

A debate on Trump, Brexit, modern fascism and the dangers from the right

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Neil Faulkner opens a debate on the nature of the threat we face from the far right in the wake of the Trump victory. Then Phil Hearse continues the debate on Trump, Brexit and the dangers from the right.

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This is what modern fascism looks like

Marxists are divided on a question of vital historical importance. If the modern far right is simply an extreme form of conservatism – if Trump, for example, is simply a radical Republican – then we are dealing with one type of threat. But if Trumpism is actually fascism – the modern, early 21st century form of fascism – then we are dealing with something far more dangerous.

This question might be expressed in a slightly more philosophical way. Does Trump represent a merely quantitative change in the radicalism of the Republican Party; or has incremental quantitative change now tipped over into a qualitative shift? That is, can you have, as it were, ‘creeping fascism’?

If we get this wrong, we are doomed. This is a life-and-death question for the labour movement and the left. If Trump and his kind are fascists, we face an immediate, all-out battle to defend the unions, the left parties, the minorities, women’s rights, and our civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

I am convinced that this is the case. I therefore regard the arguments of the ‘Lexit’ Left – that the far right is not fascist, that we are on the brink of a working-class upsurge, and that the breakup of the EU is to be welcomed – as a betrayal of the interests of the international working-class movement on a scale comparable with that of ‘Third Period’ Stalinism in the early 1930s.

I am aware that these are very harsh words. They are directed at a good many whom I consider friends and comrades; they are directed at a good many beside with whom I fought the Nazis, raised money for the miners, refused to pay the poll tax, and marched against the war. But the issue at stake is far too serious for nostalgia and personal sentiment.

To Remain or not to Remain

Many of us struggled to decide how to vote in the EU Referendum. Many of us remained conflicted and uncertain to the end. But it is now clear that the Lexit argument was all but inaudible, that it was the UKIP/Tory argument that dominated the Leave campaign, that the vast majority of Leave voters were influenced by a combination of vacuous 'take back control' rhetoric and anti-immigrant racism, and that the Brexit win was a clear-cut victory for the Far Right.

It matters not a jot that the EU is a bankers' and bosses' club, a neoliberal 'international', a vast machine hard-wired for austerity and privatisation that is hoovering wealth from the workers, the poor, and public services to further enrich the 1% and the corporations. It matters not because the Brexit vote was won on the back of a racist and xenophobic campaign led by right-wing millionaires. The Brexit vote was not a class vote for mass struggle and a radical alternative.

This is now clear. Serious Marxists are obliged to look reality in the face, to admit mistakes, and to adjust perspective and strategy accordingly. Brexit put wind in the sails of Trump. Now Trump puts wind in the sails of Marine Le Pen. This is an international mass movement of the Far Right. To continue arguing otherwise is ignorant and irresponsible.

The 'Red Referendum'

An interesting parallel is the 'red referendum' of August 1931. This was a Nazi initiative (like Brexit was a Farage/Tory initiative). It was an attempt to overturn the discredited, right-wing, pro-austerity SPD (Social-Democratic) government of Prussia (for which read the EU). The KPD (Communists) put conditions on the SPD for supporting them.

When these were rejected, the KPD formed what was, in effect, an alliance with the Nazis to campaign against the SPD in the referendum campaign, proclaiming it to be a 'red referendum' (which is rather like proclaiming 'Lexit' and 'People's Brexit' in the context of a right-wing attack on the EU).

The referendum was lost, but the Nazis raised their profile, gained popular support, and moved politics to the right. The KPD, on the other hand, had weakened itself and the labour movement by driving a wedge between the Communists and the SPD-supporting workers (just as Lexit has divided the far-left sects from the mass of progressive workers).

It is worth spelling this out. Lexit meant sections of the left forming an effective alliance with Farage, Johnson, and Gove, to take up a position opposed to that of the advanced workers in Britain, the European working-class as a whole, and the European left parties.

The advanced workers in Britain? Yes, because between two-thirds and three-quarters of the following groups voted Remain in the EU Referendum: Labour voters, Green voters, SNP/Plaid Cymru/Sinn Féin voters, trade unionists, minority voters, and young voters. It was a minority section of the working class that voted with the right-wing middle class for Brexit.

Trotsky - whose analysis of fascism is unsurpassed - denounced the 'red referendum' as sectarian madness: part of Stalin's notorious 'Third Period' that split the German working-class movement between 1929 and 1933 and thereby smoothed Hitler's path to power.

Classical Fascism

But the question remains: are we actually face-to-face with a form of fascism?

This question cannot be answered simply by reference to classical fascism in its most extreme form: that of the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1930s. Trotsky had this to say about the situation in

November 1931:

Considering the far greater maturity and acuteness of the social contradictions in Germany, the hellish work of Italian Fascism would probably appear as a pale and almost humane experiment in comparison with the work of the German Nazis.

He was right, of course: it was Hitler, not Mussolini, who murdered 12 million in the death-camps and ghettos – 6 million of them Jews – the terrible consequence of Nazism's extreme anti-semitism and racial ideology. Why was German fascism so much more lethal? Because the economic collapse and social crisis in Germany in 1932 was more extreme than that in Italy in 1921, and because the German labour movement was bigger, better organised, and more rooted than the smaller Italian labour movement had been. It was the class struggle, in short, that required Hitler to recruit a paramilitary army of 400,000 Brownshirts in order to batter his way to power.

Trotsky makes a further point. The obstacles in Hitler's way made the German ruling class wary of supporting him:

"... at present [in November 1931] even influential layers of the bourgeoisie fear the fascist experiment, precisely because they want no convulsions, no long and severe civil war ..."

Fascism was risky: it might detonate working-class revolt. This, in fact, is precisely what did happen in Austria (1934), France (1934), Spain (1936), and, albeit only on a local scale, Britain (1936).

And as soon as we shift our focus from Germany and Italy, we see that interwar fascism took diverse forms. Let one example suffice: that of Spain. Here, the lead was taken not by the fascist bands, but by the conventional military. The Popular Front government faced a revolt of the generals and the Spanish army, backed by a right-wing alliance of Church, monarchists, traditional conservatives, and phalangists (the fascists proper). It was a military coup – not a fascist coup per se – that triggered the working-class revolution of July 1936 and the three-year civil war that followed.

The Crisis Today

What is the situation now? Civil society as a whole, and the labour movement in particular, have been hollowed out by a generation of neoliberal 'counter-revolution'. Union membership is a fraction of what it was in the 1970s. The strike rate has been bumping along the bottom of the chart at mid 19th century levels since the defeats of the 1980s. Rank-and-file workplace organisation is effectively non-existent, even where there are still relatively high levels of formal union membership. Most Western workers are more atomised, more under the cosh, more at the mercy of management diktat than at any time since the Second World War.

Political polarisation is not the same as class strength. This is a basic error in the arguments of the Lexit left. Of course there are great swathes of bitterness against the political and corporate elite, and this can take a left form (support for Sanders, Corbyn, Syriza, Podemos, etc), just as it can take a right form.

This, as Trotsky observed, is characteristic of capitalist crisis. The centre cannot hold because 'business as usual' is intolerable when people's lives are falling apart. Society moves instinctively towards radical, sharp, decisive 'solutions'. And since society remains divided into two great class forces, you have 'the party of revolutionary hope' (the socialists) and 'the party of revolutionary despair' (the fascists).

In the crisis, workers may unite against the elite, or they may turn on each other. This is the essential difference between the socialist and the fascist. You therefore have solutions to the crisis

based on collective organisation and solidarity, and you have the reactionary myths of nationalism, racism, and what Marx called 'all the old shit'.

But whereas this struggle played out in the interwar period in a civil society cluttered with collective institutions, with high levels of public engagement, with strong class identities and cultural affiliations, it plays out today in a relative social vacuum; above all, it plays out in the context of labour organisation in a state of advanced decay.

In the social vacuum, in the absence of strong-points of resistance, political movements acquire exceptional velocity, and events unfold with great speed. The far right does not need Brownshirts, swastikas, and truncheons. It can advance to power wearing suits, peddling lies, spitting abuse, and collecting the votes of a disgruntled middle class and the backward section of the working class – those who are, at once, exploited, ground-down, and embittered, but also atomised, unorganised, passive, outside any tradition of solidarity, and thus open to 'all the old shit'.

Fascism without Brownshirts

So Trump can advance directly to state power without the trappings of classical fascism. Who needs Brownshirts when you have control of the most powerful state machine in the world? Why would you want them? Their 'excesses' are liable to trigger violence on the streets that will alarm the middle class and the corporate elite. Their radicalism can be an impediment to their leaders' freedom of action.

Consider, again, the example of the Nazis. The Brownshirts embodied the aspiration for radical change of a reactionary lower middle-class and the backward section of workers and unemployed. So once their essential role in the Nazi rise to power was played out, they were crushed by the newly established Hitler dictatorship (in the June/July 1934 'Night of the Long Knives').

In control of the German state after January 1933, Hitler no longer had need of a paramilitary militia with its own dynamic. What he did need was a loyal party-based security apparatus; but this – the SS – was largely constructed after the Nazis had taken power, as a tightly controlled, highly disciplined, top-down adjunct to the existing state apparatus.

What is the implication? That paramilitaries are secondary, not essential, features of fascism; that they can be constructed both before and after the seizure of state power; and that where they exist, they never have the significance of the state apparatus itself.

So What is Fascism?

How, then, should we define fascism? It is a mass movement of the far right that arises in conditions of economic and social crisis. It constructs that movement around reactionary myths of nation, race, family, a traditional order, and an imaginary past. It seeks to fragment, disrupt, and destroy the resistance of organised labour and the left. It is an attempt to resolve the economic and social crisis of capitalist society through the authoritarian imposition of a right-wing programme from above.

Its particular form reflects the conjuncture (the whole current situation) and the class struggle (the degree to which the fascists face resistance from the labour movement and the left parties). Fascism, in short, is not a thing, but a process; not a political movement with fixed form, but a far-right response to the crisis that develops in specific ways according to its dialectical relationship with other social forces.

Modern fascism will not fight its way to power through violent street battles in the manner of 1921 or 1932. It does not need to. Today's fascists are bullies in suits, not thugs in jackboots. And they are

already upon us. We have already travelled far down the road to the abyss.

To repeat what I have argued before: the film of the 1930s is running in slow motion. If the 2008 crash has the significance for us of the 1929 crash for an earlier generation, I fear that the election of Trump in 2016 may turn out to have the significance of Hitler's seizure of power in 1933.

There is still time. But we have to recognise the nature of the beast we face and build a mass movement against nationalism, racism, fascism, and the tidal wave of reactionary filth that has been unleashed on the world.

A good start would be to call things by their name: Trump, Farage, Le Pen, and the rest of them stand at the head of an international fascist movement that fits the circumstances and demands of the world capitalist crisis of the early 21st century. To refuse to accept this is to play word games with history. We do this at our peril.

Neil Faulkner

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* <http://leftunity.org/this-is-what-modern-fascism-looks-like/>

Right wing authoritarianism could open the door to fascism and war

Neil Faulkner (*This is what modern fascism looks like on this site*) is right to sound the tocsin about the dangers involved in the new surge of right wing authoritarianism. But his article includes formulations about fascism and the stage we are at that are not necessarily implied by his analysis and could lead to misunderstandings – in particular using the title “This is What Modern Fascism Looks Like” and the formulation “I fear that the election of Trump in 2016 may turn out to have the significance of Hitler's seizure of power in 1933.” I think this telescopes the argument somewhat and implies the danger of fascism has already become a reality.

Neil details the threat from the far right across a range of European countries. In particular there is the likelihood that Austrian Freedom Party leader Norbert Hofer, already installed as interim co-Chancellor, will win the re-run Presidential election next year, and the growing possibility that Front National leader Marine Le Pen will win the presidential election next year in France.

It's now obvious that the Brexit vote in Britain and the Trump victory in the United States are part of, and will further deepen, a right wing trend in world politics. The immediate reason for this is the 2008 economic crash and its aftermath, which further damaged the economic prospects for millions already hit by decades of neoliberalism. In the United States the growth in poverty and inequality is dramatic. It's not just the Mid-West rustbelt workers who feel they've been left behind, but millions in the urban centres are suffering the same demoralising crisis.

Take New York. The richest city in the world (probably not quite). The city that never sleeps (true). A

centre of untold riches for a few (also true) and comfortable affluence for most. That last bit is definitely untrue. Nearly 50% of New Yorkers live in poverty or near poverty. Huge sections of the population, many of whom have two or three jobs and who almost literally never sleep, are struggling to survive.

Poverty has taken a specific form in New York, paralleled in many desirable urban centres – rack renting. In Brooklyn it is reckoned that the typical household will spend 67% of its income on rent. In the Bronx it is 54%. For the millions on low wages, the city is becoming unaffordable.

The crushing effects of neoliberal austerity, combined with the decades-long decline of manufacturing industry, have created a new audience for the far right. In addition to the reactionary sections of the middle class, right wing authoritarianism has built a base in poorer sections of the working class that feel they have been ignored and forgotten.

This of course is the case with UKIP in Britain, where UKIP has garnered support even in former mining and steel-working strongholds in South Wales and Yorkshire, but also in France and the United States. This kind of electoral bloc, between the reactionary petty bourgeoisie (and bourgeoisie) and deprived sections of the working class reproduces the social and political base of fascism in the 1920s and '30s.

Every major crisis of capitalism tends to produce a political polarisation, with the strengthening of the militant left and the far right, and a squeezing of the discredited 'centre' – like the Democrats in the USA and the Socialist Party in France. So of in the United States' presidential election there was the huge support for Bernie Sanders on the left as well as for Trump. In Britain there is Corbyn as well as UKIP and the Tory right. Realistically today you have to say the polarisation is mainly to the right, despite developments like Sanders, Corbyn, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

To put it another way: right wing authoritarian parties have seized the ground of critical opposition to the status quo that should be occupied by the left. And once your enemies take over your political space it is often very difficult to win it back. One thing obvious in the responses to Brexit and Trump is that liberals are in utter shock that such things could happen (watch Jon Snow on Channel 4 News or read Timothy Garton Ash in the Guardian). What Marxists have warned about for years, rejected as catastrophist and alarmist by liberals, is actually coming to pass.

The victories of the xenophobic and racist hard right have dashed many illusions. In 2013 Sunny Handal wrote an optimistic article in the Guardian claiming that "Multiculturalism has won". Quoting a Lord Ashcroft survey that found that 90% recognised Britain was now a multicultural country and 70% thought that was a good thing, Sunny Handal claimed:

"The first point to note is that the continuous war waged by the rightwing press against multiculturalism has utterly failed. Public opinion has in fact moved in the opposite direction and become less hostile to people of different cultures and ethnicities living in the UK. In other words, interacting with ethnic minorities and watching them contribute to the UK (in sport, business, academia etc) has easily overcome tabloid scaremongering. This doesn't just illustrate the limited impact of the press and politicians, but the power of everyday experiences in changing opinions." (Guardian 22/4/13)

Nobody could write those words today, just three years later. It probably painted a rosy picture in 2013, but after the flood of refugees in the last two years the right wing press and TV have indeed sustained a discourse that enabled the racists and xenophobes to seize the initiative.

What explains the fact that the hard right has so outdistanced the left? As Neil Faulkner points out

successive defeats of the workers movement by neoliberalism over decades – with the consequent destruction of working class industrial ‘bastions’ – have gravely weakened trade unions and the left. But this has been topped off by a massive reactionary ideological offensive in today’s hugely powerful mass media, something that is very difficult for socialists to fight.

This offensive has succeeded amongst big sections of the population in advanced countries in creating a reactionary ‘common sense’, what Foucault called a ‘regime of truth’. This includes, depending on the country concerned, an admixture of hostility to radicalism and the workers movement, with huge dollops of racism and xenophobia thrown in (the cutting edge of which today in Islamophobia). Look at the media operation against Jeremy Corbyn. Look at the hysteria over the new waves of immigration coming from the Middle East and Africa.

Xenophobic nationalism is the crucial cement holding up the authoritarian rightwing parties. It has deep roots in the history of imperialism and slavery in the advanced countries. And crucially it is recycled constantly by the mass media, for example by the repeated TV appearances of Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage, ‘normalising’ their reactionary discourse and making them ‘mainstream’ political figures.

Does the success of the extreme right mean they represent a modern form of fascism and are we indeed on the verge of fascist victories?

Modern right-wing authoritarianism shares many features with classical fascism, but there is a major difference between (most of) them and the Hitlerite and Mussolini movements. In Italy and Germany fascism used massive levels of violence to completely destroy the militant workers movement. Trump, Farage and Le Pen do not yet represent such a development, and in many ways they don’t need it. For example Donald Trump doesn’t need to create a movement of street thugs, because one already exists – the heavily armed US police forces. In any case an enormous layer of armed reactionary militias, Klansmen, bikers and other degenerate low life exists in the US if he ever needed to mobilise auxiliary thugs.

In addition the mass militant workers movement either doesn’t exist (USA) or is severely weakened and diminished, as in most European countries. There is no need for a brownshirt type movement to crush it.

If classical fascism of the 1930s type has not taken power anywhere since 1945, then there have been governments that were the functional equivalent. The 1973 military coup in Chile did crush the workers movement with extreme violence, but the fascist Patria y Libertad movement played only a minor auxiliary role. What one might expect of fascism – the closing down of all opposition parties, the destruction of press freedom, thousands of extra-judicial killings, the subordination of the judiciary and all other parts of the state to the will of the military junta – all this was faithfully reproduced in Chile. Economically though Chile adopted neoliberalism, not classical fascist state capitalism.

In Indonesia in 1965 the military coup, backed by the right-wing Muslim party, butchered a million communists and their supporters, maybe more. It installed a military dictatorship, not classical fascism. As Trotsky pointed out, once in power fascism trends to degenerate into military dictatorship as the street-fighting squadristi are demobilised or integrated into the regular army. Once again the military were the functional equivalent of fascism.

What would be the scenario if an authoritarian right-wing party came to power in a major European country? Would it gradually grow into full-scale fascism? Would bourgeois democracy be at risk? A good way of looking at this issue is to study what’s happened in Turkey.

There, until at least the general election of June 2015, it could be argued that multi-party bourgeois democracy existed, albeit with an authoritarian government and a tough military-police apparatus. Once President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamic AKP (Justice and Development) party failed to gain an overall majority in that election, a systematic assault on democracy was launched from within the state apparatus, and the war against the Kurds restarted, to try to re-cement a majority around nationalist sentiments.

Especially after the July 2016 attempted military coup democratic rights have been systematically shut down. Up to 100,000 civil servants, judges, teachers, journalists and military officers have lost their jobs. Thirty thousand oppositionists have been locked up. The left-Kurdish HDP (People's Democratic Party) has been in practice banned and all its key leaders arrested. Torture of prisoners is routine.

Up till now though the tens of thousands of AKP supporters have not been used as a street-fighting militia. Repression of the Kurds and the Left has been left to the police and army.

The Kurdish rebel movement the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) routinely calls the Erdogan government 'fascist', but this is an exaggeration. It is a dictatorial right-wing authoritarian government that could at a future date install a fascist-like regime.

Similarly, in my view the installation of a Front National government in France or a UKIP-led government in the UK would not in itself signify the victory of fascism. But it would be a big step towards it. A real regime of terror would be launched against immigrants in an attempt to deport millions; major attacks on democratic liberties would occur simultaneously, doubtless including a purge of state employees. The road to fascism would be open.

Hitler's movement came to power in 1933, with Hitler being installed as Chancellor in January. The Nazis gradually purged and took over the state apparatus from within, but also using their street fighters to terrorise opponents. Are we in such a situation now? Not yet, but we are in a situation where further victories of the authoritarian right could lead in that direction.

Nigel Farage's decision to try to organise a march of 100,000 in an attempt to intimidate the High Court over launching Brexit via Article 50, represents a first stage in the Mosleyisation of his movement. Marine Le Pen has a very efficient and exceptionally violent stewarding force at her disposal. Right wing authoritarian governments could rely on both police repression and their own street fighting mobs.

If we are not yet in a 1933-type situation, then it would be foolish to assume that it could not occur. We have considerable resources in the workers movement, left and pro-democracy forces. Unfortunately many of these are today sleepwalking, deluding themselves about the Brexit vote and even the vote for Donald Trump.

Sunny Handal's argument on multiculturalism is certainly true of young people. If the radical left and the workers movement wakes up and launches a massive anti-racist movement including a fight for free movement in Europe, there will be huge numbers of young people won to the fight.

One thing that the surge of the super-nationalist right seems to imply is the increased danger of war between major powers. Donald Trump has promised not just to withdraw from trade treaties like NAFTA and TTIP, but to slap double-digit duty taxes of Chinese imports. Brexit plus Trump plus right wing victories in Europe would probably see a sharp rise in protectionism, the collapse of the EU and trade wars.

Socialists don't support anti-working class trade treaties, but neither do we support nationalist

protectionism. In the past wars between major powers have always involved economic conflicts. Never mind Trump's admiration for Vladimir Putin. A world of nationalist trade wars in which resource wars – in the Arctic, in the South China Sea, in Central Africa and in the Middle East – are also ongoing, is a world in which the danger of an armed clash between major powers is massively increased. Time to sound the tocsin!

Phil Hearse

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<http://leftunity.org/%EF%BB%BF-right-wing-authoritarianism-could-open-the-door-to-fascism-and-war/>
