

Is Donald Trump a Fascist? - Four answers to that question from Jacobin Editors

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Is Donald Trump a Fascist? - We asked *Jacobin* contributors for their thoughts.

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Last week, Donald Trump ratcheted up his nativist rhetoric by proposing a ban on Muslims entering the United States [[1](#)]. Trump was widely condemned, but despite Ted Cruz's new lead in Iowa, the candidate has only reached new heights in national polls. 41 percent of Republicans now support him, with Cruz a distant second at 14 percent [[2](#)].

Many on the Left have looked worryingly at Trump's rise and have been speculating that he might represent something even more dangerous than the usual varieties of right-wing populism. Could Trump be a fascist? And does the answer to that question even matter from a strategic perspective?

We asked *Jacobin* contributors for their thoughts.

- Jennifer Roesch is an activist with the International Socialist Organization in New York City.
 - Richard Steigmann-Gall is an associate professor of history at Kent State University and the author of *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity*.
 - Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Velvet Coup: The Constitution, the Supreme Court, and the Decline of American Democracy*, among other titles.
 - Dylan Riley is an associate professor of sociology at UC Berkeley and a member of the *New Left Review* editorial committee.
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Jennifer Roesch

Since Trump came out last week and openly called for Muslims to be banned from the United States, the ruling class clearly decided it has had enough and got serious about repudiating him. *The New York Times* published an editorial denouncing the “Trump Effect,” [3] while Jeb Bush’s campaign called it a fascist proposal. Hillary Clinton quickly rolled out a campaign appeal thinly disguised as a petition to “stop Trump” and Thomas Friedman lamented that Trump was destroying the United States’s ability to build a strong coalition against ISIS.

Unlike in Italy or Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, the US ruling class doesn’t face the kind of political crisis that would lead a section of it to abandon its “democratic” forms and resort to fascism. In fact, the bulk of the ruling class sees Trump as a threat to its ability to carry out its political agenda. A poll of millionaires was revealing: Clinton leads the pack with 31 percent of millionaires supporting her.

For these establishment figures, charges of fascism are a cynical ploy to distance their own rhetoric and policies from Trump’s open displays of racism and bigotry. But for millions of people horrified by his hate-mongering, there is a genuine fear about what Trump represents. I am in full solidarity with that sentiment. Trump has given confidence to some of the most right-wing elements in society.

While these elements are not organized into anything like a disciplined fighting force that could serve as the basis for a fascist movement, they do pose a real threat [4]. Witness the recent wave of vicious attacks on Arabs and Muslims. We need to confront this bigotry and build solidarity with those under attack.

But if our side succumbs to panic about Trump, we miss the greater dangers we face. It is the “war on terror” carried out by a Democratic president for the last eight years that has created the breeding ground for racism and terrorism. It is the devastating social and economic crisis wrought by austerity that creates the conditions in which right-wing scapegoating can seem to provide answers. And as long as we remain trapped in the logic of lesser-evilism, trailing the Democratic Party further to the right, we are weakened in our efforts to build the kind of strong, independent left and social movements that could pose a real alternative to Trump.

Richard Steigmann-Gall

I believe fascism can be heard in Trump’s ominous declaration: “We’re going to have to do things that we never did before ... And certain things will be done that we never thought would happen in this country.” [5] Even more importantly, the rapturous response of Trump’s followers represents a wider fascist “mood” among the American electorate.

When fascism departs from normal political methods, it does so to restore the prerogatives of the beleaguered, once-dominant majority — defined ethnically or racially — who believes that the nation is “slipping away” from them. Does this come at the expense of parliamentary democracy? Neither Trump nor his supporters call for dictatorship. But it’s important to keep in mind that never did historical fascists abolish parliaments outright. They undermine parliaments from within to make them incapable of working effectively, thereby paving the way for a strong man. Trump doesn’t

require uniformed followers in Congress when ideological allies in the Tea Party are doing all they can to render the legislative branch inoperable [6].

Fascism insists that the existing political authority is “illegitimate” and offers itself as a parallel authority, complete with paramilitary violence, which will restore the “true” nation against impostors. By articulating the Birtherism found in the Tea Party and Oath Keeper movements, Trump exploits and expands distrust of legitimate electoral politics among disaffected, downwardly-mobile white Americans [7].

If Trump lacks his own militia, there is nonetheless a violent ethos at his rallies. But also relevant here are the Oath Keepers. [8] A nationwide militia movement, like Mussolini’s *squadristi*, they are composed of veterans who promise to fight an “illegitimate” state and create a parallel authority that “protects” the nation from its own elected authorities [9]. They are not (yet) tied to Trump organizationally, but they represent a similar current of militant [10] — indeed militarist — radicalism.

When we apply “fascism” as a descriptive category, as most commentators are doing, we risk using external criteria like matching shirts or armbands to form a sterile check-list. But when we apply “fascism” as an analytical category, we understand its past social messages and following, and recognize the danger it poses today.

Daniel Lazare

Trump is not a fascist in the classic sense. There are no brownshirts in the streets, no talk of a revolution of the Right, no attacks on democracy or parliamentarism. Whereas Marine Le Pen heads up a powerful and efficient political apparatus in France [11], any such party organization is all but impossible in America’s eighteenth-century constitutional system [12]. Instead of a movement, he presents himself as an individual — Donald Trump, Inc. — who will single-handedly knock heads and make the system work.

The more appropriate term, therefore, is Bonapartist — a tough leader who positions himself above the fray and simultaneously attacks enemies from the Left and the Right. This is how Trump was able to make mincemeat out of Jeb Bush — by savaging him from the left on 9/11 and tearing apart his idiotic comment that his brother “kept us safe.”

For that reason, he could do better against Clinton than most people assume by attacking her for backing the invasion of Iraq and for now calling for a Syrian no-fly zone. If he’s smart, he’ll assail the idea as nuts and will thus succeed in neutralizing liberals who will be unable to disagree. I can see him following Le Pen’s lead by promising to speak frankly with Putin, which will also go down well with much of the liberal-left. After all, he and Putin are pretty much cut from the same cloth.

But the important point is that he intends to operate within the constitutional order rather than outside it. Plainly, Trump is more than a flash in the pan like Newt Gingrich or Michele Bachmann. He has moved American politics several leagues to the right and will undoubtedly be even more successful in the event of another ISIS atrocity. If in the White House, he’ll function as a classic authoritarian, blustering and bullying and maybe imposing a state of emergency if conditions get hairy enough. But all this would establish him as a precursor to fascism rather than the genuine

article.

Dylan Riley

No, Donald Trump is not a fascist, and yes it matters very much that he is not one.

Fascism arose in countries that had mass militant left parties aiming at the transcendence of capitalism, were excluded from the spoils of imperialism, had very large backward agrarian sectors, and possessed very weakly developed capitalist states. Out of this context arose mass party formations of the far right [13] that displayed some organizational and tactical similarities to the parties of the far left. None of these features obtain in the US today.

The Left, far from being well-organized and militant, is electorally irrelevant. The United States is the only great power left in the world. The agrarian question is non-existent, and the American capitalist class enjoys the strongest capitalist state in history. The rise of Trump can be explained by the combined unravelling of the Republican Party, and the utter failure of the Democrats to offer anything to the white working class.

One of the most important class struggles today is unfolding within the Republican Party between the East Coast establishment and the party's petty-bourgeois and partly working-class base. George W. Bush, because of his peculiar biography, was the last figure able really to hold these wings together. Trump's rise is possible only because of the shift in the balance of class forces toward the enraged base.

In historical terms this process of disintegration opens up opportunities for the Left. The collapse of a major US political party, if it were to happen, can only be welcomed. In this context we should reject absolutely the hysterical lesser-evilmism implicit in calling him a "fascist"; it is both historically inaccurate and politically disastrous because it plays into the logic of supporting whomever emerges from the Democratic Party primary.

P.S.

* <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/donald-trump-fascism-islamophobia-nativism>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/13/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-state-of-the-union/>

[2] <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/12/donald-trump-proposes-ban-muslims-soars-new-heights-poll>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/10/opinion/the-trump-effect-and-how-it-spreads.html>

- [4] <https://theintercept.com/2015/12/12/threats-and-violent-attacks-against-muslims-in-the-u-s-just-from-this-week/>
- [5] <http://time.com/4120711/donald-trump-paris-attack-muslims/>
- [6] http://www.salon.com/2015/10/19/they_want_america_to_fail_the_tea_party_far_right_hates_the_gop_and_their_own_country/
- [7] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/trump-tea-party-populist-exposed-213111>
- [8] <https://www.oathkeepers.org>
- [9] <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/03/oath-keepers>
- [10] http://www.salon.com/2015/08/14/the_gops_secret_oath_keeper_sickness_why_donald_trump_is_just_a_symptom_of_a_much_bigger_problem/
- [11] ESSF (article 40229), [From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: How the National Front Changed France](#).
- [12] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/abolish-the-senate/>
- [13] ESSF (article 40232), [Hitler Wasn't Inevitable - Class Struggle in Germany before 1933](#).