

What Can We Do With the Right's Delight in Pain?

BY

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Right-wing authoritarianism lures people away from the promise of democracy, peace, and equality toward destructive violence by offering one key appeal: pleasure in harming other people.

Review of Dagmar Herzog's *The New Fascist Body* (Wirklichkeit Books, 2025)

If you've seen the breakout Netflix series *The Hunting Wives*, you know that American right-wing authoritarianism is nothing if not libidinally charged. Throughout this murderous pulp series, which takes place in deep Texas, a cabal of wealthy white women parade their privilege by making love to their hunting rifles and engaging in copious amounts of sapphic intercourse. They hunt game, they hunt each other, they attend conservative political rallies, they go to church. Murder and chaos ensue.

The series might seem on its face like a takedown of MAGA femininity, the kind exemplified by trigger-happy women like Kristi Noem and Marjorie Taylor Greene, but the show's Eastern-seaboard foil, a fish-out-of-water character named Sophie, hardly fares any better. A married, heterosexual white woman who seems to consider herself progressive before her move from Boston to Texas, she quickly falls in with the

misbehaving trad wives (not to mention falls into bed with them) and ends up buying guns, drinking to oblivion, cheating on her saintly husband, and committing murder, all because of an emergency hysterectomy that left her infertile.

This series is pulpy, for sure. It is also a fantastic illustration of postmodern fascism.

“Postmodern fascism,” a term defined by historian Dagmar Herzog in her new book-length essay *The New Fascist Body*, describes the second coming of fascism as both rooted in and distinct from historical fascisms. It is a fascism that carries forth its predecessors’ disdain for “the ideals of human equality and solidarity,” viciousness toward “those it identifies as vulnerable,” proliferation of “racialized explanations for what are actually complicated economic and social dynamics,” and “narcissistic longings for greatness.”

What makes it postmodern is its tendency toward deconstruction. This contemporary reinvention of fascism is “cleverly self-reflexive,” Herzog tells us, “and plays, gleefully, with the inevitable contestedness and instability of truth.”

Herzog, whose work on German fascism has been highly influential in gender studies, disability studies, and European history, distills key arguments from her extant scholarship in *The New Fascist Body*, bringing insights about the history of Nazism to bear on the dynamics of contemporary transnational far-right movements. She focuses her essay on two key overlapping traits of postmodern fascism, “sexy racism” and “obsessive hostility towards the disabled,” using the messaging of Germany’s far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) as an analytical anchor.

Where Jews were once the prime target of German fascism, today’s far-right ethos in Europe singles out Arab and African migrants as the exemplary racial other. If anything, certain far-right voices in Germany have recently espoused philosemitic views, effectively turning Jewish Germans into valorized members of the “white race” and claiming that their superior intelligence makes them ideal counterweights to allegedly inferior brown migrants.

Herzog cites Mathias Döpfner, CEO of the Axel Springer group, as one of the voices who has called for Germany to become “more Jewish” in recent years. He made this claim in an essay published one year after the October 7 attacks in Israel, in which he praised the high number of Nobel prizes given to Jews as compared to the low number given to Muslims and Hindus. Here is one notable departure from historical fascism, though antisemitism is of course still alive and well in many far-right circles.

What makes Herzog’s take on today’s roiling anti-migrant sentiment unique is her focus on sex and disability. A leading scholar on the topic of sexual politics during the Third Reich, Herzog has dedicated much of her recent scholarship to the *longue durée* history of the Third Reich’s “euthanasia” and forced sterilization programs during World War II. This war on the disabled included the use of the infamous T4 carbon

monoxide gas chambers to murder residents of care homes for the disabled as well as tens of thousands of forced sterilization procedures carried out on those considered racially unfit. It took decades for Germany's disabled to be recognized as victims of the Nazi genocide, and only recently have disability activists there successfully lobbied for laws recognizing the self-determination of the disabled.

The AfD seems hell-bent on dismantling the hard-fought protections achieved by disability advocates in the last two decades, especially when it comes to inclusive education. Their violently nationalist rhetoric centers on hatred of weakness and adoration of brute strength, and they are obsessed with "smartness" and IQ. Even though, as Herzog points out, there is plenty of anti-disability animus on display in American far-right rhetoric, German fascism seems to have a unique fixation on IQ as a determiner of citizenship.

In America, by contrast, the anti-intellectual fervor of Donald Trump's Republican party has often manifested as hatred for public education and gleeful reclamation of stupidity on the part of its politicians (which is hardly a new phenomenon — just recall George W. Bush). What connects the German and American iterations of fascism is a shared disdain for the unproductive citizen, whether they be disabled, mentally ill, queer, or childless.

One of the most concerning developments in recent years has been the mainstreaming of certain fascist ideas previously thought to be extinct, or at least deeply fringe. This includes the AfD's obsession with "remigration," a fancy word for the mass deportation of migrants and asylum-seekers from Germany. As Herzog tells us: "a main effect of introducing the concept is that other German political parties are now debating which migrants are dutifully hardworking and sufficiently culturally integrated to be allowed to stay."

Increasingly, far-right parties set the terms of the debate, making it so that moderate politicians cave to fascist framings while still believing they are offering a rebuke. Productivity as a measure of citizenship is one of those framings that we see play out in many different contexts around the world.

Historically speaking, this harkens back to the increasing anti-disability animus that took over Germany in the decades leading up to the Third Reich, when calls for "euthanasia" of disabled Germans led even supposed moderates to cave on the question of sterilization. The extremity of these proposals for euthanasia killings led moderate commentators to seem even-keeled when they proposed sterilization as a solution to the allegedly hereditary problem of disability. In the process, "it became socially acceptable (and felt, to many, simply intuitive and even morally right) already prior to 1933 to express contempt for or to wish to invisibilize people with intellectual impairments or psychiatric illnesses."

When it comes to "sexy racism," Herzog reminds us that contemporary German

fascism, much like its historical antecedent, is centrally concerned with sex — and not just in repressing it. Fascism relies on the incitement to pleasure that comes from the collective breaking of taboos, giving supporters of the fascist regime a false sense of power through indiscretion.

Sexy racism describes “libidinally charged messaging to mobilize fear, outrage, and aversion or, alternatively, to convey the thrill of dominance vis-à-vis various forms of racialized vulnerability.” The AfD, for its part, “luxuriates provocatively in deliberate sexiness,” from campaign posters displaying nude white women as titillating potential victims of sexual violence at the hands of migrants, to videos promoting so-called remigration by displaying sexily dressed white women gleefully attending a fictional deportation flight.

Herzog notices a shift in the emphasis of this libidinally charged racism over the past few years, arguing that from 2019–2024, sexualized danger-mongering has given way to “a mode of full-on braggadocio, where *Shadenfreude* reigns and — as Adam Serwer put it about Trumpism — ‘the cruelty is the point.’” She goes on to argue, “The secret memo of fascism to its followers is not repression. On the contrary, it’s a message of permission, of license and impunity.”

I find this to be the most striking and persuasive of Herzog’s arguments, one that she has made forcibly over the course of her career, especially in her book *Sex After Fascism*. Fascism works because it offers something in the place of democracy, peace, and equality, something that is capable of luring people away from the promise of creation and toward the violence of destruction, and that thing is pleasure in other people’s pain. This helps explain the age-old question, raised by so many theorists after World War II, of how citizens of a democracy like the Weimar Republic could have been so misguided as to vote “against their own interests” to elect National Socialists.

Fear and rage, Herzog reminds us, are not a sufficient affective basis for fascist fervor — you need “pleasures of aggression, meanness, and violence” on the part of its adherents. And we should recognize the “multifunctional efficacy of both the eroticization of presumed superiority and the repetitive insistence on re-hierarchizing human value.”

What’s instructive about *Hunting Wives* as an artifact of postmodern fascism is not its politics, if it indeed has any, but rather its portrait of sexual transgression as a gateway drug to fascism. Sophie seems to quickly abandon her progressive politics when given permission to follow her most shameful urges. She drinks the proverbial Kool-Aid of her right-wing friends as she begins finding “the pleasure in cruelty,” to quote Herzog.

Here, I think of a 1939 photograph included in Herzog’s book, which shows a heterosexual couple on the beach cuddling under a garland of swastikas. No prior regime in history “had ever so systematically set itself the task of stimulating and validating especially young people’s (hetero)sexual desires — all while *denying* precisely

that this was what it was doing.” This “desublimating encouragement to break with restraint and tradition served to tie the young emotionally yet more directly to the state.”

If we only think of right-wing authoritarianism in terms of repression — telling people what they cannot do — then we miss the opportunity to understand, and hopefully dismantle, the emotional attachments that guide many people’s support for contemporary fascism. The “new fascist body” is one that delights in breaking the rules, that basks in an antisocial prerogative to take pleasure at other people’s expense, that eroticizes superiority and sexualizes violence — not the Left accused of debauchery by these authoritarians.

If anything left me wanting in Herzog’s book, it was a clearer picture of what we do with this insight once we have access to it. How do we redirect the libidinal energies of fascist-leaning voters in America and elsewhere? How do we foster delight in community and creation in the face of destructive neoliberalism? How do we disincentivize cruelty and promote care?

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