INTERVIEW

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Fascism's Body Politics

A conversation with Dagmar Herzog on disability under fascism in her new book, The New Fascist Body November 25, 2025

Dagmar Herzog, Adam Koehler Brown



line from Dagmar Herzog's new book, The New Fascist Body (Wirklichkeit Books, 2025). A leading historian of sexuality, disability, and German politics, Herzog now turns her attention to the frightening

continuities between past and present authoritarian forces. How do we

"How do we recognize a fascism when we see one?" This is the opening

understand the current crisis? What imaginations of sex and the body permeate our politics? Herzog recently sat down with Adam Koehler Brown discuss her new text and the questions it raises. The interview has been edited for length and clarity. Adam Koehler Brown: This book gets us into a discussion of fascist body politics in the past and the present. And, at least from my reading, there are two key ideas that you're introducing: the phenomenon you call "sexy racism" and this obsessive hostility towards the disabled. One of the interesting notes you make is that these were recurrently twinned across recent German history. Can you say a little bit about what those

history? Dagmar Herzog: For a long time, the standard checklist of what makes a fascism, or how you recognize one, included extreme nationalism, terroristic violence against political opponents and minorities, and knowledge control through both propaganda and censorship. And those are important; we're definitely seeing those happening. But what I've always thought was unsatisfying was this idea that people are seeking subordination, when I really think that what fascism offers is the promise of pleasure and the promise of a sense of superiority. It's flattering to the in-group and it's also permission-giving, above all

permitting cruelty towards the weak.

easy to interpret.

individual concepts mean and the way they come together in German

as the German equivalent of eugenics, the Anglo-American term, is actually combining hostility to the disabled with the promise of sexual transgressive pleasure. And that doubleness, that combination, becomes the Nazi program. The idea that if the Germans just kill off the weak and vulnerable, then they will become strong and beautiful and smart. The AfD (the far-right Alternative for Germany party) is combining the sexy racism and the antidisability ugliness in a new way now. Their early campaign ads featured cute women's tushes in skimpy bathing suits with the slogan "Burkas? We prefer bikinis." These were, of course, racist but in a tongue-in-cheek, funny way. Subsequent campaign ads were nastier and more fearmongering, but also soft-core [pornographic]

—for example with a naked blonde tied up, being threatened by a

silhouette of a dark man with a knife. In the most recent and noxious

messaging, Black and brown men are being dominated and abjected

Needless to say I've been following the AfD's shenanigans for a long

messaging. I kept thinking "why are they so obsessive about keeping

children with cognitive differences outside of the classroom?" They're

"slower" kids. Why is it that in every regional party program they rail

explicitly against the idea of "inclusion" of children with impairments in

the regular schools? And there's lots of possible explanations. But then

fine about the kid in the wheelchair, but they're not fine about the

time, but it took me a while to make sense of the antidisability

while the pretty white girls are gyrating seductively. So that is all fairly

This goes way back to before the Nazis, back even to the 1890s. Alfred

Ploetz, the man who invents the term "Rassenhygiene," or racial hygiene,

the biggest thing I realized is they want to re-invisibilize imperfection. I didn't fully understand until I thought more about Nazi education and Nazi teachers' organizations; their children's books and the curriculum materials and instruction guides were all expressly teaching children cruelty towards the cognitively disabled. Koehler Brown: Throughout the text you seem to use a version of the social model of disability. What is disability for you? You at times seem to dip your toe into an understanding of disability as a problem for capitalism—that disability is about dependency, about a challenge to the liberal subject, about people who require relationality and care. Herzog: One of the things that seemed most important to me in the big prior book, The Question of Unworthy Life—the one where I taught myself the longue durée of history of disability in Germany—was to clarify that the people who were murdered were the people who could

not work. So it's not primarily about those who had a sensory or a

physical impairment, that is not what caused people to be targeted for

killing. People were murdered because they required the care of others.

And without question there was then, and still is now, a hierarchy of

I was really moved, in the course of researching and writing that book,

by members of the so-called "cripple movement": people who were

themselves physically disabled, whether through polio, or multiple

sclerosis, or a car accident, or the thalidomide scandal—that's my

boundary and identified with those with cognitive disabilities and

generation—but they were cognitively fine. And yet they crossed that

battled on their behalf. To me, one of the most precious things human

beings can do is identify across boundaries, which is precisely the thing

disability—also within the disability community.

that the fascists are trying to extirpate in us. And so I really want to uplift those people who insist on full equality, mutuality and reciprocity, and human possibility. Koehler Brown: It seems to me that in many of your examples of the present-day AfD, the mechanisms by which they articulate their dispositions—about sex, about race, about disability—the whole means by which they communicate is totally different from how Nazis or even from how people in the late twentieth century did. Now we're using social media, we're using posts, we're using memes, and especially Algenerated memes. Do these new mediums of communication, these new

technologies, actually change the way we think about disability or race

Herzog: I am definitely one of those people who thinks that technology

changes human nature. I think that this is also where my emphasis on

deliberate contradictoriness (e.g., the AfD can put out pro-gay and anti-

gay content, depending on their target audience). The incoherence—and

with it, the easy deniability ("Oh, can't you take a joke?")—is the point. I

think one of the things that fascism thrives on is the utter disorientation

It exaggerates something already long since happening in photography,

postmodernism comes in; it's postmodern fascism. It's all about

or gender or whatever it might be?

about what is real and what is not.

which is that you can touch things up. One thing that's always stuck with me was the famous Nazi photographer, Anna Koppitz, complaining she can't find enough perfect bodies in reality. One point I would make about the fascist body is that there is no such thing. It's a dream ideal, a fantasy to be implemented through brutality. And then there's a fascist body like that of Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem, striding around in front of powerless men in cages, with her styled hair, taking pleasure in the pose of dominance. One thing that [philosopher] Alberto Toscano said about the production of surplus populations: We're not living in industrial productivist

capitalism anymore. We're living in utterly over-the-top, earth-

destroying consumer capitalism. Basically, entire populations aren't

needed anymore. And that's a really important point he's making. And

simultaneously, what are we to make of the over-the-top histrionics in

the face of calls to tax the rich? These people have billions. What is the

counter-revolution, preemptive counter-revolution the way that Herbert

Marcuse or Angela Davis would've analyzed it, it's preemptive counter-

regulation that might be good for the environment or for consumers, or

Koehler Brown: The AfD acts as though there has been a massive, PC,

disability-friendly trend toward inclusion of children with intellectual

disabilities in mainstream classrooms, and—this is the key gripe—the

AfD contends that this very presence of children with impairments is

somehow the cause of the comparatively weak scores that nondisabled

reform. They don't want the slightest little adjustment, the slightest

the slightest diminution of their profit.

hysteria about? And you realize—and Toscano says this—it's not

German teenagers are getting in reading, writing, and arithmetic when they are tested each year. AfD politicians rail against inclusion and against what they call a "cuddle-curriculum" and demand instead a return to an "achievement-oriented" school system. Yet you say that in fact there has not been much effective inclusion in the first place and large numbers of children with disabilities are deliberately segregated away from their neurotypical peers and placed in special-ed schools. Do you believe that that is also the case in the US, that there is a sort of make-believe leftist turn that is being preemptively reacted against? Is there an actual greater degree of inclusion in the US, or greater visibility in public in general and greater social support for children with

Herzog: There are three different strands that I want to keep separate.

referring to Kamala Harris as "low IQ" and "retarded." It was shocking to

overhear people. In a Midwestern airport, for example, a white guy on

his cell phone was loudly talking about how "she's stupid." And I just

thought, "Wow." What did it do for people, psychologically, to give them

that idea? There's a huge insidious lie that is constantly being repeated

On the other hand, I would say that if you think about disability in the

US, until Trump's cruelties, I do think there was a more sentimental and

more respectful attitude towards children with various kinds of cognitive

difference, whether that's due to Down syndrome, or cerebral palsy, or

the many varieties of autism, and towards their families. There was—

there still is—a sincere sentimentalization of devoted loving parenthood

One strand is the ways in which Trump got a lot of mileage out of

me. I was traveling around the country for a book tour and would

about who's smart and who's not.

disabilities and their parents here, compared to Germany?

in the US that I greatly appreciate, and that is not as much in evidence in Germany. One factor might be the strength of Evangelical Christianity, which has been a complicated force in the United States, to put it mildly, via its anti-abortion politics, but it has done a lot to treat disability parenthood as heroic. Trump is wreaking havoc on all that now. His nephew, who has a much-loved son with significant impairments, reported that Trump told him that his son (and others like him) "should just die." But it actually remains an achievement that in the United States leftists are not the only defenders of disability rights by a long shot. In Germany, it took such a long time—four decades or more—to get over the horrifyingly stubborn, lingering after-effects of fascism, the old hostility to the disabled that had been so savagely exacerbated by the Nazis, with massive investment of time, money, and energy in thousands and thousands of eugenic workshop sessions. But—here's the third thing—in the US now with Trump, there is also a campaign to make eugenics acceptable again. There's a racial dimension there, but it goes beyond that. There's lots more hype talk about IQ and the idea that [Elon] Musk is a "genius." [Historian] Quinn Slobodian has done the most important work in terms of showing that the far right's turn to "Nature" and supposed "natural" smartness and "natural" hierarchies is all about trying to justify the ever vaster inequalities in society.

It's all multifunctional for the right, but one of the many functions it

serves is that liberals are confused. They like to think of themselves as

the smart ones as opposed to "the deplorables." They've long assumed

they're the nonstupid ones. And so they're caught off guard, not even

income and ongoing theft. Right now the self-declared "high-IQ" elite is

Koehler Brown: Maybe your text gives us one way to sort of map out

Herzog: I wanted it to be accessible. There's a way in which too many

is not just a topic for those who are themselves directly affected—the

people think the question of disability doesn't affect them. But disability

noticing that this is about justifying the massive maldistribution of

stealing from the public purse, hand over fist.

where we are, the fascist present.

ones who are themselves disabled and those who love them. It's actually about all of us because this incessant new IQ talk and smartness talk is basically an attempt to justify the power arrangements the way they are right now, the force field in which we're living. It's a blatant effort to re-hierarchize human worth and supercharge a new Social Darwinism. One of the things that was most horrifying to me, when I delved into the German story: There's this book from 1920, which becomes the template for the Nazi "euthanasia" program. It's by Karl Binding, who's a lawyer, and Alfred Hoche, who was a psychiatrist. It's right in the wake of Germany's defeat in World War I. And its title is literally "Permission to Annihilate Life Unworthy of Life." They are the coiners of that awful phrase, "life unworthy of life." And that text has consequences all the way through to the 1980s. It's unbelievable that it continues to set the terms of debate. They are truly advocating killing those who require the care of others. The frail elderly are not their target, but rather the people who are vulnerable all along. They actually refer to this notion of "affection value" (Affektionswert) and say, well, of course your grandma with dementia has affection value because you loved her, but somebody

who has always been disabled has no affection value. That's why it was

so important to me then to uplift the un-dehumanizers that I found in

every era, but especially the activists in the 1970s and 1980s who

rebelled against the long-lingering, Nazi-exacerbated ugliness, and

insisted, "There is no reason for hierarchy of human worth; we do love

these people, and we can be in ongoing, meaningful relationship with

them. Neurotypicality is not better than anything else. And we believe in

human possibility, and everyone learning from each other." That way of

being is nonfascist, and it is profoundly precious. And that way of being

is what is now under attack.

Adam Koehler Dagmar Herzog Distinguished Professor of Brown History and the Daniel PhD candidate in sociology Rose Faculty Scholar at the at the New School for Graduate Center, CUNY Social Research and adjunct lecturer at CUNY-Hunter College Keywords: Disability, Fascism, Interview Related Names: Adam Koehler Brown, Dagmar Herzog, Donald Trump Comments (0)

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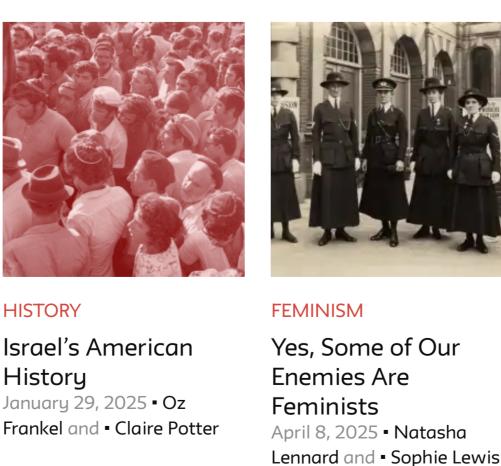
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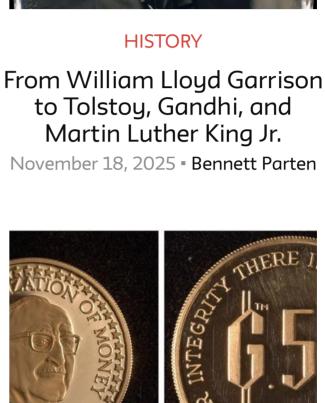
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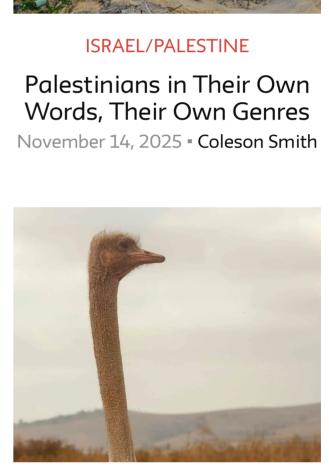








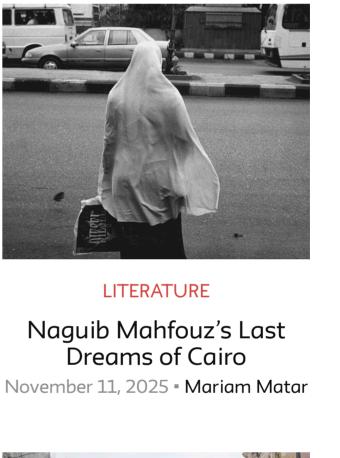




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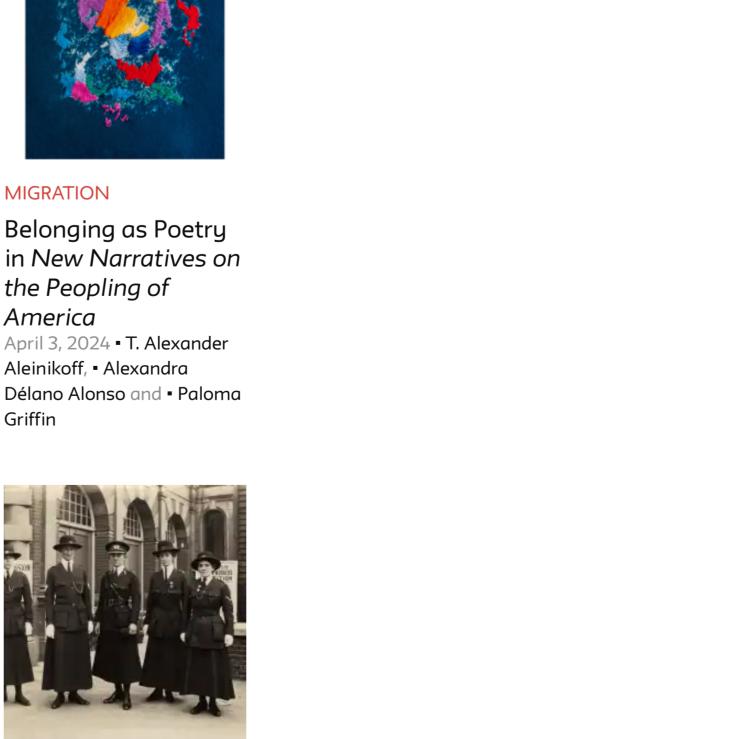
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