenomena at the “core of Fascism” (Toscano 2023, xi). The political violence of the Ku Klux Klan and the former slave-owning class, in reaction to the unprecedented advances made by the Black proletariat in the wake of Reconstruction, belongs to such a core (*ibid.*), which W. E. B. Du Bois described as the “counter-revolution of property,” a movement “to subject Black labour to strict domination by capital” (Du Bois 1935, 626). Writings by members of the Black Panther Party likewise employ the expression “Amerikan fascism” (Jackson 1970) to characterise U.S. politics, notably in the context of the extrajudicial killing of Black revolutionaries. These interventions reinvigorated anti-Fascist thought and challenged classical definitions of Fascism as a phenomenon confined to European history.

Despite the racial and colonial conditions that also shaped Canadian capitalist development, organised Fascist movements—the Canadian chapters of the Ku Klux Klan, Arcand's National Social Christian Movement, Whittaker's Canadian Nationalist Party, and various neo-Nazi organisations, for example—remained relatively minor. Today, as even mainstream academics claim to seek refuge in Canada from a creeping Fascism in the United States, many Canadian academics and intellectuals may be tempted to regard Canadian liberal democracy

as immune to Fascism. Yet this belief sidesteps the more difficult, but essential, task of identifying the past and present violence of capital, as well as the conditions that make Fascism possible. Neoliberalism, capital's reaction to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the dominant regime of capital accumulation in Canada over the last several decades, as in much of the world, carries within it an ideological canon of ethno-economists, racial hierarchies, and proponents of racial "science" (Slobodian 2025). Events such as the recent meeting of the so-called "Fascist International" further underscore the need for Canadian anti-Fascists to reckon with Fascist movements' longstanding ambition to divide the "nomos of the world" into distinct ethnic entities, all the while extracting private profit through the imperial structures of monopoly finance capitalism and its evolving forms of workplace domination. Canadian diasporic multiculturalism, reliant on fantasies of the sovereign yet alienated individual and an intensified longing for a lost primordial community, becomes particularly vulnerable to internalising these mythologised global lines of division. The stupefying applause for a Ukrainian Waffen-SS veteran in the Canadian Parliament stands as a testament to this.

The current issue comprises responses to the editorial collective's call to critically reflect on the aestheticisation of politics by Fascist movements and on the potential of humanist aesthetics

to offer a political counter-response. By situating the analytical framework within the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory and its fellow travellers, we encouraged contributors to combine literary and aesthetic critique with a social and political analysis of the conditions that catalyse Fascist politics. Let us admit it at the outset: critical theory is no innocent notion. The latest generation of the Frankfurt School has severed its ties with its erstwhile label, "Western Marxism," and has turned instead to a form of academised and moralising thought against which its German founders originally positioned themselves. The detachment from the working-class movement and the abandonment of the critique of political economy have proven particularly damaging to critical theory's capacity to confront the rise of contemporary Fascism. The contradiction between legal equality and class inequality in liberal societies can lead not only to class solidarity, as the classics teach us, but also to the anarchic antagonism of disenfranchised masses, thereby reducing the very possibility of revolutionary politics. Contemporary critical theory, which has taken root within the intellectual circles of North America, finds itself ill-equipped to reckon with the ways this dynamic manifests in a globalised world torn by the dominance of corporate monopolies and the reactionary appropriations of legitimate social cleavages generated by neoliberal capitalism. The prevailing responses offered by many of critical theory's latest

representatives rely either on postmodern critique, rooted notoriously in the philosophy of a certain infamous Nazi, on the valorisation of the excluded Other, or on forms of normative theorising that construe Fascism as an error of rational normative judgement. Critical theory, with its impoverished resources, appears deserted, occupied with deciphering Fascism as an opaque “signifier,” violently dominating its other and longing for a glorious past, while refusing to attend to the “signified” material conditions. What if the reason for Fascism’s allure among the masses is perceived as too “common” and too “lowly” an experience to be recognised by highbrow academia? This may be a properly aesthetic problem. The “glorious past” of the post-war affluent West may not have been beautiful, but rather a class compromise, the loss of which is disavowed precisely as the postmodern baroque of Fascism advances.

The focus on aesthetic critique is in no way a diversion from the critique of political economy for which the department is renowned, but rather a recognition that the critique of aesthetic representation is a necessary step in connecting rigorous social critique with practice. Unlike subsequent generations of critical theory, the first generation of the Frankfurt School was more perceptive in disentangling the problem of aesthetics in modern societies and can still teach us much about the problems of representation in our age. Aesthetics, after all, as Herbert

Marcuse (1978) reminds us, pertains to the senses. To offer a sustained aesthetic critique is not to withdraw from reality into the realm of the judgement of the beautiful, where only artistic activity takes place, but rather to connect sensuous human activity, praxis, with the representational forms that reflect, obscure, or deform that very practice. The production, distribution, and reception of artistic works are always bound up with the overall structure of labour relations in society and with the political forms in which those relations unfold. From its inception, Marxian aesthetic critique has been attentive to the homology between artistic form and the social reality that determines it. As Georg Lukács (1994) famously argued, the novel does not merely present a discourse open to critique from a plurality of perspectives; its very form reflects the principle of subjective freedom upon which modern social, political, and economic relations fundamentally depend. Fascist movements, of course, claimed to do away with the abstraction of subjective freedom through various returns to “tradition,” “realism,” and the “Return to Order.” Yet, just as in the political and economic sphere, Fascism operates by usurping an inward and alienated subjectivity, one oriented toward particular interests in the marketplace and rendered incapable of political participation. Fascist myths of primordial community deliver this politically atrophied subjectivity into the hands of arbitrary authority. The “great man,” the leader, or whoever becomes

the bearer of a conjured metaphysical authority capable of arresting the anarchy of the market, can only accelerate the ontological violence of that very anarchy. Martin Heidegger understood this well when he attempted to elevate the supposed “greatness” of National Socialism above the “troubled waters of ‘values’ and totalities” (2014, 222).

The indispensable analysis of the “value form,” it is true, cannot guide us towards a better political worldview or an “imputed totality,” and one is left with the sense that aesthetic representation is irreducible. The scandal at the heart of politics, since the time of Plato, is that politics requires guiding myths. Modern humanism, so viciously attacked by those who sought in vain to replace it with a scientific study of political economy, may not have exhausted itself as our modern myth. It is with this reflection in mind that we issued this call, invoking Thomas Mann’s aesthetic ambition to wrest myth “out of Fascist hands.” Responding to the rise of Fascism in Germany, Mann did not oppose the imperial West to its excluded others; rather, he drew on the richness of world literature, Egyptian mythology, and Jewish and Christian theology to reclaim mythological thinking from its appropriation by reactionary political forces. Gillian Rose (1992), whose contribution to Marxian literary criticism may itself be seen as a distinct and subterranean generation of the Frankfurt School, showed that Mann’s dangerous journey into the origins, a backward movement

that paradoxically propels the reader towards a “new humanism,” illuminates the fraught nature of constructing a myth of cosmopolitan humanity. By integrating diverse literary forms into what remains a novel, Mann poses the problem of modern politics in aesthetic terms: how to reconcile the totality of real social relations with what Lukács called “imputed totality,” namely the consciousness of the dominated particular class with its universal, classless potential. In arrogating authority as the author of a “new humanism,” Mann, to be sure, risks deploying the very means that enabled Fascism to capture the political imagination of his contemporary readers. Mann’s strength lies in the fact that, as a “poet,” he refused the role of spiritual leader. He understood how to make use of authorial facetiousness without succumbing to the earnestness of imposing his authority upon readers, instead educating them in the paradoxes of authority itself. Mann’s humanist expression countered Fascism without reducing art to a mere “superstructure,” and without grounding a violent mythical origin in everything, an inclination shared by both Fascism and some of its purportedly radical critics. This issue is driven by the conviction, shared by the radical current of Frankfurt School critical theory and by Mann, that art can remain politically formative.

Our contributors offer a combination of diagnosis and expression in their aesthetic critique of Fascism and their exploration of aesthetic strategies

to counter reactionary political forces. These diagnostic approaches build upon diverse traditions compatible with the impulse of Frankfurt School critical theory, fusing literary and aesthetic criticism with a social and political critique of the conditions that give rise to Fascist politics. The contradictions inherent in the modern state and capitalist economic society are discerned in the aestheticised modes of Fascist political authority, in traditionalist national mythologies of primordial origins, and in mass media and culture. In countering these myths, contributors interpret aesthetic expressions and political strategies that resist such pernicious forces, with a view towards emancipatory politics. In one way or another, all contributors politicise aesthetics within the horizon of modern society—our perennial predicament.

Roy-Rojas' *The Gramsci–Bordiga Debate, 100 Years On* situates the Gramsci–Bordiga debate amid the rise of Fascism in interwar Italy, highlighting how their confrontation unfolded within a political environment increasingly shaped by Fascism's aestheticised modes of authority. Emerging alongside revolutionary upheaval, the debate reveals how questions of invariance, strategy, and organisation were conditioned not only by material forces but also by the stylised forms through which Fascism projected power and mobilised consent. By tracing how these dynamics entered into the strategic and theoretical tensions between Bordiga and Gramsci,

the paper shows that the aesthetic dimensions of Fascism formed part of the terrain on which their conceptual developments arose, offering insights that remain relevant for understanding contemporary entanglements of aesthetics, politics, and authoritarian resurgence.

Salinas' *Being Old and Being Modern: Amedeo Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale* offers a fascinating analysis of the reception of the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani's work amid the Fascist regime's curation of the XVII Biennale di Venezia in 1930. Against the backdrop of the "Return to Order" movement's rivalry with the cosmopolitan "French taste," Salinas reconstructs a disagreement between Antonio Maraini, the organiser of the Biennale and an advocate of Mussolini's project of national reconstruction, and Lionello Venturi, art historian, critic, and the exhibition's curator, over the form and meaning of Modigliani's oeuvre. The article shows how, through his curatorial work, Venturi was able to develop an anti-Fascist interpretative approach that undermined the ideological imperative to resuscitate modern Italian art in terms of reductive visions of tradition and realism. Through a careful analysis of this curatorial dissent, accompanied by a reconstruction of Modigliani's artistic deployment of the French cosmopolitan avant-garde in his valorisation of Italian art, Salinas's contribution raises crucial questions about the facile attempts to oppose modernity and tradition.

Gauvin's *La résistance esthétique au fascisme chez Benjamin et Adorno : entre politisation de l'art et autonomie formelle* examines Adorno's account of art and politics through his debate with Benjamin. The author reconstructs the concepts of aura and autonomous art, beginning with Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which the historical depletion of art's relationship to ritual is identified as a central feature of mass society. Benjamin, influenced by Brecht, outlines the political possibilities opened up by this conjuncture; these are contrasted by the author with Adorno's critique of Benjamin and his own understanding of artistic autonomy and aura. Drawing mainly on Adorno's letters to Benjamin and his essays on music and the culture industry, the author expounds Adorno's account of the contradictions of modernist aesthetic autonomy. Gauvin's contribution thus sheds light on the limits of the politisation of art, the culture industry's relation to Fascist ideology, and the possibilities that formal autonomy may offer for anti-Fascist praxis.

Pellerin's *Esthétique de la peur et partage du sensible dans les discours politiques sur les immigrants* builds on Rancière's notion of the *esthétique de la politique* and on critical discourse analysis to highlight fear's constitutive role in political discourse on immigration. Pellerin situates the mobilisation of fear within rising nationalist sentiment and tightening border controls, showing how the aesthetic of politics

structures the world of experience and governs the unequal distribution of legitimacy and political power. Media framings of migrants, especially after 9/11, mobilise fear and anxiety to conflate migration with security threats and pressures on social services. The prevalence of securitisation discourses accompanies anti-migration policies, while obscuring the fact that the security of migrants themselves is under threat. Drawing on media analysis and critical theory, the paper outlines the relationship between securitisation dynamics and the "distribution of the sensible," thereby offering an original account of the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

Deslauriers' review of Lukács' *La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie au miroir du roman historique des antifascistes allemands*, recently translated into French, offers a striking account of German anti-Fascist literature. For Lukács, the historical novel is the literary form *par excellence* of the democratic camp, capable of providing his contemporaries with goals and ideals, thus overcoming literature's "negativity." Yet the strength, or weakness, of such literature is closely tied to the state of its struggle with bourgeois liberalism. The political possibilities of the historical novel are also inseparable from its artistic form. Its poetic dimension enables it to evoke, within the text, a humanist struggle that transcends mundanity. Deslauriers' reading of *La lutte entre libéralisme et démocratie* shows how the historical novel, when it does justice to the

people as the driving force of history, is able to enact anti-fascist struggle in the narrative form itself.

This issue is being released in a new visual form and on a new *Problématique* website. The editorial collective welcomes its new members from the Department of Politics, who will continue to showcase the department's politically engaged scholarship, as well as that of its fellow travellers.

Problématique Editorial Collective

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