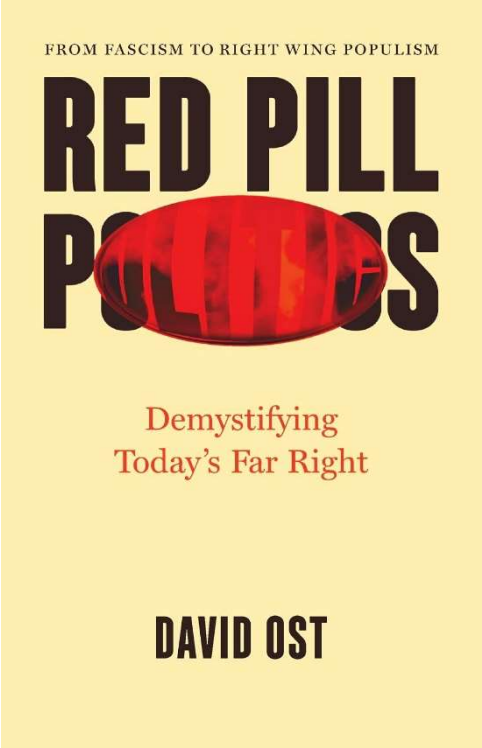
BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Red Pill Politics: Exploring today's far right ideologies

Posted: Sunday, September 13, 2026

"Red Pill Politics: Demystifying Today's Far Right from Fascism to Right-Wing Populism" by David Ost. New York, NY: The New Press, 2026, 240 pages, $28.99 (hardcover).



"We are at a crossroads in the world of politics," Davis Ost observes at the beginning of "Red Pill Politics: Demystifying Today's Far Right from Fascism to Right-Wing Populism," his newest attempt to alert us to the inherent dangers that lie just around the corner. "Things that seemed like they could only take place in a science fiction movie, or in the 1930s in Europe, are nowadays a matter of course. Every day seems to bring new outrages, new assaults on democracy and on life as we knew it. Many get mobilized, and many get scared. Many hide from the news to get through the day. But how are we supposed to think about what's happening? How are we to get a handle on the fast-moving events, on the transformation of our world?"

"This brings us to 'The Matrix,'" he continues a little further in the introduction. "You've either seen that cult 1999 film or you've heard of it. I first saw it some fifteen years after it came out, and it still seemed fresh, vibrant, and scary. It's about a dystopian world in which humans have been hooked into an elaborate, omnipresent computer system, the Matrix, which lives off their bodies and takes control of their minds. In this world, people think they are living free but their bodies are literally feeding the Matrix, which then reassembles their minds to have them believe they are living in a normal society and going about their normal lives."

As you start reading this manuscript, it doesn't take very long to start seeing the connection between Ost's primary thesis and the allegory he is making to this seminal motion picture. The parallels are accentuated on virtually every page and serve to highlight the overarching wake-up call the author is trying desperately – yet systematically – to convey.

Extensively researched, with 23 pages of references and source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and six relatively straight-forward chapters that comprise the main narrative, readers on both sides of the political spectrum should find this one exceptionally enlightening. The prose is crisp and to-the-point, and Ost goes to some lengths to provide substantive evidence for his conclusions.

After offering an historical context in which Ost dissects the rise and proliferation of far-right political movements in some detail, he proceeds to an examination of the inherent appeal associated with this particular ideology and why many of the elements championed by those who now align themselves with it were once associated with the other side of the philosophical spectrum.

Ost also delves deeply into the distinction between classic fascism and right-wing populism as he sees this as the key to effectively responding to the unique dangers each represents. Both incarnations implicitly as well as explicitly promote authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, and gender role inflexibility. Tapping into the anger and isolation of those who feel they are being left out - or at least left behind - can be a powerful impetus for adopting a political persuasion promising to combat their perceived irrelevance and the gnawing sense that "we don't seem to matter."

The former Joseph DiGangi Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Ost has a B.A. from SUNY Stony Brook (1976) and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1986). His previous books include "Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968," "Workers After Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Postcommunist Eastern Europe," with Stephen Crowley, and "The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe."

Ost's power to break down complex concepts that tend to prevent more widespread realization of what is actually occurring is one of his most endearing literary talents. Consider the following from "Red Pill Populism," the third chapter and one I found especially instructive:

"How does the fascist populism of Italy and Germany help us understand contemporary times? It shows us that Red Pill politics succeeds not just by forcing society's compliance under threat of punishment but by providing concrete benefits for nonelites. It seeks consent, not just coercion. Right-wing populist governments in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and India introduced economically populist policies as soon as they got into government, thereby moderating opposition to the politically authoritarian measures that are their main focus… Authoritarianism alone does not suffice. Red Pill politics cannot succeed for long without meaningful gestures toward economic populism.

The current administration should probably take note of that last point.

Given the negativity permeating much of "Red Pill Politics," it would be easy to conclude Ost sees our current situation as inevitable and even hopeless. But this would not constitute a correct interpretation of the author's main motivation for writing the book. On the contrary, he is overly optimistic we can overcome the present threat to our democratic way of life if we are conscientious, unified and emphatic in our response. After laying out the full extent of the problem in the previous chapters, he offers a clear way forward in "The Transformation of the Left - and How to Challenge Red Pill Politics Now," the final chapter.

"To succeed in electoral politics, you've got to sell your narrative to voters," Ost explains. "Today democracy and political freedom are faced with their most profound crisis in over eighty years. To confront that, especially in the age of social media, we need leadership that embraces what the political scientist Steven Fish calls dominance. Dominance is a style of politics that projects boldness, audacity, daring, optimism, determination, and triumph. It embraces conflict, revels in its victories, and takes credit – again and again – for the good things it is doing. It is always on the offensive, for it understands that people get their views of politics from politicians. It doesn't just react to public opinion but tries actively to shape it. It provokes fights, and doesn't back down, and defends its positions with bravado and confidence."

"The Left must, in other words, match the political energy of the 'best' Red Pill politics," he adds.

In the final analysis, I tend to agree with Steven Levitsky, the David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of Government at Harvard University, when he says "'Red Pill Politics' offers the most insightful discussion I have read of the parallels (and differences) between contemporary far-right parties and the fascist movements of the 1930s. For readers seeking a better understanding of the relationship between early twenty-century fascism and today's far-right, this is the book."

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.