

**Review**

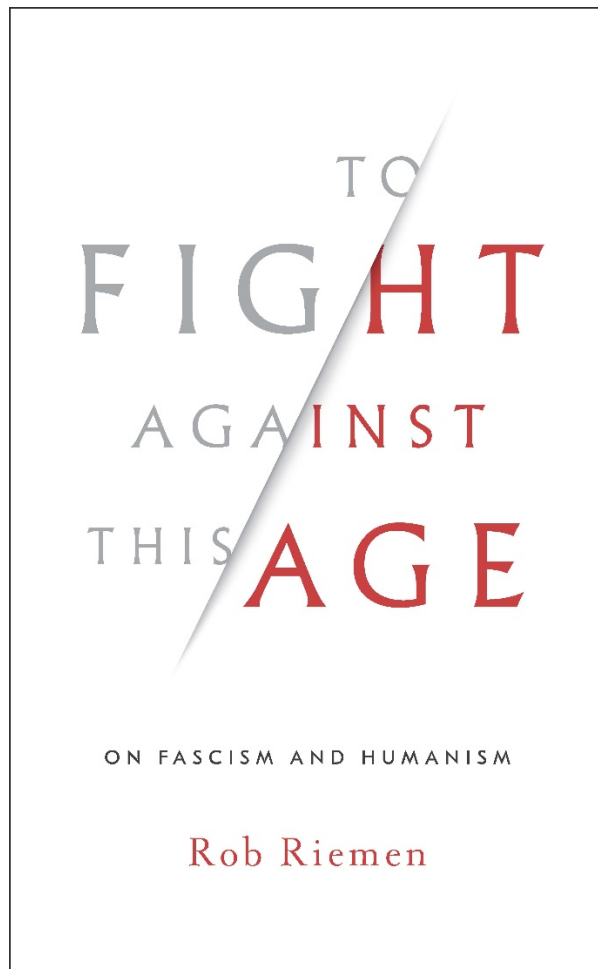
**Rob Riemen:**

***To fight against this age: On fascism and humanism***

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*Reviewed by Krystyna Henke*



Ten years ago, when cultural philosopher Rob Riemen wrote the original, Dutch language version of “The eternal return of fascism” (*‘De eeuwige terugkeer van het fascisme’*), the first of two essays contained in *To fight against this age: On fascism and humanism*, the criticism of Dutch intellectuals was withering. They asked, how dare he suggest that fascism was on the rise again, and especially in the Netherlands? Ostensibly embodied in Dutch politician Geert Wilders’ *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (‘Party for freedom’), this anti-Islam party was merely populist and, yes, conservative, as Riemen was told in response to his book, but hardly equivalent to Adolf Hitler’s *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (‘National socialist German worker’s party’) or Benito Mussolini’s *Partito Fascista Repubblicano* (‘Republican fascist party’). Riemen points out that Wilders’ party promotes an undercurrent of violence, an element that established scholars of fascism like Payne (1995) and Paxton (2004) describe as an identifying marker. However, this appeared not to be a shared concern among the Dutch elite, who took Riemen to task for his use of the term. Undeterred by the technical quibbles of what the definition of fascism is, Riemen warns that democratic society, and indeed humanity and civilization are at risk of being destroyed by “the deadly bacillus called fascism” (Riemen 2018, 86).

Riemen turns out to be a prescient voice. In 2016, Thierry Baudet’s populist political party *Forum voor democratie* (‘Forum for democracy’) materialized in the Netherlands as a more polished, sophisticated, and dangerous right-wing variety than the one headed by Wilders. Baudet espouses a nation whose so-called former glory will be restored by implementing an ultra-nationalist, xenophobic, racist and misogynistic program. *To fight against this age: On fascism and humanism* is not just a warning of the threat of fascism in the Netherlands. The book can also be applied, for example, as a relevant and apt analysis of the Trump presidency’s authoritarian and fascist tendencies. Tangible fascist threats to democracy have emerged globally, including in Brazil, in Hungary, in Poland, Turkey, and Russia, while in Germany, France, England, and Italy growing far-right political parties and movements like *Alternative für Deutschland* (‘Alternative for Germany’), *Rassemblement national* (‘National rally’), Patriotic Alternative, *Fratelli d’Italia* (‘Brothers of Italy’), *CasaPound Italia* (‘House of Pound Italy’), and *Lega* (‘League’) demonstrate a significant neofascist interest with a socially and politically potentially destabilizing effect in the future.

The cultural critic Henry Giroux (2017) points out that discussions about who is or is not a fascist serve as “a tactical diversion” (260). The real issue, he says, is how to engage in resistance to the growing waves of authoritarianism. Riemen’s strategy is to offer a warning through the first essay in which he bluntly states: “We were supposed to learn the lessons of history” (57). These lessons were not learned, he concludes. Still, the second essay, “The return of Europa: Her tears,

deeds, and dreams,” which is written like a novella with a plot, dialogue, and descriptions of characters and nature, provides hope that through culture and education the soul of Europe can be restored. Thomas Mann, Paul Valéry, and José Ortega y Gasset, whose works Riemen relies on repeatedly, identified “a crisis of civilization caused by the loss of spiritual values” (71). Akin to Nietzsche’s discussion of nihilism, a state brought on by the death of God, political theorist Wendy Brown (2019) similarly ties its role to the rise of antidemocratic politics and neofascism.

Our task, writes Riemen, is to rebuild the lost humanism in a weakened democracy through education, philosophy and the arts, thereby restoring civic values and overcoming what Brown identifies as nihilism’s partnership with neoliberalism, excessive rationality and what Riemen feels is blind reliance on technology. This will remain an ongoing process, one that is never finished, but requires constant care. Instead of being in denial about the re-emergence of the fascist spirit in the mainstream, Riemen encourages awareness among members of the Left that their embrace of Enlightenment values blinds them to “the will to power” (21) and susceptibility to fascist ideology. As part of the refusal to recognize the return of fascism, he also fingers widespread ignorance in a society gripped by fear caused by a “sense of crisis, economic insecurity, and the threat of terror or war” (21). Perhaps the most important tool in surmounting the denial of fascism’s steady gains, according to Riemen, is the embrace of the perspective and understanding that the humanities and the arts bring to a complex society that appears to be attacking itself.

One would like to agree with Riemen that culture is the enlightening antidote to the darkness of a fascist mindset. Nevertheless, poetry and literature, music and all the other arts, philosophy and education, too, can be coopted by fascism. What then? As Riemen suggests through his second essay in *To fight against this age: On fascism and humanism*, the solution may simply lie in the act of dialogue, of listening, and reflecting.

## References

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**About the reviewer**

Krystyna Henke is editor-in-chief of the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies/Revue canadienne d'études néerlandaises*. She has researched the paradoxical roles of cultural activity in Nazi concentration camps and has interviewed Holocaust survivors, including Dutch-born Jewish violinist and trumpeter Louis Bannet, about whom she wrote an article published in 1998 in the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies/Revue canadienne d'études néerlandaises*. She wrote narration and liner notes for the documentary audio book *Nobel voices for disarmament: 1901-2001* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings/United Nations, 2007). A broadcast and print journalist, her work has appeared in Canada on *CBC*, *TVOntario*, *The National Post*, and *Vrij Nederland* in the Netherlands. In 2019, she presented an academic paper at the *International Conference for Literary Journalism Studies* at Stony Brook University (New York, U.S.) on the link between literary journalism and narrative inquiry in qualitative research. Currently, Henke is working on her doctoral degree in the Joint Ph.D. Program in Educational Studies at Brock University (St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada) under the supervision of Professor Fiona Blaikie. Her dissertation research will cast a lens on music education in the West Bank in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian Territories. She will focus on children in the refugee camps, framed by approaches to teaching the violin, viola, and 'cello as high art contextualized by the pedagogical canon of music education in the West.