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## Review Essay



### American Anti-Fascism Comes of Age

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Shane Burley, *Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse* (Chico, CA.: AK Press, 2021).—340 pages.—ISBN 9781849354066.

Devin Zane Shaw, *Philosophy of Antifascism: Punching Nazis and Fighting White Supremacy* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020).—149 pages.—ISBN 9781786615589.

American anti-fascism has come of age as both social movement and object of scholarly study. During the turmoil and tribulations of the Trump era, the anti-fascist network known as antifa was active in high-profile protests against the far right across the whole of America. As a result, antifa has received more hostile, sensationalist and ill-informed media coverage and political reaction than any other organisation on the American left. Antifa has now become the biggest bogeyman to US conservatives and the far right since the heady days of McCarthyite anti-communism in the 1950s.

The last few years have thankfully seen a plethora of excellent publications written by scholars, journalists and activists that have provided much needed context and socio-political analysis of American anti-fascist history, organisation, ideology and tactics.<sup>1</sup> We are therefore now in a much better position than

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1 Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Antifascist Handbook* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017); J. Clark, 'Three-Way Fight: Revolutionary Anti-Fascism and Armed Self-Defense,' in *Setting Sights: His-*

ever to assess the historical narrative of anti-fascism in the United States and to explore both the continuities and discontinuities with interwar anti-fascist organising as well as the lessons to be learnt from postwar anti-fascism in the pre-digital era. Furthermore, there have been some telling contributions to long running debates on the pros and cons of liberal versus militant anti-fascism, on the use of political violence, and the relationship between anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and other emancipatory movements. There is now a depth of scholarship and a range of sources comparable to the rich vein of literature on anti-fascism in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

The two books under consideration here are both written from an avowedly militant anti-fascist perspective which will not appeal to all readers. However, both are the products of deep research, provide well-buttressed arguments and deepen our knowledge and understanding of contemporary US anti-fascism, while also providing some original disciplinary and theoretical perspectives which offer potential new avenues for further research, scholarship, and activism.

Shane Burley is a journalist and filmmaker whose previous book was one of the best accounts of the rise of the alt right in America.<sup>3</sup> His latest book is a collection of essays, some of which were previously published in a range of

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*tories and Reflections on Community Armed Self-Defense*, ed. Scott Crow (Oakland, CA: PM Press 2018); Nigel Copsey and Samuel Merrill, 'Violence and Restraint within Antifa: A View from the United States', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14 no. 6 (2020): 122–138; Nigel Copsey and Samuel Merrill, *Understanding 21st-Century Militant Anti-Fascism* (Lancaster: CREST, 2021); Peter Duffy, *The Agitator: William Bailey and the First American Uprising against Nazism* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2019); John Enyeart, *Death to Fascism: Louis Adamic's Fight for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Don Hamerquist et al., *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: KerspledeB, 2017); Natasha Lennard, *Being Numerous: Essays on Non-Fascist Life* (New York: Verso, 2019); Hilary Moore and James Tracy, *No Fascist USA!: The John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and Lessons for Today's Movements* (San Francisco: City Lights Open Media, 2020); Laura B. Rosenzweig, *Hollywood's Spies: The Undercover Surveillance of Nazis in Los Angeles* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Steven J. Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots against Hollywood and America* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017); James Tuttle, ed., *Fighting Fascism: Anti-fascism, Free Speech and Political Violence* (s.l.: C4SS Mutual Exchange, 2019); Christopher Vials and Bill Mullen, eds., *The US Antifascism Reader* (New York and London: Verso, 2020); Stanislav Vysotsky, *American Antifa: The Tactics, Culture, and Practice of Militant Antifascism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

- 2 For a summary of the literature on UK anti-fascism in the postwar era, see Craig Fowlie, 'Britain's Far Right since 1967: A Bibliographic Survey,' in *Tomorrow Belongs to Us: The British Far Right since 1967*, eds. Nigel Copsey and Matthew Worley (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 239–241.
- 3 Shane Burley, *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (Chico, CA.: AK Press, 2017).

online sources, while some have been written specifically for this volume.<sup>4</sup> The essays focus on the contemporary far right in America, anti-fascist resistance, and the necessity for the left to build on the energy and vitality of antifa and recent anti-racist social movements to overcome the current post-pandemic economic and environmental crises.

The first few essays focus on establishing the context of the rise of the alt-right. Burley is an acute observer of the range of far-right ideological positions, organising strategies and symbolism, and carefully delineates the splits within the movement between the white supremacist factions, the civic nationalist so-called 'alt-lite', and the patriot movement of militias and paramilitary groups like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters. These underlying tensions were brought to the fore in the aftermath of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017 when scenes of neo-Nazis in torch-bearing rallies chanting 'Jews will not replace us', and the murder of anti-fascist Heather Heyer by a white supremacist, temporarily shocked liberal America out of its complacent stupor about the dangers of white nationalism. Widespread de-platforming from the major social media platforms which had been the lifeblood of the alt right would soon follow.

Burley then builds on this historical and political context with some illuminating case studies of fascist organising in a variety of subcultural spaces—in pagan and heathen religious movements, in music scenes such as neofolk and black metal, in sports spaces such as gyms, soccer grounds and mixed-martial arts arenas, in rural gun cultures, in hypermasculine fitness regimes and, inevitably, in online spaces. His work here has much in common with that of scholars such as Cynthia Miller-Idriss who has similarly produced perceptive analysis of non-traditional far-right organisational, recruitment and radicalisation strategies, particularly aimed at young people.<sup>5</sup>

There is much to be learned from the empirical detail of this on-the-ground far-right activism but Burley is also attuned to the more sophisticated theoretical strategies of the far right and there is nuanced discussion of metapolitical publishers such as Arktos and Counter Currents which have an ambition to popularise a range of European New Right, Identitarian, conservative revolutionary, traditionalist, and occultist intellectual perspectives whilst still advocating for a white ethnostate. In one of the essays, Burley incisively demonstrates the continued centrality of antisemitism within the white supremacist

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4 The title *Why We Fight* is presumably intended as an anti-fascist counterpoint to the book with the same title by European New Right ideologue Guillaume Faye.

5 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

imaginary. He also adeptly examines the ways in which rhetoric around free speech is weaponised by the far right and shows how right-wing ‘grifters’ have become successful social media personalities who have learnt to monetise propaganda through misleading or conspiratorial reporting on antifa and other groups on the left.

But this is also a book about anti-fascism and in excavating the organisational strategies of the far right, the author also discusses how anti-fascist opposition has succeeded. Burley is rightly keen to push back on media and politically motivated stereotypes that antifa is simply about street fights, ‘The problem with this discourse is that it first misses the actual diversity of anti-fascist organising, which has a massive spectrum and is predominantly made up of ordinary people doing traditional organising work with neighbours and congregants’ (p. 59). It also overlooks that physical opposition to the alt right has been shown to be effective in certain cases. The anti-fascist physical opposition to the alt right succeeded in stopping them organising on American campuses and caused several groups to collapse, as even prominent leaders of the alt right like Richard Spencer have admitted (p. 58).

The book also features a number of valuable excerpts from interviews with anti-fascists who have been campaigning within subcultural spaces to curb any incursions by the far right or to expel them if they are already established there. The interviews testify to Burley’s point about the range of anti-fascist activism in both physical and online ‘contested spaces’ and this is reinforced by referencing a positive historical tradition of anti-fascist culture in music, video games, comic books, literature, film and publishing. If the use of interviews (including of some on the far right) to personalise and enliven the narrative attests to Burley’s journalistic background, then the range of references in the text attest to his scholarship. He is well read in the primary literature produced by the far right themselves as well as in press reporting and the extensive secondary literature published by scholars.

Burley’s book is full of insight and analysis into both the far right and into anti-fascism, but he also poses some challenging questions for anti-fascists about how they adapt to the post-pandemic economic, political, and environmental landscape. The final three words of Burley’s subtitle are ‘surviving the apocalypse’ and he uses this as a metaphor throughout the book. He uses it to discuss aspects of the political and religious chiliasm which he regards as embedded in the DNA of America, and it’s also a reference to the eschatological nihilism of accelerationist fascist violence. But Burley also advocates for a better ‘post-apocalyptic’ future and so the book is also a call to arms for the anti-fascist movement to adapt and respond to the crisis of climate change. Perhaps with a nod to the tradition of Jewish mysticism, he draws on Erich Fromm

and Martin Buber to suggest that ‘The messianic age will not arrive on its own, and it may not arrive with a bang, but we will know it when we look around and start to see the world we have been dreaming of. We can save ourselves’ (p. 62).

While Burley’s book features only nods to social theorists and philosophers such as Fromm and Buber, Devin Zane Shaw’s attempt to build a philosophy of anti-fascism is wholly engaged with a broad range of them including Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Aimé Césaire, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Jacques Rancière, and Jean-Paul Sartre. He begins however in the first chapter by drawing on the work of militant anti-fascists such as Don Hamerquist, Matthew Lyons, and J. Sakai who have posited that anti-fascists are in a ‘three-way fight’ against both the state and the far right, or in ideological terms, against both liberalism and fascism. This prompts a further division between liberal and militant anti-fascism. The former believes that fascism can be debated and that institutions and the state are best placed to combat the far right while militant anti-fascists believe in community defence and direct action. Crucially, militant anti-fascists also dispute the liberal belief that the state has a monopoly on the use of force.

The next chapter focuses on Shaw’s assertion that ‘existentialism is an anti-fascism’ (p. 23). He develops this through an engagement with Simone de Beauvoir’s work, particularly *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in which she offers what Shaw terms an ‘egalitarian and emancipatory existentialism’ as well as a justification for the use of violence as a political tactic (p. 40). The conclusion is that liberal anti-fascists are acting—within the terminology of existentialism—in ‘bad faith’. The chapter offers an intriguing argument that is strengthened through its discussion of contested philosophical interpretations of historical incidents such as the controversial execution of the French fascist collaborator Robert Brasillach and the role of violence in the Algerian independence struggle, as theorised by Fanon among others.

The third chapter is largely devoted to inter-theorist debates on Rancière’s conceptions of egalitarianism and an invocation of his ideas to develop a critique of policing. Perhaps this chapter will be of more interest to philosophers, but this reviewer felt that the book and the author’s overall thesis may have been stronger without its inclusion. Shaw makes some useful criticisms in the final chapters of advocates of non-violence such as Erica Chenoweth and Todd May and draws on anti-fascist activists like Scott Crow to make a convincing argument in favour of community self-defence. He also engages productively with Du Bois and others to forcefully argue that understanding and opposing anti-indigenous racism, settler-colonialism and systemic white supremacy is vital to anti-fascist politics.

There are some weaknesses in Shaw's book. He makes a stronger case that militant anti-fascism has lessons to learn from the ethics of existentialism and the anti-imperialist theorising of Césaire and Fanon than he does for the inclusion of Rancière in the anti-fascist pantheon. The book is very North American-centric in its conception of anti-fascism and completely ignores the extensive literature on traditions of anti-fascism in other countries. Unlike Burley's book, it largely reifies the far right in monolithic terms rather than delineating the variants in ideology and praxis.

Despite these caveats, Shaw's book is still a bold and provocative attempt to unearth a genealogy of philosophical anti-fascism. If, as Shaw writes, 'Other philosophies of anti-fascism could readily be written and ought to be' then he deserves credit for starting the process (p. 2). This will rightly be regarded as an important intellectual intervention for scholars of radical philosophy, social movements, and anti-fascism.