

Is Trumpism Fascism?

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October 07, 2016

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Whether Donald J. Trump wins or (more likely) loses the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the movement which he has stirred up will continue in one form or another. A question which is widely asked is, whether this movement—call it Trumpism—is fascist, semi-fascist, or a forerunner of fascism?

Unquestionably, he has been supported by out-and-out fascists, U.S. Nazis, white supremacists, Ku Klux Klan members, and others of the “alternative right” or “alt right,” as they call themselves. He has repeatedly re-tweeted posts from Nazis and Klanspeople, he has quoted Mussolini, and he adopted the slogan “America First” from the pro-fascist-dominated America First movement of the pre-World War II era. He has expressed admiration for dictators and “strong” rulers of other countries. He appointed a notorious anti-semitic and racist as a top official (“C.E.O”) in his campaign (Bannon, formerly the main person of Breitbart News). When asked about his supporter, David Duke (Nazi and Klansman), he coyly denied knowing anything about him, until a later date when Trump officially rejected Duke; Duke and other white supremacists took this as “something Trump had to say.” Hillary Clinton, his opponent, has denounced Trump’s support from the alt right and similar “deplorable” people. Trump responded that his followers were all good, patriotic, Americans. Meanwhile various alt right groups held a joint press conference in Washington D.C., laying out their support for Trump and openly expressing their white racism. (They claim to be an “alternate” to the more mainstream far-right “conservatives,” who present themselves as opposed to racism and for “small government.”)

These actions are in the context of an election where the establishment candidate, Clinton, is widely disliked, or at most, is uninspiring to the mass of voters (despite being a woman). A large proportion of the electorate is disgusted with both candidates and rejects voting for either.

The overall point is not just that Trump is playing footsie with previously marginalized crackpots and has opened the door for them or that Clinton does not seem to offer much of an alternative. Even more significant is that these people see something they like in the campaign of the nominee of a major U.S. political party. They like his openly expressed hatred of immigrants, Latinos, and Muslims, and his implicit hatred of African-Americans, his misogyny, his isolationism somehow combined with militarism, and his general authoritarianism and opposition to civil liberties. They like his appeals to violence and his posing as the “strong” leader who will fix everything for the U.S. people. Are they correct? Is Trump a fascist or Trumpism a fascist movement?

Fascism against Bourgeois Democracy

“Fascist” is often used as a broad insult, a label for politics we don’t like of the right or even left. Many people (even some anarchists) have an essentially liberal vision of capitalist democracy. They believe or believed in the picture of a free, democratic, society which they learned in school. They are then shocked to learn that the U.S. government spies on its citizens, tortures prisoners, discriminates against workers, the poor, and People of Color, wages unjust wars, and generally is a servant of the rich. This isn’t democracy! they cry. It’s dictatorship, its fascism! They do not understand that this is what capitalist democracy is. Bourgeois democracy is and has always been limited. Every democratic gain in the system has been won by the blood and struggle of the mass of people.

We have only to think back to the 50s, when the U.S. was proud of its freedom and democracy, having defeated the fascist powers in World War II and now facing off with the Communist states in the Cold War. In fact, U.S. politics was overwhelmed by anti-communist hysteria, when thousands of leftists were purged from jobs in government, universities, schools, and unions. Meanwhile a third of the country lived under Jim Crow legal racial segregation, enforced by the terror of the Klan. To change all this took the massive rebellion of the African American population, and its white allies, and the demonstrations and rebellions of the movement against the war in Vietnam—and a virtual mutiny in the armed forces. (It was not elections which changed society for the better but independent mass actions—something worth remembering in this election year.)

There are also people who think “fascism” should be used only for the historical examples of the Fascist Party of Italy, the German National Socialists (Nazis) led by Hitler, and various other movements and parties in Europe in the 20s and 30s. However, I believe that certain traits of the historical fascist parties may be drawn out and applied to current events. While history never repeats itself exactly, lessons may be learned from the past.

The single most important trait of fascism is its goal of overturning bourgeois democracy and replacing it with dictatorial rule. Under a capitalist economy, society is dominated by a small number of very rich people (capitalists, the bourgeoisie, a fraction of the “one percent”). Without any democratic control, they own the corporations and semi-monopoly businesses for which just about everyone works, directly or indirectly. From the labor of the mass of people (the working class or proletariat), they draw their vast profits, while paying the workers the least they can get away with.

They insist on a government which will guard their interests: enforce contracts, keep the money supply stable, keep the workers from rebelling, protect their interests internationally (going to war when needed), and so on. So long as the government carries out these tasks, it is a bourgeois state. Yet the government may take various forms, while protecting capitalism.

Under a capitalist democracy, the people are allowed to vote for officials in leading positions, such as president. (After voting, they go back to their jobs where they take orders from their unelected bosses.) Of course, the alternatives are kept limited. In 2016 we get to choose between two rich people both of whom are enthusiastic supporters of capitalism and its national state—and so it has been throughout U.S. history. (Third party candidates haven’t had a chance since the Republicans got elected on the eve of a civil war.)

There are advantages for the capitalist class in this limited political democracy. It permits different factions of the ruling class to fight out their differences and make joint decisions, without (much) bloodshed. It lets them fool the majority of the people that they are free and run the government. It brings up new talent from the masses (think of the Clintons or the Obamas). If they get a crazy or incompetent leader (say, if Trump were elected), they can get rid of him or her at the next election, instead of being stuck with him (as the German establishment was with Hitler, by the tail-end of World War II).

On the other hand, there are disadvantages for the corporate rich, especially if popular forces use their apparent freedom “too much.” There may be riots and strikes and other expressions of discontent. Someone might actually run in a major party as a “socialist” advocating “political revolution,” as Bernie Sanders did (although his program was always mild—no expropriating the capitalists—and he quickly fell into line once he lost the primary, as he was certain to do). Or a candidate might be chosen for a party’s nomination who would obviously be unable to effectively

run the executive branch of the national government (the bourgeoisie is more worried about Trump's obvious incompetence than his reactionary program).

Meanwhile the openness and rights of a bourgeois democracy are immensely valuable to radicals (anarchists, socialists, communists, pacifists, black nationalists, radical feminists, etc.). Although tiny minorities, they are able to organize, to work out theory and strategy, to publish their views, and to speak to others. This is in spite of their opposition to capitalism, the state, and other institutions of oppression (patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, ecological destruction, etc.). The bourgeoisie tolerates this so long as the radicals remain tiny minorities; but there is always the "danger" that they will grow during times of crisis.

What is Fascism?

The capitalist system as a whole is in decline, facing crises, long-term stagnation, and an expensive, drastic, need to deal with climate change. This requires the capitalists and their state drive down the standard of living of the working class in order to boost overall profits. There has been a steady long-term attack on the working class. A reaction against it fueled both Sanders' movement on the left and Trump's appeal on the right (speaking of popular motivations, not of the value of actual programs). If the crises continue to worsen, and if the reaction to capitalist conditions causes further rebellion, and if the radical minority grows in numbers and influence—then the bourgeoisie may decide to junk the advantages of political democracy and replace it with an open dictatorship.

In its history, capitalism has existed under a series of different political systems—while maintaining its economic system. Besides various forms of political democracy (some quite limited), it has existed under monarchies, police states, military juntas, "democracy" for only one race (apartheid South Africa and the U.S. South), as well as fascism. Under fascism and other undemocratic capitalist governments, there were no elections, no alternate political parties, no unions, no strikes, no radical political organizations, no opposition press, no right to assemble. These regimes differed in the degree of suppression. Some (most monarchies for example) permitted people a lot of freedom so long as they did not challenge the regime. Fascism was the most repressive, seeking to totally dominate every aspect of society, from politics to religion to chess clubs. Thus they were called "totalitarian." They required everyone to declare their support for the state, the party, and the Leader.

To totally crush all independent organizations and groupings, of the working class and all other parts of society, required more than a military coup. It requires a movement of millions of people. The Nazis and Mussolini's Fascists organized large numbers of discontented people, mostly from unemployed veterans and lower middle class people who hated the rich but were afraid of falling into the working class. They did not just publish newspapers and make speeches, but went out to beat up—and murdered—socialists, communists, anarchists, and unionists.

While always extremely nationalist, fascism has not always been racist. Italian Fascism was not racist (it had Jewish members) until its last days when it became dominated by the Germans. In the U.S.A., as mentioned, the standard conservative (really reactionary) far-right has denied being racist, either anti-Black or anti-semitic. While most of these conservatives are still for bourgeois democracy, fascist sentiments are expressed at times. Occasionally spokespeople will say that if the "tyranny" of the government continues, then "second amendment remedies" will be called for

and “patriots” will have to take to the countryside to defend themselves with guns. In fact there are various groups of armed “militias.” They have various ideologies, but some are preparing to resist the government when it comes to take away their guns (they think). This may be expressed in terms of local democracy or a wacky interpretation of the Constitution, but what is implied is the armed overthrow of the elected government. That is an element, at least, of fascism. (Similarly, Trump has hinted, in his speeches, that supporters of the Second Amendment should assassinate Clinton if she is elected.) Also, parts of the anti-choice movement have insisted that “God’s law” should be above “man’s law.” This is a way of calling for the replacement of bourgeois democracy with a theocracy, in which their leaders would dictate to the rest of the population, while claiming to speak for the Almighty.

But racism is deep in the U.S. consciousness, despite its decline among some sections of the population. Even the supposedly non-racist conservatives advocate programs which specifically target African-Americans and Latinos (such as voter suppression laws and cuts in public services). Despite denials of anti-semitism (and support for Israel), the right emphasizes its Christian faith and calls for a “Christian America.”

It is not surprising, then, that there is a section of the far-right which is openly white supremacist and anti-semitic. They say explicitly what the respectable right only implies. They believe that to whip up a mass movement to overthrow political democracy, it is necessary to openly appeal to the racism of much of the U.S. white population. (Why anti-semitism? Because the racist stereotype of African-Americans and Latinos is that they are “stupid” and “lazy.” Their stereotypes are not useful for a fantasy of an evil secret conspiracy which is dominating society. The racist image of the Jews can fit this threatening picture. The right has tried to use other groupings, such as the “secular humanists” or the “Illuminati,” but none quite replaces the image of the Jews.)

Is the U.S.A. Ready for Fascism?

There are forces which could coalesce into a fascist movement under the right circumstances. The Trump campaign has revealed the existence of such forces as an overripe piece of fruit, once cracked open, reveals its maggots. But it is not yet a cohered fascist party. Its leader, Trump, is happy to get support from the alt right. Their worked-out ideology is consistent with many of his prejudices, but he himself does not have an developed ideology. While he likes the adulation of the crowds, he does not have the organizing skills to pull together a real fascist party, nor does he have the interest.

Meanwhile the core of his followers, outside the alt right, while they accept most of his provocations, do not presently want the overturn of capitalist democracy. And certainly, the majority of Republicans who are voting for him because they are loyal to their party or hate Clinton do not want this. Conditions are bad in many ways, but not yet that bad.

Most important of all, the capitalist class, in almost all its sections, does not want to jettison democracy. Even the right wing, which has backed all sorts of far-rightists, has not supported Trump (of the leaders of the Fortune 100 leading corporations, not one has donated to Trump; neither have the Koch brothers). They are not ready to back a fascist movement, let alone a fascist takeover of the state. In any case, they do not want to put such an incompetent, ignorant, impulsive, and thin-skinned fool in charge of the U.S. state.

If the crisis get worse, if more rebellion boils up (which the bourgeoisie will want to be channeled into a pro-capitalist movement as opposed to revolutionary anti-capitalism), and if a more competent leader arises, then the capitalist class may decide differently.

I believe, and have argued previously, that overall things will get worse—despite temporary ups and shallow recoveries. The capitalist economy will continue to go downhill. Wars will continue to rage around the world, threatening a wider conflagration (and nuclear war). Climate warming is continuing at an increasing rate. And other evils of capitalism still appear, such as racist oppression.

But there are the beginnings of a massive upsurge of rebellion by working people and all oppressed. The Black Lives Matter movement has been especially exciting. The struggles of Latinos, citizens, residents, and immigrants, has been heroic. There is a growing environmental movement against climate change, including the struggles of Native Americans. Young women are refusing to accept misogyny. The fights for a \$15 minimum wage and for organizing fast-food workers have had a great impact already. While I do not regard Bernie Sanders as a genuine socialist, it is nevertheless important that very large numbers of young people were inspired to support someone calling himself a “democratic socialist.”

Conclusion

As I see it, the job of anti-fascist radicals is not just to oppose Trump but to oppose Trumpism. That is, to oppose the elements of a movement which could, in the not so distant future, come together into a fascist movement. And the most important way to do that is to build up a radical alternative. The middle is coming apart in U.S. politics—and in the politics of many countries. The discontent with Clinton and her campaign shows that the status quo does not offer any solutions. Politics will polarize into the far left and the far right. Revolutionary anarchists are the farthest to the left, meaning those most in opposition to capitalism, the state, and all oppressions. Working together with other left groups where we can, we need to build up every element of opposition to this vicious, doomed, system.

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