

# Reviews

## Fascist ships of Theseus

Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2023). 224pp., £17.99 pb., 978 1 83976 020 4

In most journalistic writing, the power of the contemporary far right to do hurt is nonreflexively theorised in the language of absurdist children's fiction. The metaphor of the looking glass, the metaphor of the 'mirror-world', the metaphor of the maze-like and uterine 'rabbit hole' – all are forms of description through which contemporary fascism is stripped of its menacing alterity and presented in the style of a storybook. The frequency with which the term is associated with 'nonsense literature' in turn seems to increase as the political authority and social acceptability of the 'far right' grows more undeniable.

Clarity of sense; possession of political authority. The concepts do not now seem to be intimately or deeply related, although they may well be deeply or intimately *nonrelated*, in a world in which, like in *Through the Looking Glass*, 'everything is reversed, including logic'.

Recently, in her unusual semi-autofictional work on left-right 'diagonalism', *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*, Naomi Klein appears to make a similar observation, when she argues that the right-wing 'mirror world' tracks a decline in the 'meaning' of language in general. Power, which concedes nothing without a demand, also increasingly demands without a nothing concede. The nonsense of the second statement warps and seems to extend backwards, into the specific meaning of the first, to the point that it becomes increasingly hard to believe with lucid conviction (per Klein) in the integrity and significance of either. This has something to do with the internet, she suggests. For her part, Klein is clearly embarrassed to talk about herself at such length. Fascism in popular usage is widely understood as direct violence against political opponents utilised to enforce social hierarchy, including the structural social hierarchy of capital. It *seems* like it should feel extremely clear. So why doesn't it? The introduction to this review was drafted a day after the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, in which Biden said of

Trump that 'he is ... responsible for doing what is being that was done'. This scrambling or blurring of words into one another, the misuse of words that makes meaning feel obtainable and at the same time fugitive or nonsensical, or just pointless, seems somehow reflective of the present, as though speech when it is 'political' *were always like this*: a blurring and a scrambling that appears strangely only really to come into focus when the most powerful man in the world is unable to conjugate his sentences. There is a tradition of anti-fascist analysis that takes this experience seriously, by asking *how* instead of *what* fascism means, and which recognises that loss of clarity, confusion, directionless, but also deliberate violation of meaning, are important political instruments. But it remains an underground tendency. Sartre's statement 'Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies' provides a programmatic starting point, but the problem is how to link this intuition to larger historical developments. If Guy Debord was right that capital has arrived at 'such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image', then the question remains, why the image of a rabbit hole? And why *images* in the first place?

Alberto Toscano's book *Late Fascism* is not another entry in the now voluminous literature on the periodisation of fascism (post-fascism, crypto-fascism, para-fascism), nor is it an attempt to decide whether current developments in US state politics can or cannot be classified as 'fascist'. The endless intellectual and biographical ornithology of minor contemporary trends on the political far right (a kind of left-liberal collector's mania) is fundamentally alien to Toscano's intellectual and political purposes. *Late Fascism* can more usefully be read as an essay in the meaning of political categories, or, more accurately, of the ways in which such categories are usefully or harmfully degraded, through the interaction of language and social activity. *Late Fascism* is thus not

a history (or even really a ‘mosaic’) of heterodox anti-fascist theories – though Toscano modestly suggests that it can read in this way – so much as an essay in *how* to analyse a political moving target (one that shoots back). It can also be thought of as a kind of performative method of description, oriented towards an enormous organic object in which some parts ‘contradict’ or annul others and where the whole is constantly shedding and acquiring new elements, making a pugilistic virtue of its own complex and ‘structured incoherence’ – a tendency that many orthodox Marxist theories struggle to comprehend. At some more abstract level, it can be read as an exercise in prophylaxis against the tendency for ‘the left’ to make alliances with, or drift towards, or imperceptibly metamorphose into, the right, usually by dissolving its idea of class into some kind of ethnic or socially conservative majoritarianism.

Distinctively, *Late Fascism* achieves this prophylaxis without simply tailing alliances with bourgeois liberalism, whether of the ‘elite progressive’ or the ‘economic-institutional’ variety. Its basic contribution is to establish a way of opposing both liberalism and fascism at the level of *method*, without splitting conceptual hairs or by summarily dissolving the two tendencies into one another (as per varieties of ultra-leftism from the Stalinist Third Positionism of the 1920s through to the French Holocaust denying ultra-left of the 1970s). It is unusual in doing this *without* presenting a ‘theory’ of anti-fascism or of its correct, watertight and definitive practice. Readers will search the book in vain for a definition of anti-fascism that definitively distinguishes it from bourgeois liberal ‘anti-fascism’ and ‘populist’ diagonalism or red-brownism; there is none. But the distinction is nevertheless there. It exists in a specific angle of approach, or, as a form of relation.

How to justify such an indirect and ‘meta-theoretical’ method? Fascism as Toscano presents it is not so much a political philosophy as a ‘scavenging’ or mimetic *tradition*. The tradition is capable of mimicking aspects of revolutionary leftism as well as aspects of the liberal bourgeois order. Its core, articulated in the book’s subtitle (‘Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis’) is self-dissembling and fugitive, since, as Toscano shows, it is constantly dissolving or fusing its primary preoccupation – crudely defined, defence of existing hierarchy – into lexicons and forms of political address that seem (at least at first

glance) to be alien to it. This may make the book’s object of analysis sound too much like a hall of mirrors. But theories of fascism that are hostile to the question of representation (mimicry, ventriloquy, resemblance, appearance, likeness) are perpetually susceptible to being outflanked by fascism in the very effort to depict it. Recently this mimetic aspect of fascism discourse has become so blatantly obvious that it has been addressed even in the social democratic mainstream: this is the significance of Klein’s recent turn towards ‘fiction’, as a way of dealing with online political experience. Fascism reveals itself everywhere as a system of will and representation. Even its ‘concepts’ are structures of likeness, mimicry and camouflage; the structured incoherences of its ideas are *systems* of maximum disruptive contrast. The motivating event for Toscano’s book – the first election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the wave of explanations for this development in terms of his appeal to the ‘white working class’ – was perhaps the first great mimetic shock of recent political history, the discovery of a ‘likeness’ between fascist and leftist speech that much of ‘the left’ itself was unable or unprepared to understand, inaugurating years of theoretical bewilderment in which many socialists and communists made a pact with liberal constitutionalism and identity progressivism while others, as per the standard red-brown synthesis, boiled class and gender liberation down to its undifferentiated component parts of skin pigmentation and sex difference.

In many ways we are still wandering in this wilderness. One of the most useful ways to think of *Late Fascism* is as a demonstration that it is impossible to theorise fascism unless we understand that fascist theory is itself a system of appearance – a mirage. Toscano’s own non-theory, with its distinctive ensemble of structured incoherences, can be understood among other things as a method of theoretical seeing. In this sense, it dovetails with other recent writings coming from a more literary-critical background that understand that fascism as a system of aesthetics, in particular a recent work by the poet William Rowe titled *Seeing Against Fascism*.

The opening chapter of *Late Fascism* sets out in more detail the context I have sketched in above. Originally published as a late intervention in the by then long-running debate on the usefulness of the term ‘fascism’ to describe the then recently elected first Trump government, the chapter is centrally about the supposed



neglect of the 'white working class' by 'the left', as well as, relatedly, the role of 'untimeliness' in different periods of fascist thought.

The trajectory of argument here is slightly different from that which emerges in the later chapters, and so it is worth setting down its basic movements step by step. Toscano begins by invoking two dissident Marxist authors for whom temporal and logical disjunction were explicit and central themes: Ernst Bloch and Georges Bataille. He dismisses the contemporary relevance of more orthodox theories of fascism from the 1930s whose central claim was that fascism was 'functional' for capital.

Three interesting and potentially contrary claims – what Toscano describes as 'disanalogies' between the past and the present – are introduced here, the tension between which will form one of the book's central points of interest:

(1) Early, 'orthodox' Marxist theories of the functionality of fascism to capital (as a form of state terrorism useful for overcoming 'economic' crisis) are inadequate to the present, when capital 'is not rushing en masse towards an exceptional state to counter existential threats to its reproduction': this argument is a brusque dismissal

of much of the current 'Marxist' literature.

(2) Heterodox Marxists opened up a more complex understanding of the relation of the past to the present by trying to understand the role of pre-capitalist 'survivals' in the consciousness and the aesthetics of fascist movements (and by arguing these 'remained off-limits to a communism whose rational principles risked generating irrational strategies').

(3) *However*, these 'survivals' in the present are no longer clearly recognisable.

The opening chapter then begins to develop in a manner that is, with a few important differences, characteristic of the rest of the book. In reflecting on the possible termination of Blochian nonsimultaneity in contemporary society, Toscano turns to Pasolini's late reflections on consumer society as 'fascism', responsible for the 'genocide' of cultural difference. Leaning on Pasolini's claims – themselves intentionally 'exaggerated' or 'inflated' – he suggests that the form of nonsimultaneity specific to fascism in the late 2010s is a form of 'nostalgia for the present'; a desire not for 'lifeways' of a nonurban society that persist as fragments and yearning into industrial modernity, but for industrial modernity itself, in the



form of the ‘post-war affluence of the *trente glorieuses*’. The political motivations for this argument emerge into view in the following pages. Both Bloch and Bataille, introduced to help us to think more subtly ‘the contemporary nexus of politics and history’, are to be ‘recalibrated’ or ‘corrected’ to account for the loss of distorted utopian drives in the fascism of the present. This loss or denaturing is itself politically explicable in terms of ‘the absence of one of the key determinants of fascism, namely the revolutionary threat to capitalist order’. A final series of leaps and transitions then carries us via Adorno’s account of an anti-utopian ‘phoniness’ in the fascist follower and Jairus Banaji’s Sartrean account of fascist ‘serial groups’ back to the chapter’s point of political and conceptual origin: to the claim that the loss of a revolutionary horizon feeds through into contemporary fascism in the form of the essentially barren character of its groups, that is, into its conception of class as group, that is, into the processed pseudo-concept of ‘the *white* working class’. This of course is the group whom authors of the most varied political tendencies reflexively declared in 2016–17 to have been ‘abandoned’ and placed as an intellectual and political totem at the centre of their accounts of the rise of the Trumpian right.

The chapter is a brilliant polemical intervention, disguised as a work of genealogy. But its complicated assessment of ‘nonsynchronicity’ also sheds light on the adjective in the book’s title – ‘late’. This has a peculiar status in Toscano’s thinking. The phrase from which *Late Fascism* is derived, ‘late capitalism’, was originally proposed by the Fourth International Trotskyist Ernest Mandel to describe the post-war structure of capitalist society, before later (and perhaps more famously) being taken up by Fredric Jameson in his attempt to define its purported ‘cultural logic’. Mandel’s use of the term suggests capitalist continuity *within discontinuity*, the most significant and theoretically inconvenient form of which was the Second World War and the Nazi Holocaust itself. ‘Late capitalism’, Mandel writes in his book of that title, ‘is ... merely a further development of the imperialist, monopoly-capitalist epoch’. Toscano’s use of the term could hardly be more different. His *Late Fascism* is not an account of the qualified continuity of the past and the present so much as a work of *anti*-periodisation that systematically demolishes the borders between periods, categories, and traditions of analysis. It exists in a

kind of ‘nexus’ (another favourite term) with the vocabulary of *salvage*, an approach to the theory of fascism that is invoked and then put to one side in the opening intervention on class – where it clashes with the deflationary and polemical tenor of Toscano’s reading of the racialised ‘working class’ – only itself to be salvaged several chapters later, where an apparently contrary project is outlined: ‘Among fascism’s scavenged treasures was also utopia. And fascist scavenging was to be countered by communist salvage’.

As the book progresses, and the periodising and polemical aims of the opening chapter recede in importance, this topos of salvage becomes more and more central. The shifting emphasis can already be made out in the second chapter on race, where Toscano mainly draws on George Jackson’s account of fascism, set out in his exchange of letters with his lawyer and Angela Davis, and other writings collected in *Blood in My Eye* (1972). Jackson’s thinking, developed and written out in his cell in San Quentin, intersects closely with a Third Position approach to fascism, which defines it as one political guise taken by social democracy: this is the root of Jackson’s well-known formulation of fascism as economic reform.

Toscano adopts a different approach to this theory than the one that defined his analysis of Bloch and Bataille. He does not ‘correct’ or ‘recalibrate’ it; instead, he quotes Jackson’s own comments on fascism *as they are embodied by the material infrastructure of his prison*: ‘the concrete and steel, the tiny electronic listening device concealed in the vent, the phalanx of goons peeping in at us, his barely functional plastic tape recorder that cost him a week’s labour’. The method of reading has subtly but fundamentally changed. ‘Concepts’ that are ‘degraded’, exaggerated or merely mouthed as insults are to be treated with a ‘great effort of imagination’ (Jean Genet, as cited by Toscano). This isn’t about Toscano condescending to Jackson, or even simply about making allowances, because it then becomes the method of reading for each of the book’s subsequent chapters. *Late Fascism* increasingly treats theoretical concepts as both (to use a phrase later lifted from Adorno) ‘tool and scar’. Toscano’s own sensitive remark on Jackson and Angela Davis’ correspondence, that it is ‘marked by differences of interpretation interwoven by a profound comradeship’, becomes the leitmotif of his own practice as a reader of the archive of communist theorisations of fascist polit-

ics, fascist psychology and fascist theory. The analysis of fascism ceases to be the struggle for a correct 'definition' and becomes instead (once again using a phrase repurposed from Adorno) something like the description of a 'psychological area'. The ability to establish profound comradeship between the apparently contradictory ideas and claims that inhabit this 'area' then becomes the measure of a meta-commentary's intellectual and political adroitness – its ability to prefigure 'coalitional possibilities'.

Here the work overlaps with some other important recent thinking on fascism. In 2023, the poet and critic William Rowe published a pamphlet on the poetry of the British poet Verity Spott titled *Seeing Against Fascism*. In Rowe's programmatic intervention, fascism is a property of vision, not of concepts. Any category can exist in its own way within what we can call the fascist 'area', as well as outside of or in opposition to it. The point here is not just to make the conventional argument that 'reification' is bad and 'relations' are good, but to explain why the attempt to define fascism by means of basic conceptual traits leads inevitably to circular reasoning and (perhaps more importantly) to a particular psycho-social sensation: something like intellectual and political claustrophobia. Just as the best response to the existence of a fascist 'way of seeing' is not to force long gold pins into your eyes *but to see differently*, the existence of fascism within the 'space' of our own categories of political understanding requires us to find different ways of orienting ourselves towards them. Rowe's approach, in which fascism is a mode of perception for which concepts possess only a secondary role, corresponds in some ways with Toscano's, for example when the latter writes about the 'differential visibility and experience of both fascism and democracy', in connection with Davis' argument that 'The dangerous and indeed fascistic trend toward greater numbers of hidden, incarcerated human populations is itself rendered *invisible*'; or when he insists on the centrality of 'differential experience of domination' in assessments of the 'correctness' of theoretical categories. Experience includes vision. The phalanx of goons peeping in on us experience with their eyes.

A productive way of approaching Toscano's chapters is to see them not only as about 'areas' of fascist thinking (a way of escaping additive 'definitions'), but also as areas within which communist thinking is superim-

posed. There are places in the book where this approach is made very explicit, for example in the programmatic declaration already quoted, where 'fascist 'scavenging' is contrasted with communist 'salvage'. But the issue is implicit elsewhere, in the way that Toscano's 'archive' is assembled. The fascist conceptual-thematic 'areas' that are introduced are always ways of thinking about communism too, present within the 'areas' of fascist thinking as

an actual reality that has been denied ... a thing that's not supposed to be there manifesting in the imaginary ... A strong force that has no image' but which has 'convulsed space and removed the possibility of grounding this thing'.

This happens to be Rowe again, but the passage reads as a description of Toscano's method transposed into a different key.

Organic metaphors acquire a significant role here. Toscano often uses the figure of 'metastasis' to describe fascist thinking – an organicism gone wrong, a cancered Romanticism. His approach to the 'lateness' of 'fascism' often returns probingly to the vocabulary of 'malaise', defined in a different context in the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms*, Aby Warburg's *History of Art*:

The archaeological model occupied Freud throughout his life. His thoughts about time – that is to say, about the paradoxes and disorders [*malaises*] in evolution – were often indebted to it, for example when he linked the question of *stages* or of *stases* to the question of strata, i.e., of material depths.

Here both of Toscano's core metaphors are anticipated. The 'stages' or 'stases' cannot be thought without the *meta*-stases, the processes of anarchic transition. What Toscano speaks about in his first chapter on 'untimeliness' as the synchronicity of fascism in the twenty-first century, a 'nostalgia for the present', develops over the course of his book into the 'geologically displaced and piled up strata' of the twentieth-century histories of fascism, liberalism and communism *as theory and as practice*, in relation to which the present is defined. 'Synchronicity' becomes just one stratum within a system of modern political history defined as an – admittedly desecrated and despoiled – archaeological site, organised, to use Didi-Huberman's terms, by 'anachronisms, phase

displacements, latencies, delays, [and] aftershocks'. The temporal malaise epitomised *not as impasse but as disorder* leads to an archaeology of uncontrollable growths.

This generalisation to the level of historical process of what we could call psychoanalytic time then joins up with Toscano's pursuit of a kind of fascist death drive (though Toscano avoids this Freudian concept): fascism's enjoyment of destruction and violence. This takes multiple forms in the book: the heroic death as national fate ontologised by Heidegger; the 'religion of death' of fascist esotericism; and the ideal of the 'useless task' or 'gratuitous brutality' that Toscano identifies in esoteric far-right cults and diffidently associates with fascist lone wolf shooters. A coda to the chapter on Furio Jesi connects this 'void' to the unspoken and mythic idea of race, but the image of a deep-seated desire for masochist gratuitousness *as void* provides Toscano with an unusual way of thinking about how fascism and anti-fascism relate to the same ideas, traditions, vocabularies and concepts. It also indicates something about how they both emerge and undergo metamorphosis in what I'm calling the same area – that is, about what it means to deal with problem of adjacency or overlap that is essential to the experience of political identity in the 'late' fascist period or anti-period for which Toscano's book attempts to find means of expression, or experience. What Didi-Huberman describes as the 'geologically displaced and piled up strata', the 'geological stratification, temporal inversion, concentric stratification around a centre, a broken line that takes roundabout paths, the zizag line of the knight's move', etc., *define areas that are endlessly available*, both to the scavenging 'void' of fascist impulses and to the salvaging instincts of a communism that tries, by building unexpected connections between both concepts and people, to create new conditions for life. 'Anti-fascist theory', writes Toscano at the end of his chapter on time, 'cannot operate at the level of the commodity form and its time alone'. By the same token, anti-fascism cannot be 'defined', it can only be described. Like George Jackson thinking about all of capitalist history in his cell in San Quentin, it is 'an actual reality that has been denied ... a thing that's not supposed to be there'. To evaluate the *products* of Jackson's theory independently of the circumstances of its production (which, as Toscano points out, appear explicitly and pointedly in the texts themselves) is itself a form of denial, and is in this sense adjacent to

fascist seeing as William Rowe defines it: blood in my eye.

The 'areas' that Toscano's book covers include fascist thinking about time, race, freedom, abstraction, history, myth and desire, i.e., all areas where communists might equally be expected to develop positions. Some claims essential to the account I am developing here can be set out schematically. First, that fascism has its own 'ideas' about freedom – in particular in relation to the state as an 'arena' for power competition, rather than as a granitic totalitarian block. Second, that its use of myths ('survivals' of earlier social formations) are central forms of ideology, in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's sense of 'real abstractions' operative in social practice. Third, that desire is important, including in relation to the use of concepts and language. The book's penultimate chapter, which deals tantalisingly if really too briefly with Furio Jesi's oblique claims about fascist language and myth, directly precedes the concluding chapter on fascist desire, gender normativity and sex politics. The adjacency is not incidental.

Toscano says in his Preface that 'This book is a record of my own path through materials from bygone conjunctures and disparate places, to salvage the components of a compass with which to orient myself'. The spatial-topographical metaphor recalls the 'mirror-world' invoked by Klein, and perhaps tacitly endorses her Carrollian map of the territory. At the same time, the trope of the disturbing double that appears in Klein's book (hypocrite reader!) is here transposed into the image of a communist 'salvaging', as parts of a theoretical 'compass', components for which fascists are also constantly 'scavenging' for their own metapolitical purposes. Conceptual disorientation (massive topographical space) bleeds into loss of political identity (extreme proximity). In working through this dissonance, Toscano goes a step further than Klein, by implicitly arguing that this combined experience of spatial disorientation and discomfiting loss of identity through proximity *has to be endured*, and that doing so might itself be part of the project of developing an anti-fascist theoretical and political approach.

Much writing about fascism and liberalism speaks about confusionism using topographical-geographical metaphors, and yet is fanatically concentrated on the idea of proximity. Hatred of proximity is the motivating occasion for Klein's book and the organising principle of

most liberal theories of fascist ‘totalitarianism’, in which bourgeois freedom is the ‘opposite’ of fascist authoritarianism, and maintenance of this social distancing is what politics essentially is. In a review of Toscano’s book in the *Marxism and Philosophy Review of Books*, Conrad Hamilton has criticised the work for the contrary form of excessive proximity, this time to liberal identity politics: ‘the false hope of a liberal buy-in’.

Fear of resemblance is the phobic root of political thinking that seeks to establish its identity through endless acts of conceptual disavowal: I am not like that, we are not like that, that is different to us. This is the-oretical language as a game of looking in the mirror: the endless attempt to establish one’s own political and social personhood through the act of staring at oneself in the reflective surface of some undecidable concepts. Toscano’s attempt to define ‘lateness’ as the historical-political point at which ‘conceptual definition’ becomes a kind of shell-game *opens up as materials for an alternative self-definition* the full gamut of relationships to concepts that cannot *not be* contested and self-contradictory: degradation, exaggeration, stereotypy, eclecticism, overstatement, the situated and deuniversalised language that is most often made over to literature, or, worse, poetry, misprision, false particularisation, resemblance, appearance, mimicry. These and other associated terms are all means through which fascism relates to (rather than obliterating) the traditions of bourgeois liberalism, most obviously through its exploitation of a freedom that is both historically produced – a ‘function’, if we like, of the forces of production – and (to use Toscano’s own adjective) highly ‘differentially’ owned: a freedom that is always and by definition a freedom for some people to inflict harm, inaugurate violent spectacle and fuck up the potential of others. The scarred or scavenged tool of ‘anti-fascism’ is itself degraded, situated, self-contradictory, eclectic and prone to overstatement, but it is also a means to convert the ineluctable shell-game within a system of overlapping and contested concepts back into a means of self-identification through the medium of relation itself, including to inevitable conceptual proximity. Toscano declines the task of reflecting on ‘late’ (that is, contemporary) fascism through the degraded materials of personal biography, but there are very few of us who in the recent period of mimetic shock will have been spared the painful spectacle of watching our ‘own’

contemporaries and ideas becoming warped into what we imagined to be our opposite. In that sense, we are all Naomi Klein (and Naomi Wolf).

This perhaps brings us back to *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and rabbit holes. In fascist thinking, deliberate absurdism has to do with the supererogatory: it is the ‘thinking’ of people whose practical commitment is to the intensification of whatever is happening anyway. When at the Berlin Biennale in 2016, a poster put up by the fascism-curious curatorial collective DIS asked ‘why do fascists have all the fun?’, the idea seemed to be about exactly this utopian aspect of (‘childlike’) irresponsibility: the freedom of thought from the burden of having to make sense, which perhaps is just an extension of the negative idea of freedom (‘freedom from’) that has always been most appealing to those already in possession of power, wealth and privilege. But if we take seriously that Mussolini’s ‘super-relativism’ means that there are no fascist concepts per se, but only fascist modes of thought, ‘stages’ or ‘stases’ that are always passing over into *meta*-stases, what could be the Marxist ‘cell form’ of these metastases, of the changing sequences of the disorder or malaise?

Late fascism as a mimetic or ‘scavenger’ tradition can be like anything else; it can be like liberalism or communism or an art biennial in a major European metropolis, and it can also be like money or a career move or a fantastic world involving a mirror. This adaptive character creates a problem that *Late Fascism* approaches using language that will strike some as almost alarmingly existentialist. Toscano talks throughout his work of voids: of the ‘tactics of the void’, or of a ‘pulsating void’ at the heart of fascism. This is his main, implied answer to what we might call the Ship of Theseus problem – the accusation that if fascism has no definition and is permanently scavenging new materials, then it is not the same as itself and lacks any meaningful identity. ‘Serious scholars’ of the phenomenon are unlikely to accept this playfully provocative insinuation. Fascism is, as ‘one of the old guard’ informed George Jackson, ‘an economic geo-political affair where only one party is allowed to exist aboveground and no opposition political activity is allowed’, *mutatis mutandis* and allowing for some fashionable variation in the descriptive vocabulary. The idea that it is a constitutive *absence*, one that defines a relationship to the ideas that it uses, *and that there are no*



*ideas of which it cannot make use*, seems deeply and therefore also suspiciously metaphysical. Fascism has to be something more than a kind of emptiness that makes its way inside the languages – all of them, without respect to political tradition – that have emerged to describe human life in its mediations by capital, technology and the state. Doesn't it?

The question hangs in the air. What becomes of political theory when it cannot free itself from an impossible riddle? To borrow some lines from Karen Dalton's version of 'Katie Cruel':

If I was where I would be,  
Then I'd be where I am not  
Here I am where I must be  
Where I would be I cannot

This idea comes back in one last metaphor that appears in *Late Fascism* on more than one occasion. In his chapter on fascist freedom, Toscano discusses the fascist 'non-state' (another concept defined by a negation) as 'the *volatile arena* for political and economic power-competitions, driven and legitimated by racial imperialism'. Later, in his chapter on fascist desire, he quotes a long passage from an article by Robin Marasco, in which Marasco argues that fascism 'offers white women an account of their unhappiness and an *affective arena* to express their rage'.

It seems that political concepts too can become 'volatile' arenas, stadia for the 'venting of rage'. But they do this only *after* they have been hollowed out, intus-suscepted with a void or absence that itself responds to our own feeling of anger that their original meanings have failed to do what they promised to do, which in the case of political concepts is usually to change our life. The scavenged and degraded fascist concept becomes a hollow arena for the 'venting of rage' only once it has failed to accomplish the transformative or descriptive task for which it was originally designed. This is one reason why fascism itself is always 'late' and why (although it is by no means simply a 'mirror' of liberalism or communism) it has no distinctive philosophy of its own. It is a kind of hole, driven into political ideas that we believe have betrayed us. Its concepts, like its states, are 'non-concepts', the tools and scars of interpreting and changing the world transformed into empty arenas for the venting of belligerent wounded animosity.

Meaning, apostrophises Naomi Klein somewhere in the middle of her unexpected 'trip into the mirror world', is today undergoing a process of 'radical currency devaluation'. Her book here produces quite unexpectedly a topos basic to intellectual elitism ever since at least the seventeenth century, articulated by figures such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift: we are living through a crisis in values, brought on by the linguistic uses and misuses of uneducated masses of people. The 'fun' associated with fascist mimicry of concepts is just this general tendency towards devaluation intensified into a nihilist comedy of hyperinflation.

Klein is interested in the way that political language comes to seem like mere noise, a background hum that continues reassuringly 'in the media' as the powerless and the weak are tortured and put to death in boats or the concentration camps of 'third country' clients. She is also interested in the way the agents of social murder can speak as if they were their opponents, and she is interested in this 'as if' as a feeling of meaninglessness, as loss of meaning, as directionlessness, as depression.

Toscano's 'lateness' may seem to invoke some of the same tendencies. But the lateness of his degraded anti-fascism is not about value but about *survival*, and the fact that this distinction is itself hard to hold on to is a testament to the absolute hegemony of ideas of value and respectability in governing the way in which we think about concepts and political identity. The figure in his book of George Jackson as someone *for whom the dominant and 'correct' theory of fascism was always a kind of non-sense literature*, always a rabbit hole leading to an upside down world fantastically purified of tiny electronic listening devices, barely functional plastic tape recorders and especially of steel bars, is its fundamental lesson. The degraded object of an in a sense obviously false Third Position Stalinism became for Jackson a means with which to explain. He did not fear he would be 'like' a Third Positionist Stalinist. Nor did he suffer from the experience of mimetic shock, which in this sense is revealed as a disease of affluence, a discovery that allows the theme of 'class' in *Late Fascism* to come back in, now as the old anxiety about being seen in the wrong company.

Ultimately the value of the thing that helps us to survive is irrelevant. If political speech is experienced now as something which has been drained or evacuated of significance, such that the solecisms of a 'sympathetic



... elderly man with a poor memory' (as one journalist said of Biden) seem to speak an essential truth about the whole thing, then this is perhaps a reflection not of the loss of value of political language but of the irrelevance of all existing systems of value to our own intellectual and political endurance. Toscano's book's open approach to degradation implies this. We may not have our own

conceptual space, free from mirrors and rabbit holes and irresponsible desires, but we relate to dead and degraded materials including ourselves with the aim of helping each other to live. Degraded as it is, the anti-fascist Ship of Theseus offers to you, without conditions, as Frank O'Hara once wrote: 'my hull and the tattered cordage of my will'.

Danny Hayward

## Farce squared

Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (London: Penguin, 2023). 416pp., £10.99 pb., 978 1 80206 195 6

In my initial read of Klein's spiral through a web of mirrors, doubles and doppelgangers, Zionism seemed to be just one instance among many of a right-wing ideology corrupting the language of liberation. But the more I sat with Klein's book, the clearer it seemed that Klein's analysis of Zionism contained the key to all of the other issues of interest. In one way, it is unsurprising that I couldn't get away from Zionism: this piece was written in April and May of 2024, when students and faculty at campuses across the United States, including my own, initiated an impressive protest wave against the continued investment of our educational institutions in profiting from the atrocities unfolding in Palestine. It has been nigh impossible these last seven months to focus on anything else, to write on anything else, to think about anything else. The brutal repression of Palestine has become a filter through which we must see everything else.

At the end of *Doppelganger*, Klein focuses on the rise of Zionism as a perverted double of Western imperialism, 'a doppelganger of the colonial project, specifically settler colonialism'. While it may seem to some that the Israeli state's current atrocities in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon are exceptional, Klein sees them as the replication of the repressed atrocities that made the modern world: European colonialism, in all its forms, which used genocide, land theft, racial hierarchy, religious zealotry and capitalist domination to remake nearly every corner of the globe. The truth about Zionism, from Klein's perspective, is that it reflects the normative rule of global power, rather than representing a novel regime of brutality. Tracing a long history of doubles from

the extermination of Indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere to the Nazi death machine to the West's attempted *mea culpa* for antisemitism, Klein reveals the present settler colonial regime in Palestine to be a return of the repressed of Christian, Occidental, liberal societies. Klein could not have anticipated how timely this analysis, which neither exculpates nor exoticises Jewish Israeli domination, would prove to be, as the events of October 7 set in motion a new level of extreme violence on Gaza.

One of the most famous accounts of historical doubling comes from Marx, who wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' The farcical is a theme that recurs throughout Klein's readings of many unsettling twin stories over the course of the book, and the case of Zionism is particularly acute. At the crest of decolonial movements for independence after World War II, the Western community coalesced around the demand for Jewish people to be granted a national state, and for that national state to be placed in Palestine. While contemporary right-wing commentators try to debate the accuracy of calling Israel a colonial state, Zionists from the 1880s through the 1950s were quite clear that they were colonising Palestine, and despite the growing global resistance to colonisation, many Zionist institutions directly described themselves as a colonial force:

The tacit argument many Zionists were making at the time was the Jews had earned the right to an exception