

What haunts European Contemporary Politics: A Discussion with Walter Famler

Part of Living with Ghosts: Legacies of Colonialism and Fascism

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Walter Famler is the secretary general of the Alte Schmiede Wien, a house for literature and contemporary avant-garde music, and has been on the editorial board of the literary magazine *Wespennest* for over three decades. He is provocative in his views of contemporary politics, often drawing from his own working-class background and experiences of growing up in Upper Austria. Famler's polemics lie in his ability to make connections across broad and seemingly disparate issues. He also has an interest in space travel and in particular the figure of Yuri Gagarin. In an interview published in the *Börsenblatt*, he states:

I am interested in the figure of Gagarin for the history of ideas. ... The first human in space was a Soviet, Yuri Gagarin! ... In 1997 ... I came across the "Pavilion Kosmos" in Moscow and I happened to witness how this large space exhibition, actually a Gagarin propaganda exhibition, was dismantled and prepared for transport. An experience that replaces whole libraries with books about the decay and destruction of great empires. ... A Dadaist, spontaneous decision: I wanted to save the head of Yuri Gagarin! We failed with the project. But I founded the Kocmoc/Gagarin movement on the spot.

Later, in 2011, he was an advisor of the Kunsthalle Wien exhibition *Space: About a Dream*, an exhibition that pre-empted the marking of the first man in space, staged prior to the anniversary exhibition of the moon landing *Fly Me to the Moon* in Zurich and Salzburg in 2019, for which he also served as advisor.

Walter Famler: I think we can trace everything back to 1957, which is the year the satellite Sputnik was launched, and the period between Sputnik and the landing on the moon in 1969. If we decode those twelve years, I think they are essential for your question on nationalism and fascism, which starkly fall in the shadows of the colonial and postcolonial wars in Africa and Asia. It was the period of the Cold War, that competition between two systems which played out in what is called the space race. In Europe, those twelve years, fifty years after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were a window of opportunity and the last hope for a socialist society. But in Austria and Germany, the National Socialist fascist ideology never disappeared. It remained in the minds of the people, both those who were victims and those who committed the crimes, the Nazis. They were allowed to return to society after the war without consequence. Their jobs were returned to them and they continued on with no discussion and without question. This stays in the minds of the people. These are the ghosts which haunt the contemporary politics in Europe.

In the 1960s and 1970s, 'our' countries, the so-called Western countries profited from the Cold War system. Capitalists here were afraid of communism, yet they had to come to terms with unions and socialists and the social democratic parties. At the same time European societies were completely Americanised via pop culture, pop music. This is not a critique of the influence of American music, however; I am an admirer of American jazz musicians, rock and roll and the blues which shaped youth culture – it shaped us. We were also shaped by the American film industry, from Humphrey Bogart to Clint Eastwood and Jack Nicholson.

Jyoti Mistry: Over recent years you have been travelling to Slovenia frequently, and from your direct experiences you have made critical observations of the breakdown of Yugoslavia.

WF: Yugoslavia was a country which emerged from partisan struggles – never forget that it was mostly the struggles of the Yugoslav partisan army fighting bravely against Wehrmacht and SS troopers which made it possible for the Soviet Army to march to Berlin.

JM: But can't the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the ensuing violence and the current state of political and economic uncertainty across the region be viewed through an increase in rightist sentiment?

WF: There's a new colonial system, we have a new nationalism promoting its goals in a modern way. It copies protest forms from the '68ers. So we are in a very dangerous moment. We face a new form of colonialism, which becomes most visible through forms of racism.

JM: What do you mean by "forms of racism" in this context?

WF: The right is campaigning against Muslims with the same methods formerly used

against Jews. Anti-Semitism is still strong, but presently Muslims are seen to be the threat to Western societies. The pretext is that there is no alternative to consumer capitalism and its shaping of the individual. Nobody should believe in the possibility of being liberated from exploitation, everybody is subjected to consumerism. There is no Yugoslavia anymore because it has been spoiled, broken, and it is now a disaster. It has been re-colonised. In my regular trips to Slovenia, I see the impact of having no jobs, factories that have been closed down, young people moving away: it's the colonisation of Slovenia by the West, even though it's part of the European Union. And furthermore, in Croatia, one is confronted with a digitalised Ustaša ideology.

JM: How do you understand the relationship between your description of colonialism in contemporary Slovenia and the legacy of colonialism from say two hundred years ago to its current structure?

WF: It's always about production, about capital, about cheap production, and about profit. Colonialism is the most profitable system we have ever had and it's the most exploitative system we have ever had. It is a class system. For example, the health care system and the law are related to class. If you are middle class, if you are upper class, doing the job as a doctor or lawyer or whatever, you're profiting from this system. Old people who have been exploited lifelong as workers are no longer seen as profitable and social systems have been cut down. Affluent societies are based on consumerism and the same mindset we had at the beginning of colonialism, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when you could bribe people with cheap glass pearls.

JM: I am aware that you have a strong connection with the ideas of Herbert Marcuse and his influential book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Marcuse writes, 'The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment'. Consumer society finds itself meaningful through consumer products. People's existence is validated through the products they buy and own.

WF: Yes, and now they are bribed with cheap advertising and promotions on the Internet through devices like smartphones. The colonial exploitation is the same: it takes place where the most vulnerable are exploited.

JM: To go back to your idea regarding class, you highlight an interesting contrast between the idea of class and mass which invites consideration of Hannah Arendt's seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). For Arendt, class is eroded through the formation of the masses 'created' by propaganda. In her analysis, she suggests that terror is used by governments to secure power. The restructuring of the former parts of Yugoslavia has been designed so that the governments have power over all aspects of society. The shifts to the right across Europe are very much connected to the mechanisms which drive economic structures. It may be viewed in terms of what you are suggesting, that advertising is the propaganda for capitalism's consumer-driven ideology, or at least what is currently driving society. How do you see this in relation to contemporary Austrian politics?

WF: The right is in government in Austria. They get more tax money because they

the votes, and we are in danger of losing the Social Democrats and the Green majority here in Vienna. There are leftist groups, but they are isolated and have a history connected to the '68 movement. The right-wing covers everything to do with discussions of identity and identity politics. In fact, there is a neglect, no, not even neglect but a counterposition which calculatedly avoids any class analysis. Nobody's talking about class anymore.

JM: The emphasis on class in the classic Marxist sense changes or shifts the priorities in contemporary politics. Identity is seen as an important way of securing solidarity or emphasising differences. This is clearly a problem in relation to the recurrent topic of debate on migration in Europe and how you have described it in terms of race as it pertains to Muslims in Europe. These divides of identity are mobilised to generate fear and misunderstanding amongst most Europeans. What I'm quite interested in discussing then is the way in which we might think about historical definitions of fascism and a historical definition of what constitutes the ideological framework that the right uses, which might be different to how it is defined in a contemporary sense ...

WF: Sorry to interrupt you, but most liberal intellectuals and many social democratic intellectuals only pretend to analyse! There are no Marxist intellectuals anymore. I think there are no differences between fascisms in history. What fascism was in the 1930s and in the 1940s or even back in the 1920s is the same as it is today. Fascism is fascism. The methods are different, the media is different, but the racist thinking, the identity thinking, the nationalist thinking, it's the same, and it's the same strategy that covers over class distinctions. The class distinctions are not acknowledged at all. The message is: there is no class, there are only folk! The nationalist discourse is part of the fascist discourse. Fascism relies on appealing to the folk and there is no space for discussion. You think there is a choice, but there is no choice.

JM: In South Africa, there are two understandings of the term 'nationalism'. If you think about the history of the African National Congress (ANC), it was a revolutionary movement, a liberation struggle which defined itself in part through the discourse of the nation state for the freedom of its people. At the same time the oppressive apartheid government called the National Party (NP) was a white minority Afrikaner party which claimed it was protecting the interests of its people. So, you had two radically different oppositions strategically creating sentiment using similar discourses as you are proposing.

WF: In Europe, there is still a reactionary national discourse, which goes back to the nineteenth century.

JM: In the context of this special edition of L'Internationale, one of the things we're looking at is the way in which art and art practices deal with the entanglement of issues within colonialism and how ideas of nationalism may be connected to fascism.

WF: The art scene pretends to reflect and to be radical, but there is no radical political art anymore. In the arts only arrogance is created, middle-class feelings and upper-class attitudes. In the academy here and in the art schools, we only have middle-class and upper-class kids. There are no lower-class kids, and they deeply

despise everybody who is an autodidact. Art is a facade. Museums are a facade for tourism. They are places for middle-class people, who look at what is presented to them as 'important' art. It's like a religion. If you go to church, it's no different. It's like a new holiness, the holy spirit of art.

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