

How is Nazism still possible today?

Ionuț Bârliba

“Gh. Zane” Institute of Economic and Social Research, Iași

G. V. Loewen, *We Other Nazis: How you and I are still like them*, Alcoa: Old Moon Academic Press, 2013, 268 p.

Keywords: Nazism, fascism, modern state, power, aesthetics, myth, otherness

“A specter is haunting society – the specter of fascism.” This is how G. V. Loewen¹ opens his latest book, *We Other Nazis: How you and I are still like them*. Whether it is true or not Loewen’s starting point is quite disturbing. The idea that after more than 70 years since the extreme fascist movements were abolished and accused for their crimes against humanity fascism still haunts our modern society is very intriguing. No, Loewen doesn’t draw attention to the extreme phenomenon of neo-Nazism. The author points to a more subtle fascism of our days. The author asserts that all the powers of our society (the Pope, The President, The Prime Minister, The feminists and Socialists) have entered into an unholy alliance to abet the specter of fascism (1). What can we understand from this? The author thinks it is time the fascists of all kinds be cast in a brighter light, their views, their aims, their tendencies and their genealogies, the starting point being that fascism is already acknowledged by all societal powers to be itself an enduring Power (1).

* This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/133675.

Basically the book initiates an analysis of the nowadays phenomenon of Nazism. In doing so, Loewen embarks on an analysis of the scenes and phenomena where fascism and particularly Nazism echoes throughout our contemporary social life (2). There is a variety of forms of fascism which seem to leak into our contemporary society. Throughout the seven chapters of his book, Loewen analyzes them according to the political structures and ideological trends of the modern state.

First issue the author discusses is power, namely the nature of power in modernity and the current definitions of power and authority. Loewen's interest here goes mainly to the concept of coercion, both individual and group coercion. In other words, Loewen wishes to understand the particular notion of the "power over", meaning "the control and suasion that allows us to get *others* – persons, things, ideas, institutions and what have you – to do our bidding." (3). He underlines the idea that there is no socialization without coercion at some kind; a reality which occurs most when it comes to the tensional relationship between the one and the many, between the individual and society. Each form of statism postulates that the citizen has no rights which the state is bound to respect. Thus, the only rights the citizen has are the ones the state grants him. The main effect of this is the retreat of the citizenry away from the action of the public sphere (33). In other words, the individual has inadvertently thrown over his powers to the state (15). The state integrates the individual and therefore the individual loses his own power. There is no distinction to be made between public and private.

Another key aspect of this first chapter is the connection Loewen makes between Nazis ideas and origins of power and the similitudes we can find in our contemporary society. Just to cite a few: "The Nazis created 'the Jews' as part of their own auto-mythology and rewriting of history. We do the same with the vast hinterland of geopolitical otherness upon we, as citizens of the 'developed' world, imbibe and lean upon." (25); physical coercion is a chief tool of political management. "The Nazis, and all other criminal governments – and *all* nation states have at least a streak of criminality about them, however well-shaded from the public glare." (37); "We speak of becoming 'cultured' or that we must

defend our culture, another Nazi favorite.” (50); “Hitler’s fetish-like adoration of classical Mediterranean societies – an adoration which many in the philosophical elites of our own day still share.” (55).

It is a well-accepted theory already that Nazism was driven by an aesthetic conception of both humanity and world. Thus Loewen discusses in the second chapter the idea of purpose in art, analyzing the myths, the mysticism and the romantic connections of fascism. In the realm of aesthetics fascism develops a rigid and conservative mode of interpretation that uses any means to force a given outcome (65). Beauty is something which must be sought in order to be restored to its place. Art is not as much about life as it is about the ideals that life can approach. German expressionism, the contemporary art of the Nazis period, was seen as a factor which undermined the public morality and subverted the aesthetic health of the people (*Volk*). This kind of view though subverts the nature of art itself which belongs to all human beings. For instance, to view Bruckner as superior to Tchaikovsky is a matter of taste, but to translate such an individual option into part of an ideology transforms art into a grotesque extension of power. Actually in the realm of health and hygiene, (another well studied fascist arena, treated in the third chapter by Loewen), the curative recovery was very much aesthetic in orientation (68).

Anyway, since the Nazis were adepts of rewriting history, everything in history became a myth. Thus, everything could be pointed at as purpose towards their political solutions and further to the absolute value of Aryan supremacy. Killing Jews was more of a ritual that would unite the Aryans, the only solution for such a union to be achieved. The Holocaust, in Nazis view had to do with “a ritual that sought the mystical union between human beings and their new myth, the narrative fetish that explained the meaning of what they were doing.” (78). This is a form of absolute power and modern society is no stranger to it. The complete annihilation is also within its power but in a faster way, namely through the rapid expiration of civilization in the holocaust of nuclear weapons. Somehow ironically, to possess such power and manage it politically is the ultimate romance; as far as for the true romanticist there is no sharp difference

between myth and reality; “just as little as there was any separation between poetry and truth” (79), as Ernst Cassirer mentions, one of the philosophers most appealed to throughout the pages of this book.

The Nazis envisioned the individual Aryan as a cell in the ‘body of the Volk’. The Aryan had to be healthy, clean, fit, well trained and institutionally educated (issues that are treated in the third and fourth chapters). The single individual, his body became a metaphor for society as a whole, the embodiment of an ideal. “The ideal of health was a single-minded and purposive as that of art, and indeed, the art of life was health, while the arts of living became hygienic.” (97).

Therefore, the idea of health and hygiene had a lot to do with Nazis race and human evolution theories. Death was seen as a cure, a therapy for a world sickened by the acts and presence of ‘life unworthy of life’ (97). Gas chambers exemplify in the most simply and direct way the Nazis politics of health, hygiene and eugenics of ‘the body of the Volk’. In our contemporary world we don’t necessary ‘need’ to murder our fellow humans in order to eliminate the weak ones. As Loewen notes, we declare the ones with disabilities ‘unfit’ to gain important positions in society (100). We see them as being somehow inferior to the norm.

In a more abstract way, Loewen depicts this as a matter of relationship between ourselves/ myself and the others/the other. The first meaning of *the other* “is that there is not another like myself, but another who is somehow different from me. He is the embodiment of *otherness*, and is not a mere other.” (103). In an extreme way this might also mean that in order to make the world a better place for ourselves the other simply needs to vanish (103). Loewen also writes that we have gone well beyond the Nazis in our acceptance that there is something wrong, as it stands, with both ourselves and, especially, others. In our modern age thanks to the scientific credence death starts to make sense in a more profound way, especially for those about to die. Whereas the Nazis constructed their discourse around the myth that certain human races were inferior by nature and there were some specific reasons for their inferior status. The Jews

were the source of both biological and cultural plagues, therefore the need to be exterminated.

Loewen believes that we are further removed from our sphere of consciousness than they were in Germany. He points out at the extermination centers of modern neo-colonialism. But we have the 'power' to ignore this phenomenon because we believe that the effects are eventually someone else's responsibility. Loewen concludes here that we all live a delusion: the delusion that we are improving ourselves and contrary to much historical evidence, improving the rest of the world as well (116).

In the next chapters, the author builds further the discussion about the way we conceive the image of the other. 'The other' is a key concept in Loewen's analysis of the ideological new trends of modern state which are linked to the various contemporary and historical forms of fascism, particularly Nazism. Not so much different from the Nazi period, we live in a world which is fascinated with technology, power, speed and authority itself. Science and its rationality (an authority made manifest in every aspect of modern education as well) make the claim of a truth beyond that of any culture. The more philosophical idea beyond this claim is that the human being had always striven to overcome what already exists, to get beyond the life that is shown to be the one into which we have been thrown (156). This conception that one can overcome his cultural background (its norms and forms) so that he creates life anew can be hardly named a fascist invention (156). Still, it is a "vision of a culture that wishes to imagine itself as a super-culture." (157). That being said, the idea of progress and leaving the inferior behind (the very foundational concepts of overcoming) is just around the corner.

As Loewen emphasizes, the mission of life itself (in the above mentioned meaning) becomes "the vantage point of being able to take advantage of 'all others', above them and beyond them." (6). It is quite clear that this is an ethical problem. Loewen identifies the lack of general concern and compassion amongst the masses, amongst the others as the most challenging ethical problem of our times (183). The current victims of we the other Nazis don't lose their lives in the concentration camps anymore but try to subsist on the streets, tenements, subways

and killing fields of other worlds. We stigmatize them, creating scapegoats for our bad conscience. In doing so an interesting phenomenon occurs: "It allows us to deny that there is any real injustice because the group or person in question is unjust themselves and therefore 'deserving' of their newly decided fate." (199). It is that kind of fault that for instance children sense when they are punished (the child believes that for sure he did something wrong).

Loewen depicts the modern nation state as the epicenter of all the forces analyzed in his book so far. "It is not so much a function of fascism in general, nor an exemplification of Nazism in particular that animates this social institution. Rather, the specific sensibilities associated with the pursuit of power for its own sake. Fascism finds a home in any circumstance that lends itself to certainty, or contexts which must somehow be controlled or even guided."(6). However the modern state proclaims the same ideas of power, control and authority. Moreover it develops an hypocrisy as the ongoing myth of the state announces that it is the nation/the humane that must carry out the mandate of order and control, security." (6). In Loewen's view the nation, we the people, should keep the state off balance. Any challenge that is issued in our times to central authority must be accompanied by a clear alternative to the ruling relations (232). Some competing entities might be the transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and other voluntaristic groups.

Any central authority tends to invent a new morality for their deeds. The Nazis are the best example here. Those who rule the state assert their moral will so that all other morals vanish. There is no morality *per se* that guides the world of action as recorded by history (240). Norms, laws, folkways and mores are all acknowledged to be social constructions. What should people do is trying to defend and adjudicate morality by valuing and revaluing systems of values. It is an essential task which should not be left solely in the hand of the state or any other organization of power (240).

So, is it us who are still Nazis or is it the Nazis who presented only an image of how we truly are? In the epilogue of his book, Loewen inverts the question he had chosen as the title for his study implying a broader sense of Nazism which

occurs in both political and everyday life. In a most intriguing fragment of his book Loewen writes: “Perhaps it is not so much the case of us mimicking various rhetorics, technologies and aesthetically inclined politics that the Nazis themselves invented or hyperbolized, but that the Nazis were simply the logical outcome of what the rest of us are either latently or in some half-formed manner.” (7).

All in all, the relationship with the other is a matter of humanism. And as Loewen notes, “humanism or its opposite alone did not give rise to genocide, but the idea that what is human must be defined in some manner is partly responsible. If we were really willing to live and let live, one might not even deign to decide that everyone human being needs be human in the way we imagine.” (242). If we do that, if we see all strangers as threats, advancing all forms of distrust upon the others, we risk to do exactly what the Nazis did, namely “to define humanity in such a narrow way that it becomes once again plausible to systematically kill the others who do not fit within the new category.” (242). If the Nazis methods and views are somehow part of ourselves, maybe it is time to reflect differently on what is yet to come in our future society and politics. As Loewen suggests the most important thing we can do is to mature ourselves from the state of dependency and try to reassess our ‘Nazi behavior’ so that we avoid the coming of another world disaster.

NOTES

¹ G. V. Loewen is a prolific Canadian social philosopher, currently Chair of the Department of Sociology in St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. His works include: *The reason of Unreason* (2013), *Hermeneutic Pedagogy: teaching and learning as dialogue and interpretation* (2012) and *Our Memory of Things: a phenomemnonics of the object* (2012).

Address:

Ionuț Alexandru BĂRLIBA
Romanian Academy, Iași

“Gh. Zane” Institute of Economic and Social Research
Str. T. Codrescu, 2, 700481, Iași, Romania
E-mail: ionutbarliba@gmail.com