

# *Erwägen Wissen Ethik*

## *Deliberation Knowledge Ethics*

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## Brief

### Response to Dr. Andreas Umland

To the Editors of *Erwägen Wissen Ethik*:

((1)) Before I enter into the substance of this communication, I would like to affirm that I have always admired Dr. Andreas Umland's work. My admiration has not in any sense been diminished by this present exchange. In my judgment, he has been misled by some rather odd notions on how one deals with the concepts "Fascism," "fascism," and "neofascism."<sup>1</sup>

((2)) Dr. Umland has taken perfectly understandable umbrage at my intimation that he might be disposed to deny Alexander Dugin his freedom of political expression. He does admit, however, that his insistence that Dugin's "bizarre ideas" are "fascist" is motivated by his desire to limit the apparently increasing influence of dangerous antidemocratic thought in Russia. Nationalist and "extreme rightist" political forces have duly objected to their identification as "fascist," particularly when the sobriquet "fascist" slides artlessly into "neo-Nazi" as it does in Dr. Umland's letter ((2)). For many commentators, as it apparently does for Dr. Umland, the term "fascist" immediately calls to mind the "Final Solution"—the mass murder of innocents and genocidal violence ((4)). Given the current usage by some, to be identified as "fascist" is tantamount to being denied the *moral* right to express one's political convictions.

((3)) Given those circumstances, Russian nationalists have charged those who have identified them as "fascist" or "neofascist" with defamation—and have won in the Russian courts more frequently than not (just as Julius Evola won against those who charged him with being a "Fascist sympathizer"<sup>2</sup>). Russian nationalists and "rightists" of sundry sorts recognize that the terms "neofascist" and "fascist" have become simple terms of abuse, of derogation, possessed of very little cognitive substance. I would suggest that Dr. Umland can better address his concern (and mine) about the future of Russia by addressing the "bizarre," the "esoteric mumblings and fantastic schemes" ((5)), and antidemocratic ideas of "ultranationalists" like Dugin without attempting to identify them as "fascist-nazi" mass murderers. If the term "fascism" has acquired a "special meaning" ((7)) in Russia, having nothing to do with Mussolini's Fascism, perhaps one might be well-advised to use a different word to characterize Russia's antidemocratic forces.

((4)) Dr. Umland has not shown that Dugin's ideas have any affinity with those of Mussolini's Fascism. He has not denied that Dugin borrows the core of his convictions from Julius Evola—who was neither a Fascist nor a National Socialist. In my judgment, whatever the source of Dugin's curious ideas, calling them "fascist" does absolutely nothing to stop their increased reception by the Russian elite ((6)). Dr. Umland and I agree that Dugin may well be a dangerous political person and that everyone committed to political democracy and human rights should take every opportunity to expose his "reprehensible," "dangerous," and "fantastic" ideas particularly since Dr. Umland is convinced that they might lead to "the death of thousands, perhaps millions of people" ((4)). If Dr. Umland can convincingly show that to be the case, it should not be too difficult to defeat such grotesque and inhumane ideas without identifying them as "fascist." Calling Dugin a "fascist" might provide some immediate advantage, but given the very thin intellectual vindication for its use, indiscriminate use of the term may very well provide him, and his likes, advantage when the Russian courts and Russian intellectuals dismiss the attribution as irresponsible.

((5)) Whatever Alexander Dugin is, he is not a fascist in the literal and historically meaningful sense of the term—and neither Professor Roger Griffin nor Dr. Umland have said anything that might convince me otherwise. Dugin might well be a representative of the "Russian extreme right" ((8)) or the "ultraright wing" ((3)), but I have argued that neither would qualify him as a "fascist."

((6)) Dr. Umland and I both agree that something is amiss with fascism studies. For his own reasons, Dr. Umland laments that scholars have written "hundreds of books and articles" trying to identify the "extreme right" with fascism to the apparent neglect of more serious issues.

((7)) In my opinion, the profligate use of the term "fascism" by some specialists (think of the use of the term "Islamofascist") to identify any and all objectionable political groups, accomplishes little for comparative studies, and has at least two negative consequences: (1) it tends to delegitimize the right of such groups to free expression; and (2) it affords their opponents the occasion to attempt to implicate contemporary political leaders like A. B. Vajpayee, leader of one of the largest political parties in India,<sup>3</sup> and Gianfranco Fini, leader of the Alleanza Nazionale, and a notable political figure in Italy, in mass murder in general, and the mass-murder of Jews in particular<sup>4</sup>—something I find reprehensible. One might accept such costs if it was

clear there were significant cognitive gains by using the term “fascism” in the fashion recommended by Professor Griffin. I have argued there are no such gains, and considerable intellectual costs.

((8)) Over the extent of the exchange in EWE, Professor Griffin has forthrightly abandoned or significantly modified his earlier views, including those to which I initially took objection—something I find commendable.<sup>5</sup> We can now make distinctions between different, if related, political movements and regimes. Fascism does not mean National Socialism any more than it means communism. Given that, we can hardly be sure what “generic fascism” or “neofascism” might mean in the modern world. What we can say with considerable assurance is that the “neofascism” of Julius Evola had literally nothing to do with Mussolini’s Fascism—and whatever we may think of the ideas of Alexander Dugin, I hardly think they qualify as “fascist” in any meaningful sense.

### Notes

1. In my judgement, the distinctions must remain clear. Professor Griffin (R2, fn. 7) chooses to skate over them. He speaks of Julius Evola as influencing “neofascism.” I have not contested that. I have, however, insisted that Evola was never a Fascist, neither in his own nor in the judgment of Fascists. That “neofascists” chose him as an ideologue tells us how little such “neofascism” has to do with Mussolini’s Fascism.

2. Professor Roger Griffin tells us that if a political thinker denies that he is a “fascist,” and entertains a system of beliefs that are, “at least in theory...deeply unfascist...,” he cannot be a fascist (R1 ((25))). And yet, although Evola satisfies those requirements, he is still identified as a fascist by both Professor Griffin and Dr. Umland. Dugin, who is Evola’s intellectual heir, is similarly identified. I think the difficulty lies entirely with Professor Griffin’s conceptualizations.

3. Jairus Banaji, in his “Political Culture of Fascism” (in *Fascism in India: Faces, Fangs and Facts* [edited by C. Krishna. Manak 2003], pp. 20, 27), cites Professor Griffin’s generous definition of “fascism” as grounds for denigrating the largest political party in India, its founders, and its present leaders.

4. Both Vajpayee and Fini deny that they are fascists or neofascists. Vajpayee comes from a tradition having nothing to do with Mussolini’s Fascism or Hitler’s National Socialism. Gianfranco Fini has traced his ideas throughout Italy’s modern history into the “postfascist” era. He has affirmed that he is not a Fascist, because Fascism has no place in contemporary Italy. According to the criteria offered by Professor Griffin, neither Vajpayee nor Fini could be identified as “fascists” or, I would imagine, as “neofascists.” In far too many instances, the terms have become virtually meaningless other than to serve as simple expressions of abuse (see my forthcoming volume, *The Search for Neofascism: The Use and Abuse of Social Science*).

5. The editors of *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* have provided ample space and opportunity for the airing of Professor Griffin’s views. One need only compare his original position in *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge 1991), my criticism (in *Interpretations of Fascism* [Transaction 1997]) with his latest formulations to measure the distance between his original notions and his present, much modified conceptualizations. Professor Griffin no longer speaks of “fascism” being the unique source of mass murder in the twentieth century, nor does he deny the affinities shared between Mussolini’s Fascism and the various forms of Marxism-Leninism. He now fully acknowledges the “important and substantive taxonomic and interpretive issues...raised by the relationship of communism to fascism....”(R2, fn. 7). He talks of “Stalinism, Maoism and the Khmer Rouge as hybrids of Marxism and fascism”—something I urged on him in our earliest exchanges—something he appears to have initially dismissed with his silence. He now proceeds to grant that “interwar period fascism” shared “greater affinities with communism than with conservatism,” and that both regimes were “totalitarian” and “intensely nationalistic”—[corroborating] assertions long since made by Gregor,” and then recommends that we treat Fascism and communism as “belonging to distinct, yet related political categories” (R2 ((9)) 5)—something I have always insisted upon (see my discussion in *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* [Yale 2000] and *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China’s Long Revolution* [Westview 2000]). He admits his term “palingenetic” is a “universal, archetypal human myth” and that “ultranationalism” is “felicitously vague” (R2 ((8)) 3, ii and iii)—criticisms I advanced with my first review of his work. Professor Griffin now agrees that the term “totalitarianism” has “value in the understanding of fascism” (R2 ((9)) 6)—a concept totally neglected in his original treatment of Fascism and generic fascism. He speaks of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as “two quite different regimes” (R2 ((10)) 3)—a distinction for which I have argued from the commencement of our exchanges. For all that, Professor Griffin seems to still believe that I have argued that nationalism and racism are “binary opposites” (R2 ((11))—when I have simply argued for *differences* that must be acknowledged since the consequences of “ultracism” are manifestly different from those of “ultranationalism”—a difference he now fully acknowledges (R2 ((11)) 4). Professor Griffin is now prepared to recognize the differences between a National Socialism and a Fascism that share “affinities” (as I urged upon him), just as he is prepared to recognize the affinities between Fascism and the various forms of Marxism-Leninism (see (R2 ((14)) 5, 6, 8). He is prepared to reconsider the relationship between the “New Right” and “fascism” (something I have consistently urged upon him). He graciously admits that his original Hauptartikel was a “mish-mash of concept, definition and theory” (R2 ((15)) 9)—something I suggested in my first response.

I am convinced that Professor Griffin is right in maintaining we have come a long way. The Editors of *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* are to be applauded.

A. James Gregor

24 October 2004

### Address

Prof. Dr. A. James Gregor, University of California, Department of Political Science, 210 Barrows Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950, USA