

# COUNTERPUNCH

## Resisting Fascism: A Review of Shane Burley's *Why We Fight*

Chris Wright

October 15, 2021

The elevation of Donald Trump onto the national political stage in 2016 provoked a heated debate among centrist and left-wing commentators that has yet to be resolved (and likely never will be): do Trump and the Republican Party today represent a recrudescence of fascism, or is this a flawed historical analogy? Writers like Timothy Snyder and Jason Stanley insisted on the parallels between interwar fascism and the contemporary far-right, from demonization of ethnic “Others” to fomenting of violence against democratic institutions (as on January 6, 2021); writers such as Samuel Moyn and Corey Robin disagreed, arguing that Trump proved to be much too weak a figure—and his attacks on the political order were much too weak—to legitimately be called fascist. Scores of articles and books have been published litigating the term “fascism” and its applicability to various ugly phenomena across the American political scene.<sup>[1]</sup>

Wisely, journalist Shane Burley bypasses this debate in his new collection of essays *Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse*. It's clear there are both similarities and differences between classical fascism, on the one hand, and Trumpism and the modern far-right on the other. (For this reason, one might call the latter neofascism or proto-fascism, as an acknowledgement of the valid points made on both sides of the debate.) Instead, Burley takes it for granted, and illustrates throughout his book, that a vast constellation of groups and individuals on the right today have salient fascist characteristics and would happily tear down democracy if they could. *Why We Fight* consists mostly of articles Burley has

published in recent years shedding light on these shadowy groups, this underworld of the Alt-Right and its relatives.

In seventeen chapters, Burley illuminates the methods and varieties of both fascist and anti-fascist organizing. Among the topics he covers are the rise and fall of the Alt-Right, from 2008 to the aftermath of the Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally in 2017; the nature of the “Alt-Light,” a less extreme version of the far-right that coalesced around figures like Milo Yiannopoulos, Alex Jones, and online “manosphere” leader Mike Cernovich; the toxic cult of masculinity that unites a wide range of far-right groups; the world of fascist publishing in Europe and the U.S., led by companies like Arktos Media and Counter-Currents that are dedicated to “creating the intellectual foundation for a new fascism” (p. 151); attempts by anti-fascists to colonize cultural spaces that have often attracted fascists, such as soccer, gun clubs, mixed martial arts, the paganism and heathenry subculture, and, in music, black metal and neofolk; the deep-rooted and continuing appeal of antisemitism to the far-right; and even the remarkable Kurdish experiment in an anarchist, anti-fascist society at Rojava. Altogether, the book gives a nuanced and compelling picture of the highly fragmented, internally divided, typically amateurish, but very frightening world of the contemporary far-right—from the Proud Boys to militia organizations, from journalist provocateurs like Andy Ngô to the neo-Confederate Council of Conservative Citizens (founded in 1985), from “lone wolf” mass shooters to student groups like Turning Point USA that seek to intimidate and silence left-wing voices at college campuses.

As an “advocacy journalist,” Burley eschews a neutral or academic tone; he combines history, journalism, psychology, an editorial voice, and even memoir to stitch together a tapestry that, in its totality, serves to communicate the urgency of fighting and defeating all these noxious forces. In one of his pieces, for example, he argues that anti-fascist activists (often known collectively as *antifa*), rather than some diffuse “public opinion” or mainstream intellectual commentary, were responsible for the downfall of the Alt-Right in the months after Charlottesville. Through constant interference with public talks by Alt-Right speakers, pressure on university administrations and other venues not to permit such talks, counter-protests, violent physical

confrontations, and other aggressive measures, left-wing activists essentially shut down the Alt-Right phase of the white nationalist movement.

“Police barricades,” Burley writes, “last-minute venue cancelations, and public brawls overshadowed the Alt Right’s message, and as members were doxxed and fired from their jobs, it became harder and harder to make their movement attractive to recruits. In the wake of Charlottesville, they were forced off social media, web hosting, podcast platforms, and just about every outreach tool available, leaving them only to the back alleys of the internet” (p. 57). He clearly endorses such tactics, barely even acknowledging concerns about censorship and the right to free speech.

It would have been interesting, however, for him to delve into the ongoing debate over tactics and moral principles. Or, if this would have distracted from the book’s journalistic focus, it is at least incumbent on the reader to think through these issues. On one side are, it appears, the majority of leftists who both deny that fascists have a right to be heard and, tactically, think the best way to defeat them is to prevent them from being heard. On the other side are principled civil libertarians such as Noam Chomsky and Glenn Greenwald who argue that everyone has the right to be heard, neither the state nor private entities like Twitter and Facebook should be allowed to police speech (for then what is to prevent them from policing left-wing speech, as they in fact constantly do?), and even tactically the best way to defeat fascists is to let them air their views so that others can expose their absurdity and immorality. Chomsky, for instance, argues that while fascists should never be invited to speak at college campuses, if they are, the best response is not to shut down the event—which allows the speaker to pose as a great defender of free speech under attack by leftist totalitarians—but to use it as an educational opportunity and organize a counter-event exposing the hideousness of far-right ideas.<sup>[2]</sup>

One might reply, on the other hand, that making life miserable for fascists does seem to help inhibit the growth of a movement. (But, again, is such harassment, including violence, wrong in principle?) As for “deplatforming” the far-right, someone in Burley’s camp might concede that social media companies (for example) should not have the right to police speech and indeed should be publicly owned and operated, while maintaining at the same time that as long as

private entities do have this right and are happy to wield it against the left, activists should pressure them to wield it also against racists. If doing so helps conservatives and centrists vilify leftists as authoritarian and opposed to free speech, so be it.

A chapter devoted to these questions of principle and tactics, thorough and fair-minded in its treatment of the conflicting arguments, might have been a valuable addition to Burley's book, especially given the book's activist purpose.

One theme that recurs in some of the essays is the useful reminder that fascism doesn't always wear its heart on its sleeve, and it is important to be able to see through euphemisms or non-fascist appearances to the political reality and poisonous potential underneath. Burley quotes reporter Tess Owen: "Far-right publishing companies like Arktos have sought to give white nationalism a veneer of pseudo-intellectual legitimacy by dressing up old, ugly, racist ideas in euphemisms. For example, their authors don't talk about whiteness, they talk about 'European identity.' This is part of a calculated strategy: move out of the fringes, and into the political mainstream" (p. 164). There are certainly "degrees" of fascism among groups and individuals on the right, but, in the words of Burley, to the extent that there is commitment to "human inequality, social traditionalism, racial nationalism, and an authoritarian vision founded in the resurrection of heroic mythologies" (p. 65), there is an affinity for fascism.<sup>[3]</sup>

Even the mere cult of masculinity, widespread among large numbers of disaffected men in an age of social dissolution, can embody very dangerous ideological impulses, as Burley documents in his lengthy final chapter. The whole online "manosphere" of "men's rights" advocates, incels, pick-up artists, and the like, can be considered a sort of gateway drug to fascism—and it must be said that leftists ignore or ridicule these millions of lost male souls at their peril. When you leave the indoctrinating and organizing of men, as men, to the right-wing, what you get are weird perversions like the neopagan Wolves of Vinland, which Burley has investigated in depth. Founded in 2005 by the bodybuilder Paul Waggener, the Wolves of Vinland is a "male-tribalist organization" that assures men that "the promise of their patriarchal authority is built into the connective tissue of the natural world and that their feeling of anxiety is the proper reaction to the 'attack on men' that the modern world has devised" (p. 261). Until being recently

discontinued, its online and in-person program Operation Werewolf—“equal parts pagan instruction, workout regimen, and self-help manual” (p. 261)—attracted men from all over the world who craved the “Total Life Reform” it promised. This involved, in part, being indoctrinated into a semi-Nietzschean ideology that glorified violence, physical strength and pain, an idealized masculinity, tribalism, hierarchy, and contempt for the effeminate weakness and decadence of modern society.

What is most frightening about Operation Werewolf, which Burley discusses in great detail while interweaving stories of his own personal experiences with unhealthy masculinist cultures, is that it is just one tiny node in a sprawling global network of similar proto-fascist subcultures. What the left’s answer to this challenge should be is not entirely clear. Burley’s proposed solutions to fascist organizing, scattered throughout the book, are, perhaps inevitably, vague; for instance, to counter groups like the Wolves of Vinland, he suggests we “build up communities that are strong,” “rediscover spiritual traditions...that can connect us to where we are today,” and “help people build a body cult to stay tied to their physicality and health, not to fit the prescriptions of a hierarchical and fat-phobic fitness culture, but to build themselves according to the vision they alone have” (p. 305). What is clear is that the task of defeating cultures of “toxic masculinity,” which often overlap with white supremacy, will require meeting people on their own terms and dispensing with contemporary leftists’ beloved “purity tests” for who they will or won’t interact with.

*Why We Fight* is, in short, worth a read if one seeks information about cultures of the far-right. This isn’t to say, however, that it is immune to criticism. Burley’s style of writing, while at times eloquent, is often awkward, as well as needlessly prolix, rambling, and repetitive. The frequent typos and grammatically awkward constructions are distracting. More substantively, it would have been nice to see some information on the kinds of people who have been attracted to these fascist organizations, such as their class, occupational, and geographic backgrounds. Statistical studies of Trump’s supporters have shown them to be disproportionately petty-bourgeois and moderately affluent, though frequently without a college degree: small business owners, real estate brokers, managers, and so on—not primarily “the white working class,” despite the

mythology.<sup>[4]</sup> The same is presumably true of the groups Burley discusses, but he presents very little data on the matter.

Likewise, one would have appreciated more information on the funding sources of all these far-right groups, particularly to what extent some of them might be supported by reactionary big business. Doubtless such information is not readily available, though.

In the end, however imperative it is to fight against such organizations as the Wolves of Vinland, or the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, the American Identity Movement, the Atomwaffen Division, etc., it is surely not these peons, the flotsam and jetsam of a tempestuous capitalist society, who present the gravest danger to the country and the world. It is the “respectable” people and institutions: the Charles Kochs of the world, the ExxonMobils, the Citigroups and JPMorgan Chases, the Defense Departments and Supreme Courts—the ruling class. These are the agents of our coming immolation in the fires of ecological holocaust and, possibly, nuclear war. Relatively speaking, the likes of Paul Waggener and Andy Ngô are picayune. They’re dangerous, but more dangerous are the well-funded think tanks and propaganda outlets like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute—two of the forces behind the immensely damaging Tea Party—or the Manhattan Institute, one of whose “senior fellows” (Christopher Rufo) is almost entirely responsible for the current furor over “critical race theory.”<sup>[5]</sup> Fox News, One America News, the Daily Caller, the Daily Wire—these are the entities that indoctrinate tens of millions.

How, or whether, the left can dethrone these truly demonic forces before they cause the demise of society is the burning question. As always, the answer can only be found through mass education and organization.

1. For an overview of the debate, see Udi Greenberg, “What Was the Fascism Debate?,” *Dissent* (Summer, 2021). Links to some sources can be found at Matthew Sitman and Sam Adler-Bell, “Did It Happen Here?,” *Dissent*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/know-your-enemy-did-it-happen-here-fascism-debate-trump>. ↑

2. The journalist Natasha Lennard, who wrote a foreword to *Why We Fight*, contests Chomsky's position by making the remarkable claim that arguing against white supremacy is futile; only *force* (of various kinds) can work. "Anyone who has watched [Richard] Spencer and his ilk in public debates," she writes, "...should see how the belief that his violent white supremacy can be reasoned away is flawed. He sticks to his guns about the necessity of a white 'ethno-state'..." But the point, of course, is not to convince the fanatical racists themselves; the point is to educate and inoculate the public, including young men who might otherwise be susceptible to white supremacy. It is deeply defeatist and cynical to have no faith in the power of rational argument. See Natasha Lennard, "Is Antifa Counterproductive? White Nationalist Richard Spencer Would Beg to Differ," *The Intercept*, March 17, 2018. ↑

3. On this understanding, the intellectual celebrity Jordan Peterson, for example, who is enamored of hierarchies ("consider the lobster!"), archaic myths, cultural tradition, strong and heroic masculinity, and the conflict between Order and Chaos, has quite a few points of contact with fascism. See Pankaj Mishra, "Jordan Peterson and Fascist Mysticism," *New York Review of Books*, March 19, 2018, at <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/19/jordan-peterson-and-fascist-mysticism/>. ↑

4. Jesse A. Myerson, "Trumpism: It's Coming from the Suburbs," *Nation*, May 8, 2017. ↑

5. Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict over Critical Race Theory," *New Yorker*, June 18, 2021. On the origins of the Tea Party, see Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017)—or, more briefly, my blog post "The rise of right-wing libertarianism since the 1950s," at <https://www.wrightswriting.com/post/the-rise-of-right-wing-libertarianism-since-the-1950s>. ↑