

# Entrevista

## “Fascism is once more at our doors, and we still refuse to see and treat it by its name”: an interview with Cultural Philosopher Rob Riemen\*

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### Abstract

Rob Riemen is the Director of Nexus Institute, an “independent international human rights research and policy center” and an interdisciplinary Dutch researcher. Even though he prefers to be regarded as a Cultural Philosopher, his studies and works expand into various areas of the humanities. In 2010, therefore at the beginning of global democratic recession wave, Riemen published a book called *The Eternal Return of Fascism*, in which he analyzes that fascism will always reappear as long as mass society exists, and that it needs to be addressed for what it is: fascism, without using intellectual juggling to give other names to undemocratic movements. In this interview he spoke on how fascism will always reappear through new faces, but maintaining some old characteristics that make it possible to still be comprehended as such. He also described fascism as the political version of nihilism, showing how it is based only in an obsession with power.

Keywords: Fascism, populism, nihilism

### Resumo

Rob Riemen é um pesquisador neerlandês multidisciplinar diretor do Nexus Institute, um “centro internacional independente de pesquisa e política de direitos humanos”. Embora ele prefira ser considerado um filósofo cultural, seus estudos e obras se expandem para várias áreas das ciências humanas. Em 2010, portanto, no início da onda de recessão democrática global, Riemen publicou o livro *O eterno retorno do fascismo*, no qual afirma que o fascismo sempre reaparecerá enquanto existir sociedade de massas e que é imprescindível que ele seja tratado pelo que realmente é, evitando cair na armadilha do malabarismo intelectual. Nesta entrevista, ele falou sobre como o fascismo sempre reaparecerá através de novos rostos, mas mantendo algumas características antigas que o permite ser compreendido como tal. Ele também descreveu o fascismo como a versão política do niilismo e falou como o populismo é um conceito vazio.

Palavras-chave: Fascismo, populismo, niilismo.

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In this interview he spoke on how fascism will always reappear through new faces, but maintaining some old characteristics that make it possible to still comprehend as such. He also described fascism as the political version of nihilism, the necessity of treating the anti-democratic movements as what they really are and how populism is na empty concept. Furthermore, Riemen finished with a analysis on how fascism is returning in its own country, even though it has no social or economic problems whatsoever.

### **Would you mind telling me a bit about yourself and about Institute Nexus?**

When I was younger, I studied theology. Not with the intention to become a priest. For me it became essentially a train in Cultural Philosophy. I don't consider myself a Theologist, but in many ways a Cultural Philosopher.

Back in 2010 I saw in my country a growing movement which could only be labeled as a new fascism movement. I wrote the *Eternal Return of Fascism* because I've realized: If this can happen in The Netherlands, it can happen everywhere. It has happened here, in this rich, very prosperous country with no social issues. so it can happen everywhere. Well, 8 or 9 years later I turned out to be very prophetic because if you see what is happening now all over Europe, in Italy, Hungary, Poland, how strong they are in Spain, how strong they are in France, how strong it is in Brazil, unfortunately I was right.

Interesting enough when I published it two groups were very much against me: On one hand the politicians, because how do I dare to say that in this country there is a return of Fascism, I should be ashamed of myself and blah, blah, blah. Well, of course for the political class it is hard to admit that something like this can happen and that we are dealing with an inconvenient truth, and nobody likes inconvenient truths. The second class that came after me very violent and aggressively was the academics. And, don't take this personal, but I think in general the academics are the most stupid people on earth. And there's nothing they could know because the academic world made a mistake long time ago. At certain moment we got René Descartes, who had an idea of how to discover a truth on the world of the science of nature. But Giambattista Vico about 200 years later in Italy came with a very important critic and said “look monsieur Descartes, it's a wonderful idea to discover the truth of nature, but there's nothing on your idea

that we can use to discover the truth of human mind and human society.” For that we need philosophy, we need poetry, we need history, etc. Well, he was right, but the whole academic world is now based on two paradigms: Truth can only be a scientific truth, according to the Descartes way, so humanities are constantly looking for theories and definitions; and the other truth is that it is based on numbers, so you have to publish and all these things. These in terms of humanities are brain dead, just brain dead. And of course there is nothing they understand, nothing they can deliver for better understand of our society as it is.

Let's come back to the world of literature, because, and I quote, Albert Camus, Thomas Mann and I could had mention Hermann Bloch and many others. They understood what was going on. And it is as well as for today. So we are now in a situation where again why are the academics still tied with the title populism? It's almost hilarious, because in America Bernie Sanders is a populist, Elizabeth Warren is a populist, Obama is a populist, Trump is a populist, everybody is a populist. They know it doesn't mean anything, so they have to say “it's extreme”, or whatever, anything to avoid the F word because for the F word we have to find a definition for it. They even do not know the history of Fascism. If you go back to Italy, if you go back to Mussolini, if you go back to Benedetto Croce. Mussolini wrote the fascist manifesto, so Croce wrote the anti-manifesto saying that there was nothing in it. Because there is nothing in it. That's one of the powers of fascism: There is nothing in it. It's primary ideas are only about power, power, power and nothing else. This is also a reason because it's a mistake to think that fascism is a phenomenon limited to the right. No, it is beyond politics. In the USSR in the time of Stalin, people like Shostakovich were talking about soviet Fascism because for them there was no difference at all.

**Sorry to interrupt. First I would like to say that I agree with you. That's a discussion I've been having a lot in the Brazilian academy: trying to show that Fascism is not limited to extreme right wing politics and that even Mussolini had characteristics from both sides of the spectre, as pointed by Robert Paxton in *Anatomy of Fascism*. This because it's not only a political system, but, what's more, a power methodology. This being said, do you believe that Maduro, by using a leftist example, can be called a fascist?**

Of course he's a fascist. It's even nonsense. As I also explain in my book, Nazism is something different. There is an idea behind Nazism. With its anti-semitism. But nothing like that is inherent in Fascism. Fascism is the barbaric child of a mass democracy. And ever mass democracy, and that is something that Nietzsche and Tocqueville understood, eventually can turn into a fascist state. So, it doesn't matter if it comes from the right or from the left. It's a new secular religion. And that is why it is so appealing. Now things become complicated when the “so-called” intellectual class, or “so-called” academics, don't given any understand of what's going on.

I was very happy with Umberto Eco, that's a very good book. I've thought the book of Madeleine Albright was pretty useless, because still today she refuses to admit that Trump is a

fascist. Look, fascist, as you already mentioned, is one of concepts that are misused all the time. And then you have the argument that you can't use it any longer. Well, I can tell you one word that has been misused much more than the word fascism: It's called democracy. Mubarak claimed democracy, Saddam Hussein claimed democracy, Putin claims democracy, in China they are claiming democracy. Does that mean that now when we get the term democracy I will just say "no we cannot use this word anymore"? No. So, it means that we have to rediscover what democracy is. But it's our obligation to make sure we understand democracy, and the same thing with fascism. Fascism is an important word because it's the expression of what will happen with the modern society when the democratic spirit is dead. Because that's what fascism wants to do: Kill the democratic spirit. First kill the spirit, then goes for the democratic institutions. We know what we will get.

**Well, I would like to ask you a bit of my president. I don't know how familiarized you are with him, but I would like to know your opinion either way.**

It's an old story now, because we've seen what fascism is all about. Look, it raises to power through the democratic rules.

**Exactly he puts himself as a democrat whilst accuses his enemies of being anti-democrats**

Kaddafi said he was a democrat, Putin said he was a democrat. Bolsonaro is the classic incarnation of contemporary fascism. Well, he make silly gestures? No.

**Well... He does, actually... Like a gun.**

Well, ok, he does. He has invented his own new silly gestures. I mean this is a simple theme, even though there's not much we see about Brazil in our newspapers. I mean, at least Goebbels was an intelligent man, this guy who, if I'm not missing for, even denies that the earth is going round.

**I'm not sure if he believes the earth to be flat. But his mentor, an astrologue, says that there is "nothing that refutes the flat earth".**

Point is: They can get these things done because of Trump. Trump legitimizes these characters all the time. But the bigger question is: How is it possible that in a country like Brazil you could get this far? Again, I'm the first to admit that in certain way The Netherlands is a more astonishing story because Europe is so prosperous, but still. And you're dealing with the same phenomenon, which are that the moral values has been replaced by commercial values. Because everything in our time is about commercial values. A sense of quality has been replaced by a sense of quantity. So, it's a business like mindset which invades everything and as a consequence moral and spiritual values are no longer cultivated. Second, next to that, the braindead of the academic world. Because even though the academics are able to organize millions of

conferences on populism and what kind of populism these governments are; they are not able to speak “see, that’s what’s happening”.

It is a misleading concept and this is what Spinoza understood so well. This is why populism is such a stupid term, especially when it helps the fascists to get away. Democracy is about elevating people, it’s about appealing to the highest manners instead of the lower instincts. It’s about creating a society because democracy is the only form of government where you can unite a plurality of people with different ideas and interests and still work on a sense of common good. That is extremely difficult. Totalitarianism is much easier. Any form of tyranny is much easier, any form of fundamentalism is easier, because it’s always one way approach. The whole idea of democracy doing what people want is insane, but if you don’t educate people, if you don’t give them a training in cultivating the quest for wisdom, if you don’t educate them in the principles of European humanism, which has its political translation into social democracy, which is the only guardian for the democratic society. When you give them these things they are no longer leaving truth. This being said, freedom can become a danger, a power for demagogues. What people find hard to admit nowadays is that the return of fascism starts with a crisis in education.

**Do you believe that for fascism to achieve power, to rise, it necessarily demands a crisis? Not only in education, but a social or economic crisis for example.**

Yes, because well...

**Like the social and economic crisis in Brazil, for example.**

Yes, but the economic crisis comes next.

**So you think it’s a cause, not an effect?**

See, the big difference between a fascist government and an authoritarian regime as you see in China, is that fascism is embraced by the people, it is what people want. It is what they are longing for, it is their choice. Trump has been chosen by the American people. Democrats will say that he lost on the popular vote, well, yes, but the system is still the electoral college. I mean, even Lincoln lost on popular vote. Even Lincoln was president only because of the electoral college. Johnson the same thing (although Johnson is not a fascist, Johnson is something different). But it’s their system. Now, why is it? That the free people, willingly, says “we want a fascist leader”. Why is it? Now that’s the true question we should address. First of all it is important to point out that Ortega y Gasset is explicitly not talking about a certain social class. He explicitly says “you can be an university professor and be part of the Mass-Men”, which is very true.

Indeed the appeal of fascism is always the anti-politician who present himself, most of the time it’s a him, as the messiah who will solve all social issues. And, knowing that this is no true, there always will be liars. They need the politics of lies because they know they cannot win otherwise. So, the first thing they need are scapegoats, people that they can blame for how things

are the way they are. They need the politics of fear, the politics of resentment, they need all these things. But again why do people fall into this trap? Why is that so many “educated people” are part of their clan? Well, the main part for the intellectuals is hatred. They hate ordinary people. They hate the normal society. They hate that they lost the status. You know, it's like Heidegger. They want to be the counselor of the king, the emperor, or whatever. So for them is resentment.

For the other people, when you have lost your all self-confidence, when you are only an individual, when you have no personality of yourself anymore, when you are not trying to think for yourself, when you feel completely dependent of forces outside you, you can become very religious, very suspicious, you want nothing to change, you want everything how it is, everything that is different to stay away. You only want to stay in your own tribe. Well, what comes first? The fear of freedom, the rise of nationalism, the demagogues, we got all of them. Again, the biggest question is: After two world wars, after supposedly have learned the lessons of history, why are we going through that again? How is it possible that after all of that, the whole bloody thing has started again? That's a question that I still do not have an answer for.

Because all of these things have social consequences. And you're in the frontline. I mean, your country will feel the social consequences much earlier than we. And if Trump gets reelected, and it's very possible that he will get reelected... In that case we can easily see the collapse of European Union. And then what will happen to our economy or climate. That is a true hellish scenarium. At least from my part of the world I want to tell people that it is five seconds before midnight, but it is still five seconds before midnight. We still have an opportunity to change things. It will be very difficult, because of what's happening in America, UK is on its way out and will be out, but we are still not like Turkey, we are still not like China, we are still not like Russia. We still have freedom here. But we are running out of time.

But it is again important to make clear that you are dealing with a fascist government and that those who are adept to the policies of them are part of a fascist cult. Those people are on the wrong side of history. Very wrong side.

Why did I publish my book in 2010? Because I saw back then that the parties were giving a red carpet for the fascist policies. And now the core became accepted. We have even two of these parties now.

Now NBC is against Trump, but they created Trump. If they would have ignored the fool, he wouldn't have been there. But it is everything about ratings, ratings, ratings and next year they will do everything to get Trump in their programs, because it is good for the ratings. My worry about America is it that Joe Biden, who at least for now is the front one and may be the best one to beat Trump, really thinks and says again, again and again that Trump is just an incident in American history. Apparently he has never read Sinclair Lewis. Apparently there's nothing he

knows about America history. I mean, because if you really believe that Trump is just an incident, and not something that has been common for a long, long time, my godness.

#### **About a taboo on the word fascism...**

Yes, you need to ask: If we have a taboo on the word fascism, then why don't we have a taboo on the word democracy? Or a taboo on the word freedom.

#### **...Or why populism is not...**

Because it is completely meaningless. And stupid. Look, Steve Bannon was - do you know the Bill Maher show in America? - it is a kind of late night show. And it is very outspoken against Mr. Trump. In that respect he is one of the best and he has no problem in saying that Trump is a fascist. But then he invited Steve Bannon on his show. And of course he had to be polite, and then he asked "Bannon, what is your problem?", of which Bannon replied "the left wing populists. Trump is a right wing populist to balance things." It is what the fascists love. They keep it that way, being called right wing populists. They are very happy with that, because then they don't need to claim that they are no fascists.

In February 1933, Hitler being already in power, Churchill gave a speech in Queenswood in London in which he said "Mussolini is a genius of our time and his fascism is the political strategy for the future and it is what we have to embrace." Even Churchill, by that time, had a blindspot. He was against Hitler, he knew that Hitler was a danger, but he didn't see the same on Mussolini. He was one of the first admirers of Mussolini. It took him a bit little longer.

Nobody likes inconvenient truths, but if we had accepted the inconvenient truth of climate change in the 70s, we wouldn't be having the climate disasters we are having now. So, yes, it is an inconvenient truth but it is still a truth, so better accept it. Churchill and many others had their blind spot, it was a new phenomenon, took them a while to perceive it. Thomas Mann was one of the first that realised what fascism was all about. We are no longer allowed to have this blind spot because we know what it is. So we are also no longer allowed to use all kind of euphemisms. We are no longer allowed to be ignorants, especially when you have the privilege to be educated.

The real problem is the on going moral and intellectual corruption. Which is much worse than the political corruption, or the financial corruption. When you are an academic you don't have political or financial power, but you are obligated to say the truth. When you stop speaking the truth, because you feel more comfortable with your position and because your career is better that way, then you are a liar. And this is what most of these people are.

**There's a passage on *It Can't Happen Here* that caused a big impression on me. I mean, the whole book did, not without reason I took it as my main study object, but this one passage in particular. On the very beginning, when the Latin professor writes to Doremus asking "how can we resist this growing fascism?". And I think it is beautiful how the book**

**ends with kind of an answer for that with the final statement that says “a Doremus will never truly die.” Then I’m going to make the very same question that appeared in the book: How can we resist this growing fascism? And also, what do you think are the basic pillars for it to be considered fascism?**

Well, there are many ways to do it. The first principle is to tell the truth. The truth, the bitter, inconvenient truth. Despite all the consequences. Secondly, to cultivate the democratic spirit. Again, the democratic spirit is a difficult spirit, because it demands an education in thinking, it demands the practice of being free, it demands the cultivation of moral values, and probably all these things has to start in small places. It has always been small groups that kept alive certain ideals. If you want to keep alive a notion of what European civilization is all about, and I'm not talking about something eurocentric, but about a cosmopolitan idea where the dignity of men comes first, where individual freedom comes first, where every single human being, wherever they are, whatever their race is, wherever they come from, are entitled to live a life in dignity, where any form of government will take as its principle to protect what is vulnerable, children, elderly, people that are ill, animals, the planet, the culture, if we want to keep alive that kind of ideal of civilization. If we don't start to valorize this now, then we will see what Paul Valéry already said in 1919: “now we know why civilizations are mortal”. We are currently seeing the process of European civilization death. But we still can revive it, if we act now.

**So, one of the best ways to resist it would be insist on the idea of the small? Small groups, small communities?**

Yes, that will be always the case.

**This reminds me of Didi-Huberman book, *Survival of fireflies*. He talks about Pasolini's essay on the fireflies, about the rise of neofascism back in the 60s. Pasolini is very pessimistic, he says that all fireflies are gone, dead and killed. Therefore, fascism will prevail over and over again. Didi-Huberman come back to it and says that it is not like that, Pasolini is being overpessimistic and that it is still possible to resist through the small. You can't do anymore a large revolution, but you can still work on small revolutions.**

Yes, of course. Imagine the impact that Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche or Goethe would have on people. Imagine the impact of ideas. Imagine the impact of Van Gogh's paintings. If we don't have people who cultivate these ideals, who transmit them, we fail. But it is still possible, as we are not in a totalitarian society. In authoritarian societies such as China is much more difficult. But it is not happening.

Again, nothing good will come from Harvard, Stanford or whatever, nothing. This is just a marketing industry and no true education whatsoever. American media... Well, the New York Times asked me several times to submit an oped, but then they refused to publish it because they do not accept that I use the F word (fascism) when talking about Trump. Because it may put them



in a position that they might no longer have access to the White House. You won't see the F word in the New York Times. They say "no, fascism is for what it is happening in Europe, it can't happen here."

This is the time when artists and intellectuals need to step forward and do their job. But they are not doing it. Most of them not. Here in Nexus Institute we are one of the few organizations who are doing that, as long as there is still the possibility.

**In your book you state that "fascism is the political version of nihilism." If possible I would like to hear a bit from you about the relation of these two subjects.**

Nietzsche diagnosis and explains a world invaded by nihilism, which is a very sharp and important think. Which basically comes to the fact that there are no longer transcendental values. So if there is nothing above us, nothing that is universal, despite all of our differences in ideas, when that is gone, then everything becomes individualistic. Your values, your ideas.

Then it comes fascism, which is a seek for power, power and power. And why is that? Because of the emptiness. Fascism rises on individualism. But what else he realises, because he has realised so much, is that no one can live with emptiness, is the only innacetable thing. Either you commit suicide or you go crazy, because nobody can accept that life is completely meaningless. Nobody. So, you have to have goals, in order to fulfill this void. And one efficient goal is to achieve power. Most of these people - Trump or your president, for example -, only have this. Ok, they have a lot of money, women or beautiful boys, but that is only entertainment, behind it there is nothing.

Now fascism is the political expression of these lines. There is no idea behind it, there is no ideal behind it. It is a power structure which a clan can use to be powerful. And they have to seduce people with national identity, with hate. But it is empty. It is the political consequence of this emptiness. Because when society doesn't want to think any longer about values such as goodness, they embrace the new messiah, which will take power of everything. "The messiah will take care of everything, we do not need to think or act anymore", they say. They embrace their most basic instincts.

Because what we created in our capitalist society is a caged society in which we only feel good, we only surpass the emptiness, if we be cool, if we are having entertainment all the time, by games, by sex, by drugs, we need to be excited all the time. We need more and more and more of it because we have to avoid this terrible feeling of emptiness and nothing.

All goes well as long as we have money to entertain ourselves. Money to have more drugs, more games, more sex or whatever. But, you know, when there is an economic crisis, party time is over. You can no longer afford the pleasures. You may lose - or have already lost - your job. Lose your house or whatever. And then you become angry, and very aggressive. And

someone has to be blamed. Here's when the demagogues come: They can activate this resentment, this fear, this hatred, and cultivate their own cage, which is the cage of a fascist cult.

**This is a personal curiosity of mine. I do not know much about Dutch politics. I know some of the politics, such as Geert Wilders and I believe his party is called Party for Freedom, right?**

Party for Freedom, yes, but now we also have Baudet. Which is from the Forum for Democracy, we have two fascist parties now. Wilders is kind of an outcast, uneducated, you know, typical white male and blah, blah, blah. Mind you, he is now the biggest opposition party.

Baudet is a different case, for he is much more dangerous. But he is more recent phenomenon. He is the incarnation of the proto fascist. He is a Goebbels like figure, he reads books, he writes novels, he got his Ph.D at University of Leiden. And it is completely based on lies. In his thesis he claims that nationalism is the moral value for democracy - not true. He writes love letters to Trump and to Putin, he denies that the MI7 was shot down by the Russians, and he now has the biggest party in the Senate. And he is surrounded by the whole academic elite. And most of the students are in love with the guy.

This is authentic fascism. You know, he hates everything that is moral. For him, culture stops with Beethoven. And everything beyond Beethoven is trash. And of course, the resentful academics, who hate any form of modern culture, who hates all the Muslim people who came and are "invading our culture", love the guy. And he is a complete charlatan. But they don't care, why should they?

On the most recent elections, we have a very complicated voting system, from non existence he became the biggest party. This shows everything about the political state of this country. Again, do we have massive economic problems? No. Is immigration the biggest issue of our society? My goodness, I think we have 50,000 refugees, you know, out of a country with 7 million people. It is complete nonsense. But for him, you know, the arabs are a danger, EU is a danger, we have to get out of EU and reclaim our national identity. We have to make The Netherlands great again and blah, blah, blah. With full support of the academic class, with full support.

There is a complete silence of what actually is going on. What is important to realise is that all of this has been on the making for decades. And it could only take roots in our society because we made something wrong. We did something wrong. And it is not only because we destroyed our education system, which we did. And it is not only because we created this kitsch culture and everything is individualistic, it is about what I like and everything should be happy and funny and in the very moment things become difficult you have to take your medicine or your drugs. But it is also a social injustice. A growing divide between the super rich and the rest of the

people. And it is, you know, what I claim in the introduction: The cultivation of stupidity. We keep making people more stupid. Much more stupid.

We created a culture in which all these things can easily take roots. Again, because democracy is a very difficult idea. All the things that make life meaningful are difficult. True friendship is difficult, true love is difficult, to deal with death in a reasonable way is difficult, to find meaning in your life is difficult. Spinoza was right when he said “everything of excellence is as difficult as it is rare”. But if we are afraid of everything that is difficult, then nothing will be of excellence. And when you take away everything that is meaningful, that’s what you get. It is the red carpet for the fascist world. And, of course it will be different and they will not wear the same uniforms, but the main characteristics are still the same.

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