

Rattled

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Dedicated to the memory of Rosemary Bechler

In being seen as no more than the exit of a living creature from the social combine, death has been finally domesticated: dying merely confirms the absolute irrelevance of the natural organism in face of the social absolute. (§ 148)

Fascism, it is said, is a death cult. National Socialism incubated within the habitus of the thinkers of the so-called Conservative Revolution, in particular, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. In each of these writers, one finds an undeniable glorification of death and what Adorno mockingly calls the “soldierly man” (*der soldatische Mensch*). For Jünger, death formed the core of the *Fronterlebnis* or “experience of the trenches.” For Schmitt, the essence of politics, “the political,” is disclosed the moment the enemy—the one who threatens “our” very existence—comes into view as such. And, finally, in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the “authenticity” (*Eigentlichkeit*) of the situated human being (*Dasein*) is defined explicitly as being-towards-death (*Sein-sum-Tode*). In the awareness of this—its “ownmost possibility”—*Dasein* experiences an “ecstatic” standing-out from a leveling, abstract everydayness. In response to a young female student rather besotted with Heidegger who, as Adorno wryly notes in his *Jargon of Authenticity*, remarked that “Heidegger had finally, at least, once again placed men before death, Horkheimer replied that Ludendorff had taken care of that much better.”

Against the fascist cult of death is counterposed the fetishization of human life in liberalism. This means that life, defined and understood abstractly as mere duration, is to be valued above everything else. Liberalism’s motto is simply: The more the better. Yet, paradoxically, it fervently hides the aged, the infirm, the dying and the dead ever further from the gaze of the living, as in Beckett’s *Endgame*, in which Hamm’s parents are confined to trash cans, and therefore anticipate the fate of contemporary nursing homes which became like morgues during the early stages of the unfolding Coronavirus pandemic.

The drive for a mythic “fountain of youth,” as hinted at, for example, by Herodotus in Book III: 23 of his *Histories*, is pursued with unparalleled zeal by liberalism via the most advanced forms of biotechnology and genetic engineering. Pharmaceutical companies invest massive sums in tiny pills designed to forestall the detumescence of that most universally archaic symbol of youthful potency—the phallus. While the multi-million-dollar fitness and diet industries, drawing upon the best available medical science, aim to abolish the finitude of the body, technicians of the soul such as Ray Kurzweil take aim at the mortality of the mind by treating it as software, as so many digital files to be transferred into endlessly replaceable, fungible machines, mimicking the reduction of individuals to scarcely more than the empty social roles and functions they mechanically perform.

If liberalism wages war on death in pursuit of the banal, routinized, and

comfortable life of Nietzsche's "Last Man," then, in opposition, fascism aggressively embraces the heroic cult of death as the means of accessing "concrete" and hence meaningful experience. Can there be any more noble an act than to lay down one's life in service of the community? In their respective projects to embrace and repudiate death, however, it escapes the notice of fascists and liberals alike that the sharp line that once separated death and life had already been erased, to the further embarrassment of both.

Damaged life is life that has ceased living. Capital is, as Marx teaches, nothing if not dead labour, and, in the form of the exchange relation, it dominates living labour. Capitalism always, therefore, had something of the monstrous about it in the sense that the dead dominate the living. The death camps—whose ghosts haunt *Minima Moralia*—reveal *in extremis* the logic of wage slavery. Particularly unfortunate inmates referred to as *Musselmänner* were reduced to the condition of a living death. Perhaps this is what explains our morbid fascination with Zombies. In the halting, aimless yet persistent shuffling of the "walking dead," we see reflected our own impoverished lives as if pathetically parodying Odysseus' heroic homecoming. The only possible way for the subject to survive in capitalism in its late stage is to mimic the deathly state to which it compulsively reduces sensuous nature. To preserve its life, the subject must enervate itself. The unfolding ecological catastrophe tells the story, allegorically, of the human species' own eventual extinction: *De te fabula narratur*. What may once have been possible as an emancipatory promise understood as the negation of all forms of human negativity or alienation, becomes, itself, the teleology of a catastrophic history—species-being-towards-death.

If life is lifeless, death loses its substance and therefore sense. Consequently, understood as the event that once gave shape and meaning to the life of an individual, death is no longer possible. As Weber put it with reference to Tolstoy, while in the past it might have been possible to die, having felt "satiated by life," on the disenchanting landscape of the "steel-hard shell" (coffin?) (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) we grow "tired of life," we seize up and keel over, when, as the saying goes, "our number is up."

The primal origin of human meaning lies in the attempt to make the event of death speak in eloquent terms. The earliest origin of hominid sense-making lies precisely here. As the conceptual refinement of such a response to life's end—understood as both simple cessation and what Aristotle called final cause or purpose—Socratic, Epicurean and Stoic philosophy was understood as preparation for death. Recall, here, Socrates' final words to Crito: "We owe a cock to Asclepius; pay it and don't forget."

Facing death with equanimity was amongst the highest ancient ideals and informs the image of the redeemed condition: a life without fear. Today, such an ideal has withered. It now seems impossible to die a meaningful death because it is not possible to live life rightly, though, in truth, it never really has been possible to do so. Perhaps the word "nihilism" signifies not the inherent nothingness or meaninglessness of an indifferent universe, as was once suggested by Turgenev's famous protagonist, Bazarov, but rather the fact the death has, itself, died.

Biography

Samir Gandesha has been a post-doctoral fellow at the University of California at Berkeley (1995–97) and an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Universität Potsdam (2001–2002). He is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and the Director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University. He specializes in modern European thought and culture, with a particular emphasis on the relation between politics, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis. He is the author of numerous refereed articles and book chapters and is co-editor with Lars Rensmann of *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (Stanford, 2012). He is co-editor with Johan Hartle of *Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle* (University of Amsterdam Press, 2017) and *Aesthetic Marx* (Bloomsbury Press, 2017). He is editor of the recently-published *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Pluto, 2020). In the Spring of 2017, he was the Liu Boming Visiting Scholar in Philosophy at the University of Nanjing and Visiting Lecturer at Suzhou University of Science and Technology in China. In January 2019, he was Visiting Fellow at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe.