

After fascism, what? “Trump represents a new kind of politics”

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The question of whether Donald’s Trump victory marks a triumph for fascism in the US depends, as always, on which definition of fascism you use.

For most of the past fifty years, the principal way in which theorists of fascism have defined it is by drawing up a list of surface phenomena which were shared by the Italian and German fascisms of the 1920s and 1930s: a belief in a strong party, a style of authoritarian leadership, an ideology which positioned itself as neither right nor left, racism, a belief in a new fascist man, etc.

Under the list method, Trump or Trumpism looks more unlike than like fascism: there isn’t a Trump “party”, Trump doesn’t demand the same sort of loyalty that Hitler or Mussolini expected, he is not offering a universal alternative to liberalism, socialism, etc.

Within liberal definitions of fascism, political scientists have long been aware that there is a problem. Around Italian and German fascism there were a series of other fascist parties some of which were more similar than not to them (eg the British Union of Fascists) some of which shared some but not all of these external forms (eg Francoism). How much would a “mimetic” (i.e. copying) semi-fascist movement need to share with fascism in order to qualify as fascist? There is no agreed answer.

The trend in liberal scholarship has been to replace the list method with an emphasis on one single factor which is said to define the essence of fascism, namely an ideology of national rebirth (“palingenesis”). The problem, as I argued in my book *Fascism: Theory and Practice* [\[1\]](#) twenty years ago is that even national rebirth turns out to be a slippery place from which to view and understand fascism.

Almost every centre or right-wing politician of the past 100 years has said that their election will result in an improvement of the nation and more than a few have promised its transformation on their watch.

Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” undoubtedly looks like a promise of national palingenesis, but Ronald Reagan used exactly the same slogan, as did Margaret Thatcher. Silvio Berlusconi’s “Forza Italia” was barely different.

Compare for example this speech from a British political leader in 1996:

“Just think of it – Britain, the skills superpower of the world. Why not? Why can’t we do it? Achievement, aspiration fulfilled for all our people. Because a great people equals a Great Britain...”

“This is our mission for Britain today. We knew we could do better. And we did. We knew we could be better, we the Labour Party. And we are. Britain, too, can do better. Britain can be better than this. A thousand days to prepare for a thousand years – not just turning a page in history but writing

a new book, building the greatness of our nation through the greatness of its people."

And this from Trump on the campaign trail:

"Our failed establishment has brought us nothing but poverty at home, and disaster overseas. We are tired of economic and foreign policies that have bled this country dry. It is time for real change that puts the people back in charge. This election will decide who runs this country: the Corrupt Political Class - or you, the American People. That's the choice. She's with them - I'm with you. This is our last chance."

Trump's has an urgency which Tony Blair's speech lacks, Tony Blair's conversely has an idea of the nation as an organic being with its own history of decline or advance which is in these respects closer to the way in which the politicians of the 1920s and 1930s thought.

In case anyone misunderstands me, I am not saying that Tony Blair was a fascist; I am saying only that we live in a political culture where politicians are competing for the right to govern nation states and in that context national palingenesis is not a rare and unusual message limited only to the fringes of the extreme right, actually it is a near universal message of politicians of the parliamentary centre and right.

In *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, I argued that fascism was best understood as a specific form of reactionary mass politics.

The least important part of this definition was the phrase "specific form," which was a partial nod to the list-definitions I have referred to already.

More important was the notion of "reactionary mass politics". Here I was saying that the goal which fascists set themselves was to abolish social democracy (note, not revolutionary socialism but social democracy) and that the means the fascists chose to do so was a popular mobilisation (i.e. an organisation of people, whether small owners or white-collar or unemployed workers) to destroy the buildings, organisations and people of the trade unions and the parliamentary left. The paradox or if you like the motor of fascism was precisely the mobilisation of a group of people (workers) against the very organisations which were conventionally assumed to represent them.

Looking at Trump through this model it is plain that Trump is not a fascist and in fact bears very few points of comparison with the politics of the 1930s.

He isn't waging a war against conventional democracy and neither does he possess a private army to achieve this victory.

He does have a counter-revolutionary ambition, as (of all people) Nigel Farage rightly remarked as he stood waiting to ascend in Trump's golden elevator, but the focus of Trump's ambition is not against social democracy but against the social victories that have been made after 1945 and belong to a different epoch from it - reformist feminism, LGBT rights, today's (minimal) toleration of migrants rights etc.

Nor does a consciousness of social democracy play any recognisable part in his philosophy.

He is socially illiberal, and the way he used rust-belt voters against the Democrats shares a certain resemblance with the way in which Hitler and Mussolini turned unemployed workers against the organised working class (with the important caveat that of the course the Democrats never had been a workers' party in the way that the SPD, for example, still was in Germany prior to 1933). But Trump's victory was a battle of votes, not guns. The Democratic Party is not about to be banned by

law. The NAACP has not had its offices occupied by militia nor were its leading members killed before Trump had even been elected in a violent civil war.

The people who vote for Trump are, for the moment, just that: voters rather than political soldiers in training.

To my mind, the search for comparisons with the 1930s is a mistake. We do it, because in every political moment we take our images of evil from the experiences of the past.

Between 1945 and 1989, we lived in a world that was recognisably post-fascist. Politics was divided, in every country, between blocks of opinion that allied with either of the two main powers that did most to defeated Nazi Germany. You could be (in British terms) pale pink or deepest red, or on the other side of the political spectrum yellow or Royal Blue. The side you chose owed its politics to large blocks which had coalesced as far back as the 1940s.

Social liberalism, in so far as it retained a distinct project, gave itself the task of completing a liberal agenda still set by the events of 1945: such demands as refugee rights, prohibitions on torture, universal declarations against racism, all made sense because they were an attempt (admittedly through the state) to prohibit a return to 1933 for ever.

Conservatism was credible only if it nodded back to Churchill (and not to the appeasers).

Conversely, when ultra-right parties emerged they did so led and funded by people who had been participants in 1939-45, or defined themselves by that moment.

In Britain, the memory of anti-fascist resistance was weaker than in almost any other country in Western Europe, but even here it left behind a certain moral calculus which was well established on activists on the far-left and which went something like the following.

1. Fascism is different from any other political philosophy under capitalism era. 2. It is different because if it triumphs it would abolish not merely revolutionary socialism but parliamentary socialism and in fact democracy itself. 3. Fascism is in addition the only political force which has enacted genocide against a domestic racialised other (plenty of European parties enacted racial wars against people in other countries, what was different about fascism was that it constructed death camps at home). 4. Because of 2) and 3) fascism is a repugnant enemy of all social progress. 5. Therefore it is appropriate to conduct a war against fascism, to fight it with violence if need be because the alternative is that fascism will defeat - and perhaps kill - everyone on the soft and hard left.

This theory was summed up in the phrase “no platform”, where the important word was not the second: we should try to prevent fascists speaking. The important word was the first: if fascism was to be stopped, it had to be stopped everywhere.

The problem with anti-fascism as an approach to politics is that Europe and the world ceased to be recognisably post-fascist at some point in our recent past. Either in 1989, where Communism vs anti-Communism ceased to be the main fault line in politics. Or on 9/11 when the right acquired a “big story” which was no longer about 1939-45 but Muslims. Or in 2008 when a series of ostensibly liberal or social democratic governments wagered the future of the welfare state on protecting the banks.

However it has happened, we have acquired a new and successful far-right which isn't constantly replaying in its mind the battles of 1933-45.

In British terms, we saw this shift with the decline of the British National Party and its replacement by the EDL and UKIP. To say to an activist from the BNP, "You are a Hitler supporter," was to call their politics bogus, was to point out the flawed, apologetic nature of their party's relationship to the past. Supporter of the EDL, however, a party whose members met in pubs and sang themselves the Dambuster theme tune had less difficulty laughing off the same insult. And to be an anti-fascist against UKIP is, once again, to look for a secret point of shame among people who don't see themselves as Hitler's descendants and find the comparison not upsetting but bemusing and laughable.

This process, whereby the far right slowly frees itself from its historic fidelity to the politics of the 1933 is much further gone in the United States where the most successful advocates of proto-fascism were radio celebrities (Father Coughlin) and not party-builders.

A problem with the "no platform" politics of the 1970s was the idea that under developed capitalism you could have liberal democracy or you could have fascism and there was no space for anything in between. What we find today, instead, is that increasing number of states combine the forms of democracy (i.e. periodic elections) with style of politically authoritarian and nationalist leaderships in which large parts of civil society serve not check the state, but (just as under any dictatorship) choose rather to serve it. In what meaningful sense could Russia be called a democracy, or Hungary? How much democracy is left in India? Who will win the next elections in Austria or Italy or France?

Trump represents a new kind of politics. One enabled by conventional right-wing Republicans (think of all the old-school plutocrats who had to rally behind him in order to sell his candidacy to a sceptical Republican electorate, 90% of which ended up voting for him) but a regime in which the most extreme figures have all the advantages (powers of patronage, the legitimacy of a mandate) over the old guard. He brings to the White House narcissism and paranoia. His programme is to use the state to smash the few welfare reforms which still protect the most vulnerable, while reducing taxes on the rich as close to zero as can be reached while still paying for an expanded army and police force. He will ally with every nationalistic, militaristic leader he can find whether actual fascist (Assad), of fascist origin (Le Pen) or on some other trajectory (Putin, Farage) and they, along with the likes of Steve Bannon and the alt-right, will be invigorated by him.

The movement against Trump needs to find its own language, to sound through the world as "They shall not pass" once did. But it must be slogans for our times not for the past.

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P.S.

* <https://livesrunning.wordpress.com>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.e-reading.club/bookreader.php/135772/Fascism_-_theory_and_practice.pdf