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France: 'There are common features between historical fascism and the far right.'

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Sociologist of the far right, Ugo Palheta, on the risk, too often denied, of a neo-fascist project in France

Ugo Palheta, a specialist on educational issues and on domination and inequality, and a member of the 'International Migration and Minorities' unit of the Institut national d'études démographiques (INED), analyses, with justified concern, the current 'neo-fascist dynamic' at work in states that are, in principle, based on democratic principles. A trend due to the 'political effects of neoliberal counter-reforms'. With increasing social inequalities, 'the possibility of fascism', along with the sharpening of nationalisms and the intensification of racism, is a risk to be taken into account. He reminds us that the Brazilians with Bolsonaro, the Hungarians with Orban and the Americans with Trump have already had bitter experience of this. Is France next on the list?

On the eve of elections in these countries, most commentators persisted in presenting the victories of Trump, Bolsonaro or the Polish ultraconservatives of the PiS as 'unthinkable'. How do you explain this refusal to grasp these realities?

I see several reasons. One of the most important, in the global North, is that we often imagine our countries have finished with the forms of barbarism of previous centuries, even though their epicentre was mainly in Europe. Slavery, colonialism, fascism, world wars and of course the genocide of European Jews and Roma committed by the Nazis, without denying the atrocities committed elsewhere by tyrannical powers. Let us say that, in the dominant imagination of European countries, barbarism, dictatorship or policies of ethnic cleansing are reserved for distant countries in Africa, Latin America or Asia. Yet the radical 'purifying' nationalism that is fascism was born on the Old Continent and did not disappear in the rubble of Hitler's bunker in 1945, as the historian of fascism Zeev Sternhell has often reminded us.

After its post-war eclipse, in a Europe traumatised by the Second World War, fascism was forced to mutate in order to be reborn and resume its progress. From the 1970s onwards, each crisis allowed it to advance, at different rates in different countries. By focusing its activity on the electoral and media scene, it adopted the war of position, in Gramsci's sense, as a political-cultural strategy. Even if small violent groups that developed in its wake sought to hold the street and committed attacks on minorities (ethno-racial, gender, sexual) and feminist, anti-racist, anti-fascist and left-wing militants. Even bombings, in the case of some isolated fascist activists.

Would you say that there is a similar denial in France?

I would say that the denial has long been stronger in France than elsewhere, because we often imagine our country as a kind of beacon of humanity, the 'homeland of human rights'. Some historians have even claimed that France was 'allergic' to fascism in the twentieth century: because

of the deep roots of republican ideas and the existence of other traditions on the right, fascism could not have found favourable ground and therefore could not develop. But this is to forget that there were genuine and undeniable fascist mass movements in the 1930s, for example Jacques Doriot's French Popular Party, that other mass movements such as the Croix-de-Feu had more than a passing resemblance to fascism, and that the Vichy regime was a dictatorship that borrowed many of its features from fascism – especially from its Portuguese variety, Salazarism.

It is also to forget the extent to which one of the main propaganda axes of European fascisms, namely anti-Semitism, was central and endemic in French politics from the end of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. Finally, it is to forget how compatible the Republic was with the colonial enterprise, and all that this entailed in terms of dehumanisation, racial hierarchy, the confiscation of property, and so on. Features that have very much in common with the fascist project. It's not surprising, then, that the founders of the Front National included collaborationists (Pétainists) and those nostalgic for French Algeria – some of whom even boasted of practising torture during the colonial war.

What are the signs that this 'possibility of fascism', to use the title of one of your recent books, may not be so far away? That it's not 'just happening to others'? And how do digital networks increase this risk?

There are countless 'morbid symptoms', to use Gramsci's phrase. For example, there is the government's dissolution of anti-racist groups fighting against Islamophobia (CCIF and CRI), anti-colonial groups (Palestine Vaincra) and anti-fascist groups (Gale, in Lyon). [1] There are also the twin liberticidal laws imposed two years ago, under the name of 'global security' and 'against separatism', which together intensify authoritarianism and further institutionalise Islamophobia. One could also mention the anti-migration policies of several decades and their criminal consequences, or the generalised indifference towards the terrible fate of refugees and the way in which the state's repressive apparatus continuously brutalises them.

There is also the way in which political institutions function in France, with enormous power concentrated in the executive and the marginalisation of the National Assembly, which is essentially a shadow theatre: during the health crisis, all decisions were taken by the president in the Defence Council, in complete opacity. If the institutions of the Fifth Republic have always been very undemocratic, Macronism has further accentuated their most authoritarian features, to the point where we are no longer within the framework of what used to be called 'bourgeois democracy'. Finally, we must bear in mind the police violence, almost always unpunished, which is historically endemic in working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods, and which has largely intensified against social movements since 2016, and then the staggering police and judicial repression during the Gilets Jaunes movement.

You are rightly wary of anachronisms, or far-fetched and simplistic comparisons between eras. Is the term 'fascism' appropriate to describe the regimes of Trump, Bolsonaro and co? Is it also appropriate for one that might come to power in France?

It is interesting to see how many scholars are uncomfortable with comparing the contemporary far right with historical fascism, but readily use the category 'populism', which refers to past movements (nineteenth-century Russian and American populisms, or Latin American populisms) that have little to do with the far right today. In fact, there are many common features between historical fascism and these movements, with differences that justify speaking of 'neo-fascism' – if we want to be quite precise when characterising the project of most far-right organisations. That is, a new form of fascism. It is true, however, that this 'fascist' categorisation is not really appropriate to describe their rule, since they have not managed – for the moment in the case of Bolsonaro – to use their

electoral victory to profoundly transform the state and build a dictatorship. This proves that it is not enough for fascists to win an election to be ipso facto able to set up a regime that is entirely their own, because they necessarily encounter resistance (social movements, sectors of the ruling class that are resistant to an ultra-authoritarian solution out of self-interest, etc.). All the more so since the neo-fascists do not have (except perhaps in India today) the kind of mass organisations that historical fascists were able to create in the past.

In my book with Ludivine Bantigny, we speak of ‘fascisation’ to refer precisely to a process, both ideological and material, of transforming the state in a fascist direction. A neo-fascist leader or organisation can come to power without managing to complete the process of fascisation. On the other hand, this kind of process can be set in motion without fascist forces being in power; this is the way we analyse what has been happening in France for the last few years, notably with Macronism, an authoritarianism of capital that has systematically shifted to the terrain of reactionaries – such as the laws already mentioned, the ‘asylum and immigration’ law, the denunciation of so-called ‘Islamism’, etc. Obviously, the arrival in power of Le Pen would have the consequence of accelerating this process, by intensifying the subjugation and brutalisation of minorities, and the crushing of social protest movements.

Ugo Palheta’s books include *La Possibilité du fascisme. France, la trajectoire du désastre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018); *Face à la menace fasciste*, with Ludivine Bantigny (Paris: Textuel, 2022); and *Défaire le racisme, affronter le fascisme*, with Omar Slaouti (Paris: La Dispute, 2022).

Translated by David Fernbach

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P.S.

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<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5331-there-are-common-features-between-historical-fascism-and-the-far-right>

Footnotes

[1] Cf. ‘Dissolution de la Gale : une décision sans précédent’, *Politis.fr*, 5 April 2022.