

Donald Trump and Fascism

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All too often, progressives have sought to justify their support for the Democratic Party by claiming that Donald Trump is a fascist. Since it is obvious that peaceful street protests continue and trade unions continue to engage in strikes, the underlying argument for this claim can only be that Trump has a secret plan to organize a coup in order to acquire dictatorial powers. Needless to say, there is not a shred of evidence to support such a conspiracy theory.

With this argument in mind, it should be helpful to provide a brief history of how the claim that one's opponent is a fascist has been used to justify the lesser evil. The final section looks at how fascism, and in particular Nazism, actually functioned under Hitler's rule.

The Popular Front

Hitler assumed power in January 1933. It soon became clear that he was intent on destroying any opposition, particularly that coming from anywhere on the Left. Thus, labelling someone as a fascist or Nazi rapidly became a common method of belittling conservatives.

The Communist Party was the strongest force in the U. S. Left during the 1930s. It had developed a significant popular base that followed its policy directives. Still, policy guidelines for the CP were set in Moscow in accordance with Stalin's latest worldview and were therefore subject to swift and radical shifts.

By the mid-1930s, Stalin had come to the realization that Nazi Germany represented a serious threat to the survival of the Soviet Union. Parties adhering to the Communist International were ordered to build a broad Popular Front against fascism. In the United States, the new line led the Communist Party to align itself with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. In 1936, Roosevelt was opposed by a moderately conservative Republican, Alfred Landon. With Moscow's approval, the CP opted to spend all of its time attacking Landon, repeatedly condemning him as a fascist. Roosevelt went on to defeat Landon in a landslide of historic proportions. Soon after the 1936 election, the Communist Party shifted to open support for the Democratic Party, as its militants joined liberal organizations directly tied to the Democrats.

Of course, Landon was not a fascist and the CP's leaders knew this. Criticizing the Republican candidate as a fascist merely provided a convenient rationale for the implicit argument that the current situation was such an extreme emergency that a fundamental precept of U. S. socialists, independence from the Democratic Party, had to be abandoned. Trump is more conservative than Landon, but then the program presented by mainstream Democrats such as Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden falls short of the limited reforms promised by the New Deal.

Hitler and the Lesser Evil

The spurious use of the term 'fascist' during the 1936 presidential election as a justification for lesser evil politics is a particularly salient case from U.S. history, but the most important example arose in Germany during the Nazi's rise to power. Hitler was prepared to use force to gain control of the state, but he preferred to have a veneer of legality as a cover for his autocratic regime. In the spring of 1932, Hitler campaigned to become Germany's president, a powerful position in the Weimar constitution. Although his paratroopers used force to intimidate the populace, he still failed to be elected.

The incumbent president, Paul Hindenburg, was frail and old and had no desire to remain in office. Hindenburg had been the Kaiser's chief of staff during World War I. Frightened that Hitler would win a plurality, the German Social Democrats, the largest working class party, urged Hindenburg to seek re-election. A loose coalition of mainstream conservatives, centrists and social democrats came together to back Hindenburg, ensuring his victory. Since Hitler received roughly only one-third of the total popular vote, Hindenburg defeated Hitler by a substantial margin.

The Social Democrats had opposed Hindenburg when he was first elected in 1925. To justify their switch, social democratic leaders insisted on the need to support the lesser evil in 1932. In this case, categorizing the right-wing candidate as a fascist was not just rhetoric, but a matter of fact. Nevertheless, the strategy proved to be a total failure. Less than a year after the election, Hindenburg named Hitler as chancellor. Within a few weeks, Hitler used the excuse of a fire in the Reichstag to destroy all civil liberties in Germany.

Confronted with the mortal threat posed by the Nazis, the Social Democrats continued to believe in the system, relying on an electoral maneuver to resolve their quandary. Only the mass action of a united working class could have created the possibility of averting disaster. Even in an extreme situation, lesser evil politics is both an illusion and a snare.

Fascism

So far the focus has been on the electoral arena and its pitfalls. We need to move beyond this and look at what fascism actually was. Hitler's Germany remains the archetypical example, but Italy under Mussolini is also relevant.

A fascist regime crushes any form of opposition. This means destroying independent trade unions, banning any dissident voices in the media and prohibiting public protests such as marches and rallies. Elections are either suspended or rendered meaningless. Yet fascism is not just a particularly brutal form of autocratic dictatorship. It has its roots in a type of popular insurgency. The Nazis formed large paramilitary organizations as they grew in strength. These militarized units, the SA and the SS, used violence to break up meetings held by those on the Left. The Nazis also organized elaborately choreographed mass rallies designed to exalt Hitler as an iconic figure. Although Hitler assumed power through a maneuver that maintained a facade of legality, the use of force was always present. Indeed in Italy, Mussolini's fascists took power in a coup, with only the thinnest veneer of legality as a cover.

Fascism arose in a specific historical context, that is, a country in total disarray. The Nazis surged in popularity after Germany had lost a devastating world war and remained mired in the worst economic depression in history. Unemployment was pervasive and the economy was in shambles. Once in power, Hitler solved these economic woes by ramping up for war. Military spending brought full employment for a while, but it also led to another world war that led to Germany's utter destruction.

The current situation in the United States does not approximate Germany in the 1930s. Although the grim consequences caused by the flight of heavy industry have led a segment of the working class in the Rust Belt to back Trump, this is still a long way from the circumstances needed to sustain a viable fascist movement.

Conclusions

Donald Trump is an opportunistic politician. A demagogue, he appeals to the worst sentiments of a certain section of the populace. His record is atrocious, but it is not that of a fascist. Labelling Trump as a fascist is just a convenient excuse for progressives to support Democratic Party candidates while avoiding the fundamental, underlying problem. Capitalism has reached a point of no return. We either come together to create the basis for a new society or we continue to lurch from one crisis to another even worse one.

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