

“All Academics Should Be Humble”

Interview with Professor Roger Griffin

Jakub Drábik



Roger D. Griffin is a British professor of modern history and political theorist, well known for his work on socio-historical and ideological dynamics of fascism, as well as various forms of political or religious fanaticism. In May 2015, he will visit Prague for the very first time to give a keynote speech at the conference *Social Policy in Occupied European Countries* and his book *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (2007) was translated to Czech and it is going to be published by Karolinum press.

Jakub Drábik (JD): Dear professor, first of all thank you very much for finding a time for this interview. I would like to start with some biographical, maybe even personal questions. Tell us a little bit more about the Roger Griffin before he became Professor Roger Griffin. I am aware that you already answered similar question in an interview with Mathew Feldman in 2008 (published in the book *A Fascist Century*), but for those that didn't read it, could you tell us how did you get involved with Fascist studies? You did not study history, but French and German literature, why such a change?

Roger Griffin (RG): My route into history, if you can call it a history, was what they say in English circuitous, it was not a very straightforward one. I studied French and German literature at Oxford University and that made me interested in the history of literature, but also into history of ideas: the difference between enlightenment and romanticism and expressionism and all those modern 'isms'. I got interested in the 'isms' which constitute modern history. And in particular the fact that every author I studied seemed to embody a different way of seeing the world. So I got very interested in the way the world could and can be seen in so many conflicting ways and the way every time you studied an author you were partly studying the age that person lived in, and got a glimpse into the "foreign country" which we call the past. It seemed obvious to me that there was no true way of seeing the world, just a kaleidoscope of different ways of seeing it, each normal to the person you study. And that made me very interested in how history creates a myriad of "normalities". When you are trying to understand a book, you are really looking into a certain normality or set of values which an individual could adopt within historical time.

And that insight — I didn't realize it at time — became very useful to me when I tried to understand the nature of fascism. In between leaving the university and ending up in the History department of Oxford Polytechnic, which then became the Oxford Brookes University, I taught courses on the history of ideas. They were a bit like philosophy courses. But instead of being interested in philosophy in the sense of reconstructing the thought of individual thinkers like Spinoza or Kant, I was interested in the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age: German idealism, German Romanticism, English Enlightenment, things like that. So I found it quite natural when head of department invited me to help him teach the course on fascism to become fascinated by this new 'ism' with its own normality of values and world-view. I obviously got very interested in what was the key to understanding this 'ism', and soon realized that (apart from Marxists who thought they knew) none of the major historians could agree on what lay at the core of this 'ism', or whether it was a proper 'ism' at all. A lot of serious scholars thought it was indefinable, or that it had no ideology, or that it was just negative (an anti-ideology), or anti-modern, or just a product of capitalism determined to destroy socialism. So, using my literary training I started reading individual fascists. I started with ideologues and intellectuals in Fascist Italy and then in Nazi Germany (which most German historians said was not fascist), and I studied what fascists said and the value-assumptions underlying what they said, a bit like studying literature. In another words, I was trying to answer the question "how did this person see the world?". And it was that line of research that led me to define fascism *in its own terms*, and not using values based on anti-fascist premises

JD: What about your doctoral studies? How long did you actually work on your theory? You obtained the doctorate when you were 42, is that correct?

RG: I tried to write a doctorate on interwar German literature when I was in my 20s, but that never really worked out. I never really boiled my extensive reading down into a really good, original, feasible research question. So I abandoned that and basically just lectured at Oxford Polytechnic and enjoyed reading around a lot in anthropology, philosophy, sociology, a bit like an autodidact. But then, when I married an Italian from Genoa, and my teaching meant knowing about fascism I immersed myself in lots of primary sources relating to Italian, German, British and French fascism (or 'putative' fascism, because I did not know yet if it was fascist or not). As I did so I became aware of this recurrent theme in what I was reading which seemed to me to suggest that fascists themselves knew what fascism was. All the books about fascism seemed to ignore what fascists themselves said fascism was about. Not only that, but despite the vast difference between all the fascisms I looked at, I noticed a really clear pattern which connected them all, even though obviously Nazism was very, very different from Italian Fascism. They all had, what I call, the same core myth, the same utopia of an alternative society. So at certain point in 1986 I said to myself "since I haven't found the book that explores this idea, I will have to write this book myself". So I enrolled for a doctorate at what is called a DPhil at Oxford University and I spent next three and a half years writing my doctorate. My supervisor did not fully understand my thesis, my internal examiner certainly did not understand it, but for-

tunately my external examiner for the doctoral viva, Sir Ian Kershaw, who is a very eminent historian of Nazism, did understand it and he made sure that I was actually awarded the doctorate. So after one abortion and a difficult birth I finally had my doctoral thesis, well into my middle age, like a late mother!

JD: Which historians of fascism you would mark as the most important/influential for your doctoral research?

RG: At times I felt very alone because hardly any experts really supported my thesis in their analyses of fascism. Nevertheless, there were three people who I felt were like kindred spirits. I felt less alone with them. The most important was George Mosse. He was interesting because he was a Jew who escaped being killed in Nazi Germany and finally ended up in Wisconsin as a historian, and had thus had a direct experience of the ideas which had so nearly succeeded in murdering him. For a time he only taught medieval and early modern thought and culture, with a particular interest in the core ideas that shaped the period. He then transferred what he had learnt from studying the power of ideas to trying to make sense of Nazism. He never formulated a concise theory of fascism. But nevertheless his work on the main characteristics of fascism, even though he never defined it, was very convergent with mine: he stressed the role of myth; he stressed the role of new man, of the dream of a better world, of the idea of some sort of revolutionary drive to create a new era. In fact, in his very last book, *The Fascist Revolution* (1999), which is a collection of essays which he had published before, he does acknowledge me, as somebody who was working to continue his ideas.

The second person, who was extremely important to me, was Stanley Payne. He had written a book called *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (1980) which was brilliantly synoptic and looked at lots of different sorts of fascism, but when he offered a “typology of fascism”, he put what fascism was against (the anti-dimension) first and then what fascism was trying to create second and then its style and organization third. In the positives he accepted that fascism was trying to create a new type of society. I was excited when I read Payne’s book, but what made me feel he had still not quite ‘got’ fascism is that he was still putting the fascist negatives first, when it seemed obvious to me that the negatives are the functions of its positive goals. Fascists wanted to create a new sort of economy, a new sort of state, a new national character etc., “and that is why it rejected certain things that would prevent the realization of their goal (liberal democracy/communism etc.)”. And, in fact, after I wrote my book, he wrote his brilliant *A History of Fascism*, where he reproduces the typology but this time, actually swaps it around so the positive goals come first and the negative goals come second. He also offers a single sentence definition of fascism which is basically a paraphrase of mine. We have always got on very well on issues relating to fascism, Stanley Payne and me. He did a lot more work on different fascisms in *A History of Fascism* than I did for my *The Nature of Fascism*, and is what I consider a ‘real historian’ in a way I have never been. What makes him different is that he started with Spanish fascism, with *Falange*, and then moved on to general fascism, whereas most experts in the field started with either Fascism or Nazism.

The third historian I learned so much from was Emilio Gentile. While I was writing my work, I came across this amazing book which nobody had ever talked about in England, called *l'Ideologia del Fascismo*, or, the *Ideology of Fascism* written by a Roman academic who was hardly recognized outside Italy, called Emilio Gentile. His work totally vindicated what I was doing. In a series of publications he had carried out an analysis of Italian Fascism based on archival scholarship combined with great intelligence which completely converged with what I was doing. He also, very significantly, used this wonderful word 'palingenetico', palingenetic, referring to palingenesis (re-birth), to talk about Fascist myth. It was thrilling for me to find someone else using it to describe the myth of rebirth of the nation that I had discovered independently was central to defining fascism, and hence to understanding all the fascisms which I called fascist. In a sense, with the work of Mosse, Payne and Gentile, I felt I was not completely alone, and that I was just continuing their work by tidying up their insights to create a coherent theory and definition of generic fascism

JD: What about the assessment of your dissertation? It was not approved by one of the examiners, if I remember correctly. What is the story of your theory, how it changed from almost rejected to being presently the most influential definition of fascism?

RG: When my dissertation was submitted in 1991, the internal examiner called Ralf Dahrendorf, quite famous, thought it was rubbish. Like so many experts at the time, he assumed axiomatically that fascism was anti-modern. He did not recommend the dissertation for publication, so basically my whole thesis would have had no impact at all but for a rather weird coincidence. I went to a conference in Lancaster about fascism and I just sat in the audience listening to these people and kept saying to myself arrogantly 'these experts simply have no idea what they are talking about'. I mean really. They embodied the period that I came to put an end to — the period where nobody really had any working definition of fascism. One of the people sitting on stage was called Roger Eatwell. He was at Bath University and he was an editor of the book series on the political right. I talked to him a bit over coffee and a few months later out of the blue he invited me to write a volume in his book series based on my dissertation. The first book in his series was called *The Nature of the Right*, so he wanted my book to be called *The Nature of Fascism*. That title, however, had been used for an earlier publication by Stuart Woolf based on the conference. So it wasn't an original title and it wasn't my title. I wouldn't have used that as a title. But that's how the book came to be written and it came out as an expensive hardback. Not surprisingly, it didn't sell, nobody read it, and it was completely ignored, apart from one review by a historian of Italy who said it was rubbish. Then a very strange thing happened. In 1993 somebody from Routledge, an editor, had my hardback in the bag of books to consider for publication. And her car broke down on way to an editorial meeting, so she had to take it to a garage. As she sat there while her car was being repaired she read my book. On an impulse she decided it should be in paperback. So they put it in paperback. I got a very bad deal with the royalties so even though it is still in print I make hardly any money from it at all. But nevertheless, I am grateful to Routledge because the book gradually became well known.

Thanks to *The Nature of Fascism* in paperback I started to be known by publishers on fascism and the next major book, also still in print, came when OUP (Oxford University Press — J.D.) asked me to write an anthology of texts on fascism. And this is the reader called *Fascism*, which I know needs a lot of revising now that so much has changed on the fascist scene, and I would put in texts on other groups I left out, such as the Croix de Feu and Ustasha. But it was a good first attempt at an anthology of fascist texts. That was 1995. And then the third book which came out in 1998 while I was becoming better known is the one where I first used this phrase “the new consensus”. Somebody else wanted an anthology, publishing firm called Arnold — and I called it *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*. That’s where I introduced the idea that actually my approach to fascism was becoming more and more common, which it was at the time. Basically, with those three books and lots of articles and introductions and chapters, I started influencing people with my theory, especially in the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. In fact the other good luck I had was that the Soviet empire collapsed when it did. It meant that in the 1990s there were new historians trying to make sense of their past distorted by Marxism-Leninism, and which often contained an element of fascism which made no sense using the Soviet model of fascism. A lot of these people in Hungary and Romania, and even in Baltic states started finding my work useful. By the end of the 1990s, I had established myself as quite an important figure in comparative fascist studies, but it could easily not have happened.

What I became aware of in the 2000s was basically that a generational gap had grown up between me and older historians (many of whom didn’t even consider me a historian). I have always been completely ignored by Oxford University, and I still am. I was never invited to give papers at Cambridge — well I was by one of my former students called Andreas Umland, who invited me to talk to a seminar — but nobody at Oxbridge has ever taken me seriously. Nevertheless in other universities like Manchester, Warwick, Cardiff, Sheffield, Nottingham, Hull there were modern historians who found something important in my work. But my main success is abroad, where there had been quite a crisis with the conventional theory. For example in Spain, because, again, Marxist ideas were the norm for about twenty years but then they started collapsing in the 1990s; or France where there was a lot of suppression of their fascist past, but new generation has started to look at what happened in inter-war and war-time France in comparative framework. I am also well known in Scandinavia, Hungary, in American Universities and even in South Korea (for my work on totalitarianism). Other academics have started using my work. This academic year I have been invited to give keynotes in Berlin, Moscow, Granada, Lisbon, Genoa, Athens, and Prague. Wikipedia has probably also helped disseminate my theories worldwide, since it cited in many articles on fascism.

The final book I’ve written on fascism — because I’ve largely moved from fascist studies now even though I still do conferences and the occasional article — was I think my most important book yet, even if it is so densely written that it has not sold many copies. *Modernism and Fascism* may be obscure partly because I am so used to reading a lot of German intellectuals and that has affected my style. The genesis of the book lies in the 2000s when I started focusing on the question why fascism happened

when it did, why did this palingenetic myth of ultranationalism sprang up almost everywhere in Europe (and even in some places abroad) in the interwar period. And in order to understand that, I had to look at all the other things which were going on in European society between say 1880–1939 which involve some sort of utopian project for a new future, especially in the interwar period. That led me to carry on to radically rethink of concept of modernism. In *Modernism and Fascism* I elaborate a definition of modernism as a revolt against the modernity, modernity meaning a collapse of meaning and cultural integrity (the *nomos*). I see modernism, you see I am back to ‘isms’ — as the attempt to resolve the problems of modern age by giving it a new source of meaning or spirituality or purpose or structure or order. I think that if this location of fascism within modernism, gradually gets more understood to the point of becoming ‘common sense’ (like fascism as palingenetic ultranationalism is now), it will be my most important legacy to fascist studies.

So first, there was a definition of fascism as a palingenetic form of ultranationalism, which is structured by the idea that the present nation or race is decadent or dying, but can be replaced by a movement and then a state which will guarantee the rebirth of the people and the regeneration of the nation. That was my basic contribution, if you like.

Secondly, my *Fascism* reader established the idea that you really have to read fascists and take them seriously, take their ideology seriously, ask them what they think it is all about to understand what makes fascism tick. One of the important things I did in *Fascism* was to actually continue the story after 1945 and look at the lot of different forms that fascism has taken since the end of the war. Because when you define it not as a movement like Hitler’s NSDAP but as a vision of a different world based on the nation or race then it does not necessarily take the form of a leader movement. It can be a form of ideology, it can be a website, it can be a ‘metapolitical’ intellectual movement, or a form of aggressively racist music, it can take many forms. It can even just inhabit the mind of a terrorist like Timothy McVeigh as an idea which was crystallized in the *Turner Diaries*.

In a way my third major contribution apart from the definition was perhaps embracing postwar development which many people didn’t really understand the relationship they had to the interwar development. And fourthly — and this is where I feel not many have understood the importance of this yet — is to locate fascism within the modernist revolt against the collapse of meaning and order under modernity. Some people understand that, but a lot of people don’t. So they are the three or four major contributions I think I’ve made, out of which only the first three are really being understood.

JD: Why is it important to have a one sentence definition of fascism?

RG: When I came into the field, there had been one attempt to define fascism in a paragraph, and that was Ernst Nolte’s paragraph in his book *Three faces of fascism* and I think that is a really unhelpful, practically unintelligible definition of fascism. Actually, I doubt whether anybody really understands what he means by it. Even German academics don’t understand what he means by it, and it has remained practically unused by other historians since he concocted it. He calls it practical and theoretical

resistance to transcendence. Now, when you read him very closely in German, you do realize that basically what he is saying is that transcendence means some sort of socialistic progressive idea of humanity, even the enlightenment and certainly the socialist one, and that fascism is trying to stop all progress in the emancipation of humanity. But it is a very obscure way of conceptualizing fascism, and again emphasizes the 'anti-dimension' to fascist ideology and not its positive utopia. Apart from that, there were many books and many authors who managed to write about fascism without ever defining it. So for example you never quite work out from their works if Franco was a fascist or if Nazism was fascist because you are never given any precise criteria. I found this extremely frustrating.

Then I had a sort of *Eureka* moment, and this is quite weird really. It might be assumed that I discovered my definition by finding nationalism and then palingenesis, but actually it was other way around. The thing that struck me about so many fascist writers was the obsession with rebirth. So the rebirth came first. At one point I wrote down, like "E=mc²" the formula, "fascism = palingenesis +?". Then it suddenly struck me. Of course it is a synthesis or compound of the archetypal myth of rebirth and the modern myth of the nation. And that nation can either be a race or nation conceived as an organic historical entity, not necessarily with any biological racism. It seemed to me so obvious, that this was the common denominator. I have been accused of essentialism, I have been accused of saying this is what fascism 'really' is. And that is nonsense, because I spent the whole of chapter 1 in talking about every definition of fascism as an ideal type. So it is just a theory, a 'heuristic device'. Most of my critics never actually read me and thus do not even know I call it an ideal type. But basically, once I had that definition, it made everything fall into place and demystified the entire field of studies, creating order out of chaos. The single sentence identified palingenetic ultranationalism as the core myth that dictated all fascist policies and actions, the rationale of all construction and destruction. One importance of this definition was that it challenged the academics to offer their own definitions and in fact in the next ten years, you can find writer after writer writing a book about fascism which quite often reject me and then come up with their own one sentence definition, often remarkably similar to mine.

So with my sentence I think I basically succeeded in saying "look, why don't we just treat fascism like any other ideology?". It has an ideology, it has a world view, it has a value system with a core value and we should just treat it like a normal thing. It is not barbaric or anti or destructive or mad or absurd or a conundrum or a mystery. It is just another 'normal' human ideology. And I think that it was important to offer the definition that brought it back into history. For a very long time, fascism was demonized to a point, where it no longer belonged to human history, especially in the case of Nazism. Minds seemed to go blank when they tried to conceive it and define it.

JD: In 2005 there was well known discussion in a German journal *Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik* (EWE), later published as a book *Fascism Past and Present, West and East* (2006). Your opening article was written in a somewhat sharp tone, which invoked strong reactions. Would you write this article differently today or would you leave the tone so it stimulates discussion?

RG: In 2005 I was invited to write an article on my theory of fascism for a journal, whose nature I slightly misunderstood. It is called *Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik*. It is a journal with a serious methodological intent almost inconceivable outside Germany. I was asked to write a serious article on fascism which would then be discussed by other academics. I was asked to be as candid as I wished because the point was to expose my core ideas to academic scrutiny and then refine them in a follow-up article. What I wrote would not be reviewed or edited in any way. I understood the nature of the journal as an invitation to write something quite provocative, a bit satirical, a bit hard. So I wrote this rather sarcastic article about how blind German historians of fascism had been to the debate about fascism in English language. For decades word fascism in German was only used by Marxists to include Nazism. Fascism was either something that happened in Italy, or, if it was used generically, was something to do with authoritarian capitalism. In the case of Ernst Nolte, he tried to use fascism in a generic way but nobody could really understand what he was saying so that didn't really have much influence. So I came in with English irony blazing like toy guns and it did annoy a lot of German academics and one or two Americans as well like A. J. Gregor.

If I had a chance I would have written it differently, less arrogantly, less sweepingly, less condescendingly. Ironically though, the article annoyed some people so much that the debate that emerged was really fierce and went through two rounds. I wouldn't advise anybody to read it all. Basically, it is a lots and lots of responses to me and then me trying desperately to respond to the responses, which is really tedious unless you are obsessed with fascism studies. But although I rather regret doing it, it did actually in a way at least established the fact that there is an international debate on the nature of fascism which raises serious historical issues of interpretation. Also, almost perversely, since my article I have been invited to Germany five times to give papers on fascism and Nazism, two of which have been published, and one major conference and a major German book on fascist aviation have been based on my work. So in a roundabout way the article was influential.

Basically, all the academics should be humble with respect to other academic cultures, and the thing I was probably confusing was the task of the academic with a task of a journalist: a journalist can afford to be provocative and simplistic, but these are lethal qualities in an academic. So yes, if I was asked to write it now, I would write it very differently. But paradoxically that would probably mean that it would not cause any discussion and would just be another dry article. Anyway there would be no reason to write it now, because by 2015, my ideas about fascism are banal and are the common property of the discipline. In 1998 I called it a new consensus, but it has actually become an old consensus and it is hardly worth mentioning. Literally, there are thousands of people in Europe who think that fascism has at its core the rebirth myth. In 2004 Ian Kershaw wrote an article on the uniqueness of Nazism where he says that 'of course' at the heart of fascism lies a myth of rebirth. I took that 'of course' as a great tribute to my work, because there was nothing self-evident about this fact before my *The Nature of Fascism*. Of course I can't take full credit for this, because as I said, it is partly a generational thing, and I would not have had to battle so long to establish the value of my approach with the younger generation. Times have changed

and even some German historians now invite me to their conferences and even offer one sentence definitions of fascism of their own which have the word rebirth in it (or *Erneuerung*, which means renewal).

This trend has produced some important collaborations that were unimaginable ten years ago. For example, in 2012 there was a major conference held by two Germans in Italy with people from five other countries. The result of that encounter was a very interesting special issue of *Journal for Modern European History* on fascist temporalities, the different ways fascists conceived time. And that special issue can be seen as the vindication of everything I've done. I gave a paper, I wrote the main introductory essay, and the whole conference was inspired by my theories of rebirth and what is called a temporal revolution, changing the nature of historical time itself. Apart from the two Germans who organized it, the other contributors were three Americans and a Romanian and there could have been many more participants. In a way, though I annoyed a lot of people, I think the EWE article did shift the debate, not by convincing anyone but, quite unintentionally, by annoying people and forcing them into engagement. To that extent I do not regret it.

JD: Similarly, there were also huge differences between you and Marxist historians, which even led to your paper from the conference on fascism in Leeds in 2003 being rejected for publishing. Were you able to find the common ground since then or are the differences still insurmountable?

RG: That was quite weird. I was invited to the conference in Leeds in 2003, which was organized by the Marxist Party of Great Britain. The motivation for inviting me was rather complex. I think essentially, there were some hardcore Marxists there and they thought that I will just stir up the debate again by sleeping with the enemy. As it is, I probably sensed that I was in a sort of bear pit, *Bärengraben*, and I again, was probably too satirical on my attack on Marxist positions. I do find most Marxist intellectuals quite annoying actually when they pronounce on fascism. I mean, there are obviously some highly intelligent Marxists, but when they write about fascism I think their obsession with the need to overthrow capitalism blinds them to the existence of an attempted revolution from the right. Even people like Walter Benjamin or Bertold Brecht, who are brilliantly creative, I think are just wrong when it comes to fascism. So I gave a slightly arrogant paper again. I think when I feel threatened by critics I become arrogant out of self-defence. As a result of this, when I wrote my paper for collective volume of essays from that conference, they rejected it.

That was ok, because I did rewrite that essay and it was actually published by a brilliant Marxist scholar in Italy called Luciano Pellicani in Italian and in my book of essays *A Fascist Century*. My essay suggests there might be some sort of reconciliation between the Marxist and non-Marxist theory of fascism (I had written a similar essay calling for reconciliation about fascist aesthetics earlier). But the real product of the confrontation in Leeds was a whole special issue of the *European Journal of Political Theory* in 2013 in which six Marxists were invited to comment on the new consensus and were challenged to respond to the idea that there were actually elements in new consensus concerning the revolutionary nature of fascism that they

could accept from a Marxist point of view. That was actually a very, very good special issue, it can be found on the web. Even though that conference was a disaster, something came of it: the original article I wrote, which is probably ignored, and then a major special issue, which again had very little visible impact immediately, but may still lead somewhere. Academic consensus can change very fast but also very slowly. I still like to think that one day, some of these ideas — the recognition of the mythic power and the revolutionary dimension of fascism, the fact that it wasn't just about creating a terroristic form of capitalism, that it was in fact a rival creed of renewal — should be perfectly acceptable to Marxists, even if they disagree with it and think that Marxist revolution is the only *true* revolution. Most Marxists instinctively reject my ideas, but, interestingly, I think that there are some modern Marxists who are able to recognize that there were many projects to change the capitalist world in the early 20th Century and fascism was one of them. I see the extensive use of slave labour by Nazism in hyper-modern factories and the pursuit of total autarchy on the basis of imperial conquest in Europe is a pretty radical transformation of capitalism. The sticking point is that no matter how hostile fascism was towards communism and how horrific it was towards human beings regarded as inferior, my theory sees fascism as not just modern, but modernist and in its own way progressive. It is trying to achieve alternative modernity to liberal capitalism and communism. I'll give you an example, the Marxist Peter Osborne who wrote a major book about the politics of time, completely independently of me, postulates the theory that fascism is a form of political modernism with its own temporality. This put him out of step with most Marxists who feel threatened by the idea that there might have been another major revolutionary force at work in the 20th Century.

JD: You meet with your academic “rivals” at conferences from time to time — how do you get along with them? Can you go out and drink beer or do these differences go beyond the academic ground out to the personal life as well?

RG: Academia is a strange community full of the jealousies and enmities of any family. I basically divide academics into two personality types. It is very simplistic, but it is broadly true in my experience. There are some academics who are extremely territorial (and who tend to be male) and treat all other males in their field as rivals. The imagery that comes to mind is when you have animals peeing on trees to mark out their boundary and say “this is my area: keep out”. There are definitely some academics, who have read my stuff and have seen how successful my theory has become and say “I really don't like this guy. Who is he anyway, is he a historian? Look, he hasn't even got a degree in history, and what is this ‘palingenetic thing’ and what is this ‘nomic crisis’? Just some meaningless jargon”. And they really, really reject what I say. I have encountered these people face to face very rarely. One of them is Kevin Passmore, who paradoxically used my theory in his PhD and his first book and then went on to heavily criticize it and distance himself from it. I have actually met him on three occasions and he is always polite, but he criticizes my theory in print and I really cannot see that he has offered a cogent theory of fascism himself which can actually be used in historical research. One of my most extraordinary personal en-

counters was when I gave a talk in Austria with Hans Mommsen present, who had previously treated me with disdain at a conference in Madrid for suggesting fascism was modernizing. At the end he came up to me and gave me an enormous bear hug and said 'Das war brilliant!' People can be very unpredictable.

But generally speaking, I have found all over the world — I have been invited to most European countries and translated into many languages on the back of my theory's success — and I found an great deal of extreme friendliness and hospitality. I could cite one or two people. There is a major Portuguese scholar Antonio Costa Pinto who very early on adopted my theory when investigating Portugal and Salazar and has often hosted me in Lisbon. I am very well known at Oslo University, very well known at the Central European University in Budapest, where there is a brilliant historian called Constantin Iordachi. He speaks English, Hungarian, Romanian, French etc., and he thinks my theory is a very good starting point for investigating comparative fascism. I have 'fans' of my work in Paris, in Bucharest, in Uppsala, in Amsterdam, in Granada and it is always a pleasure to meet them. But one or two people, who are radical critics of me, like Michael Mann or Robert Paxton or A. J. Gregor — all of them actually use a thinly disguised form of my theory — I would really like to meet just to create a bit of honesty and genuine debate. There will always be territorial academics, so it is better to have direct dealing with them rather than be reduced to writing hostile comments often based on misreading what has been said.

JD: If you had to give your students only one book to read on fascism, to provide them with a general overview, except for your work, what that would be?

RG: The most important book that I would give my students to read is Stanley Payne's *A History of Fascism 1918–1939*, which I think is quite superb. It is methodologically sound, and the sheer wealth of reading it subsumes is fantastic: it gives genuine histories of nearly every form of interwar fascism. It also does look a bit at postwar fascism. Of course, it is out of date now, because it came out in 1995 and a lot happened since: 20 years have passed. Nevertheless, I would say read that. But in a way, what I would also suggest to do is use internet. If they read Payne's book in conjunction with and the fascist readers by Alexander Kallis and Constantin Iordachi they will already be at the heart of the contemporary debate: and then they can supplement this basis with an intelligent use of the internet: there are really some quite good Wikipedia articles on fascism if read critically.

JD: Did you ever think about leaving academia? Did you always want to become a university teacher or was it rather a coincidence?

RG: Well, no: I think that I have always quite realistically had the idea that there is not much else I could do other than teach. I mean intelligent investigative journalism, I would love to have done that, but I don't think I would have been very good. I admire journalists, I admire campaigning, journalism that really undercover scandals and looks at the terrible things happening abroad and uncovers the scandals at the heart of our so-called democracies: I think it is fantastic. But I never really thought

about doing that. As for more practical stuff, I think I would have been quite bad in business. I am very naïve, I am not very hard headed: I probably would never made a profit and gone bankrupt. So in a way, no, I never really thought about it seriously. I fell into academia because I kept on doing quite well in school and I just naturally kept doing the next thing that followed on from exam success. I got a scholarship to Oxford, then I got a First, so I started a PhD and then a Polytechnic that asked me to do some teaching, which then became one of the best University history departments in England. I always felt lucky that I have a job and the job has grown round me. The Mountain has come to Mohammed. As for things like business or City or making a millions of pounds out of banking — I am hippie enough to find all that completely repellent and sort of morally ugly. So I am probably really very lucky that I ever had a job and one involving teaching, which I really do love. It is my passion even more than writing books and articles. Even at 67 I still feel a buzz when I lecture and feel a glow of satisfaction when students write good essays. I even like teaching at school level — this term I will be teaching a group of thirteen year olds at my son's former school. I get a little burst of energy every time I have to prepare a talk and give it. So I think I found my vocation. But I never really knew it was my vocation. Also, I think I would be pretty hopeless doing anything else. It is called in English serendipity, it means things happen a bit by good luck, and there has been a lot of serendipity in my life.

JD: We are now witnessing something like a rise in radical Right in Europe, especially in the countries with poor economic performance like Hungary or Greece, but also in France for example. What do you think about these trends? Might it become dangerous or is it just hugely overrated by the press? Might the history, in some way, repeat itself?

RG: The world has become a very different place then it was in the interwar period and I think it is very dangerous to try to understand the contemporary world using the lenses we created for ourselves for looking at the interwar world. We have just about understood what fascism was and why it arose. The political space for the movement like Nazism has disappeared. There is no political space for that. In times of crisis small political spaces can still open up. But even Golden Dawn is never going to be like the Nazi party, whatever its delusions of grandeur. Jobbik is disturbing, but it is not a Nazi party, because the conditions are very, very different in contemporary Hungary from Weimar Germany and it will always remain marginalized. We are not going to have another fascist era. Having said that, there are many types of extreme rights now: they have proliferated to adapt to the changed post-war conditions. For one thing, there are many more democratic rights, neo-populist parties who want to keep Hungary for the Hungarians, Denmark for the Danes, and France for French etc. etc. There is a completely intellectual right, the *Nouvelle Droite*, the New Right, which was very influential for a time in Germany and Italy with its idea of purely cultural fascism or 'Gramscism from the right', and is influencing events in Russia via the major New Right, Alexander Dugin. You still have forms of revisionism denying the Holocaust, and you have very small groups of skinhead neo-Nazis.

In America you have *Christian identity* and *Ku-Klux-Klan* which have been partially Nazified and if you go to Norway there are little groups which cultivate an Odinist Nordic form of racism. Then there is the neo-Nazi music scene, and there is above all universal Nazism which takes its inspiration from new sources of ideology such *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce freely available on the Web. So basically, you have a whole lot of rights attacking liberal democracy in one way or another, some of them quite legally. But you also got something unclassifiable like the Putin phenomenon. Russia is extremely right-wing country, but it is not a fascist country. It does not fit into interwar models. It is not technically an authoritarian dictatorship, because it is very compromised form of parliamentary democracy on one level, even if its overriding state ideology is ultranationalist. And then you have a new breed of terrifying Islamic extreme rights: Islamists, Jihadists, Salafists, Sunni and Shia fanatics etc. It is incredibly complicated set of different rights and every single country has its own constellation of them rooted in each country's history or infiltrating it. For example, in Britain today we've got a burnt out BNP, a more recent EDL, which has lost its momentum, and we also have an attempt to imitate the Islamophobic Pegida in Germany, while at the same time we also have a sort of populist anti-immigration party called UKIP which is probably going to be quite influential in the next elections. They all in one way or another represent the right, but you really need to be an expert in many cultures and very clever with taxonomy and definition to make sense of what's going on. Some of it is almost pure fascism.

Golden Dawn is a very clear example of the fact that given the right type of the breakdown of society and economic distress, you can still have interwar type fascist parties with marches and symbols and rhetoric of rebirth and biological racism and renewal of civilization, all that stuff. It is amazing how Golden Dawn absolutely resembles interwar fascism. But most far right stuff is not recognizably fascist in terms of the interwar period and you need a lot of knowledge and patience to really make sense of it. It is far too easy for Marxists to say that, for example, Le Pen in France is fascist. It is not fascist. The reason why it is important, along with the things like *The Freedom Party* in Holland etc. is not because it is fascist but because it is anti-pluralism and has a sort of organic idea of the nation that has to be defended, a myth that has real appeals in an age of mass migration and increasing instability and poverty. In a way, history will never repeat itself, but there always will be elements of society that reject pluralism and relativism, and will scapegoat and demonize other groups in society and have xenophobic reactions to change. That is why universities should be breeding grounds for intelligent people who are humanistic and can live with ambivalence without becoming fanatics of simplistic solutions. Properly educated young people will know the things are complicated and you can never blame particular groups, even the bankers, for what is going wrong.

JD: Your last book is on terrorism — why the switch? Do you see some common tendencies between fascism and terrorism?

RG: Firstly, I was starting to get bored with writing about fascism: I felt I had made my case and said nearly all I wanted to say, apart from clarifying my own thoughts

about fascism's relationship to culture, modernity and modernism. I was working on my *Modernism* project when 9/11 happened, and, as for anyone who went through it, I found the event fascinating in its manifestation of the destructive power of an ideology, just the sort of thing I had been studying for 20 years. In fact I was on a plane returning from a conference in Wisconsin commemorating George Mosse's life when the Twin Towers were attacked. When I heard a lot of academics and journalists trying to understand the extremism behind the attacks, I found it natural to try to understand the motivation terrorist behind Al Qaeda using the same conceptual tools I had created to understand Nazism. So I focused on trying to make sense of Jihadism and even something like terrorism of Timothy McVeigh or Anders Breivik by using my basic model of the way the fear of decay, decadence, breakdown, anomy, chaos, confusion and ambivalence can generate a Manichaeian mindset which can lead to a palingenetic myth of creative destruction. In other words I came to see terrorism on one level as a reaction against what Zygmunt Bauman calls the liquefaction of reality. Some people cannot tolerate the complexity of the living in the modern world with so many realities colliding and interconnecting. Some people have a real deep drive to find some sort of clear vision of what is going on, a diagnosis which will divide the world into good and bad and allow them to pick up a heroic mission. That's exactly what Nazism offered millions of Germans in the interwar period after 1929. And it is what Islamism can offer people in Iraq and Syria, where the Sunni identity can be appealed to make them feel that they are fighting an apocalyptic battle against enemies, and it can also appeal to diaspora Muslims who feel that their lives are meaningless in Germany or Norway and that they must finally do something to assert who they are, where they belong, even at the price of their own lives.

This is not to say Islamism is a form of fascism (even if Breivik's attacks were). Islamofascism is not a meaningful term, but at a psycho-dynamic level there are some links between Islamism and fascism. I think that we have to keep this word 'fascism' fairly restrictive. It is used in America about Obama because of totally anti-academic book called *Liberal Fascism*, it is thrown around by Putin about Ukraine. People even talk of health fascism and body fascism. I think academics have the duty to keep it fairly precise. The only common denominator between fascism and Islamist terrorism is at the level of mindset; the fanaticism that you need to be an SS killer or Gestapo killer of 'the enemy' in a dichotomized world. It has links with the mindset you need to blow up a building or cut somebody's throat in the name of a higher ideal. This fanatical mindset is part of human nature which can be mobilized in precise historical circumstances either by certain movements or speakers or websites.

JD: The Czech translation of your book *Modernism and Fascism* is just about to be published by the Karolinum press. I think, it is just the second translation of this book after Spanish. How do you feel about that? Your theory was not well known in Czech Republic until lately.

RG: I am thrilled that my book is coming out in Czech. I would be very pleased if any Czech intellectual can actually understand it, because it must have been a nightmare to translate (though if they can understand it, they probably understand English any-

way), and especially if they could one day use the theories in it in their own work on Czech culture or history. Because the only great compliment you can pay an academic is if you do not just understand his or her theories, but also use them to advance academic knowledge. So I am hoping that someday somebody will send me something in Czech which I can't understand except through Google translate, but at least I am in the footnotes in a non-hostile context.

I don't think it is a great book in terms of number of copies sold or influence, but I still think it is an important book and given the size of Czech Republic it is a great compliment that somebody thought it was worth spending thousands of pounds to have it translated (I would like to meet her or him!), and I feel very guilty towards the translator. But nevertheless if it can be influential, it will be very flattering to me and I will be very, very pleased. I would also like to thank you, Jakub, for taking the trouble to interview me.

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