

# **Marxism, the Far-Right and the Antinomies of Liberalism: An interview with Enzo Traverso**

Sunday 21 April 2019, by [SOUVLIS George](#), [TRAVERSO Enzo](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2019).

**George Souvlis interviews Enzo Traverso on the emergence of far-right movements across the European continent, drawing on Traverso's extensive body of work since the 1990s.**

*This interview originally appeared in Práticas da História.*

**1) By way of introduction, could you explain what personal experiences strongly influenced you, politically and academically?**

I belong to an Italian generation that discovered politics in the early 1970s: a rebellious age in which culture was extremely politicized. High schools and universities were bastions of the radical left and I became an activist almost naturally, without being confronted with moral or political dilemmas. Furthermore, my father was a member of the Communist party and my sisters were deeply engaged in the feminist movement.

At the time, universities had been transformed into realms of permanent assemblies and mobilization; students were often graded collectively; courses and seminars were troubled and the most popular courses were taught by professors who were politically engaged. But the atmosphere of freedom and freshness of 1968 was over. Very soon, the contiguity between collective movements and terrorism—the Red Brigades and other armed organizations—created a climate of violence and fear: more than a radical change, people were waiting for a violent confrontation with the state apparatus. In this context, many scholarly currents—structuralism and post-structuralism, existentialism, critical theory, psychoanalysis, aesthetic avantgarde, formalism, feminism, and several historical “schools” such as those related to the French journal *Annales*, “history from below”, microhistory, oral history, etc.—were assimilated through an all-compassing Marxist framework, either Gramscian-historicist (the “organic” historians of the Communist party) or “operaista” (the current of Mario Tronti, Toni Negri among others). Thus, I discovered the tradition of conservative thought and classical liberalism a decade later, at the time of the “crisis of Marxism”.

In the 1980s, the cultural and political atmosphere in Italy had become suffocating and getting a research position in an Italian university was almost impossible (a situation that has not changed in the decades since). Thus, I decided to emigrate. I learned German and wished to move to Berlin, a city that was already powerfully attractive, but finally I opted for Paris, because I received a French fellowship and, in spite of a general cultural change in continental Europe, Marxism seemed to me more vibrant in France than in Germany.

**2) Your first study, *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate* (new English edition Leyden: Brill, 2018; original French 1990), examines how Marxists between 1843 and 1943 dealt with the Jewish question. What are the main limitations of Marxists of this period**

**according to your view? Are they summed up by an incapacity to effectively grasp the religious phenomena in history and a difficulty in theorizing the nation because of their deterministic epistemology? Could you delineate the basic lines of an analytical Marxist framework that could effectively grasp the national aspect of a historical social formation?**

I wrote this book as a PhD dissertation when I moved to Paris and met Michael Löwy, who became my supervisor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). A Marxist born in Brazil from a family of exiled Austrian Jews, Michael merged the tradition of German-Jewish culture - Lukacs, Mannheim, the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, Marcuse, etc. - with the legacy of Guevarism and Latin American political radicalism. This was quite unique and very refreshing. At that time, the reception of the Frankfurt School was almost exclusively limited to its aesthetic dimension.

The book is the history of an intellectual debate that lasted over a century: its methodological premise is that Marxism and Jews experienced a symbiotic relationship, and therefore that the debate dealt with two deeply intertwined continents. On the one hand, Jews drew the intellectual profile of Marxism and, on the other, Marxism became a fundamental feature of modern Jewish culture. It was a result of the process of emancipation and secularization that took place in Europe all over the nineteenth century.

Positing that bourgeois cosmopolitanism was destroying national boundaries and creating a unified—today we would say “global”—society, Marxist internationalism always approached the “national question”—and the “Jewish question”—as a transitional step of historical development. This offered a satisfactory solution to the dilemma of Central and Eastern European Jews, who had broken with Judaism as a religion but remained stigmatized by anti-Semitism. Marxist universalism allowed them to struggle against both bourgeois society and religious prejudices. Their Jewish roots were a powerful “antidote” against nationalism. But the Marxist approach to the Jewish question was not monolithic; it implied a variety of currents lasting from radical internationalism (Rosa Luxemburg) to “cultural autonomy” (Wladimir Medem); from Marxist Zionism (Ber Borochow) to Jewish messianism (Walter Benjamin). In other words, Marxism allowed Jews to think a word without national cleavages and, at the same time, to think their own “national” emancipation. In some respects, an analogous reception of Marxism took place in the colonial world, where Marxism became a flag of both internationalism and national liberation.

**3) In your next study, *The Jews and Germany: From the Judeo-German Symbiosis to the Memory of Auschwitz* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1994; original French 1992), you argue that coexistence between Germans and Jews was just a culturally limited phenomenon that never took place because Germans never aimed to such a synthesis. Could you present us with the reasons why this happened and provide the wider historical context within which it took place? Also, in the second part of your study you argue that Germans have not overcome their Nazi past. 23 years later since the publication of your study do you believe that the situation has changed for the better? Can you detect any important shifts in the ways that national memory is dealing with the issue nowadays?**

I wrote this book between 1990 and 1992, in the middle of German reunification. In that historical conjuncture, many voices warned against the risks of the rebirth of the so-called “Grossdeutschland”. The intellectuals of the GDR denounced an annexation and a process of colonization that simply destroyed all the democratic expectations of 1989. Their posture was well synthesized by Hans Mayer in *Der Turm von Babel*, where he explained that the pitiful end of the GDR should not hide the hopes it aroused at its origins, when it appeared as a conquest of the antifascist struggle. In the Federal Republic, people like Jürgen Habermas and Günther Grass pointed out that united Germany had been the premise of National Socialism. For them, the division of the country was an open wound that permanently highlighted the Nazi crimes. One of the slogans

of the alternative movements was “Nie wieder Deutschland!” (*Never Again Germany!*). The shift from democratic claims (“we *are* the people”) to identity claims (“we are *one* people”) announced the rebirth of ethnic nationalism. Thirty years later, we can easily recognize that, hopefully, the German reunification did not mean the return of National Socialism. Today, the rise of a post-fascist movement like Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is related to a European tendency and cannot simply be explained as a Nazi legacy. Nevertheless, these warnings were legitimate and contributed to the inscription of the memory of the Holocaust within the historical consciousness of the unified country. In other words, the reunification led to a form of Habermasian “constitutional patriotism” rather than to the rebirth of German nationalism (and AfD is a late reaction to this historical change).

At the same time, the reunification was a major turn that allowed us to put the German past in a historical perspective and clarify its major features. Gershom Scholem was right when depicted the “German-Jewish symbiosis” as a myth: the Jews had transformed German culture from within but, with a few exceptions, an authentic dialogue between Germans and Jews never took place. The so-called “German-Jewish symbiosis” was a Jewish monologue. This contradiction was one of the premises of the exceptional intellectual creativity of the Jews of Central Europe, who always thought and wrote as outsiders. They were the most brilliant representatives of the culture of nations that never recognized them as their legitimate members, rather it perceived them as a foreign and dangerous body. The “German-Jewish symbiosis” is a retrospective construction: it’s a “realm of memory” of the Federal Republic of Germany, an inexhaustible *Trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning of a destroyed German-Jewish past. The true cult of this engulfed past – German cultural archives pay astronomic amounts of money in order to acquire the manuscripts of Kafka or other Jewish authors – is the expression of this grieving, and a symbolic compensation.

**4) Your next study, Siegfried Kracauer: *Itinéraire d’un intellectuel nomade (Paris: La Découverte 1994)*, is devoted to Siegfried Kracauer. What do you think are his major theoretical insights to the study of phenomenon of Nazism? Could he be considered as part of the Frankfurt School? Do you detect any important deviations in his political and theoretical outlook from that of prominent members of the school like Walter Benjamin?**

When I published this essay, in 1994, Kracauer was still considered a marginal author, known almost exclusively for his very original and highly debatable book on German expressionist cinema: *From Caligari to Hitler* (1946). In the following years, he has been canonized: his works have been republished and translated into many languages and many valuable critical studies have been written in both Europe and the USA. Kracauer was a very peculiar figure, almost unclassifiable: a writer, a literary critic, a philosopher of history, and a theoretician of cinema and photography. He was deeply linked to Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, with whom he had a short love story at the end of the Great War. He never belonged to the Frankfurt School, a scholarly institution with which he had a conflictual relationship, very similar, in many regards, to Walter Benjamin. He shared with both Adorno and Benjamin a “romantic” interpretation of Marxism based on a critique of capitalist reification and instrumental reason, but he never accepted Adorno’s conservative rejection of the cultural industry and popular culture. From this point of view, his discrepancy with Adorno was radical. Kracauer considered images as epistemological tools. For him, photography and cinema were not only authentic realms of aesthetic creation, despite their commodity form; they were also devices capable of revealing, describing, and interpreting history and society, what he called “physical reality.” The Frankfurt School merged the legacies of Weber (the critique of rationality), Marx (the critique of capitalism and a theory of commodity reification), and Freud (the discovery of the unconscious) into a radical but exclusively romantic, resigned and sometimes conservative criticism of capitalist modernity; Kracauer added to these sources a phenomenological approach inherited from Georg Simmel. This is why Adorno’s dry and cryptic

prose never attained the literary quality of Kracauer's German writings. Kracauer had understood that the twentieth century was the age of images. Adorno despised cinema in which he saw nothing but a form of commodity reification. With Benjamin, Kracauer had recognized the potentialities of the mechanical reproduction of art works and did not build his thought on a nostalgic remembrance of its lost aura. He had broken the Jewish "Bildverbot" (prohibition of images) and this transgression opened new realms of knowledge: a new hermeneutic of modernity.

**5) Your study, *L'Histoire déchirée, essai sur Auschwitz et les intellectuels* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997), examines the ways in which various Jewish intellectuals who survived the Holocaust interpreted the experience of Auschwitz during the postwar period. What were their main limitations and insights into the understanding of the phenomenon just a decade after its occurrence? What were their contributions to the formation of the national memory of the Holocaust in Germany, if any?**

*L'Histoire déchirée* is a study of the impact of the Holocaust on postwar culture. It starts from the recognition of the discrepancy that exists between our own perception of the extermination of the European Jews as a central event in the history of the twentieth century, and its relative invisibility at the end of the Second World War, when the Holocaust - this word did not exist at that time - was overwhelmed and occulted by the magnitude of the war's violence and destruction. In this book, I sketch a typology of intellectual reaction in the face of Auschwitz, going from incomprehension and neglect (Sartre) to critical understanding and interpretation (Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Theodor Adorno). I tried to explain that this latter sharp perception in the middle of a blind world supposed a particular gaze - made of both psychological proximity and critical distance - characterized the marginal position of many European Jewish intellectuals who had emigrated to the United States. In my book, I interpret this marginal position as the epistemological "privilege" of exile. This "privilege" was gained at a very high price - think to an essay like Arendt's "We Refugees" or Adorno's dark meditations on the "mutilated life" of emigres - but resulted in some of the most powerful works of twentieth century philosophy and critical theory.

6) Which is your take on the relation between Auschwitz and Enlightenment? Was the former an expression of the latter's logic, stretched to its limits?

At the end of the Second World War, antifascist culture depicted National Socialism as a "throwback of civilization into barbarism". Against this commonplace, some critical thinkers - notably Arendt, Horkheimer and Adorno - interpreted it as an authentic expression of modern civilization. Arendt viewed the Holocaust as the result of the convergence between imperialism and modern anti-Semitism; Horkheimer and Adorno as the epilogue of a process of the "self-destruction of reason". Instead of Hegel's Absolute Spirit, they emphasized that the trajectory of the West led to Auschwitz. In a famous aphorism by Adorno, "no universal history leads from savagery to Humanity, but there is certainly one leading from the stone catapult to the megabomb".

This epistemological shift radically changed our vision of both capitalism and fascism. It seems to me an essential achievement and a premise for rebuilding a critical theory, and a project of liberation in the twenty-first century.

**7) The next important study you published was *Le Totalitarisme: Le XXe siècle en débat* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), an intellectual history of the discussion around totalitarianism. Could you speak about the origins of this debate and explain the nodal shifts of the concept that you detect over the time? Can we equate the Soviet Union with Nazism both in analytical and political terms? Does the concept have any analytical value or is it just an ideological fabrication in order to delegitimize any kind of non-liberal alternative?**

In this book, I tried to gather the most relevant contributions to the debate on totalitarianism, which was one of the richest controversies of twentieth-century intellectual history. It was conceived of during the 1990s, the age of triumphant neoliberalism. Whereas in the United States and West Germany the concept of totalitarianism belongs to the culture of the Cold War of the 1950s and the 1960s, in other countries – notably France, Italy and reunified Germany – it emerged in the 1990s, when it became instrumental in capturing the meaning of the twentieth century as the age of violence and genocides. In Germany, it meant the “double past” of a country that had experienced both Nazism and real socialism; in Italy, it allowed the former Communist party to shift from socialism to left liberalism and for Berlusconi to present himself as a champion of modern freedom; in France, it accompanied the decline of Mitterrandism and the burial of what remained of the Left. Perry Anderson was right when he depicted Paris as “the capital of European reaction”. It is there that François Furet wrote *The Passing of an Illusion* (1995) and a team of scholars led by Stéphane Courtois published *The Black Book of Communism* (1997).

My book took up a double challenge. On the one hand, it sought to demystify a strong media campaign by showing its apologetic purpose: the critique of totalitarianism was instrumental in legitimizing the neoliberal order that had followed the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, it attempted to reveal the complexity of a philosophical and theoretical debate that could not be reduced to the ideological goals of liberalism (“immunized” against both fascism and communism). The twentieth century experienced new forms of total power with fascism and Stalinism, both related to the inner logic of Western civilization. Hannah Arendt interpreted totalitarianism as a unique form of the symbiotic relationship between ideology and terror that aimed at destroying politics itself, i.e. any form of interaction between different subjects in a shared public space. There is also a Marxist critique of totalitarianism – think to Trotsky, Marcuse or Castoriadis – that is a radical criticism of total domination: totalitarianism as universal reification and the transformation of instrumental rationality into social and political irrationalism. Of course, this critique of totalitarianism has nothing to do with a defense of classical liberalism and its equation communism=fascism=totalitarianism.

One of my conclusions is that, despite its pertinence in the realm of political theory, where it can fulfill a critical purpose, the term is almost useless for interpreting fascism and communism. We can detect some superficial analogies between them, but they remain two antipodal political phenomena in both their origins and their social and ideological content. Even the violence they produce is deeply different, and the concept of totalitarianism basically overwhelms and hides their discrepancies.

**8) In your study *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003; original French 2002), you make the argument that the uniqueness of Nazism lay in its terrifying blend of many forms of distinctively Western violence. What were these forms?**

I prefer to speak of “historical singularity” rather than of “uniqueness”, a concept frequently related to mystical interpretations of the Holocaust as a metaphysical or supra-historical event. In my view, Nazi violence was the synthesis, allowed by a set of exceptional historical circumstances during the Second World War, of many tendencies which had emerged in Europe since the beginning of the nineteenth century: the birth of modern racism and anti-Semitism; the transformation of conservatism and anti-Enlightenment into political irrationalism and radical nationalism, leading to the birth of fascism; the triumph of colonialism as a culture of domination and a practice of extermination; the serialization of death and invention of industrial massacre, etc. The Nazi aggression against the USSR in 1941 was at the same time a war against Marxism and the Enlightenment, a colonial war for conquering the vital space of Eastern Europe, and a war for exterminating the Jews, the brain of Bolshevism and the intellectual avantgarde of a “lower race”, a kind of “sub-humanity” (*Untermenschentum*) in Hitler’s language. If there is something “unique” in

Nazism, it is this exceptional fusion of many tendencies shaping the history of the West as a whole. From this point of view, my interpretation of Nazism is antipodal to that of Habermas: I see Nazism as the “distillation” of the West rather than as the expression of a *Sonderweg* that separated Germany from Western civilization. This genetic interpretation also tries to overcome the limits of a theory of totalitarianism that simply depicts and criticizes domination without paying attention to its historical premises.

**9) In light of what you call *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London: Pluto Press, 2016) what has happened to the other part of the famous polarity: Greece? Since the eighteenth century, major thinkers, from the German Romantics to the Deconstructionists, have discussed modernity in terms of Hebraism vs. Hellenism, Jerusalem vs. Athens, the messianic and the mythical, Abraham vs. Agamemnon and so on. If Jewish modernity, as you argue, is over, what has happened to its Greek counterpart over the last several decades?**

Used as metaphors, Athens and Jerusalem mean the invention of democracy and the invention of monotheism, reason and revelation, the contradictory pillars of the West. This is also the reason why Leo Strauss considered their impossible synthesis “the secret of the vitality of Western civilization”. Broken by Nazism, which transformed Athens into a realm of “Aryanism” and Jerusalem into the symbol of an enemy “race”, this problematic link was reestablished during the Cold War by the partisans of the so-called “free world”. Today, for the ideologists of neoconservatism, Athens and Jerusalem mean the alliance between the United States (liberal democracy) and Israel (a Western bastion in the Middle East). I consider more appropriate the metaphors suggested by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire*: Washington (the Pentagon), New York (Wall Street) and Los Angeles (Hollywood), in other words the military, financial, and cultural pillars of the West, a modern version of what Polybius called “mixed government.” In this new configuration, Athens, i.e. democracy, has simply disappeared. I agree with Wendy Brown that neoliberalism is a way of “undoing the demos”.

In my view, the end of Jewish modernity means that after the Second World War, with the progressive decline of anti-Semitism in Western societies and the birth of Israel, the Jews have exhausted their historical role as the critical consciousness of Western culture, a subversive subject that “deconstructed” and putted into question Western culture from within, acting as one of its constitutive and at the same time disruptive elements. This transition is symbolically embodied by two antipodal figures that dominate the Jewish world in the first and the second half of the twentieth century: Leon Trotsky, the wandering Jew of world revolution, and Henry Kissinger, the strategist of US imperialism. Obviously, this does not mean that all Jews have become conservative or reactionary: hopefully, a Jewish tradition of critical thinking is still alive and produces fruitful results. But the premises for the explosion of intellectual creativity that took place at the turn of the twentieth century no longer exist.

**10) In your study, [Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914-1945](#) (London-New York: Verso, 2016; original French 2007), you criticize western historiography with analytic tools that derive from the western historical canon. What do you think about this paradox and the wider issue of the use of universal categories for the critique of liberalism? Are they adequate? How we can we renew our analytical repertoire by using non-western concepts, if we can at all?**

This book is an attempt at analyzing the entanglement of violence, culture, and politics in Europe between the two world wars. It seems to me that “civil war” is the best concept for capturing the transformations produced by total war in the anthropological structure of the continent. A civil war is an anomic conflict that affects all dimensions of human life and pushes violence to paroxysm. In spite of its aporetic aspects – civil wars have always been studied as internal wars that put into

question the state monopoly of violence - this concept has many advantages. On the one hand, it captures the end of classical wars, as inter-state conflicts between sovereign powers have been replaced by ideological or *Weltanschauung* wars. On the other hand, it includes the enchainment of revolutions and counterrevolutions that occurred in Europe after October 1917. Civil wars are the antithesis of politics as conceived of by classical liberalism. This is the reason for which its most interesting thinkers are - from antipodal perspectives - either Marxists or fascists: on the one hand, Lenin and Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Gramsci; on the other hand, Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt. "Civil war" is a political concept rather than a "universal category". In my book, I quote many of the intellectual actors of the "European civil war" (Gramsci, Trotsky, Schmitt, etc.) but I owe this concept to contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Mario Tronti and Jacob Taubes, among others. Do these critical thinkers belong to a supposed "Western canon"? Yes, they are not postcolonial thinkers; but many elements of this "Western canon" could be easily detected in *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon or *Black Jacobins* by C.L.R. James, and they knew that. I agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty when, in *Provincializing Europe*, he explains that postcolonialism means a displacement of sight rather than a rejection of Western analytical categories.

**11) Should the left mourn its defeats? Should it also - complimentary to this process - mobilize resources and memories of the past both on political and intellectual levels, in a manner similar to British Marxist historians such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm?**

In my book *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), I argue that what helped the left to overcome its defeats during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Paris Commune to the Chilean putsch of 1973, was the conviction that the future belonged to socialism and even the most tragic failures were only lost battles. Rooted in a teleological vision of history, this belief in a final goal gave the left an extraordinary strength, which today no longer exists. Far beyond the collapse of the USSR and real socialism, the turn of 1989-1990 created a general awareness that a revolutionary sequence had been exhausted. And this new historical consciousness put into question the idea of socialism itself. This does not mean that the left experienced a "final" defeat - think to the myriad of social and political movements that have emerged in the twenty-first century - but this historical consciousness claims a reinvention of the left, of its culture, its projects, its organizational forms, and its methods of action. Socialism, I argue with Lucien Goldmann, is a human "bet", a possible future inscribed in human potentialities, and we know that socialism itself can become a new form of barbarism. This is the lesson of the twentieth century, which inevitably suffuses this bet with melancholia. One of Daniel Bensaid's best books is titled "the melancholic bet" (*Le pari mélancolique*).

Left-wing melancholia does not mean nostalgic resignation, passivity, or impotence. In my view, it belongs to the "structure of feelings" of the left - I borrow this concept from Raymond Williams - that has always haunted its history, from the French Revolution onwards. Changing the world requires not only strategic projects, valuable diagnostics of force relations, effective claims, and strong organizations; a process of human self-emancipation forcefully mobilizes powerful emotions, expectations, and hopes. Melancholia is one of these feelings. After any historical defeat, it charges with memory the process of mourning and the building of a new perspective. In other words, left-wing melancholia can become a link between the past and the future. I am not sure that my view of Left-wing melancholia corresponds with Eric Hobsbawm's sensibility (generally suffused with resignation) as expressed in his autobiography, *Interesting Times*. As for E.P. Thompson, I would speak of romantic rather than of melancholic Marxism (think to his biography of William Morris). In my book, the most relevant examples of melancholic radical thought are Walter Benjamin and Daniel Bensaid.

**12) Let's move forward to the liberalism of today. Nowadays, the emergence of xenophobic far-right movements is a common political denominator in many European countries. At**

***the same time, Tariq Ali and others have pointed to the emergence of an “extreme center”, as center-left and liberal parties increasingly embrace far-right policies. Can we still speak about “political liberalism,” or do we need new analytical categories to grasp these transformations?***

The new right is nationalist, racist, and xenophobic. In most Western European countries, at least where it is in power or has reached a significant strength, it adopts a democratic and republican rhetoric. It has changed its language, its ideology, and its style. In other words, it has abandoned its old, fascist habits, but it has not become a completely different thing yet; it is not an ordinary component of our political systems. On the one hand, the new far right is no longer fascist; on the other hand, we cannot define it without comparing it with fascism, which in many cases remains its matrix. The new right is a hybrid thing that might come back to fascism or turn into a new form of conservative, authoritarian, populist democracy. My concept of post-fascism tries to capture this transitional status. In my view, post-fascism is a regressive reaction to neoliberalism as carried out by the “extreme center” in the last decades. In the UK, Tony Blair claimed his continuity with Margaret Thatcher; in France, it was very difficult to recognize any significant difference between Nicolas Sarkozy’s and François Hollande’s presidencies; in Italy, Matteo Renzi was usually depicted as an authentic inheritor of Berlusconi’s neoliberalism; in Germany, the “grand coalition” showed that social-democracy and Christian conservatives shared the same objectives: the final result of these anti-social policies have been Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Alternative für Deutschland.

The European tragedy lies in the fact that the rise of these reactionary and nationalistic “Europhobic” movements is a product of the policies implemented for twenty years by the EU Commission itself. The EU has become the tool of financial capitalism that has imposed its rules – I am speaking of a compulsory legal structure, made of laws sometimes inscribed into constitutions – on all its governments. After two Commission presidents like Barroso (today a Goldman Sachs advisor) and Junker (the former leader of a fiscal paradise like Luxemburg); after the Greek crisis of 2015 and ten years of austerity policies on a continental scale, the rise of right-wing populist leaders like Matteo Salvini and Victor Orban is not striking at all. In other words, we cannot struggle affectively against post-fascism by defending the EU; it is in changing the EU that we can defeat nationalism and right-wing populism.

***13) Which similarities can you detect between the current far-right that is emerging throughout Europe and that of the interwar period? Can we call Le Pen and Trump fascists? Is it a legitimate conceptualization? What does your experience of European history tell us about the stance that an intellectual should keep today in the face of the disintegration of liberalism by the ultra-right in France, the UK, and the US?***

Trump clearly shows – I would say ostentatiously exhibits – many fascist features: authoritarian and charismatic leadership, hatred of democracy, contempt for law, exhibition of force, derision of human rights, open racism (notably against Blacks, Latinos, and Muslims), misogyny, homophobia, etc. But he is a fascist leader without a fascist movement behind him. He was elected as a candidate of the Republican Party, which is a pillar of the American political establishment. A fascist president in a liberal democratic system is an anomaly that cannot become durable: either democracy will reject this fascist threat, or democracy itself will be put into question. A similar dilemma, in an even more dramatic and striking form, is at stake in Brazil after Jair Bolsonaro’s victory in the presidential elections.

At the same time, the new radical rights – particularly in Europe – have lost the “utopian” dimension of their fascist ancestors: Bolshevism, their historical enemy, no longer exists, and they do not pretend to be an alternative to both liberalism and communism. They have abandoned their old



ambition to create a “New Man”. They wish to come back to national sovereignties, protectionist policies and the defense of “national identities” threatened by globalization and Muslim immigration. From this point of view, they are much more reactionary than fascist.

***14) Could tell us in which ways do you think we can productively and strategically engage with the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, since it has been hijacked by the state of Israel and the European center-right?***

I think that Islamophobia has replaced anti-Semitism in the political culture and ideology of post-fascism. This does not mean that anti-Semitism has disappeared – think to the recent massacre in Pittsburgh or the terrorist attacks in France a few years ago – or that the current wave of Islamophobia is preparing new genocides. History does not repeat itself, and Islam in the twenty-first century certainly cannot be compared with a small minority like the Jews in the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, post-fascist propaganda turns Muslims into the scapegoats of Western fantasies, fears, and psychoses. They haunt current xenophobic impulses, whereas anti-Semitism is declining in most Western societies. Furthermore, most of nationalist leaders have very good relationships with Netanyahu and the current Israeli government. Some among the most anti-Semitic currents of Western conservative culture – think to Christian fundamentalists – have become the most enthusiastic supporters of Israel.

A useful and effective politics of memory should inscribe the legacy of the Holocaust within this new context: instead of legitimizing Israeli policies of occupation and colonization, it should be used as a lever against the current forms of xenophobia, racism, and discrimination.

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**George Souvlis**  
**Enzo Traverso**

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