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EDITORIAL

Antifascism from Below

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1. Introduction

Any balanced scholarly study of antifascism today must grapple with the intricate historical, national and ideological nuances that have shaped this orientation and movement in all of its multiplicity. While antifascism might appear to merely be the countering of fascism, there is in fact so much more to this movement; as Stanislav Vysotsky (2021, 1) has aptly put it: "Antifascism is simultaneously a complex and simple political phenomenon". In terms of the latter, leading scholar Copsey generalizes antifascism as "a thought, an attitude or feeling of hostility toward fascist ideology and its propagators, which may or may not be acted upon" (Copsey 2000, 4). In terms of the former, however, lies the enormously multifaceted question of what fascism is, and was, in various historical and national contexts, and how each of these various permutations are met with an equally multilayered and shifting response. This includes the question of where fascism and fascist ideology actually begin. And in light of the global rise of so-called right-wing or alt-right populism and autocratic upheavals in various democratic societies, the answer to this question is of great urgency—both practically and theoretically.

Copsey & Olechnowicz (2010) have encapsulated the breadth of the emerging field of Antifascism Studies using the term the "varieties of anti-fascism", which reflects the wider context for the small slice of perspectives included in this special edition. The German communist antifascists of the 1930s, for example, differ in practice and tactics from, say, the '43 group' of Jewish ex-servicemen in postwar UK, who are themselves distinct in ideology from the 1980s' autonomous antifascists of Western Germany, which are distinguishable from the social movement activists of post-cold war Eastern Europe. There are rarely clear predecessors and successors, and yet these groups are related in elusive ways. Each national movement contributes points of reference, styles and actions that then feed into a broader rhizomatic mythos to be adopted and adapted by other groups and movements. In this way some of these ideas and practices are then echoed in US based antifascists, who coalesced after the alter-globalisation 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 (see Smith 2001), and developed their own trajectory of contesting white supremacy against the context of the US's history of slavery and structural racism.

Although each national movement has its own deep lineage of antifascist identity and heritage, these are seldom understood in their transnational and transhistorical context. A few collected volumes examine antifascism in the pre, mid, and immediate post war context, for example in Scandinavia (Braskén, Copsey, and Lundin 2019), in inter-war Britain (Copsey and Olechnowicz 2010); in Europe from 1922 (García, Yusta, Tabet, and Clímaco 2016; Angermann, Binz, Karwarth, and Müller 2022a, 2022b), worldwide between the 1930s and 1940s (Braskén, Copsey, and Featherstone 2021) or more recently (Bray, Namakkal, Riccò, and Roubinek 2020). Others offer specific national contexts like East Germany before and after the fall of the wall (Jänicke and Paul-Siewert 2023[2017]). In terms of full-length studies, with the exception of Schuhmacher (2014), the majority of scholarly monographs examine US (Shaw 2020; Vysotsky 2021), and to a lesser degree, UK movements (Copsey 2000, 2016; Renton 2006). One exception might be Bray's (2017) monograph, which appeals to a global audience, but is still written predominantly from a US historical understanding and perspective. Despite the value and importance of antiracist cum antifascist movements, accounts grounded in a post-Seattle US context do not capture enough of the diversity of the European heritage of real-existing fascism in development since the 1930s. This is largely because of the media attention paid to actions during the Trump presidency between 2017 and 2021. It is also largely due to the US conflation of antifascism with antiracism in the context of Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the far-right extremist attack on protestors in Charlottesville in 2017 (Capek and Harris 2018; Neus 2023) assuming the role of the generalized understanding of antifascist militancy as it is recognized and portrayed worldwide, despite coming from a limited, country-specific context. Furthermore, language barriers interrupt and delay recognition of non-anglophone movements, leaving US and UK accounts inordinately dominant narratives in what should be a varied transnational history. Indeed, as Vysotsky also points out, neither of these countries have experienced the 'real existing fascism' of their European predecessors. Citing Burley (2017), he concludes that this has enabled a movement where, in some respects "[o]pposition to fascism essentially came to mean a kind of generic and symbolic anti-authoritarianism, an issue that plagues the antifascist movement to this day" (Vysotsky 2021, 6). This critique holds true in *some* Anglophone contexts where fascism is defined merely as capitalism or police brutality, or where antifascists still look to the proletariat for revolutionary potential (Copsey 2018).

However, in countries that have experienced 'real existing fascism', and are forced to grapple with both its legacy and their own part in it, many antifascist groups perform a much more specific form of opposition to contemporary fascism than these critiques of reductionism allow. Whether in street fights with neo-Nazis, state infiltrated 'fascist tendencies' of illiberal democracies (Piotrowski 2021), contesting public appearances of the far right or interrupting violence against refugee-seekers, the contemporary examples presented in this special issue shed light on Antifa activism today that is anything but generic. To this end, this special issue seeks to

illuminate a broader swath of this heritage, not in the post-WWII context, but after the fall of real existing socialism, amidst the new European political order after the Cold War and esp. in view of the current formation of authoritarian policies in several countries.

2. From antifascism to Antifa[1]

Historically, the distinction between Antifa and antifascism first arose in regards to the pressing question of whether there was a need for a "new antifascism" following new manifestations of right-wing anti-immigrant violence in the early 1990s (Haug 1993), or whether the term itself was no longer relevant in a post-Cold War globalized world.

As a post-cold war movement, Antifa developed in resistance to neo-Nazism: understood not as organized fascist political parties or a government structure, but rather as the grassroots "tyranny of the everyday" (Schuhmacher 2014). This encompassed the continuous everyday street politics of hateful violence against minorities, nationalist white supremacy, racism, xenophobia, anti-migration etc., on the one hand, and, on the other, debates around these violent outbursts in the political mainstream. Antifa is understood here as the morally motivated reaction to this situation. It is a cultural form of "politics of the self" (Jones 2018b), with a focus on youth subculture and radical subjectivities, combined with advocacy and solidarity for third parties (for example refugees, migrants, or people of the global majority), and other concepts gleaned from repertoires of social movements (Schuhmacher 2017). This implies that Antifa goes far beyond the definition of a "single issue" or "counter movement" (Piotrowski 2021). Indeed, in this post-1989 manifestation, Antifa encompasses a complex set of societal debates, contexts, cultures and contestations. These include a range of theoretical understandings as well as different national traditions and historical political positions within, and conceptions of, the (radical) left.

In common usage, antifascism and Antifa were and remain fuzzy collective terms encompassing different political currents, approaches and associations in the postwar era. Many scholars use the two interchangeably, or with the assumption that one is the only shortened form of the other. However, we wish to argue that antifascism has transformed from the opposition to state-led fascism or Nazism and towards what we understand as a subcultural movement with affirmative, rather than only reactionary, ideological elements. For this reason, we propose a distinction between the terms *antifascism* and *Antifa*. While the former can include the wide historical trajectory of countering fascism manifested 'from above', the latter refers to the subcultural movement 'from below' after the 1968 generation countering similar grassroots neo-Nazi currents.

Copsey (2018) refers to what we call 'Antifa' in our distinction as 'militant antifascism', as opposed to simply antifascism (which does not engage in direct, or militant action). However, given the discussion of militancy in this special issue, as well as the definition offered by Jones (2018a), we prefer placing this distinction between the terms Antifa and antifascism, since Antifa are not opposing 'real existing fascism' in the same manner as the French resistance, for example, but rather contest new cultural forms of neo-fascism that manifest in racism, white supremacy, and violence against newcomers, but not in state-led fascist governments. We therefore understand the contestation of neofascism by "the" Antifa as an everyday 'street level' countermovement 'from below', which can be analyzed according to the following categories:

[1] The authors of papers in this special issue may use any of the terms "antifa", "Antifa", "anti-fascism", and "antifascism" according to their own norms and national case studies. While we editors use Antifa as a proper noun, and differentiate it historically from antifascism (in the German context), we have decided not to standardize the spelling in this issue in order not to impose our own opinions upon each author's own national, disciplinary, or personal traditions.

- an *orientation*, including a set of moral values, ethical judgments and political opinions. At its core is the deep rejection of fascism and related ideologies, justified not least by the historical experience of real eliminationist political violence in the past and present;
- a *practice*. The term Antifa refers to a field of political conflict and "contentious politics" (Tarrow and Tilly 2007) primarily against 'right wingers', using methods of physical or symbolic contestation, up to and including "Militanz" (Jones 2018a);
- a "*cultural technique*" (Keller 1996) referring to specific 'functions'. In this sense, it is associated with a) building historian tradition, b) building collective self-empowerment and c) entering cycles of stigmatization and self-stigmatization in the relationship to society;
- a *social configuration* to be understood as a structure of groups, networks and people within a cultural environment, which are politically and socially interconnected, including strongly institutionalized non-militant formal associations (e.g. journals and newspapers, information centers, social centers, educational institutions, trade unions, and even organized football supporters).

None of these aspects relate to a structured parliamentary party, or even a classical social movement determined to influence policy or society. Alongside Vysotsky (2021) and Jones (2018b), we argue that Antifa are not, in fact, even a social movement in the sense of the "grand theories" of resource mobilization or economic impact. While being inspired by these movements (and sometimes also joining forces with them), Antifa have discarded the structures of what scholars such as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani might define as a social movement, in terms of networked structure, conflictual approach, unusual repertoires of action, and emerging collective identity (della Porta and Diani 2020, 16 f.). Instead, they promote immediate, direct countering, or self-defense, in everyday life. This form of politics 'from below' is not purely individual — despite national differences, most movements retain a structure, including mechanisms of limitation, that groups should adhere to. It's also not necessarily "sub"cultural in the literal sense because it contains an ongoing communication with broader publics. Antifa is therefore not the nihilistic gangs of violence-loving hooligans that some media portray, but rather a form of politics that have grown disillusioned with the "bureaucratic nihilism" (Jones 2018b) of state inaction, which they perceive to be at best indifferent, and at worst sympathetic to fascist violence. This stance is grounded in a century of experience and shifting repertoires, since antifascism at its most fundamental remains a counter movement that adapts in response to the tactics and repertoires of the neofascist threat.

3. About this Issue

Our special issue therefore begins at the point where the traditional form of antifascism begins to manifest as Antifa: a cultural practice and technique, concerned less with countering fascist political parties 'from above', and more with those new manifestations of neo-Nazism 'from below'. To 'go where they go', as the classic slogan demands, now means to interrupt new cultural and public manifestations of the far right. Admittedly, the state organized brown shirts of Nazi Germany also promoted cultural youth activities, so that Hitler youth could enjoy music, sport, and art in a complementary fascist context. However, this state organized cultural programme is not the same as neo-Nazi cultures manifesting in grassroots forms such as white supremacist music scenes, football fanclubs, or martial arts and other sports clubs. Similarly, Antifa now focus their energies on interrupting these cultural forms, whether it be in football fan clubs, as Katsourides and Charalambous explain in this issue, via music and cultural events, as Carter analyzes, or other grassroots avenues such as leftwing martial arts clubs (Pedrini, Brown, and Navarini 2021). The following articles

examine this cultural form of Antifa across Europe and, for good measure, Canada. They carve a path from West to East, and seek to understand not only cultural praxis, but also the discursive contexts (Jones and Schuhmacher) and theoretical understandings (Schwartz) or illiberal democratic (Piotrowski and Kocyba) and communist (Charvát) contexts of Antifa on a broader political level.

In the article *Expose, Oppose, and Confront: The anti-racist movement against the far-right Heritage Front in Toronto, 1989 to 1995* **Kristin Schwartz** describes a case study in Toronto, Canada including a confrontation between antiracists and the far-right Heritage Front organization. This episode provides valuable insights into the impact of the radical flank effect (RFE) on the dynamics between movements and their counter-movements. By scrutinizing media coverage, primary sources, and conducting interviews with former participants, the research demonstrates how Anti-Racist Action (ARA) operated as a radical component within the antiracist movement. It played a role in the disintegration of the Heritage Front by reshaping the relationships among antiracists who were less militant. This highlights the ability of radical organizations, under specific circumstances, to reshape the political landscape.

In the article *"Move Your Feet to the Cable Street Beat": The Cultural Praxis of Anti-Fascist Action, 1988 – 2000*, **Alex Carter** describes how in recent times, the field of antifascist historiography has seen significant expansion. Nevertheless, scholarly focus has been disproportionately centered on the street-level and violent tactics employed by the movement. High-profile clashes between antifascists and their far-right adversaries have driven a surge in research investigating the causes and outcomes of their radicalization. Yet, antifascism encompasses a wide array of strategies, with the majority being non-violent in nature. To address this notable gap in the academic literature and shed light on the multifaceted character of antifascist mobilization, this article aims to delve into the movement's 'cultural praxis.' This involves examining how antifascists utilize culture to create a platform for effective public engagement while also thwarting the far-right's attempts to establish a similar platform. Specifically, we will investigate the deliberate use of music and music scenes by the British militant antifascist organization Anti-Fascist Action in their confrontations with the far right between 1988 and 2000.

In the article *Ghostly Militanz: the Loss of Discursive Infrastructures and German Antifascist Radical Counterpublics* **Ali Jones** and **Nils Schuhmacher** contend that the historical foundation of German Antifa is rooted in radical counterpublics, which are created and maintained through discursive frameworks that enable activists to declare, discuss, rationalize, and constrain their direct actions. This process of communicative discourse not only enables them to justify their direct actions, which may include violence, as morally justified "Militanz," but also categorizes these actions as political rather than criminal. Using a case study of the legal trial involving the group known as Antifa East, this paper argues that certain segments of German Antifa have forsaken these communication structures, leading to a loss of moral justification for their actions. When they abandon their movement's boundaries and traditions, the "Militanz" they employ only vaguely invokes that justification. Consequently, these covert attacks, carried out without any discursive explanation or engagement with the counterpublic, cannot be regarded as political actions. Instead, those involved face legal charges under the German criminal code (§129) rather than being categorized as engaging in political or potentially terrorist activities (§129a).

Continuing on in Germany, in her article *The invisible 'Antifa-Ost'. The struggles of anti-hegemonic engagement in East Germany* **Christin Jänicke** writes that more than three decades after the conclusion of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a societal division between East and West persists, evident in the contemporary antifa movements in Germany. Recently, the perception of the East has once again become intertwined with and influenced by far-right ideologies. While discussions about the far right in the East are not novel, there is limited understanding of its impact on antifascist resistance in that region. This article

explores the complex relationship that present-day East German Antifa maintains—a delicate balance between acknowledging and combatting right-wing dominance while fostering a positive connection to the East that highlights the resistances of antifascist civil society and rejects stigmatization. Activists strategically draw upon historical narratives and shared struggles in response to the far right's advancements in the region and the resurgence of a unifying media narrative surrounding the 'Brown East,' which oversimplifies the far-right issue as exclusive to eastern Germany. The argument presented posits that the activists' emphasis on East Germany primarily serves as a tool to counteract specific far-right movements in the region. Additionally, it functions as an empowerment strategy to amplify the visibility of antifascist activities, which have been obscured in discussions surrounding the 'Brown East.' These conclusions derive from a qualitative content analysis of a public debate held in Berlin's Zionskirche in 2021, illustrating how the shared experiences of marginalization, othering, and derogation as East Germans fit into a broader discourse about the East.

Moving to the eastern parts of Europe, **Grzegorz Piotrowski and Piotr Kocyba** present in the article *The Dynamics of the Antifascist Movement in the Context of Illiberal Democracy in Poland* how the emergence of illiberal democracy in Poland began reshaping the landscape of social movements in late 2015. Since then, the country has experienced a political regression, leading to various reactions involving both new and established forms of political resistance. The antifascist movement serves as an illustrative example of this transformation. Traditionally rooted in subcultural activism, the antifascist movement has encountered new challenges, notably the institutionalization and normalization of xenophobic discourse and the expansion of the far-right sphere. This paper delves into the internal dynamics between radical and moderate factions within the movement. It particularly examines the impact of shifts in political opportunity structures on the revitalization of the antifascist movement in Poland, its (de)radicalization within certain segments, and changes in its core objectives.

In *“Against Red Fascism!”: Anti-Communism of the Czech Antifascist Action as a Polarizing Factor on the Czec*h *Radical Left* **Jan Charvát** writes about how following the demise of communism in 1989, the Czech Republic witnessed the emergence of various phenomena, one of which was the rise of the far right. This movement capitalized on vehement anti-communism, nationalism, and support for right-wing ideologies. Concurrently, there was a notable discrediting of left-wing perspectives due to their association with communism. This article explores the collaboration between the Czech Antifascist Action (AFA) and anti-communism. Initially, it outlines the fundamental principles underlying anti-communism and then delves into its manifestation in post-communist Czech Republic. Additionally, the article traces the history of anarchist anti-communism. It subsequently provides a summary of the history of the Czech version of AFA. Methodologically, the article employs content analysis, relying on texts published by Antifascist Action in their magazines Antifa News and Akce!, as well as on their website, Antifa.cz. It is posited that anti-communism played various distinct yet interconnected roles, allowing AFA to differentiate itself from the Communist Party and communism as a whole. The Czech AFA's anti-communism is characterized by a fusion of anarchist and Czech post-communist approaches.

The article *Perspectives of the Antifa movement in Cyprus* by **Yiannos Katsourides and Giorgos Charalambous** investigates two distinct leftist Antifa entities in Cyprus—a political party and a societal group represented by an organized football fans' association—in relation to two focal points. Initially, the authors examine their range of actions to discern the types of activities undertaken to counter the threat posed by fascist and far-right elements. Subsequently, they delve into the entities' perspectives on the magnitude of the fascist threat and their attitudes toward employing violence in confronting far-right organizations and activists. The objective of the article is to comprehend how anti-fascist actors in Cyprus conceptualize resistance against far-right entities, specifically examining violence as one expression of this resistance. The methodology employed entails fieldwork that combines two distinct approaches: analyzing social media posts spanning an 11-year

period (2010-2021) and conducting selected interviews with activists and members of the two entities. The findings reveal that these entities share similar views concerning the scope and nature of the fascist threat in Cyprus. Moreover, they exhibit parallels in their overall toolkit for addressing far-right issues. However, a notable discrepancy emerges in their perspectives on the utilization of violence against fascists.

Finally, **Salim Nabi**'s article *Antifascist Mediation: Practices of Affirmative Biopolitics in Lesbos, Greece* completes the special issue from a philosophical perspective. It interprets the mediation of antifascist activists as a form of solidarity with refugee-seekers in Lesbos camps, and reads their interventions as a mechanism of interrupting biopolitical apparatuses of control. Nabi argues that the practices of Antifascists in Lesbos, Greece have highlighted, on the one hand, the biopolitical practices of the humanitarian sector and authorities and, on the other hand, they have shown the potentiality for an "affirmative" biopolitics. The different biopolitical orientations operational in Lesbos came clearly to the fore in the two cases of the Occupation of Sapphous Square and the Occupation of SYRIZA offices in Mytilene, Lesbos in autumn of 2017. The two cases additionally showed that mediation, too, is biopolitical, and therefore subject to the same bi-directionality insofar that both the humanitarian sector and the antifascists acted as mediators, albeit serving different political objectives. Furthermore, these practices in Lesbos allow us to understand biopolitics as bi-directional insofar that on the ground in Lesbos, which we also find in theoretical reflections, attempts have been made to disentangle life from the apparatuses that control, manage, and even exterminate it.

4. Future Steps

This range of articles offers a breadth of contextual, historical and contemporary case studies of Antifa engagements and cultural forms of praxis. Beginning with antiracism in the Anglophone West, and then traveling from Western to Eastern to Southern Europe, it presents a range of Antifa actions and interventions from a grassroots to a theoretical level. Of course, this is only a small slice of the broader international Antifa movements, and some critical manifestations could not be covered by these articles. For example, Black and Indigenous antifascism is an important history, especially in North America. Schwartz's article points towards some of these aspects in terms of Rodney Bobiwash in Toronto, and a forthcoming volume *The Black Antifascist Tradition* by Hope and Mullen promises to make an important contribution to this understudied part of the field. Activism related to queer, non-binary, or gendered performances of Antifa is another important area that will benefit from future research and publications. Hamilton has made an initial 2020 study addressing queer activism against fascism, which offers an excellent basis for this conversation. Feminist Antifa would also be a welcome addition, and would offer important breadth to what is often portrayed as an incredibly masculine, macho movement. Majewska has made an important contribution to this field with her 2021 *Feminist Antifa: Counterpublics of the Common*, which lays the groundwork for more of this incredibly important discussion. Antifa action and research related to differently abled persons is also an under-researched area of increasing importance, and would lend much needed scope to research on Antifa. Research on radical leftwing martial arts clubs would also contribute more to the discussions of football clubs and sports, for instance. While there are some exciting journalism pieces on 'red' feminist boxing clubs in the UK, for example, scholarship on Antifa martial arts clubs is still pending, although work on Polish ones is forthcoming from Piotrowski. Finally, as Carter points out, Antifa activism is often understood and portrayed only as violent militant action, while in reality this is only a narrow subset of movement actions. Future research on Antifa infrastructures, such as archives, libraries, and amateur historians is forthcoming from Jones, while Piotrowski is currently working on the historical NGOization of Antifa in Poland, and Schuhmacher is exploring the influence of former Antifa activism on civil society actors. These future studies will help expand understanding

of particular Antifas beyond the fringe minorities presented in this special issue, and open conversations about radical, yet non-militant forms of Antifa infrastructures and societal forms of intervention. There is also an urgent need for scholarship examining resistance of the new phenomena of fascism "with an open mind" (Copsey 2013), referring to right-wing populists and post-fascists currently holding political power – such as the case of Hungary or Italy – or where far-right parties seek to take power – as in France or Germany. These contemporary developments and reconfigurations of the fascist threat post the question and need for a "new" rendition and conception of anti-fascism, which may perhaps need to learn from its antifascist predecessors earlier in the 20th century. Finally, Nabi's piece points toward what might be one of the most pressing issues of migrant activism and the role of Antifa claimed by refuge-seekers. While much literature (and action) in Europe is dominated by persons who have not had to claim asylum or flee their homelands, refuge-seekers nonetheless engage in activism for their own rights and protection from xenophobia, violence and neo-Nazis. Their accounts and self-understandings will offer an important conversation in the near future that will critically expand perceptions about who Antifa are and what they look like. While not claiming to be conclusive, the articles in this special issue seek to initiate that conversation, clarifying the difference between antifascism and Antifa 'from below', while broadening our understanding of this radical subcultural practice transnationally.

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