

Fascist or not? The left cannot combat the far right if it fails to understand it

Wednesday 29 January 2020, by [HAYWARD Freddie](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2020).

To caricature all on the right as “fascists” is lazy and counterproductive.

Last year, I witnessed a rally protesting Steve Bannon’s appearance at Oxford Union. The crowd chanted: “Nazi scum, off our streets”; a chant that has been echoed at other demonstrations. In the US, “No Trump! No KKK! No fascist USA!” has become more popular still. The activist Owen Jones labels himself “anti-fascist” while Patrick Harvie MSP, co-convenor of the Scottish Green Party, has described President Trump as “increasingly fascist”. In June 2019, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez labelled the Trump presidency “fascist” during her criticism of migrant detention centres on the US’s border with Mexico.

Meanwhile, in the Twittersphere, right-wing politicians are frequently denounced as fascists. Roger Griffin, author of *The Nature of Fascism* and a leading expert on the topic, told me he has even seen Boris Johnson, the European Research Group and Margaret Thatcher labelled “fascists”.

It has become common for some on the left to respond to the rise of the far right by labelling individual politicians and their movements “fascist”. The whiff of authoritarianism and xenophobia is enough to yield condemnations that often conflate distinct political ideologies. Some treat the far right as a homogenous bloc that can be both explained and dismissed with this single term.

But the neglect of precision in the discourse surrounding the far right weakens political analysis and may counterproductive in combatting the various ideologies within it.

There is an increasingly noticeable disjunction between the use of “fascist” and its academic and technical definition. While there are detailed debates about the definition of “fascism”, often between Marxist and non-Marxist analytical frameworks, it is still possible to use the term in a precise and consistent manner.

This is not to say that fascism is a concept with a single, lucid definition. Efforts at conceptualising fascism switch between attempting to establish an account of interwar fascism, to establishing an ahistorical theoretical account akin to frameworks of socialism and conservatism.

In his essay on fascism, the cultural theorist Umberto Eco writes that the fascism of the interwar years was a “fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions”. Today, the study of fascism has developed the concept to the point where it can be applied systematically by scholars – something that was much more difficult in the twentieth century.

Griffin says the most broadly accepted definition is that fascism is a revolutionary movement for total societal transformation, expressed in a wide variety of permutations. For him, fascism is a

certain type of ultra-nationalism that makes use of a mythical component such as “purity of blood” or racial history to create an artificial sense of common destiny and identity. He contends that a desire for the rebirth of the nation following its failure as decadent, weak, and threatened is central to fascism.

As the British fascist Derek Holland wrote in the 1980s in his pamphlet *The Political Soldier*: “if we are to have a redeeming National Revolution, that will act as a cleansing fire of purification, we must... found a sacred brotherhood dedicated to the redemption of our People, and to the salvation of the European Motherland.”

The logic of this approach – the mechanism through which fascism achieves its objective – leads to violence, ethnic cleansing and war. Anders Breivik, the terrorist who killed 77 people in Norway in 2011, is a fascist archetype. His attacks were intended to precipitate a civil war with Muslims that would bring about the rebirth of Norway.

According to this definition, Griffin argues, figures such as Trump, Putin, Erdogan and Farage are not fascists. “Even Tommy Robinson... is not calling for a racial revolution. They may be in the privacy of their own pub, but externally their ideology is not revolutionary nationalism, it’s nationalism. It’s racist but it’s not revolutionary racism, and therefore technically it’s not fascist.”

Even those Marxists who link fascism with capitalism agree that these figures are incorrectly labelled fascist. Daniel Woodley, the author of *Fascism and Political Theory*, told me he characterises Tommy Robinson as a xenophobic neo-nationalist. He points to Trump’s intolerance towards liberal-cosmopolitan narratives of global interdependence and human rights as reason to see him as an authoritarian conservative with a strong instinct for populism. But neither, he contends, are fascists.

The socialist historian David Renton describes fascism as a reactionary mass movement that incorporates anti-Semitism, anti-socialism, and a leadership cult. One of the central theses of his new book, *The New Authoritarians*, is that the term ‘fascist’ has been too loosely used in recent years.

“Neither Donald Trump, Steve Bannon nor Nigel Farage is a fascist,” writes Renton. “Even Marine Le Pen’s electoral success has depended on a 40-year project in which the Front [National] has repeatedly distanced itself from fascism.”

How, then, should the far right be characterised from an ideological perspective?

In his new book *The Far Right Today*, the political scientist Cas Mudde begins by dividing the far right into two: the radical right, and the extreme right. This distinction is also used by another historian of fascism, Nigel Copsey. The “radical right” supports democracy, but condemns major components of liberal democracy – most notably the rights of minorities and the rule of law. The “extreme right” rejects democracy itself. Fascism falls into the second category.

For example, the radical right has argued that in Brexit negotiations, the rights of European nationals should be used as bargaining chips to force the EU’s hand and secure the sovereignty of the people. The rights of minorities – fundamental to liberal democracy – are cast aside, but democracy remains a principle all the same.

A desire to entirely remove democracy itself is much less common. It is difficult to say exactly how big the extreme right is; its members often keep a low profile or masquerade as the radical right (as the BNP does). But it is likely that its size is overstated.

Woodley says there are no overtly fascist regimes in the developed world. Griffin asserts that whilst there are “quite a few thousand neo-Nazis” in the US and Germany, they do not pose a serious threat to liberal democracy.

In recent years, where the extreme right has sought power through elections, its impact has been slight. The Greek fascist party Golden Dawn, for example, was unusually successful when it received 6 to 7 per cent in the Greek parliamentary elections of the early 2010s – but by 2019 it no longer had a single seat. It is not that fascism does not pose a threat – but conflating fascism and the far right exaggerates the size of that threat.

Why, then, do some on the left erroneously label the right as fascists?

Why does any political actor misrepresent their opponent? To win the argument. Or, as Mudde told me: “shock effect. If you can link someone to... the Nazis and the Holocaust, you don’t have to explain or justify anymore why we should fight them.” This historical context puts the terms “fascist” and “Nazi” among the most loaded and emotive insults in the English language.

It is also probably true, Mudde told me, that some on the left truly believe that their opponents are fascists. But the onus is on these people either to provide an ideological account of fascism that corresponds with, say, Trump – or to demonstrate that Trump is not just a nationalist but a revolutionary nationalist.

Distinguishing between these ideologies and being precise with our terms is not just a matter of political science. The way language is used in political discourse, and its disjunction with technical definitions, has far-reaching implications for the political dispensation and for combatting the far right itself.

When the left calls the right and its supporters fascist, the right is free to claim fake news. A mislabelled, hyperbolic accusation is easier to dismiss than nuanced criticism. This happened in 2006, when David Cameron dismissed Ukip as a bunch of “fruitcakes, loonies, and closet racists”. Far from stemming Ukip’s astronomical rise, the accusations of racism seemed to help the burgeoning party. The establishment had resorted to caricature, and in doing so it only cemented Ukip’s position as a party outside the political establishment.

Steve Bannon clearly understands this effect. In 2018, he told Front National activists: “Let them call you racists. Let them call you xenophobes. Let them call you nativists. Wear it as a badge of honour.”

This rhetoric also appears to be damaging the left’s image, causing it to appear hysterical, oversensitive, and preoccupied with marginal issues. This in turn undermines the left’s criticisms of the far right.

Renton points to the Italian left’s opposition to the then Italian prime minister Berlusconi’s pension reforms in the 1990s, which focused on the fact that Berlusconi had brought members of the National Alliance, which had its roots in the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, into his first cabinet. When the left then introduced similar laws in office, it was made to seem dishonest.

“The problem with using the term against people who aren’t actually fascists is that the left has an audience,” Renton told me, “and if people see a term being misused repeatedly, they come to distrust the left.”

The greatest danger is that hyperbole about the far right leads people to ignore the ideologies within it and that we miss a crucial opportunity to combat a force that threatens our freedoms. Any attempt

to counter misinformation and the forces that propagate it must start from a position where the truth, even with regard to one's opponents, is respected.

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P.S.

- The New Statesman. 27 JANUARY 2020:
<https://www.newstatesman.com/2020/01/left-cannot-combat-far-right-if-it-fails-understand-it>
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