

Europe: Postfascism: the rise of the radical right

Saturday 8 June 2019, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 29 April 2019).

Phil Hearse reviews *New Faces of Fascism* by Enzo Traverso, Verso, 2018

The forward surge of fascist and far right movements, symbolised by figures like Trump, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Salvini in Italy, poses important theoretical and political questions for the militant left. Enzo Traverso's new book is one of the best responses from a Marxist viewpoint. Unlike many studies of this subject, this book does not attempt to provide a factual account of the progress of the hard right, but goes straight to some of the main analytical problems. These include how we can understand the new hard right in relation to 'classical fascism' in the 20th century, the idea of 'populism', identity politics (left and right), Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, as well as the usefulness (or otherwise) of the notion of totalitarianism. This is a big agenda, undertaken by an historian with a deep knowledge of modern politics and culture, and is therefore quite dense – decidedly not a basic introduction.

The first thing most readers will notice is the term that the author uses for the new(ish) hard right movements – postfascism. Postfascism because it is neither a simple repeat of the old interwar classical fascism, nor something distant and unconnected with classical fascism. (The author reserves the term 'neofascism' for those who are attempting a literal rebirth of the old Hitlerism – for example Jobbik in Hungary).

"In the 21st century, fascism will not take the face of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco; nor (we might hope) will it take the form of totalitarian terror. Yet it is also clear that there are many different ways to destroy democracy. Ritual references to the threats to democracy – and in particular to Islamic terrorism – usually depict the enemy as external, but they forget a fundamental lesson from the history of fascism: that democracy can be destroyed from within."

That democracy can be destroyed from within is indeed a key lesson from the 1920s and '30s. Hitler and Mussolini organised street militias, but neither took power by a 'revolution' against the existing state apparatus, but took over the existing state, supported by significant sectors of big business. Once in power they proceeded with the process of 'gleichschaltung', bringing the existing state apparatus into line with fascist priorities [1]. The exception as Enzo Traverso points out was Franco in Spain, where a military coup was supported by a fascist mass movement, the Falange.

The issue of nomenclature is not the most important thing here. For example John Bellamy Foster uses the label 'neofascism', while another recent book uses the label 'Creeping Fascism' [2]. The key thing is not the label, but understanding what the new movement shares with the 'old' fascism and what is different.

Enzo Traverso takes the Front National (now Rassemblement National) in France to be the archetypal 'postfascist' movement. Since Marine Le Pen replaced her father as the Front leader in 2011, the movement has evolved from its fascist origins, and now has a quite different ideology,

positioning itself within the discourse of the Fifth Republic (ie bourgeois democratic legitimacy). It has also tried to evolve more 'modern' positions on social questions, for example LGBT+ rights (although not of course on questions like race and immigration).

Traverso argues that the ideological positions, indeed the political identity of postfascism, is unstable, reflecting the acute political instability of the first part of the 21st century. This seems to me to be an acute observation. We are dealing here with an evolution, a political force developing in tumultuous times. Postfascism is traversed by conflicting political positions, but is often flanked by more radical, more overtly fascist, organisations, for example Casa Pound and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, which are a permanent pressure. As the crisis deepens, especially if there were to be another financial crash (quite likely), it is eminently possible that the movements of the hard right will radicalise further to the right.

Look at it this way. On the evening of 23 April 2017, the day of the first round of the French presidential election, it became evident that the two candidates going into the second round would be Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. The left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon said he would not call for a vote for either candidate. The (then) Communist Party (PCF) leader Pierre Laurent by contrast appealed for a vote against Le Pen because "If she becomes president the fascists will have control of the state apparatus" – by which he meant especially control of the repressible apparatuses, the police, security services, army etc. Now, was Laurent being alarmist? It would be a reckless gamble to say 'yes'. Almost certainly Marine Le Pen in power would mean the mass victimisation of immigrants and Muslims, harsh repression against the left and social movements and a restriction of democratic rights. This could not be resisted by pointing out that ideologically the RN has moved towards Republican legitimacy. You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

In Britain we have now a quite complex alignment of the far right. You have the right wing of the Conservative Party, more and more obviously a majority at local and national level; you have UKIP which has gone to the right and is actively recruiting fascists; you have Nigel Farage's new Brexit party; and you have Tommy Robinson and his floating bands of fascist thugs in the ambit of UKIP. They demonstrated together, but with contending physical platforms, on the March 9 pro-Brexit demonstration. There is conflict among them, but the overall radicalisation to the right is clear.

So there is one basic question – is postfascism the modern analogue of classical fascism? Bearing in mind that the 'exterminist' irrationality of the Nazis was the most extreme and irrational wing of fascism, which modern fascism would not necessarily repeat? Obviously the typology of right wing movements and governments is more complicated than just bourgeois democracy on the one hand, or Hitlerite fascism on the other. Take the example of the United States, where neoliberalism has already put liberal democracy under pressure. Republican voter exclusion and a grossly unfair electoral system makes it difficult for the popular majority to be expressed. Trumpite reaction now has a stable majority in the Supreme Court. And popular resistance is made progressively more difficult by the paramilitarisation of police forces and the harshly repressive nature of the US legal system. There is absolutely no need in the United States for a fascist street movement, because there is no militant workers movement to crush and the streets and protest in general can be controlled by police forces awash with arms recycled from the Iraq war [3].

Enzo says that unlike classical fascism, there is no mass movement that Trump leads. Well, sort of. But Trump is busy building that movement in the mass rallies he regularly holds around the country, which will give him a mass base semi-independent of the Republican Party. The issue is not whether the postfascist movements and leaders will develop in an overtly Hitlerite direction; the issue is whether they can carry out the reactionary tasks previously assigned to the fascists. In that sense I think the title of the book – *New faces of Fascism* – more precisely sums up the present situation

than some of the discussion within it.

New Faces of Fascism contains a detailed appraisal of the features of modern racism and the hard right, including Islamophobia, identity politics left and right, intersectionality, the usefulness (or otherwise) of the term 'populism', anti-Semitism and the political uses made today of the Holocaust. I am not going to recount the arguments in each of these sections, but just focus on a few points of particular importance to the political left.

First, identity politics. The author draws out key elements of hard right 'identitarianism'. On the one hand you have 'biopolitics', which in effect promotes the superiority of 'white' people. This is to be found in for example Italian citizenship law, which makes it extremely difficult to become a citizen without at least one parent being an Italian citizen. This the author points out has led to millions of mainly young people who either live or work in Italy being denied citizenship. In addition to biopolitics there is the cultural construction of difference, which mainly takes the form of Islamophobia. Right-wing identity politics is aimed at *exclusion*. Hard right exclusion politics is economically and culturally backward because:

"Immigration is its [Europe's] future: it is the condition for averting demographic and economic decline, for paying for the pensions of an aging population, for opening up to the world, for renovating Europe's cultures and setting them in dialogue with other continents."

Eloquently put. If this was the clear position of the major left-wing formations in Europe and elsewhere, we would be in a much better position to fight the new fascists.

Enzo Traverso argues strongly that the identity politics of oppressed minorities is not fundamentally exclusionary, but a plea for inclusion. He also argues that the left was slow to champion the movements of the oppressed, and when it did it tended to include the struggles of minorities considered as subordinate to the issue of class. Nevertheless he is critical of some forms of radical identity politics that are exclusionary. He says:

"..an exclusive identity politics - politics reduced to identity claims - is as short sighted as it is dangerous, for the role of politics is precisely to overcome and transcend particular subjectivities. In the United States identity politics has had contradictory results: on the one hand it conquered fundamental rights; on the other it scattered Blacks, feminists, gays and environmentalists into separated and often marginalised movements. Identity politics has failed where it has abandoned any attempts at unity. This is not how we build commons causes."

Now we come to the issue of Left failures. Enzo says a major cause of the rise of the Front National was the failure and decline of the PCF. He also says that in terms of reinventing itself to meet contemporary challenges and build mass support, the far right is way ahead of the left. But he sees hope in sections of the left that have tried to reinvent themselves for the 21st century, for example Podemos in the Spanish state, and the movement around Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

The book is not about the changes in the Left and the labour movement, and I am here referring to scattered remarks in the text, which don't necessarily explain the author's views in detail. With that qualification, I think that in posing things the way he does, leads to gliding over some really fundamental problems. Because there has been no lack of projects for 'refoundation' in the left, in fact there have been a dizzying number of them in the last 20 years, and none of them has managed to decisively defeat the right. Some of them have completely capsized, like Syriza in Greece. There are major problems with the Podemos and Corbyn projects; there is little guarantee they will end well, indeed it is quite possible that that they won't.

It's true that a major part of Left defeats has been the complete capitulation of all the old social democratic parties, and some of the old Communist and ex-Communist parties to neoliberalism. But the radical Left has held out against it, and still it faces major problems, even where it presents a face of 'modern socialism', like the Left Bloc in Portugal [4].

The far right outdistancing the Left is a process that has seen a spectacular spurt since the economic crisis of 2007-8 and the subsequent harsh austerity imposed on the working class and the poor. Karl Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* predicts that a political polarisation caused by economic crash will go mainly to the right at first [5], for many obvious reasons connected with the huge political and ideological offensive launched by the bourgeoisie against the Left.

In the period from the crash in 2008 until 2012-13, the Left and radical forces forged a series of social movements and political parties that were effective in mobilising millions - with the help of social media. The repeated general strikes in Greece leading to Syriza, the Indignados in Spain leading to Podemos, the Arab Spring, the worldwide Occupy! Movement, the first Melenchon presidential campaign (2012) and the Front de Gauche in France, then eventually the Corbyn phenomenon, and Bernie Sanders (and the DSA) in the United States, and anti-austerity mobilisations in many countries. During this period, especially before 2011-12, the pink tide in Latin America was still en marche - roughly up until the death of Hugo Chavez.

The political spirit of that time - just a few years ago - was summed up in Paul Mason's book "Why it's all kicking off everywhere" [6]. Basically, the idea that rebellion and the Left are on the offensive.

As a consequence of these developments the political representatives of the ruling class internationally have over the last 9-10 years been engaged in a massive counter-revolutionary offensive to crush these radical responses to the 2008 crash, and to deliver devastating political blows against the Left.

The new hard right parties have been enabled by this generalised reactionary counter-offensive, either deliberately or as a more-or-less unintended consequence of harsh xenophobia, Islamophobia and ideological rage against socialism and the Left. What Tariq Ali calls the 'extreme centre' - the Blairites, the leaders of the EU, the right-wing leadership of the Democratic Party - are no less partisans of this war against socialism and the Left than reactionary 'postfascist' movements. These are hard times for the Left and the tide has turned against us.

There is a long and difficult struggle ahead: *The New Faces of Fascism* should be read by anyone who wants to investigate the new parties and movements of the hard right, the reasons for their successes and key political themes needed to defeat them.

Phil Hearse is one of the authors (with Neil Faulkner, Seema Syeda and Samir Dathi) of the new edition of *Creeping Fascism*; and the pamphlet *Full Spectrum Mendacity* on far right social media. Both available from prruk.org

Phil Hearse

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P.S.

Socialist Resistance

<http://socialistresistance.org/postfascism-the-rise-of-the-radical-right/16856>

Footnotes

[1] This theme is explored in [Tragedy and Farce, Trum in the White House](#) by John Bellamy Foster. See also

<https://monthlyreview.org/press/trump-as-neo-fascist-john-bellamy-foster-interviewed-on-law-disorder-radio/>

[2] <https://prruk.org/product/creeping-fascism-what-it-is-and-how-to-fight-it/>

[3] On this see [Policing the Planet](#), by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton

[4] On the Portuguese Left Bloc, see Francisco Louca

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5696>

[5] Applying Polanyi's ideas to today's situation is done in *Can Democracy Survive Globalised Capitalism?* By Charles Kuttner, Norton Publishers, May 2018 . See my review of this - [Is Fascism Inevitable?](#) - on this site

[6] Verso, 2012.