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11.03.2025

In a World Run by Fascists Can Humans Survive?

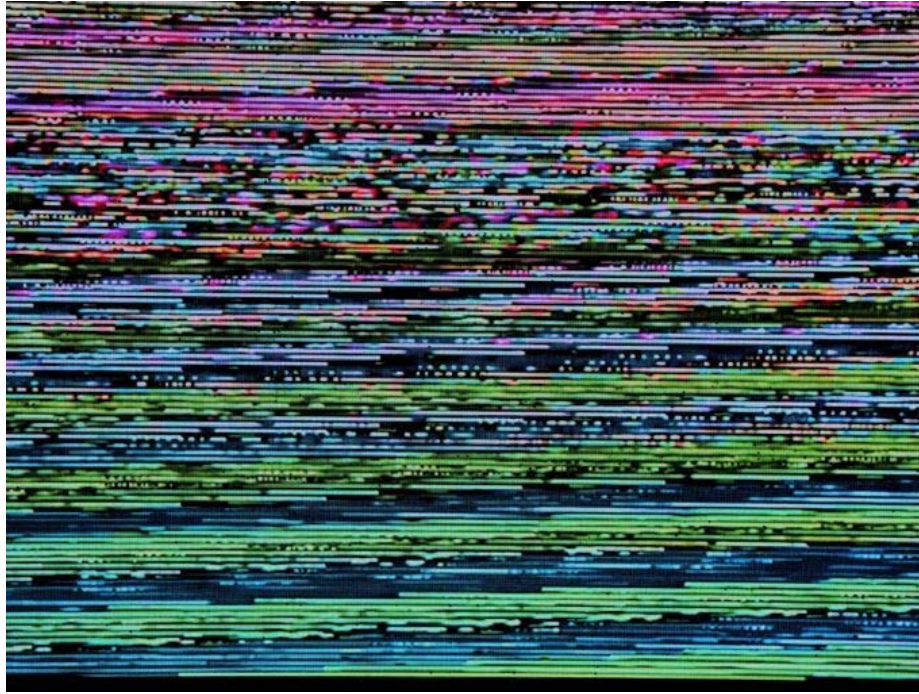


Image by Michael Dziedzic.

On March 9, 1970, editors of *The Intercontinental Press*, Joseph Hansen, Pierre Frank, Livio Maitan, Ernest Mandel, and George Novack wrote an article called, “In a World Run by Idiots Can Man Survive?” The *Intercontinental Press* specialized in political analysis, labor rights, socialism, postcolonial independence, and black liberation. In the article, the authors referenced well to do biologist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, a Hungarian-Jewish biochemist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1937 for isolating and discovering vitamin C. After he won the award, he donated all the prize money to Finland to ward off Russia’s 1939 aggression. Szent-Gyorgyi joined the Hungarian resistance movement during the second world war and

later became an unyielding opponent to the Vietnam War. War disgusted Szent-Gyorgyi so much in fact that in WWI he intentionally shot himself in the arm to end his tour of duty according to journalist Chris Gaylord of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

By 1970, Szent-Gyorgyi was filled with pessimism. He remarked after writing his 1970 book, *The Crazy Ape*, in a conversation with Robert Reinhold in the *New York Times* that humankind's days were numbered. "Man is a very strange animal," he stated. "In much of the world half the children go to bed hungry and we spend a trillion on rubbish — steel, iron, tanks. We are all criminals." *IP* also included his explanation of the "terrible strain of idiots who govern the world," leading to ultimate doom. Szent-Gyorgyi made clear that "the force of our arm was exchanged for forces of the atom...which course will man take, toward a bright future or toward exterminating himself?" He emphasized that not all hope was lost and that younger generations ("the human brain freezes up for new ideas by age 40") would need to survive and engage in new beginnings for civilization to continue. On top of that, Szent-Gyorgyi remarked that "American society is death oriented." This marked a moment in history when people interested in science, economics and politics regularly joined together in the resistance of state violence and the horrors of fascism and war.

We are very likely in yet another moment of confronting post-fascist forces. The CUNY Graduate Center has started a series of lectures and teach-ins that have been sponsored by both the English and Chemistry Departments. Fascism is not just a topic for the Social Sciences in a world run by idiots, Szent-Gyorgyi might argue. CUNY titled the theme of the talks, "Emergency Brakes: A Discussion Series on Fascism, organized by Daniel Horowitz, Souli Boutis, and Yagiz Ay." The series was described as:

The call of the hour is emergency. What Walter Benjamin once described as the responsibility of the human race in the face of an eternal wrestling match between progress and doom forces us today to rescue the task of critique. "To activate the emergency brake" is the guiding theme of this series of meetings on texts, ancient and modern, concerning the resurgent problematic of fascism. This will be the second meeting, but it is certainly not a requirement that you have attended the first. Following our discussion of Adorno's 1967 lecture on the new aspects of right-wing extremism, we turn now to Felix Guattari's 1973 lecture-turned-essay "Everybody Wants to be a Fascist," where he responds to fascism as "a real political problem, and not as a purely theoretical consideration" especially through the analytic of desire.

In the Trump era, the scientific community, including medicine, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Institute of Health (NIH) and NASA, have all faced

threats to severe budgetary cuts while the administration pushes for national and global “defense systems,” militarily speaking. As Trump undermines climate science research and sought to pull the US out of the Paris Agreement, The Musk-Trump alliance has linked the privatized commercial space industry with increased state subsidized militarization. A vicious and new national priority of fascism along with every deleterious “ism” imaginable has brought on a heightened intention to eradicate institutional control (and mere existence) of public education, public health, and basic scientific research, at lightning speed.

On the one hand, Trump and Musk are not idiots by any measure. Both are fully aware of how to employ their fame, wealth, and notoriety to navigate and exploit the cultural politics of fear, frustration, skepticism, hatred, and anxiety — all to test the limits of political power while using vulnerable sectors of the population to embrace state capitalism and imperialism at their own peril. As the famed reporter Seymour Hersh once noted, Trump’s long standing ability to perform well on television, since his days on the Golf Channel, reveal his savvy for absorbing the benefits of today’s US agitprop and keen abilities to drive the major media’s news cycle in the rallying of a cult. And Musk certainly knows the benefit of inspiring the next generation of impressionistic youth with expensive toys and futuristic cars all the while extolling the end of art, poetry, literature, and drudgery of a secular humanist education.

Even Trump’s ignorance regarding topics such as Ukraine (where he destroyed world order according to Chris Hayes), Lesotho, a place obviously heard of — and his lack of knowledge regarding the military, tariffs, “trans mice,” and World War II, don’t make him stupid. They make him, along with surviving an assassination attempt, both a transcendent figure historically and a proverbial everyman, according to the hard right. As Newt Gingrich once said, “Trump is not a student of history,” rather, he’s an entrepreneurial sage who negotiates with facts in the present, not with that pesky and speculative past stuff. (Of course, Gingrich expects Democrats to notice history and nuance as he sees fit).

But where Szent-Gyorgyi would find Trump and Musk dangerous fools is in the pursuit of annihilation and unbridled capital that threatens the survival of the human species. Noam Chomsky famously asserted and warned of the contemporary threats to human existence in the 1992 documentary version of Manufacturing Consent:

Now, it’s long been understood very well that a society that is based on this principle will destroy itself in time. It can only persist with whatever suffering and injustice it entails as long as it’s possible to pretend that the destructive forces that humans create are limited: that the world is an infinite resource, and that the world is an infinite garbage-can. At this stage of history, either one of two things is possible: either the general population will take control of

its own destiny and will concern itself with community-interests, guided by values of solidarity and sympathy and concern for others; or, alternatively, there will be no destiny for anyone to control.

As long as some specialized class is in a position of authority, it is going to set policy in the special interests that it serves. But the conditions of survival, let alone justice, require rational social planning in the interests of the community as a whole and, by now, that means the global community. The question is whether privileged elites should dominate mass-communication and should use this power as they tell us they must, namely, to impose necessary illusions, manipulate and deceive the stupid majority (Chomsky does not however agree that the majority is stupid) and remove them from the public arena. The question, in brief, is whether democracy and freedom are values to be preserved or threats to be avoided. In this possibly terminal phase of human existence, democracy and freedom are more than values to be treasured, they may well be essential to survival.

The warnings presented by Albert Szent-Gyorgyi in 1970 resonate with striking relevance today, as we face a world increasingly dominated by lethal and fascistic forces that threaten not only our democracy but also our very survival. The rise of figures like Trump and Musk, whose manipulation of power and resources fosters division and deepens the destruction of public goods, mirrors the dangers Szent-Gyorgyi warned against, the unchecked pursuit of capital and militarization at the expense of humanity. As Chomsky rightly argues, the future of our species depends on a collective shift toward solidarity, rational social planning, and a commitment to values of democracy and freedom. Whether we can rise above the forces of destruction and ensure a future grounded in justice, equity, and compassion remains the crucial question for our generation — and the one Szent-Gyorgyi might have hoped would drive younger minds toward the survival of civilization.

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MARCH 10, 2025