

Book Review: Alberto Toscano's Fascism As It Is Now

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Review of Bill V. Mullen

Late Fascism:

Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis

By Alberto Toscano

London: Verso, 2023, 224 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

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ALBERTO TOSCANO IS a philosopher who is hoping to change the world, or at least save it from fascism.

Toscano is a professor at Simon Fraser University in Canada. He writes as a Marxist on politics, culture and communications. He has written books on fanaticism and co-edited with Brenna Bhandar an important collection of writings by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. He has also written for *In These Times* about the Far Right.

His new book, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*, is a bold, imaginative, often brilliant reconsideration of how we think about fascism, talk about fascism, and experience fascism.

Toscano seeks to liberate our understanding of fascism from what he considers narrow, constricting boundaries created by fascism's formal rise in the interwar years of the 20th century.

He believes and carefully documents that the outsized horrors of fascism especially in Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy have prevented us from thinking about how and why fascism persists into the present, and severely limited the number of people we go to as "experts" when we try to understand fascism as a political ideology.

He sets out to correct this record with four provocative propositions that form the basis of his book. These are meant to suggest that what he calls "late fascism" — roughly the period from the 1960s to the present — can only be understood by avoiding constant comparison of the present with earlier fascist states and forms.

In short, Toscano is trying to free us from the trap of historical analogy.

Fascism, Colonialism, Slavery

Toscano's first proposition is that what has been called "classical fascism" in Germany and Italy

cannot be fully understood without attention to earlier histories of settler-colonialism, chattel slavery, and intra-European racial capitalism or “internal colonialism.”

Toscano draws upon authors like Cedric Robinson, who coined the phrase “racial capitalism,” to argue that fascism in the 20th century, and by implication all fascisms, are rooted in “pre” fascist processes like slavery and European powers’ colonization of Africa and Asia.

“It is one of this book’s wagers,” writes Toscano, “that our ‘late’ fascism cannot be understood without the ‘fascisms before fascism’ that accompanied the imperialist consolidation of a capitalist world-system.”

To this argument Toscano musters authors like W.E.B. Du Bois, whose classic study of American Reconstruction described the history of slavery and colonization as precursive to the “counter-revolution of property” by white slaveowners and capitalists that both ended Reconstruction’s experiment with racial democracy, and swung wide the door for the expansion of American capitalism and imperialism.

As legal historian James Whitman has shown, the end of Reconstruction also ushered in Jim Crow race laws which became inspiration for the Nuremberg Laws of the Third Reich. Toscano’s argument also chimes with analysis by the Martiniquian Marxist Aime Césaire, whose 1951 Discourse on Colonialism argued that the violence and brutality inflicted on Jews, Romas, Africans, Socialists and queers by interwar fascist regimes had been rehearsed by European powers against colonial subjects dating back hundreds of years.

Toscano’s second proposition is that “fascism has been differentially applied, experienced and named across axes of race, gender, and sexuality.”

In a chapter called “Cathedrals of Erotic Misery,” Toscano points to the current global Far Right’s united hostility to non-binary gender forms, homosexuality, and transgender as both a legacy and deviation from classical fascism’s fetishization of gender norms.

Where classical fascism sought to harden normative gender boundaries by restricting abortion and returning women to the kitchen, “late” fascism recruits women to fascist politics by promising them “masculine” and individualist rewards, and punishes an enemies’ list of gender and sexual upstarts who constitute a threat to racial and gender purity.

As Toscano memorably puts it, “Where the migrant of colour is the avatar of the Great Replacement, the eventual extinction of whiteness and its component nations, transness is the emblem and emissary of a Great Disorder, the scrambling of sexual difference and the destruction of the family....For them, the decline of the West is gender trouble....”

“Ethnonational Rebirth” and “Fascist Freedom”

Toscano’s third proposition hews closest to traditional Marxist accounts of fascism. Fascism, he writes, “is grounded in a modality of preventive counterviolence, its desire for ethnonational rebirth or revanche stoked by the imminence of a threat projected as civilizational, demographic and existential.”

Clara Zetkin’s and Trotsky’s arguments for fascism as direct reaction against Bolshevism and Communism is here filtered through two important influences on Toscano: Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis.

It was Marcuse who as Davis's graduate school mentor in the late 1960s defined fascism as "preventative counterrevolution" against all challenges to U.S. capitalism and consumerism. Angela Davis's own writings tweaked that to "preventive" and "incipient" fascism represented primarily by what she called the "law-enforcement-judicial-penal apparatus."

Here Toscano draws on theorists of mass incarceration and racial capitalism like Ruthie Gilmore, who have put the prison at the heart of their analysis of an "anti-state state" which seeks to disavow the state's social welfare role while exponentially ramping up discipline and punishment for selective members of the population.

This line of thinking merges with Toscano's fourth proposition, a chapter titled "Fascist Freedom." Toscano challenges conventional liberal claims popularized by thinkers like Hannah Arendt that fascism (or specifically totalitarianism) was predominantly an attack on human freedom. Rather, Toscano shows how Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany drew on liberal economic theory to offer fascist capitalism as a supposed higher form of freedom.

Recovering this history allows Toscano to perceive the current global conjuncture of neoliberalism and authoritarianism as a continuation of what might be called free-market fascism. Toscano here joins a range of thinkers — from Stuart Hall to Prabhat Patnaik to Ugo Palheta — convinced that neoliberalism has been one pathway to some variant of "late fascism."

This argument also returns Toscano to a more classical Marxist framework. What he calls after Gramsci the "morbid symptoms" of our neoliberal present are offered as a clarion call for those seeking to plant their flag in opposition: "Whoever is not willing to talk about anti-capitalism" he cautions in conclusion, "should also keep quiet about anti-fascism."

Toscano describes fascism as a "scavenger" ideology cherry-picking its ideas from storehouses of reaction. Perhaps intentionally, Toscano meets this challenge with his own ecumenical assemblage of sources and ideas to interpret fascism: Fred Hampton is here along with Roland Barthes, Max Horkheimer, Sigmund Freud, Guy DeBord, Hannah Arendt, all of them purposed, as he puts it, "to theorise fascism's social and ideological dynamics, its cultures and temporalities, rather than naming or clarifying movements, regimes, or individuals."

This approach may frustrate some readers, and anti-fascist organizers, seeking to better know the enemy. The ground troops of modern-day fascism — the Proud Boys in the United States, Germany's Alternative for Germany party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India — remain largely offstage in this book. We learn little about the quotidian lives, tactics, and aspirations of the people Toscano wishes to save us from.

These methodological choices ultimately make Toscano's book more suited to thinkers than organizers, book-makers than barricade builders. But what it sets out to do, Toscano's book does magnificently: shock us into new analytical awareness of the historical, political, and philosophical forces that have produced at least 100 years now of real, identifiable and lethal fascist ideas and practices.

Refusing complacencies and platitudes of all kinds — including that the victory of either Donald Trump or Joe Biden will make a dent in the persistence of "late fascism" — Toscano throws down the gauntlet that perpetual thinking and organizing against fascism will have to take place if we have any hopes of expelling it to the dustbin of history.

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P.S.

• Against the Current No. 230, May/June 2024:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc230/fascism-as-it-is-now/>