

Not Your Grandfather's Antifascism

Anti-Fascism Has Arrived. Here's Where It Needs to Go.

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Following the clashes in Charlottesville and the massive anti-fascist demonstrations afterwards in Durham, Boston, and the Bay Area, the struggle against fascism has arrived in the consciousness of the general public. Tens of thousands of people are realizing that the fight against fascism didn't end in 1945—that today, as increasingly authoritarian governments collude with ascendant fascist movements, this battle is more pressing than ever.

It's worth taking a moment to review what anti-fascists have accomplished since Trump was elected. Despite harassment and attacks from fascists and law enforcement, what was initially a few hundred people without financial resources or sponsors has grown into the foundation for a massive social movement. On April 15, fascists rampaged through Berkeley, recording video footage of themselves beating people to use for recruiting purposes. On Sunday, August 27, the same fascists attempted to hold another rally in Berkeley. In response to the murder of Heather Heyer during a fascist rally in Charlottesville two weeks prior, thousands of people converged to make the fascist demonstration impossible.

Imagine if the “Unite the Right” rally had taken place without resistance, and a thousand white supremacists had been able to march around Charlottesville unopposed. In that scenario, emboldened fascists could have presented themselves as a legitimate part of the political spectrum, while preparing the way for more murders like the ones in Charleston and Portland. In that case, the government with Trump at the helm would be able to present itself as the only possible solution to fascist violence, and the general public would be forced to seek assistance from the very authorities that are already implementing most of the white supremacist agenda. We should be grateful that long before Charlottesville, forward-thinking anti-fascists were doing the thankless work of monitoring fascists and mobilizing against them.

But now that the struggle against fascism has arrived on a massive scale, it's time to come to grips with the limitations the movement faces today. Every victory generates new challenges. Let's explore the obstacles that the anti-fascist movement will have to overcome to succeed in creating a world free of authoritarianism.

Corporate Media Back the Fascists

The *Washington Post* titled their coverage of Sunday's demonstration “Black-clad antifa members attack peaceful right-wing demonstrators in Berkeley.” It is not surprising when Fox News publishes barefaced propaganda describing the organizer of far-right demonstrations that have included at least one fascist murderer as a “prayer activist,” but it is more unsettling to see fascist talking points parroted by supposedly liberal outlets.

The image at the top of the *Washington Post* article shows a right-wing demonstrator apparently being shoved by an anti-fascist with a shield. Yet several videos show the same far-right demonstrator pepper-spraying anti-fascist demonstrators without provocation and then pepper-spraying people at random immediately before the photo was taken. If you look closely, the attacker is wearing a shirt that celebrates Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet for murdering dissidents by dropping them out of helicopters. If you look closer, you can see that the anti-fascist in the picture has a stick, but is choosing not to use it, instead simply using a shield to block the fascist with the pepper-spray from carrying out further attacks. In fact, the *Washington Post* chose to use a photo in which the assailant's right hand is not visible, so readers would not see the pepper spray he holds in it.

When the *Washington Post* portrays such fascists as “peaceful,” suggesting that they are victims even as they attack people and glorify mass murder, this gives them legitimacy, securing space for them to recruit and to promote and organize further attacks. Why would liberal media outlets do this?

Journalists often determine the substance of their story in advance, and it appears that media outlets across the spectrum had determined in advance to report the anti-fascist demonstration in Berkeley as an expression of violent excess even before it happened. In the event, the demonstration was largely peaceful; even the worst clashes were considerably less violent than the fighting on April 15. Despite this, corporate media outlets that had ignored April 15 altogether devoted considerable space to a few isolated incidents in which anti-fascists scuffled with fascists or other Trump supporters.

The intention was clearly to impose a limit on the amount of popular legitimacy anti-fascists would be permitted to accrue after the events in Charlottesville. Two weeks of positive coverage of anti-fascists, during which various members of the clergy came forward to praise their efforts, were deemed to be too much. Heather Heyer’s murder had taken corporate media by surprise, interrupting their conventional narratives and proving that the threat anti-fascists had supposedly been blowing out of proportion was all too real. It took corporate editors two weeks to regain control of the discourse. As soon as they did, they reimposed their old stereotypes as if Heather had never been killed.

This should put an end to any illusions we might have had that corporate media could side with anti-fascists. Outlets like the *Washington Post* aspire to position themselves against both Trump and his adversaries in the streets—to occupy what some call “the extreme center.” They are gambling that the current polarization of society is temporary, that they can be the beneficiaries of disillusionment with both sides.

Anti-fascists have to strategize about how to organize and legitimize our efforts to the general public without the benefit of positive media coverage. This is no easy task. At the minimum, it will demand our own grassroots media, at the same time that this media is under systematic assault from right-wing trolls.

This challenge is symptomatic of the larger phenomenon of polarization, which is worth examining separately.

The Swinging Pendulum of Polarization

US society has been splintering and polarizing for years now, since the recession of 2008 if not before. The movement against police and white supremacy that burst onto the national stage in Ferguson in 2014 as Black Lives Matter generated a far-right backlash, which inspired a resurgence of anti-fascist organizing. In response, fascists gave angry liberals and anti-fascists a central place in their strategy, seeking to provoke them into reactive behavior that could be used to further mobilize the right-wing base. Milo Yiannopoulos used this strategy until it blew up in his face last February, when a black bloc of hundreds shut down his event in Berkeley.

Various fascist and fascist-friendly organizers also used this approach, baiting leftists and anti-fascists with a series of “free speech” rallies in Berkeley, Portland, and elsewhere around the country that won the nascent fascist movement notoriety and momentum. This movement appeared fully formed for the first time in Charlottesville—but the shockwaves of that debut drew

many more people into the movement against fascism, changing the balance of power once again. The “free speech” rallies scheduled afterwards in Boston and the Bay Area were total washouts for the fascists.

In each of these cases, when the pendulum of polarization swung to one side, the opposing side was able to use the specter of that victory to draw more sympathizers into action. With the media narrative coming out about Berkeley, the pendulum has again swung away from anti-fascists to benefit the right-wing reaction.

So long as this pattern persists, every anti-fascist victory will produce an even greater threat from the far-right and the government. To break out of the pattern, anti-fascists have to strike blows in ways that don’t enable fascists to cash in on the resulting fear among right-wingers, or else to find a way to draw in large swathes of the population more rapidly than their competition on the right. We can offer a few hypotheses about how to accomplish this.

The Myth of Symmetry

The allegation that fascists and anti-fascists are equally bad has been advanced most famously by Donald Trump himself in his response to the events in Charlottesville. He suggested that the problem was an “egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides,” refusing to say a word about the fascists who murdered Heather Heyer. This should tell us something about those who describe fascists and anti-fascists as symmetrical.

To equate those who fight for freedom and equality with those who want an autocratic state to enforce hierarchies is to reserve all legitimacy for the state alone—which is itself an autocratic position. It means celebrating the legalism of passive spectators over the heroes who fought the rise of dictatorships in Italy, Germany, Spain, Chile, Greece, and a hundred other nations. It means congratulating those who keep their hands clean while their neighbors are rounded up and imprisoned, deported, or killed.

We have to become adept at spelling out the ethical differences between fascism and anti-fascism, and all the justifications for forms of direct action that can actually be effective in this struggle. We need allies from many different walks of life who can help us make this case to the public at large.

Unfortunately, we can’t count on everyone on the Left to behave responsibly. In “How ‘Antifa’ Mirrors the ‘Alt-Right,’” the same Chris Hedges who assisted the state in dividing and repressing the Occupy movement reappears to perform the same service in relation to the movements against fascism and the Trump administration.

The irony of a war journalist perennially accusing others of being driven by a lust for adrenaline should not be lost on anyone. It is worse still that Hedges, as a journalist, arrogates himself the right to pass judgment on the events in Charlottesville from a distance rather than deferring to people like Cornel West who were actually there putting their bodies on the line. But the true irony here is that Hedges purports to be warning against precisely the problem that he himself is creating. “By brawling in the streets,” Hedges alleges, “antifa allows the corporate state... to use the false argument of moral equivalency to criminalize the work of all anti-capitalists.” Actually, it is Hedges who is equipping the state to do this, by attributing “the same lust for violence” to anti-fascists that he believes motivates fascists. He could just as easily use his soapbox to debunk this moral equivalency, but he lacks the moral courage—he simply

cannot resist performing the same kind of “self-advertisement for moral purity” that he accuses others of.

In 2012, when the authorities needed a narrative with which to isolate the ungovernable elements of the Occupy movement, Hedges provided that narrative, and the FBI subsequently parroted it verbatim in their efforts to justify a series of entrapment cases. Now Hedges is providing Trump’s government exactly the same service, equipping them to declare “antifa” a terrorist organization, as many on the far right have already been demanding. Already, the mayor of Berkeley is calling for “antifa” to be designated as a gang—imagine if everyone who opposes the rise of fascism is classified as a gang member, or a terrorist!

Hedges needs to understand that it is not anti-fascists gaining ground that brings about fascist attacks and government crackdowns. If anti-fascists were not gaining power in the streets, fascists would still be taking advantage of the despair and resentment of poor whites, and the government would still be developing more means of repression—there would simply be no social movement to protect us from them. It is fundamentally paranoid, disempowering, and ahistorical to understand these developments as the result of anti-fascist activity. On the contrary, it is imperative that we build the capacity to act effectively in the streets before the fascists outstrip us and the government is able to centralize enough power to establish tyranny once and for all.

All that said, we also need to avoid offering our enemies on the Left and Right alike the opportunity to present us as a mirror image of our fascist adversaries. Let’s explore some ways we can go about this.

Identity and Containment

On one hand, it has been extremely useful for people in the US to learn from anti-fascist movements in other parts of the world. At the same time, the wholesale uncritical introduction of European models has created problems, chief of which is the containment of the struggle against fascism within a discrete identity, “antifa.” It has been a tremendous boon to the far right that they can describe anti-fascists without having to spell out the entire word “fascist”—it helps them to avoid the question of why anyone would oppose resisting fascism.

In German, abbreviations are common: national socialist becomes Nazi, anti-fascist becomes antifa. But in English, especially to those not familiar with the history of German anti-fascist struggles, the word antifa can appear alien and off-putting. At its worst, the German antifa movement has tended towards subcultural insularity; this is the last thing we need in the US, locked in a massive struggle with fascists and the government itself—a struggle we can only hope to win if ever-wider segments of the population are drawn over to our side of the barricades.

Identity is fundamentally about distinguishing oneself from others. Anti-fascism, however, is for everybody. We should be careful not to insulate it within a particular demographic with a specific dress code and lingo. This is paramount because the far right are scrambling to depict antifa as a monolithic, hostile, alien organization. Our task is not just to build a network of groups, but to create an anti-fascist momentum that will spread contagiously throughout society at large, along with the critiques and tactics necessary for this fight. Specific antifa groups and the cultural cache of “antifa” itself can be useful in that project, as can black bloc tactics, provided we evaluate them as tools for achieving particular objectives rather than expressions of identity or belonging.

The Tendency to Militarize

As the conflict between fascists and anti-fascists intensifies, we are seeing more and more guns in the streets. Some people who were in Charlottesville reported that it was good that there were guns on both sides: it discouraged fascists from escalating physical conflicts past a certain point. Others report that most of the anti-fascists openly bearing arms were located some distance from the clashes. Some people who were in Ferguson at the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement say that without the threat of gunfire from the locals, the police would never have permitted the demonstrations to happen. Others who experienced the trauma of having their loved ones shot before them counsel that the consequences of bringing guns into street conflict are weightier than most people can imagine.

Participants in the Syrian revolution report that for the first several months, the revolt created an open space of debate and possibility in which many people of different walks of life participated. Later, after the conflict escalated, power among the rebels accrued in the hands of religious fundamentalists, as they were the only ones who were able to consistently acquire military supplies—and from that point on, the horizon of liberation and transformation was closed. Sometimes, such escalation is inescapable, even if it closes the door to future possibilities; in any case, it is better to prepare for it now than to be suddenly caught flatfooted. But if our goal is to carry out a revolution rather than to fight in a civil war, we should not hurry the process of escalation—we should drag it out as long as we can. Most of the social changes we want to see cannot be brought about by guns.

Likewise, we should not imagine that coercive force can solve everything, nor permit fascists and state repression to put us so on edge that we see enemies everywhere we look and begin to attack people when it is not strategic. In the words of an elder anti-fascist veteran from Germany, fascist violence aims to exterminate, while anti-fascist violence aims to educate. We should not hurry to put fascist martyrs in the ground next to Heather Heyer. We must never risk coming across as bullies. It must always be clear that we are here to protect the public at large, not to assert our own authority. When we are compelled to use coercive force, we must make sure that the ways we do so don't centralize power or legitimacy within our own movement.

The Language of Terrorism

In the wake of Heather Heyer's murder, signs appeared at vigils and rallies reading "White Supremacy is Terrorism." While it is understandable that people wish to condemn her murder in the strongest possible terms, it is dangerous to use the language of terrorism to do so.

The framework of terrorism is constructed by the state to define who has the right to employ violence and who doesn't. When we denounce white supremacists as terrorists, we mimic the verbiage of Senator Cory Gardner, chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and Paul Ryan, Republican Speaker of the House.

Terrorist is used to designate those who are beyond the state's control and cannot be brought into political alignment with the state. This explains why Heather's murderer has not been charged with terrorism, while many anarchists who did not so much as scratch someone have received terrorism charges over the past decade and a half.

Using the rhetoric of the state reinforces frameworks and narratives that the authorities will ultimately use against us. This is dangerous to our movements and constitutes a betrayal of comrades engaged in struggles we're often aligned with. Palestinians are labeled terrorists to delegitimize their struggle against the Israeli state. Like the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front, the YPG and YPJ in Rojava have been labeled terrorists. The language and ideology of the "war on terror" were carefully introduced into US political discourse in order to prepare the ground for the catastrophic invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The word terrorism comes to us from the Jacobin government's brutal and merciless rule in France in the 1790s—the term was invented to describe their "reign of terror" during which thousands were executed. Even though the word was coined for the Jacobins and they wore it proudly as a badge, some historians today argue that the Jacobins weren't terrorists because they were a state entity with *legitimate* power. This should give us a sense of the extent to which the discourse of terrorism serves to give the state carte blanche while delegitimizing all who stand against it.

There Is No Good Authoritarianism

Sunday's far-right rally in Berkeley was promoted under the slogan "No to Marxism in America." As with the far-right "March against Sharia," there is no danger of the United States coming under a Marxist government any time soon. Like all totalitarians, fascists desperately need enemies even more oppressive than themselves to point to in order to convince people to join their ranks. There is an ominous symmetry between groups like ISIS and Western fascists, some of whom openly fantasize about a "White Sharia." This explains their obsession with authoritarian Marxism.

In fact, the fiercest opposition to contemporary fascist organizing has not come from authoritarian Marxists, but from anarchists who oppose state power itself. This is inconvenient for many fascists in the US, who still need to present themselves as enemies of "big government" in order to appeal to US Libertarians and traditional conservatives.

If fascists are eager to paint all their domestic opponents with the broad brush of Marxism, we should not hasten to assist them. Yes, authoritarian Marxists have historically played a role in the fight against fascism, but they have hardly played it honorably. They began by betraying and undermining other social movements as early as 1871. If Stalin hadn't sabotaged anti-fascist participants in the Spanish Civil War and other movements around Europe and then concluded a pact with Hitler, the Second World War would have unfolded much differently, and it might not have taken decades afterwards for grassroots liberation movements to recover.

Both fascism and authoritarian Marxism are experiencing a small resurgence today. Much of this is taking place among people who grew up after the fall of the Berlin Wall, who are too young to have grandparents who lived through the Second World War. For many in the United States, totalitarianism is abstract, something to joke about on the internet. Some people on the Left see the hammer and sickle the way many right-wingers see the swastika: as a provocative meme rather than a blood-drenched symbol of oppression. Yet Stalin, too, carried out ethnic cleansing, as have many other authoritarian Marxist regimes.

One cannot consistently oppose fascism without opposing all forms of authoritarian government. This is not to say that rank-and-file members of authoritarian communist organizations can never be comrades in this struggle. Many of them are sincere people with the best of intentions—

and clearly we need all the comrades we can get when we are facing down Nazis with guns. The point is that anti-fascists should oppose the leadership of authoritarian Marxist parties for many of the same reasons that we oppose fascists and other authoritarians. If you care about a member of an organization like the Bolshevik Party, you can express that care by making sure that his organization never comes to power—for if history is any guide, he will be the next up against the wall after you.

We must make it clear to the general public that we do not intend to impose a new dictatorship, but only to open and preserve spaces of freedom. There is no statist solution for tyranny.

Martyrdom

Unfortunately, Heather Heyer is not the first person to be taken from us by fascist violence, and she will not be the last. In addition to being wary of the discourse of terrorism and the tendency to militarize our struggles, we should be wary of the discourse of martyrdom and tendency to celebrate death in battle. We need to find ways to remember people above all for who they were, for what their lives gave to the world, not for how they died or what their deaths meant to the struggle. We should not begin to regard ourselves or each other as playing pieces to be exchanged for strategic gains.

We live in a society in which aging and death are concealed from most of us. If this struggle continues to intensify, more and more of us will be forced to learn what it is like to spend hard weeks in the hospital, to meet at funerals as well as outside jails and courtrooms. We should approach this as another opportunity to come to know ourselves and each other better, to recognize what is beautiful and worthwhile in life—the things for which we are fighting in the first place. We should not subordinate ourselves to the struggle, but recognize it as one of the ways that life pours forth abundantly within us.

Cutting to the Roots

The vast majority of the anti-fascist struggle does not take place in street confrontations. It takes place in how we raise our children; it takes place in the hard conversations at workplaces and family dinners; it takes place in the ways we relate to our neighbors, the ways we understand togetherness and belonging. To triumph, we have to make it possible for people of all genders and ethnicities and religions to work together to survive the ordeals of capitalism; we have to create movements that can offer everybody more than the fascists ever could.

Ultimately, a thoroughgoing anti-fascist movement should not focus on targeting fascist groups that are so marginal that they stick out from the rest of the political spectrum, but take on the infrastructure through which any authoritarian program will be enacted. That is to say, it should focus on the state itself. If we simply fight defensive battles, the fascists will eventually gain the initiative. We should take the experiences of fighting together that we can experience in anti-fascist struggle and use those as points of departure to work together to solve all of the problems that we have. This is the way to take the offensive and move on to confronting the fundamental sources of oppression.

Some believe that life will go back to normal soon enough, and fascism and anti-fascism will once more be things of the past. But we fear that we have yet to see how far these conflicts will go,

and that we have to invest ourselves in confronting them head on. The only way out is through.
Double or nothing.

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