

# Getting used to the f-word

by William Gairdner

There has never been much agreement on the definition of fascism. Nevertheless, the impression that, whatever its form, it always has to do with the triumph of the will over nature, seems a penetrating truth about early fascism as well as its more recent manifestations. The French saying *Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop* (“banish the natural, and it comes galloping back”) is a truth of nature that, absent the help of massively oppressive state powers, no degree of will could ever succeed in altering for long. Despite this bald reality, the recent history of the West has been a disturbing and repetitive narrative centered on the complexities and catastrophes that result from efforts to banish nature. In what follows, I argue that all the modern, unnatural, and therefore anti-human, attempts to bend nature and human nature to the will, have been expressed in two basic forms, one macro, the other micro. By the end, we may want to ask to what peculiar quirk of nature we owe our apparently insatiable hunger to banish it.

Before looking at the differences between these two forms, however, let us ask about the origin of the word “fascism,” for which it suffices to recall the imperial image of victorious Roman legions marching in triumph with the *fascēs*—bundles of bound sticks from the center of which protruded a menacing axe—borne aloft. The symbolism could not be clearer: Roman power binds and controls all individuals as one. This form of macrofascism, originally an engine of military empire, eventually found its most coher-

ent modern political and moral expression in the *Social Contract* (1762) of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which he insisted on the complete absorption of all individual wills into a single national, or General Will. The plainest description of this template for what we now recognize as a uniquely European form of totalitarian democracy may be glimpsed in his novel *Émile* (1762), where we read of his ambition “to transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one, but a part of the unity, and feels no longer except within the whole.” This was the first fully articulated political formula for what may be called a democracy of the one, rather than of the many. It served as a guide and moral justification for the murderous fanaticism of the Jacobins during the French Revolution, and then for Hitler’s Nazi party as well as Mussolini’s Italian Fascists. Hitler often burred publicly, “This revolution of ours is the exact counterpart of the French Revolution,” and Mussolini famously formalized his own philosophy in the slogan *democrazia organizzata!*

These recent forms of macrofascism, whether French, Italian, German, or Russian, have always been collectivist, secular, and militant, striving through the fearsome top-down powers of the State to draw all things into the ambit of a single pattern of national—or in the case of Communism, international—will always expressed by the subjugation and assimilation by force of things spontaneous, private, and natural to artificial and unnatural public designs. For

private religious belief? A secular and wholly materialist belief. For concepts of transcendent natural law? Man-made laws only. For the private family? An array of public programs and services from national daycare, to health care, to subsidized housing, to old-age homes. For private enterprise and free markets? Intensive regulation, ever-higher taxation, and the direction of the forces of production to state ends. For countless voluntary community organizations? Equivalent public organizations. In short, it is a will that leads to the Nanny State, cradle to grave.

The German word that described this transformation of the private and natural into the public and artificial was *gleichschaltung*, which means “to bring everything into line.” Take note of the word “line,” for the variety of methods used to force all things natural, spontaneous, curved, and organic (think of all those charming European village laneways, a map of which looks like a biological or botanical growth) into geometrically rigid lines and grids, conceptual or actual, is truly astonishing. The monomaniacally linear architect Le Corbusier, gloating upon his fantasies for the perfect Soviet city, could not resist sniffing that “curved lines constitute paralysis, and the winding path is the path of donkeys.”

On this general theme of regulation, however, our liberal-democratic regimes cannot afford to be smug. Although we have never had to pack machine guns to enforce our softer, but no less pervasive, brand of statism, most of the policy specifics common to macrofascism are recognizable in our own “progressive” regimes. To wit, more than three-quarters of the German and Italian programs (and a lot of the Communist ones) are virtually indistinguishable from our own political fare, and this is true for all the Great Society, New Society, or Just Society programs of our modern “liberal” States. No matter which democracy we look at, we find ever-increasing statism, taxation, debt, and regulation. Everywhere, the larger national or federal political units continue to absorb and subjugate—bring into line—the smaller states, provinces, regions, and municipali-

ties; so everywhere, we see more “democracy,” but less freedom. And what might be the reason?

Some say that all fascism is a reactionary response to a perceived loss of natural community. But its deeper sources are more likely rooted in despair over the glaring imperfections of human existence, most notably our anger at the apparent absence of justice on Earth (which is to say, at our perceived abandonment by God). From this dejection has sprung the modern resolve to go it alone, so to speak: if there is no God to make earthly existence perfect, then we’ll do it by our own means, powered by the belief that human beings (at least of the planning type) are actually godlets (“made in the image of God” is the template) who have an obligation to impose a uniform design of perfection on all natural but imperfect expressions of human life. Secularization began in earnest with the rise of the modern State during the French Revolution, Rousseau’s *Contract* in hand. Its effects then and since may be seen in sobering detail in James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (Yale, 1998), which traces various militant effort to create “a single national society, legible from the center,” in which all things natural and non-conforming were to be “denaturalized” (a cure that operates more like a disease).

The standard recipe for spreading this disease requires only a few ingredients to create a “full-fledged disaster.” The first is a comprehensive aspiration to the “refashioning of social habits and of human nature itself.” The second is an ideology legitimizing the “unrestrained use of the power of the modern state” for the satisfaction of human needs according to a “rational” model. The third is “a weakened or prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans.” In a putatively democratic age ruled by a supposed “sovereignty of the people,” this abasement of civil society is surely the saddest element.

From this ideological gestation, the modern Statist dystopia, which relies on well-worn tools of regimentation, has emerged. Examples are the imposition of official languages by means of which whole regions formerly illegible to central government may be linguistically subdued and culturally incorporated. Another

standard tool is the eradication of all local systems of weights and measures. The foot? The pound? The ounce? Such intimately natural human measures have been made illegal in most nations by metrication, the most zealous proponents of which always argue that a more “rational” unit will produce a more rational (and, therefore, a more easily organized) citizenry. The most menacing novelties of modern statism are surely the highly precise and all-pervasive instruments of statecraft, such as computerized data, encrypted identity cards, statistical bureaus, modes of instant satellite communication, precise cadastral (tax) maps, intensive tax-harvesting (by installment) on an unprecedented scale, pervasive State invasions of the private realm, sophisticated spying and security measures, and much more. None of these modern tools now common to our putatively free nations could have been imagined for a moment in even the most frenzied dreams of any absolutist king or despot in all prior human history. It is indisputable that we were much freer (less regulated, spied upon, and taxed), before the onset of modern democracy.

Personal examples of the loss of freedom to the macrofascist will over nature are very close to many of us. One of the purposes of modern property codification and taxation regimes has been to incorporate into the state what Scott calls the “free gifts of nature”—forests, game, wastelands, prairies, surface minerals, water, and air rights. And this has meant that most once-private natural property is now under the surveillance of the land, resources, and animal police. Recently, after two years of caring for a pair of swans on my pond that might otherwise have become a meal for coyotes, I was shocked to see two smartly uniformed federal officers from Wildlife Canada pull up in a brand-new Jeep Cherokee. They served me with a \$240 dollar fine for “keeping swans without a licence” (a \$10 dollar fee I had failed to renew). Protestations that it was costing me plenty in food and in bubbler pumps to keep my pond open in winter were for naught. And then, this past spring, in an attempt to purchase a piece of vacant land for a new home and driveway, I was informed by several layers of bureaucracy that the work could not begin

until July, “after the birds have left their nests” and that the one thing that would “absolutely stop the driveway” would be the discovery of a butternut tree in its path. My question, asked (I am ashamed to admit) in a somewhat tremulous voice—“Why are my birds to be more protected than my snakes, beetles, turtles, or worms?”—produced a perfectly bureaucratic look of “just wait and see.”

By the close of World War II, the macro form of violent fascism that had threatened to throw all of Europe under the jackboot was defeated. One of the main lessons of the conflict was that nature cannot be altered or extinguished by force from above for very long. In Professor Rudolph Rummel’s bleak review of the various utopian carnages of the twentieth century, *Death by Government* (1996), he verified about 50 million military deaths and, in addition, an appalling 150 million legitimate citizens slaughtered *by their own governments!* In short, macrofascism, which started with a respectable reputation—recall that Hitler was *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year in 1938 and Mussolini was the hero of Western cocktail chatter—ended with a very bad name.

Despite the dark failures of the Axis regimes, manifestations of macrofascism as systems aiming to triumph over nature have continued in newer, more subtle, and pervasive ways. No machine-guns have been required, so far, but places like Canada and Sweden are on the brink of becoming—may already be—tripartite states in which one third of the people work to create wealth and jobs, one third works for government, and another third receives significant government welfare or other support. Anyone can see that the last two-thirds will always gang up on the first—which is why no artillery is required (all you need is democracy).

So it seems that in a pragmatic response to the collapse of the macro form, a softer microfascism, also rooted in a much earlier intellectual tradition, evolved slowly through the second half of the twentieth century and is now in full bloom as our most pervasive and most invisible political religion. It has produced

a historically unprecedented type of polity, characterized by a radically individualistic and autonomist ethic that nevertheless rather ironically seeks to organize itself as a national inventory of common public orthodoxies expressed not as a collective triumph of the will over nature, as in the past, but instead as the triumph of the will of each and every individual over his or her own individual nature.

The most influential prophet of this revolutionary trend was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, who enunciated most clearly in his canonical booklet *On Liberty* (1859) the notion that liberty—and therefore morality—boils down to doing whatever you want to do as long as you do not harm someone else. It took a while, but Mill's "harm principle," although developed from a number of European ideas (most likely lifted from Article 4 of the French Revolution's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen) slowly began to radiate outwards to infect all Western nations. Today, it operates as a corrosive solvent upon community morality by persuading millions of people that individual freedom of will should be preferred to the common good. So powerful is the appeal of this new individual standard that it has been enshrined into the highest law by Canada's Supreme Court as a replacement for community standards. In *Regina v. Labaye* (2005), it specifically cited Mill's harm principle as its authority. Just so, the myriad communities of the West seem to be fragmenting into a collection of millions of highly regulated individuals who live within their own private moral bubbles—no need take notice of anyone else's behavior unless bubbles collide.

In retrospect, it seems as if the deeply revolutionary Christian insistence on the moral freedom of each individual human being has continued apace, but in a mutated secular form especially visible in our tortured skewings of law and social policy to grant legal priority to private will, or "choice." This is ironic, of course, because our spiritual progenitors exercised their free will to escape a slavery to their own bodily appetites and temptations, but we now cite the sanctity

of choice as our authority for indulgence in those same appetites. This new war of the will against constraints, especially those on our own biological nature, has taken many forms, and what follows is a kind of fugue on that theme.

Signs of the shift to radical individualism have been visible for a long time, especially in public disputes about "sovereignty," which today has little to do with the admirable Western struggle to establish individual liberty within a politically and morally ordered polity. Rather, sovereignty, as we now conceive it has more to do with "rights" and with individual claims against the body politic—which is to say, with the demands of the imperial self. To trace this path over past centuries is really to describe a halting line falling from heaven to earth: from God to royalty, to aristocracy (where it is still partly lodged in new and devious forms, such as on our judicial benches), to "the people," and finally . . . to the solitary individual.

The British historian George Gooch observed that modern democracy is a "child of the Reformation," because he had traced the rapid transformation of the original Protestant demand for individual spiritual autonomy into a secular demand for political and personal autonomy. This went viral, as the saying goes, rather quickly, in quirky displays of antinominism. During the English Revolution, for example, discontented soldiers in Cromwell's army actually insisted that the generals should take orders from the soldiers! But Gooch did not live to see the radical expression of this same trend in what may be called our "hyperdemocracies"—political regimes in which, against even democratic logic, sovereignty, and rights are believed to inhere primarily in individuals, rather than in their communities.

"One man, one vote" is now emblematic of the egalitarian democratic faith, but it would have shocked our forebears (who wondered why the vote of an idiot should cancel the vote of a genius) and is an indication of the downward historical trend of sovereignty, which has only come to a halt in our prisons. Voting rights are even granted to convicted criminals in places like Canada, where no one bothers to ask why those who have demonstrated a pref-

erence for breaking the laws ought to have the right to determine them.

Another hint of microfascism at work can be seen in social atomization. Aristotle famously declared that we are all *zoon politikon*, or political animals, who naturally affiliate in social groupings. Yet in parallel to the descent of sovereignty has been a startling growth in the “atomization” of the natural social molecule. There are now millions of “administered” individuals, each an entry in bits and bytes on the lockstep computers of the all-seeing state as well as in the electronic files of any corporation that can afford such information-gathering (often purchased from or provided by the state). When I was young, we had a family health card. Now we each have an individual one, a process of individuation repeated in all walks of life, public and private, and now considered a normal and rational informational requirement of human organization. Although we have never believed more emphatically that we are free, we are individually under near-total surveillance. Consider the spread of the RFID, or “spychip,” a tiny “radio-frequency identification device” so small it can easily be placed almost anywhere. It is activated by a radio receiver-transmitter such that when you walk into a government building or your favorite department store the spychip inserted in your shirt, tie, bra, eyeglasses, or blue jeans during manufacture will reveal lots of details on your whereabouts and behaviors. So much for the individuation of bodies.

The real focus of the new micro-war against nature is biology—everything from the skin inward, especially sexual desires, reproductive matters, and, for serious ideological reasons, the ultimate question of the existence or non-existence of human life. In a regime of personal will, it is possible for an ideologically inconvenient “other” to throw into jeopardy the elaborate moral, and legal justifications of the regime itself. Whenever this looms as a real threat, the most urgent question becomes “How can we make the threatening other disappear?” For the truth is that, in order to sustain ideological purity, many regimes in history—we are no exception—have been forced to make entire classes

of humans disappear legally. Most Greeks and Romans, for example, simply took for granted that their empires—especially their democracies—were impossible to sustain without chattel slaves whose labors freed citizens to participate in political life. But as no free person can in good conscience enslave another free human being, they had to invent a special category of law that transformed slave-humans into slave-things. My point is that the most egregious ancient as well as modern example of the triumph of the will over nature is human slavery. It is a triumph that simply cannot be sustained without making a target class of natural human beings disappear. Although the transatlantic slave trade was the most obvious recent commercial employment of this repellent art, it is an art still very much in service to the ideological maintenance of our own hyperdemocracies.

We see this slave-making technique in operation today where egalitarian radicals have negated the natural and eternal biological differences between the genders. They have succeeded in arguing that, in order to be equal citizens, women must have the right to triumph over the natural consequences of their own sexual behavior by removing the natural burden of their own unwanted children. This could not be achieved, however, without first converting an entire class of human beings—the unborn—into things. The legal weapon of the ancients was required, and, in order to attain to egalitarian purity, democratic nations have legally converted their unborn children into womb-slaves whom they declare to be non-human until born alive.

A physician friend once clarified this technique by asking why, on one side of a one-inch-thick hospital wall, physicians are spending a million dollars on high-tech professional skill to save and preserve the life of a premature baby, while on the other side their colleagues are throwing an aborted baby of exactly the same weight and gestation into the garbage? If, at the right moment, the two mothers were to make the opposing “choice,” the child to be saved would disappear and the non-human child would suddenly become human. Clearly, the source of such existential prestidigitation is

the naked will of the mothers, by whom human life is created *ex nihilo* or extinguished, not via biology, but by will alone. I am not judging this fact morally at the moment. I am simply trying to present the bald truth that as a political and moral extension of the microfascist will to triumph over nature, the Western democracies, by ideological imperative, have adopted a legal technique for converting millions of human beings into things. Thus have we become slave-regimes of a new kind.

Another looming reality in our aging democracies is the growing clamor—already achieved in some jurisdictions—for the right to control natural death. Suicide is self-inflicted death, but, beyond the understanding that to rest the ethos of a human society on a right of suicide would be to opt for something very dark indeed, we cannot object to nor very easily prevent this use of will. Euthanasia, however, means someone else has to make you die or help you die; someone living must be an instrument in the killing of another, regardless of how remotely. Here too, the will, ever strident, is demanding mastery over nature. In the Netherlands, there is now a group called Out of Free Will campaigning for the right of people over seventy who are “tired of life” to be euthanized. Of course, these campaigns do not address the corresponding obligation upon another (usually an agent of the state) to do the killing required by such a law. The underlying logic is that just as we can create life or make it disappear in the womb by will alone, we ought to be able to end it by will alone. Just so, the legal right to will a kill, so to speak, is shaping up as the ultimate triumph over nature, because it means openly playing God.

Wanting to be a godlet is not some modern trend; rather, it is an ever-present, and once heretical, human desire. The freedom-loving Adamites of the fifteenth century, for example, declared themselves to be so pure and god-like they were incapable of sin. Their altered Lord’s Prayer began, “Our Father, who art in us,” and their passion for adultery they considered a sacrament, good simply because freely willed. In the seventeenth century, the

influential Jacob Barthelmy declared that God “is in this dog, in this tobacco pipe, he is in me and I am in him” (no capital H for egalitarian Gods). Many voluntarists down the years recommended promiscuity and adultery for the “subtle in spirit” whom they encouraged to indulge in a “paradise of the senses” without shame (as in the Garden of Eden), thereby to become “as free as little children once again.” One such fellow, Abeizer Coppe, promised all women who fornicated with him would become virgins once again, thanks to the conscienceless purity of his motives (perhaps the craftiest sexual self-promotion ever invented).

Of other biological aspects of nature over which we now seek a mastery of will, there are too many to count. One of them, “no-fault divorce” (“two to make it, one to break it”)—considered purely as a social site for the expression of radical will—has clean removed the natural contractual basis of marriage, thus returning us to the radicalism of the French Revolution during which the Jacobins argued that if the two spousal wills are not in accord, no marriage exists. Both the union of marriage and the honest contractual intentions of observant spouses have been subjected to the unilateral “choices” of disaffected spouses.

More of the determination to triumph over nature is apparent in our gender-constructing, gender-bending, and gender-merging discourse, too, not to mention in our choices—in time of conception, in time of birth, in womb, sperm, and egg. The theme here is that there is actually no binding natural order, for all can be altered by will. Perhaps the most tiresome inebriations of anti-biology logic are produced in egalitarian campaigns calling for laws and public funding to impose androgyny upon us; the most devout exponents insist on forcing boys to play with dolls and girls with trucks. On this score, my feminist neighbor finally surrendered in good humor when, after six months of attitude correction of her children, nature came galloping back: she caught her daughter putting her little red fire-engine to bed with a bottle.

In Sweden, where the campaign against natural biology has been in full swing for a

half century, the tax-funded Egalia pre-school invented and now enforces the use of a “genderless” pronoun. An Egalia “gender pedagogue” said (notice the emphasis on the child’s Will) that this change gives the children a “fantastic opportunity to be whoever they want to be.” Once again, purity of one’s own existence is imagined springing from the purity of unencumbered will. In Toronto recently, there was an uproar because two parents insisted on raising their five-month-old child “genderlessly.” Such children, they claimed (same theme) would grow up as “whoever they want to be.” And, in a kind of double-header, the international “autonomy rights” movement aims to recognize self-sovereignty even in minor children, and would like to see agents of the state enforce such rights against parents. This combines macro- and microfascism in a single initiative.

Another disturbing aspect of the war against nature is modern “multicultural” policy. In the middle of the twentieth century, Julien Freund opined that only three things matter in politics: command and obedience; the public and the private; and the insider-outsider distinction. Deep culture is a product of this latter, frankly illiberal, but deeply natural human tendency to bond socially according to widely shared values as insiders creating outsiders. Wherever a deep culture exists and is upheld, people naturally assimilate to it; the modern nation state is a natural expression of this tendency. Rather ironically, then, multicultural policy, which began as an earnest attempt to denaturalize this illiberal fact of life, has turned millions of citizens into cultural microfascists. For as the French critic Pascal Bruckner observed, it has condemned hundreds of ethnicities to “house arrest in their own skins,” engendering an isolating “identity politics” that would have made the Nazis proud. In short, multiculturalism has mutated into multi-fascism, a trend that is creating mini-nations within nations, many of which, as in France, are now violent “no-go” zones for police. Nature has come galloping back again.

Just how far does the microfascist trend of extending will over nature go? As far as the entire cosmos, it seems. In 1971, the American astronaut Alan Shepard was sufficiently irreverent to drive a golf ball 800 yards on the moon—a gestural transfiguration of the solar system into a personal playground. But the extension of will over nature extends even farther. In the notorious 1992 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, we heard for the first time that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” This oft-quoted declaration betrayed an utterly unselfconscious confidence and conceit, whereby even cosmic meaning was declared subject to—a creation of—personal liberty and wherein there lurks a right not simply to search for ultimate truth outside ourselves, but also, in a kind of cosmic inversion, to create it within ourselves. It was a pro-godlet ruling that subjected the meaning of all of nature and the universe to individual will, while at the same time pulverizing that meaning into demos-bits.

We may conclude by saying that our view of freedom, and therefore of God, has changed a lot. We used to say that because God is the ultimate Good and can only do good things, we ought to follow suit. Freedom was obedience to the Good. But we have switched Gods to make a more convenient life. We had to, because a regime resting on a foundational ideology of individual sovereignty requires a God of pure will, in whose image we can proceed to fashion ourselves with every personal choice. At such a point, with no constraining external truth, the Good is absorbed into whatever is willed. Will becomes truth, not in the body politic as Rousseau had hoped, but in each individual body, producing our millions of godlets. This switching of Gods constitutes a theological revolution in Western life with profound and as yet unforeseeable implications.

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