

Review

Julia Adeney Thomas & Geoff Eley (eds):

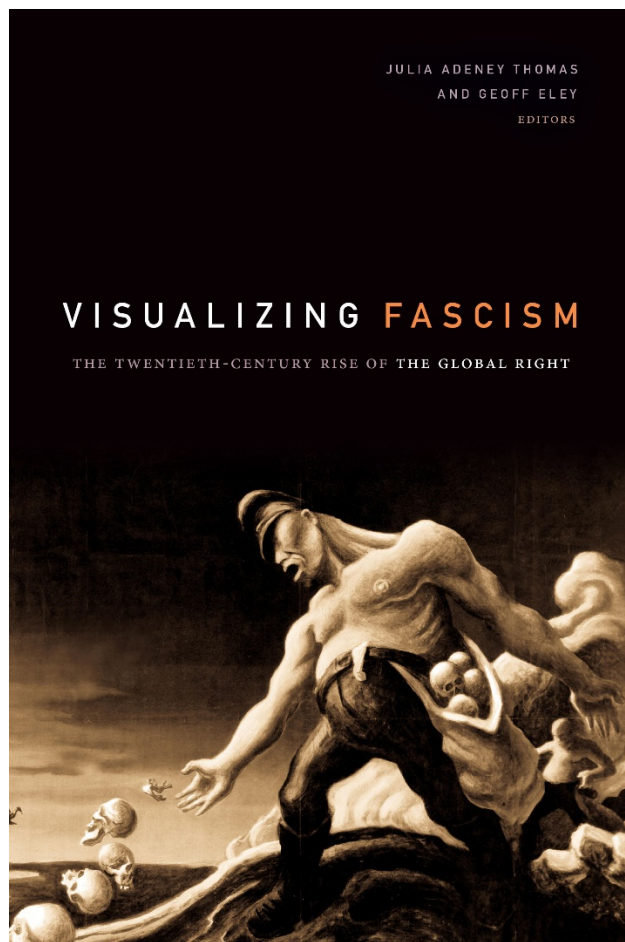
Visualizing fascism:

The twentieth-century rise of the global Right

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Reviewed by Nathaniël D.B. Kunkeler



Visualizing fascism is a timely and effective contribution to the ever-shifting sands of scholarly debate on fascism. As a heavily contested term, in spite of a concerted 21st-century effort to generate a consensus, fascism demands a theoretically cogent approach. Julia Adeney Thomas, associate professor at the University of Notre Dame and intellectual historian of Japan, and Geoff Eley, professor of contemporary history at Michigan University and scholar of German history and nazism in particular, are together well-suited to oversee a project with a fresh theoretical perspective and broad purview.

This edited volume seeks to understand fascism as a global phenomenon, as it emerged in the interwar period and during WW II. The key to this global conception is the visuality of the title, the imagery and aesthetics of fascism which allowed it to quickly spread across national borders and attain a foothold everywhere in the world, images that “helped vitally compose the layered ideological corpus that movements and regimes elsewhere would be able to raid” (289). To this end, Thomas and Eley propose a “portable concept” of fascism, that is, one which applies to a wide variety of spaces, both where regimes were established and where movements failed, a concept that is not defined by parties or institutions, but what Thomas a little quaintly terms “ideological energies” (6). If that sounds a touch universalizing, this portable concept is nevertheless tethered to three historicizing factors: capitalism, modern communication, and colonies. It is these which explain the emergence of fascism in the 1920s specifically, and its global reach, though without confining it to a specific “fascist epoch.” A conscious strike against the endemic Eurocentrism of fascism scholars, Thomas and Eley make a compelling argument that fascism “contained multiple centers with multi-directional flows: a globality of rival imperialisms caught in the fallout of a worldwide capitalist downturn” (284). This is demonstrated across eleven chapters, which aside from inevitable traditional fare (Germany, Italy), cover Slovakia, China, Southern Africa, the USA, the Netherlands, Indonesia, and Japan (which features in no less than three chapters). Each chapter deals in some way with visuality and fascism, with considerable variation in how these two terms are wielded and interpreted, and discusses a case study, several of which break out of the national mould.

Overall, the contributors bring out Thomas and Eley’s contentions quite successfully. The global range is powerful and effective, and the visual theme is neatly adapted to the task of presenting histories of fascism unconfined by the usual organizations of state and party that tend to be associated with it. The visual is amorphous and mobile, and thematically helps locate fascism in places where it traditionally is not seen, outside of mass parties, spectacular rallies, totalitarian states, and genocidal warfare. A key point of this volume, which several of the authors do well to highlight, is that there was no coherent fascist aesthetic, no

aesthetic that could be described as definitively fascist through examination of its formal visual properties (54, 70, 112). In fact, it shared much of its visual repertoire with liberal and socialist opponents – for instance, Maggie Clinton, in her essay on fascist media in 1930s China, points out that while magazines produced by the Guomindang’s Blueshirt faction foregrounded issues common to fascist movements globally, they circulated images and aesthetics indistinguishable from those found in popular nonpartisan lifestyle magazines or Left periodicals (30). Instead, as Lutz Koepnick points out, following the historiography of fascist aesthetics since the 1990s, the analysis looks to how visuals were operationalized under fascism, even if those visuals themselves were not unique to fascism, or even totalitarianism and dictatorship (112). Paul Barclay in his highly informative essay on Japan’s *chureito*, loyal-spirit towers, ceremonial ossuaries housing the military dead of the Fifteen-Year War, argues that their fascist visuality was not in their aesthetics, but their operationalization in the service of the military state (45). Taking a different tack, Thomas in her own essay on Japan’s “war without pictures,” shows how post-1937 fascist Japan, rather than seeking to excite and entice through its images in the style of Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, aimed for stillness and “foreverness” in its tedious war photography, deploying “non-eventfulness” to perform continuity after the revolutionary fascist takeover following the 26 February Incident (167). Here is a focus not on some kind of essence, a presumed definitive fascist visuality, but rather on how it worked, where it operated, how fascism deployed visuality, not what that visuality was. Doubtless this is a step in the right direction, very much in line with current trends in fascism scholarship.

A very different approach to the theme is taken by Ethan Mark, with “Fascisms seen and unseen: The Netherlands, Japan, Indonesia, and the relationships of Imperial crisis.” His vehicle for the study of Dutch fascism in the Netherlands and the Indonesian colony is the monuments built to commemorate Joannes Benedictus van Heutsz (1851-1924), governor general of the East Indies, responsible for the brutal “pacification” of Aceh for the Dutch Empire. Funded through extensive donations, Van Heutsz’s body was re-interred in an enormous mausoleum in Amsterdam in 1927, dominating the centre of the cemetery. The leftover funds were used for the construction of two monuments to Van Heutsz, one in Amsterdam constructed in 1935, (since altered and renamed the *Monument Indië-Nederland*), the other in the colonial capital Batavia (Jakarta), 1932, since destroyed, though it remarkably survived Japanese occupation. While Van Heutsz was in fact widely criticized for his governorship during his life, Mark positions his monumental commemoration in the political scene of the interwar Netherlands at a time of global imperial crisis, where Van Heutsz was reassessed as a strongman who responded forcefully to the responsibilities of empire. Mark

also examines the rise of the small Dutch National Socialist Movement led by Anton Mussert, which, though in 1933-35 growing quickly in the metropole before collapsing again, became in fact the largest party in Indonesia, where Mussert was granted a state reception by Governor-General de Jonge in 1935. "In an increasingly hostile interwar environment that embraced metropole and colony alike," Mark argues, "many Dutch citizens were drawn *not* to Nazism as such but to an essentially native, imperial form of fascism as a vehicle for securing their continued imperial privileges or gaining new ones" (186). Dutch fascism then was rooted in an elite preoccupation with the preservation of empire, and an uncommonly aggressive rejection of compromise with native movements for independence. Yet in his treatment of visuality, Mark diverges here from most contributors. Opening with the governor general's son's letter to the Nazi-appointed mayor of Amsterdam in 1943, which complained that the 1935 monument was weak and decadent, Mark essentially concurs that it indeed lacked a "fascist aesthetic" (183-84), something instead apparent in the mausoleum's "bunker-like entrance [...] flanked by two supremely muscular, larger-than-life Viking warriors" and a massive concrete monumentalism (191-93), rather than "operationalization" it seems.

It is of course natural in an edited volume that the contributing authors should part ways on theoretical points, even key ones, and that variety is in itself desirable. But it is symptomatic of the inevitably variable quality of chapters in such a volume generally, and more specifically here the variation in theoretical cogency between chapters. Some of the authors are well-versed in the theory and historiography of fascism and they provide theoretically advanced discussions that advance the topic as introduced by Thomas, (Geoff Eley's own chapter, "Nazism, everydayness, and spectacle" stands out), while others only engage obliquely with the framework set by the editors, or indeed diverge from it. The concept of a "portable fascism," non-typological, decentred and historically dynamic, is definitely one useful tool for approaching the subject, but it has perhaps left the collection vulnerable to theoretical and semantic slippages: there is particularly a tendency to presume an equation between aggressive nationalism, imperialism, and fascism, which becomes especially problematic when fascism is no longer tethered to a historical-semiotic origin point such as Mussolini's Italian Fascism.

Another concern is the lack of transnationalism in the chapters, a historical approach which is clearly invaluable to a global history of fascism, and which has advanced with leaps and bounds in the past decade. Both Thomas and Eley acknowledge the crucial role of transnational dynamics in the spread of fascism and the developments of its peculiarly ad hoc, ragtag qualities, in visual terms and otherwise, but the essays themselves often leave this out. For example, none of the chapters dealing with the traditional regime cases, Italy and Germany, of

which there are three, take a transnational perspective into account, which could have significantly enriched the volume as a whole. By way of exception, Paul Barclay's fascinating "Carved in stone" focuses particularly on architectural constructions between Manchuria and Japan, highlighting how Japanese fascism was not attached to any particular event or person, and did not radiate outward and downward from Tokyo, but rather across a vast geographic expanse from China to Japan, significantly affecting its character and operationalization (47-48). Last but not least, the volume remarkably lacks any case studies from South America, an area subject to a rich and up to date scholarship on fascism, with significant transnational ties across the globe – an omission sorely felt here, especially among the European case studies.

All the same, this volume provides a fascinating selection, with elucidating global case studies, and generally of a high quality. While many will no doubt hesitate at *Visualizing fascism's* overarching conception of its subject, it should be of great interest and value to any student of fascism.

About the reviewer

Dr. Nathaniël Kunkeler is an independent historian based in the U.K., studying the radical Right in 20th-century Europe. They received their Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge (U.K.) in 2019, with a thesis on the construction of myths in Swedish and Dutch fascism during the 1930s, due to be published as a monograph by Bloomsbury. They have also published articles on aspects of Swedish and Dutch fascism in various journals, including *The Historical Journal* and *Contemporary European History*. They currently work on a research project exploring the transnational experiences and connections of rightist military volunteers in foreign conflicts since the Russian Revolution and supervise undergraduates in modern European history.

