



Review Essay: Fascism and Eluded Truth

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Claudia Leeb, *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Keith Kahn-Harris, *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*. Mirefoot: Notting Hill Editions, 2018.

Federico Finchelstein, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020.

Three recent books—Claudia Leeb’s *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*, Keith Kahn-Harris’s *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*, and Federico Finchelstein’s *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*—help ground an understanding of why fascists are paradoxically both *lying* and *honest*. All three books contribute to understanding the fascist’s concept of truth and the psychological mechanisms by which the fascist seeks to bury or hide from the truth. According to Federico Finchelstein in *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*, “Lying is a feature of fascism in a way that is not true of...other political traditions.”¹ Fascists do not only lie tactically, to “con” enemies or the masses. According to Finchelstein, fascists also lie as a matter of epistemological principle, since they view the truth as something created and enforced by violence, not as something to be discovered. Paradoxically, then, fascists’ lying has an element of honesty: a sincere and genuine rejection of the idea that their beliefs could ever be rationally proven or disproven, since they believe their beliefs are simply intuitively known to the select few destined for power, or conveyed by the leader or movement to the followers. However, as Finchelstein points out, and as Kahn-Harris’s and Leeb’s work help illuminate, fascists also lie for disingenuous, psychological reasons—that is, fascists lie as a mechanism of *denial*, to protect their consciences from awareness of what they are doing and to hide from “unspeakable truths” about themselves.

Finchelstein, Leeb, and Kahn-Harris are not the first to broach this topic. Fascists’ dishonesty, insincere use of language, and self-deception are not new discoveries. For example, in his study of 1940s fascist antisemitic U.S. American agitators, Frankfurt School scholar Leo Lowenthal remarked on their linguistic “unseriousness.” Although as Lowenthal points out, the antisemitic agitator appeals to popular ideals—in the case of Lowenthal’s “American agitator,” to American Constitutional principles like “free speech”—the agitator’s “approach to values is often revealed by an undercurrent of unseriousness in his statements, the effect of which is to

¹ Finchelstein, 3.

dismiss ideals as mere bunk, hogwash, lies.”² (One is reminded of a rare moment of “mask off” honesty in which alt-right leader Richard Spencer, who frequently relied on a public defense of free speech, was asked on a podcast, “Long term, do we even support free speech?”, and he answered, “Of course not.”³) Theodor Adorno also explored fascist dishonesty and unseriousness. Hannah Arendt famously criticized fascists’ lack of regard for truth, and the “thoughtlessness” of coldly fanatical bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann. In “Anti-Semite and Jew,” Jean-Paul Sartre also famously wrote that antisemites (a category which of course has broad overlap with fascists) are fully aware of “the absurdity of their replies”:

They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, because he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play. They like to play with discourse, for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert.⁴

Hence, it is not a new realization that fascists behave dishonestly with language, including by a kind of toying with language as something that does not need to be taken seriously as a mechanism of truth. However, these three recent texts offer fresh insight for the present on this ongoing issue.

The three books also show that fascists are virtually incapable of introspection and self-examination as long as they remain committed to fascist ideology, and that their denial of their own genocidal aims takes the form of outward aggression. Fascist dishonesty tries to plug individuals’ existential voids of meaning by resort to mythic narratives and adherence to leaders, and these new sources of meaning provided by fascist ideology must then be violently defended to preserve the individual’s fragile sense of self.

According to Claudia Leeb in *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*, fascist violence and bullying serves in part as a defense mechanism against the truth and is one of the central ways that fascists seek to repress their guilt and hide from awareness of harm they are doing to others. Keith Kahn-Harris, in *Denial: The Unspeakable Truth*, helps to explain a dimension of fascist defense mechanisms against the truth. Although Kahn-Harris’s book explores “denialism” broadly, not focusing only on fascist denialism—he includes alongside Holocaust denial, denialism about the Armenian genocide, climate change, vaccine effectiveness, the AIDS epidemic, and evolution—his exploration of denialism and conspiracy

² Leo Lowenthal, “Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator” in *False Prophets: Studies on Authoritarianism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2016), 34.

³ Jared Holt, “Richard Spencer: The Alt-Right Is Not Pro-Free Speech,” *Right Wing Watch*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/richard-spencer-the-alt-right-is-not-pro-free-speech/>.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*. Trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 13.

theories provides a window into the same mechanisms of fascist lying addressed by the other two authors. Finally, Federico Finchelstein, in *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*, stresses that the fascist is both lying and honest, as he explains through his analysis of fascism's understanding of the nature of truth. Finchelstein explores fascism as an international movement, including looking at Latin American figures, such as the romantic or proto-fascist Argentinean intellectual Leopoldo Lugones. Finchelstein is focused on fascism's attachment to leaders of fascist states, and to the myth of the hero, according to which the leader expresses an intuitive "inner truth" and stands for "natural order."⁵ A significant part of the book's project is locating Trump as a fascist leader. Finchelstein rightly predicted that Trump would not accept the election results and would seek to maintain power; his book was designed in part as a warning, with an international perspective, that what was potentially happening in the United States had been seen before, and that it would be necessary to look behind Trump's lies to what his lying reveals about the nature of his politics.⁶ Finchelstein is more focused on fascism in power, rather than the ideological upsets and malaise that precede its victory. When it comes to explaining the nature of fascism, Finchelstein perhaps overemphasizes fascism's fixation on leaders at the expense of its earlier stages as a social movement seeking power. Nevertheless, his philosophical study of fascist lying as grounded in fascists' understanding of truth is an essential contribution.

Despite decades of philosophical and sociological exploration of fascists' fundamental dishonesty and their leering, tactical bullying—such as their repeated claims to be “just joking”—the general public still falls for liberal arguments for inclusion of fascists in a “marketplace of ideas.” Many people still naively hope that the threat of fascism can be overcome by publicly debating fascists. This assumption fails to account for the fact that, in debating fascists, one does not enter into a collective search for truth between the debaters and audience, but rather one plays host to a tactical performance by the fascist to generate publicity, outrage, recruitment, or mockery of enemies.

In addition to the external dishonesty of fascism—e.g., telling audiences it is only joking, that it is only fighting for freedom of speech, that it only wants equal rights for white people, and so on—fascism is *internally* dishonest, towards itself. Internal dishonesty is far more complex than tactical trolling. Understanding the way in which fascism *lies to itself*—at a collective, social movement level, and at the level of individual fascists' psychological defense mechanisms—is highly difficult, because of the challenge in determining what is occurring at conscious as opposed to unconscious levels. It is here that Leeb, Finchelstein, and Kahn-Harris provide perhaps their most important contribution to the topic of fascist lying. The nature of the topic means, though, that we rarely can differentiate fully what is occurring consciously, unconsciously, or both.

As Finchelstein points out, fascism is built on *the will to myth*, rather than on a rational argument or interpretation of a set of facts. Fascism believes in myth as an inner

⁵ Finchelstein, 59.

⁶ Finchelstein, 101-2.

truth of the self that cannot be “fact-checked.” For fascists like Goebbels, knowledge was a matter of faith, and especially a deep faith in the myth of the fascist leader.⁷ Myth is to be *enforced*: fascists seek to reshape the world to fit the myth.⁸ This is not, however, in fascism’s view, a full refusal of truth, but rather a means of the creation of truth. Truth and myth, identical with one another in this view, are brought into the world and maintained through violence. Violence itself is inseparable from the fascist notion of truth. That fascism is anti-rational in a way many other ideologies are not, also makes fascism harder to define. In fact, fascism is “not a concept,” according to Peruvian Marxist philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui.⁹ Fascism is, according to Finchelstein, citing Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Codreanu, “anti-programmatic.”¹⁰ That is, it is not interested in a step-by-step implementation of a set of ideas—rather, it is interested in an apocalyptic destruction and remaking of the world according to its intuitive feelings and the narratives (myths) that give it meaning.

Despite fascism’s possession of a degree of sincerity blended with its lying—i.e., it sincerely denies that truth can merely be found and insists that it must be violently created—fascism is also paradoxically grounded in a conscious choice of dishonesty, Finchelstein argues. It follows, importantly, that fascists are responsible for their behavior; their actions are not the accidental result of uncontrollable unconscious forces. “Claims about the inner authenticity of fascist politics were, in fact, a fascist rationalization,” Finchelstein writes. “They constituted a rationale for the fascist political and nonprogrammatic emphasis on drives, myths, and fantasies. Thus, ironically, the fascist unconscious was necessarily the result of a conscious act.”¹¹ At the same time, Finchelstein states, “Fascists were not simply cynical about their lies. They wanted to believe in them, and they did.”¹²

The meaning-giving narratives and myths of fascism often rely on conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, of course, almost always play a role in fascist ideology, often through antisemitic conspiracy theories about secret Jewish schemes and control. Committed conspiracy theorists of any kind are fully within the enchantment of myth, and thus immune to the counterpoints raised by debunkers of conspiracy theories. Some conspiracy theorists fall under Kahn-Harris’s category of “denialists.” What makes something a conspiracy theory, as I am using the term here, is not the truth or falsity of its content (i.e., whether the conspiracy described is one that truly exists). Rather, conspiracy theories are built on the addictive accumulation of facts (or falsehoods) to defend a belief that is accepted without openness to its falsification. Although conspiracy theorists may insist that they just want to “see the evidence” that they are wrong, and that they were led to their beliefs by a skeptical, open-minded investigation, the conspiracy theorist *par excellence* is uninterested in counter-evidence (except as a

⁷ Finchelstein, 12.

⁸ Finchelstein, 13.

⁹ Finchelstein, 56.

¹⁰ Finchelstein, 54.

¹¹ Finchelstein, 60.

¹² Finchelstein, 75.

means to push their own view in response). By dressing up as science, conspiracy theories conceal the believer's true motives, both from others and the believer. At their core, conspiracy theories are narratives accepted on faith, often revealing a sweeping, apocalyptic conflict between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. They are, in short, myths masquerading as science.

Take Holocaust denial, which always relies on conspiracy theory. (If Holocaust deniers were right, only a vast conspiracy of historians and Jews could ensure the continued propagation of such inaccurate information.) Committed "denialism" of any kind is, in the words of Kahn-Harris, an attempt to evade "an unspeakable truth," a desire that cannot be fully acknowledged and expressed, often even to oneself. The Holocaust denier, of course, *wants to kill Jews*, but since they cannot admit this to the public and often not even to themselves, they insist that not only do they not want to kill Jews, but Hitler didn't either: didn't want to and didn't do it.

Denial also shifts the burden of blame for personal and societal problems onto chosen enemies. When the problem is oppressive violence in which the denier is complicit, the denier relocates the problem from the perpetrator to the messenger; those informing the public accurately are accused of "covering up the truth." Fascists are bullies who constantly paint themselves as victims, and they perpetually rely on this aggressive, table-turning defense of their denial. As Claudia Leeb points out, fascists repeat the abuser's pattern of behavior that psychologists call DARVO, which stands for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. Abusers, fascists included, deny or cover over their abusive intentions towards others, then attack their accusers when their behavior or intent is pointed out, playing the victim of those they abuse.

The fascist holds "unspeakable truths" that they must constantly conceal, including from their own awareness, and this process of concealment ultimately tends toward violence. The fascist's hate, sadism and destructiveness are among these unspeakable truths. Each cannot face the reality of who they are—i.e., that each is not simply a victim of life circumstances or of an oppressive conspiracy, but rather a perpetrator who longs to harm and destroy other human beings. This alone is enough to make the fascist dissemble and hide. But there is another hidden truth as well: although in many cases her aggression and hate can be openly embraced, the fascist cannot face the ultimate *meaninglessness* of the endeavor and what it implies about the ultimate meaninglessness of her own life. As long as she reduces her identity to loyalty to the "movement," she has no independent sense of self. Lacking a framework for understanding the world without fascism, she digs in her heels, arms herself materially (with weapons and fellow soldiers) and mentally (with arguments and insults), and bristles at every assault that might reveal to her that her identity rests on shifting sand.

Fascist Denial as Repressed Guilt

Claudia Leeb identifies another root cause of fascist denial in her exploration of "repressed guilt." Leeb's book explores Austria's "repressed guilt" for past involvement in the Holocaust, using four case studies. The first two cases cover direct Nazi guilt: Austrian Nazi doctors Franz Niedermoser and Wilhelm Beiglböck. The second two cases cover the defensive reactions of members of the Austrian public to (1) a 1988

production of a play that critiqued antisemitism in Austrian society and (2) to the opening of Austria's first proposed Holocaust memorial museum in 2017.

Leeb argues that Austrians bear collective guilt for their nation's participation in the Holocaust, and she clarifies that this guilt is collective "political" guilt, not "moral" guilt. Repression of collective (political) guilt generates thoughts and emotions that are disconnected from reality, she argues, and these irrational thoughts and emotions give rise to psychological defense mechanisms. If guilt is not "worked through," defense mechanisms can escalate into a cycle of violence. This will again take the form of DARVO. Faced with criticism, both Nazi criminals of the past like Beiglböck and Niedermoser, and today's Austrian public alike, Leeb argues, deny their repressed guilt, pose as victims of those who are seeking justice, and go on the attack against their critics.

Admittedly I have some hesitancy about the concept of collective political guilt, which Leeb insists is real and not merely felt—the concept may both distract from a purely political responsibility in some cases, or distract from actual moral guilt in other cases. However, Leeb's overall point is relatively separable from the concept of collective guilt. She convincingly demonstrates strong similarities between the cold unwillingness of the two Austrian Nazi doctors to face their own atrocities during and after the war, and the defense mechanisms of post-war Austrian citizens.

According to Leeb, lack of "embodied reflective judgment" prevents an experience of guilt, shutting down the affective component of cognitive judgments that could generate feelings of guilt. In the case of the "Storfer episode," for example, Adolf Eichmann visited a former colleague who was imprisoned at Auschwitz and who had appealed to Eichmann for assistance. Although he declined his colleague Storfer's request for help, Eichmann later testified that he felt "a greater inner joy" to see his friend again.¹³ Eichmann's "great inner joy" to see an old friend—who was *being tortured in a death camp*, from which Eichmann had power to release him!—shows the cold bureaucrat critiqued by Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil." Eichmann was not so much unable to think, Leeb writes (modifying Arendt's formulation), as unable to feel. His lack of empathy in the face of the living death of a former colleague is shocking to us, but to Eichmann, desensitized and his conscience killed, the event sparked little more than a pleasant sensation of seeing an old friend.

Leeb devotes a chapter each to the Austrian Nazi doctors Niedermoser and Beiglböck, exploring their defense mechanisms, especially their lying and denial. Both played brutal and significant roles in the Nazi genocide. The psychiatrist Niedermoser oversaw a mental hospital and ordered executions of psychiatric patients for the Nazis' eugenics program, while the medical doctor Beiglböck subjected Roma and Sinti concentration camp prisoners to the excruciating "seawater experiment," denying them potable water until they became desperately ill or later died. After the war, their trials showed their moral bankruptcy, absence of remorse, and their refusal of all

¹³ Leeb, 40.

responsibility to their victims. (Niedermoser was sentenced to death; Beiglböck served ten years in prison and appallingly returned to a highly successful medical career.)

While carrying on Nazi atrocities and then at their trials for their crimes, both Austrian Nazi doctors often sought to displace responsibility onto those above or below them in the employment hierarchy (as in, “just following orders,” or “the lower-level staff were doing that, not me”). They also submerged their personal actions in a sense of collective identity, including “overidentification with doctors and soldiers” as well as carrying out policies that were administered throughout “the whole Reich.”¹⁴ They employed use of “code names,” that portrayed their victims as not fully living or human (such as “unlivable lives” or lives unworthy of life, *Lebensunwertes Leben*) and their victims’ deaths as not really murder (“euthanasia,” or “sleeping peacefully across”). Leeb notes that racist and ableist dehumanization were recapitulated in the trials, with the testimony of victims being downplayed and at times silenced due to their Roma/Sinti background or their disability.

In Leeb’s chapters on the Austrian public in the 1980s and 2000s, we hear defense mechanisms expressed by a cacophony of voices. The emotionally extreme reactions of members of the Austrian public both to the production of the play *Heldenplatz* and to the proposed opening of Austria’s first Holocaust memorial museum, clearly demonstrate unconscious defense mechanisms. (The play *Heldenplatz* takes its name from the central square in Vienna where Hitler greeted cheering supporters at the annexation of Austria, and the museum was also set to overlook the same square and to include the balcony from which Hitler spoke.) In particular, the defensiveness shown in the listed objections to the museum, the “House of History,” seem glaringly obvious in their cloying disingenuity, as Austrians frantically attempted to relocate the Holocaust memorial museum in time or space. The museum should have opened earlier or should open later, not so soon. The museum should be about something further in the past (the Hapsburg Empire) or should be about the future and be called the “House of the Future” (*obviously* a psychological defense, since no museum focuses on things that have not yet happened). The museum should be somewhere else, definitely not in its proposed location, one of the most important buildings in Vienna, steeped in history.

Leeb’s work is a call for collective self-examination, aimed in her case at her country of origin. White U.S. Americans, reading this book, certainly have no cause for condescension or smirking. We recognize these defense mechanisms all too well. The Austrian public were frightened to look at themselves and their collective past. Austrians’ defensive response in the 1980s to the theater production mirrors the more recent outraged response of many white U.S. Americans to Colin Kaepernick “taking a knee” during the national anthem at NFL games. Viennese sensitivity about seeing their antisemitism portrayed at the heart of one of their cultural institutions, the theater (in the case of the *Heldenplatz* production), mirrors American outrage at perceived violation of the sacred idols of flag, nation, and football by Kaepernick’s protest against police brutality. Austrians’ rage at a proposed Holocaust museum resembles white Americans

¹⁴ Leeb, 69.

tripping over themselves trying to present “not racist” reasons for maintaining monuments to the Confederacy.

Systemic oppressions, including white supremacy, are always grounded deeply in denial. Kahn-Harris argues that denialism is a recent phenomenon, because modern progress has made outright expression of certain hatreds less acceptable. He also believes we are now entering a “post-denialist” age, as society becomes increasingly “post-truth.” “A symptom of this is the proliferation of ‘multi-denialists’ who reject not just one but a whole range of sciences and scholarly consensuses.”¹⁵ Untruths are expressed with greater confidence, with less marshalling of facts (or alleged facts) in their defense, while older, long debunked theories such as “flat earth,” make a resurgence.¹⁶ Denialism has succeeded to such a degree, Kahn-Harris suggests, that denialists can just “signal vaguely in a denialist direction,” simply making or referencing denialist claims without having to make arguments.¹⁷ Denialist arguments also become less necessary to make once denialists are in power. Truth becomes judged not against facts but by the “sincerity” of its expression and whether it seems to express a “primal force.”¹⁸

Although there may be truth in the claim that we are entering a “post-denialist” era, and this is a very interesting point, I would emphasize that denial is a fundamental feature of the white supremacist and settler colonialist projects that helped to birth the modern social order. Consider, for example, the systematic denial of the humanity of enslaved persons, written into the law itself as well as into the systematic practices of slaveholders, so well detailed by Frederick Douglass. The humanity of the enslaved, Douglass would point out, was already implicitly conceded by slaveholders by engaging in such practices as the deliberate and immediate separation of families, prohibitions on literacy among the enslaved, and even such cruel practices as deliberately preventing enslaved persons from knowing their own birthdates, a relatively simple personal fact that provides considerable insight into one’s journey along life’s path and for many, helps to forge one’s sense of humanity and identity.

The entire system of slavery was built around knowing the humanity of the enslaved, and then systematically denying the reality of that humanity, attempting to hide that reality from both the enslaved and slaveholder. Although the denial of enslaved persons’ humanity generally differs from the conspiracy theorist’s obsessive accumulation of “facts” covered by Kahn-Harris’s term “denialism,” the fact that denial rests at the heart of structures of racism suggests that the current acceleration of conspiracy theories is not caused by their unconscious content being more socially unacceptable than it used to be. That is, the increasing spread of Holocaust denialism, for example, is not a product of antisemitism being less socially acceptable than it used to be and now needing to be masked. (In fact, Holocaust denialism in various forms was

¹⁵ Kahn-Harris, 131.

¹⁶ Kahn-Harris, 132-3.

¹⁷ Kahn-Harris, 134.

¹⁸ Kahn-Harris, 139.

always already part of post-war antisemitism.) By nature, human beings see the other's humanity with relative ease. Dehumanization continually proves itself unstable, requiring for its maintenance the constant defense of shaky ideological or "scientific" premises, as well as policies and practices of degradation that make humanity easier to deny further.

"Denial," Ibram Kendi writes, "is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, races, and nations. It is beating within us. Many of us who strongly call out Trump's racist ideas will strongly deny our own."¹⁹ Crystal Fleming writes, "Ours is a society that has socialized white folks to live in the midst of racial oppression but go on with their lives like normal. At every turn, those who have oppose white supremacy have been met with denial..."²⁰ "Epistemologies of ignorance," in the words of critical race theorist Charles Mills, are written into the history and present of U.S. American racism. The willful ignorance and denial of whole societies is a crucial piece of what makes fringe fascist movements show up again and again as "live options," and this same willful ignorance and denial has social, structural, and historical sources. Similarly, as Finchelstein points out citing Adorno's earlier work on the question, fascist "unseriousness" towards truth enabled others in the general public to be in denial of fascists' aims.²¹ Fascists' cavalier relationship to truth and reality, for example, enabled many in the wider public to dismiss Hitler as he rose to power, as a kind of "clown" who did not really mean all those things or wouldn't be able to carry them out, just as many Americans chose to downplay the threat posed by Trump.

What Kahn-Harris calls "denialism," which he distinguishes from mere "denial," arises because the institutions and ideologies that denial defends are under threat. When that threat lessens, denialists more easily go "mask off"—they stop claiming they are merely Holocaust "revisionists," for example, and get down to brass tacks, telling us that they really just want to kill Jews. Kahn-Harris writes, "Denial is knowing and not knowing, acknowledgment and refusal,"²² like the relapsing alcoholic who is dimly aware, going into the bar, that they will not be having "just one drink." Full-fledged "denialism," Kahn-Harris explains, surpasses the "vulnerability of denial." "To be [merely] in denial is to *know* at some level. To be a denialist is to never have to know at all."²³ As denial becomes less necessary when its unconscious desires are normalized and its refusal of truth no longer needs to be defended—that is, as we enter a "post-denialist" era—I suspect we in some ways come closer to the truth (the admission of hidden desire) but in other ways are further from it (no longer seeking to use language to make arguments, just to "signal" support for an entire system of false beliefs). How the United States can work its way out of this morass is no easy question

¹⁹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To be an Anti-Racist* (New York: Random House, 2018), 14 (large print edition).

²⁰ Crystal M. Fleming, *How to Be Less Stupid About Race: On Racism, White Supremacy, and the Racial Divide* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 128-9.

²¹ Finchelstein, 37.

²² Kahn-Harris, 17.

²³ Kahn-Harris, 24.

to answer. Although no longer under Trump's administration, the United States remains in a post-denialist reality.

Steps Forward

What does this study of fascist and society-wide denial and lying suggest about how to confront fascist and white supremacist movements in the United States today, as well as the social structures that make them possible? First, as Finchelstein correctly notes, Trump's rise to power would not have been possible without the widespread racism of his followers— "abnormalizing Trump normalizes America."²⁴ Needless to say, a Biden administration does not erase the consequences of the past four years nor the consequences of racist movements and social policy going forward.

Kahn-Harris correctly notes that attempting to debate denialists in public and confronting them with counter-facts to "debunk" their theories is hardly ever effective, and makes them often entrench further in their beliefs. Instead, he suggests that there may be a place for trying to have a gentle and "civil" discussion about deeper, underlying questions, "offering them a safe space to acknowledge their desires." He references Joshua Oppenheimer's disturbing film *The Act of Killing* (2012), which gave Indonesian perpetrators of genocide a chance to confront their crimes and themselves through theater re-enactments of their crimes.²⁵ Rather than an attitude of confidence that "the truth is out there" to be found, Kahn-Harris suggests adopting an attitude of intellectual humility and attempting to expose the hidden desires behind denialism and ask questions about those desires, such as, "Perhaps we can talk about the negative consequences of genocide for the perpetrators?...Genocide is not only hard work, it empowers some really distasteful people."²⁶

This approach strikes me as somewhat naïve, since having a truly "safe space" (an ironic term in this context!) for a denialist to express their hidden desires requires the normalization (perhaps even the victory) of their desires. (Oppenheimer, interestingly, conducted his theater experiment in a society, Indonesia, where the perpetrators of the genocide held power and where the genocide was not only acknowledged but routinely celebrated.) It seems to me that Kahn-Harris concludes a deeply reflective and important work by forgetting one of his most important points: that denialism is fading precisely because its "unspeakable desires" are gaining in legitimacy and power. This is not the book to read for advice on "deradicalizing" fascists. The discussion of deeper, underlying questions could play a role in the prevention of recruitment into fascist denialism and help stem the tide of recruitment "upstream," and it might help remorseful former fascists unwind their prior ideological beliefs, but during the time when an individual's sense of personal identity is rooted in denialism, a philosophical discourse seems about as likely to get through to them as counterfactual debunking. Performed in public, it only empowers them further by giving them a platform.

²⁴ Finchelstein, 104.

²⁵ Kahn-Harris, 162.

²⁶ Kahn-Harris, 163-4.

Perhaps rather than butting heads with fascist denial, we should focus on amplifying the voices of fascism's targets and learning to listen. Survivors of racist hate attacks and other oppressive harm carry their own "unspeakable truth," a truth for which society is not always ready, and which they cannot always speak safely. Trauma silences survivors, and telling one's story is crucial to healing, enabling a narrative to emerge out of a series of terrifying, disjointed memories.²⁷ Leeb notes the importance of victims' and survivors' voices, and Kahn-Harris also points out that "denial" is the final stage of genocide, the "final insult to victims."²⁸

However, unless there is hope of the story becoming part of the past, rather than an ongoing experience of threat and terror, trauma can be ongoing. ("I'll tell you what freedom is to me: no fear," Nina Simone said.) In the United States under a new Biden administration, many will be seeking reconciliation without truth. Subtle forms of victim-blaming ("we need to move on," "time to heal our country") will replace calls for justice and will be repackaged as forgiveness and kindness, in the unspoken absence of accountability.

Repressed guilt, as Leeb correctly points out, cannot be worked through without reparations to those harmed; she also calls for "embodied reflective spaces," including educational spaces and museums, where discussion of dehumanization and guilt can take place. She also suggests, interestingly, that teachers should be educated on psychoanalysis and trained to understand defense mechanisms and the way in which repressed unconscious desires can feed DARVO-like cycles of violence.

We can also realize that our identities are never wholly absorbed by categories, which is not to say that identities, especially of marginalized groups, are unimportant. Leeb argues that a certain degree of distance from collective identity is necessary for engaging with collective guilt, in the case of Austrians: needing to see themselves both as Austrian but with an identity that transcends Austria, so that they do not need to become personally defensive about criticisms of Austria. Those who belong to dominant groups may need to accomplish this combination of identity and separation from identity in order to hear the voice of the other; in the case of white U.S. Americans, for example, this would mean both acknowledging one's whiteness but not identifying with it as the whole of one's identity.

Fascist dishonesty and denial are also helped by anti-intellectualism, and so theoretical study as well as interdisciplinary approaches are important and can help shape praxis. All three authors acknowledge the relevance of psychoanalysis, although Leeb provides it the most attention and Finchelstein devotes a chapter to fascist hostility to psychoanalysis, while Kahn-Harris mentions psychoanalytic work on denial more in passing.²⁹ (The relevance of psychoanalysis lies beyond the scope of topics I can address in depth here, but it seems safe to say that fascists' violent hostility to the "Jewish science" of looking at hidden motives and unconscious desires, says a lot about

²⁷ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing from Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 233-4.

²⁸ Kahn-Harris, 62-3.

²⁹ Kahn-Harris, 18.

fascists.) In addition, all three authors engage to varying degrees with Frankfurt School Critical Theory (again, Finchelstein and Leeb in more depth), and the tradition's exploration of the authoritarian personality and related topics remains essential today (and continues to also make fascists nervous and defensive, to the point of spinning out endless conspiracy theories about "cultural Marxism").

Fascist movements in U.S. American society are not a bizarre fringe element to gawk at, but express structures and sentiments at the center of American history and economic, political, and social power. Overcoming the danger they pose will be a long road and will require both structural change and honest collective reflection, not mere protesting or policing. However, perhaps we can create a society more conducive to truth through building our "embodied reflective judgment" through genuine solidarity, confronting our own denial by being bravely honest, and confronting fascist myths of heroic greatness with the reality of the experience of its victims and survivors.

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