

A Fascist in the White House?

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I've studied fascism on and off for the past forty-five years. In college I thought that New Leftists were using the word much too loosely. For example, it was common for student activists, underground newspapers, and left-wing publications to refer to Nixon and even Humphrey as fascists. But the problem with using the word as shorthand for any political opponent at all is that it makes it difficult to recognize the real fascists when they arrive. However, we are no longer in the 1960s. We now face the question, are they here in 2016? Donald Trump's election to the presidency on November 8 poses the question of fascism with a stark and pressing immediacy that it has not had, in the United States at least, since the 1920s and 30s.

Classical fascism is a European phenomenon. It began in Italy, in the aftermath of a failed workers' revolution, the occupation of the metal-working factories in 1921 in the "northern triangle" of Milan, Genoa, and Turin. The onset of fascism consisted in the formation of right-wing paramilitary squads, the *fasci di combattimento*. Consisting largely of disgruntled war veterans as well as common thugs, the *fasci* (literally bundles, but in this case squads), battled with communists, socialists, and trade unionists, beating many, killing some, and setting fire to the homes and headquarters of others. The rise of fascism continued with the former socialist, Benito Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922, his appointment by the king of Italy as head of the Italian government, and his slow and uneven consolidation of power over the following five or six years. When finished, all political parties other than the fascist party were banned, legal protections against abuse of police power were removed, special political courts were created, and Mussolini reigned supreme as *il Duce*. The fascist state took control of all means of mass communication, pioneered in the development of a modern propaganda apparatus, using the recently invented media of cinema and radio, and subordinated Italian culture in general to the fascist quest for a unified authoritarian state. The official purpose of that state was to solve the problem of class antagonism by developing "corporatist," guild-like structures integrating proletariat and bourgeoisie into the overarching unity of the nation; reinvigorate the dynamic, expansive life-force at the root of all personal and national greatness; and expand both the domestic territory of the nation and its colonial possessions by means of heroic warfare in which soldiers would exhibit their contempt for comfort, pleasure, and other "bourgeois" values by courting death as an alternative to mere animal existence. All of this would be unified by an established hierarchy of command and obedience, and by the charismatic leader in whom the "totalitarian" (Mussolini's own word) state was personified. Except for a handful of communists, socialists, and labor activists working underground, the enemies of the regime were either dead or rotting in prison after the fascists consolidated power. Probably the most brilliant mind of his generation, the Communist Party leader, Antonio Gramsci, was imprisoned for sixteen years, and finally released only to his hospital deathbed. Nevertheless, Gramsci was able to write his magisterial *Prison Notebooks* during this period, which his sister-in-law smuggled out of jail. They are indisputably one of the great contributions to twentieth-century political thought, and

include an analysis of the history and politics of fascism that bears re-reading in light of our current situation.

Hitler was inspired by Mussolini, the only man he regarded as his equal, at least until *il Duce* became a client of the Nazi regime when the American army landed in Sicily in 1943. Adolph Hitler, of course, was a bum, the impoverished son of a government clerk in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, who lived in Viennese men's hostels, and never held a substantial job. But World War I gave him the opportunity to transcend his miserable existence by facing death on the battlefield. This would also place him in the ranks of disgruntled war veterans, from whom he would recruit his earliest and most fanatical followers. In the wake of Germany's humiliation with the Treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War, and then the Great Depression that began with the stock market crash of 1929, Hitler's uncanny oratorical and mimetic ability to embody the resentment and rage of his lower middle-class supporters enabled him to emerge at the head of the new National Socialist German Workers Party. Following Mussolini's example, the party got its start by organizing paramilitary squads that battled the Left in the streets (the *Sturmabteilung*, or SA – Stormtroopers), and, somewhat later, conducted the first Nazi pogroms against German Jewry. Hitler's rise to power was also similar to Mussolini's in that it began with a parliamentary victory – his election as deputy to the Reichstag (the German parliament) and his subsequent appointment as Chancellor by the president of Germany, Hindenburg. Like Mussolini, it also took Hitler a few years to consolidate fascist state power, an effort that he accelerated by having the SA set fire to the Reichstag building, while blaming the arson on the communists. Soon after the Reichstag burned to the ground, Hitler rose to a status equivalent to that of Mussolini as *il Duce*; he became *der Führer* (both expressions mean “the leader”). Hitler proceeded to construct the Nazi state on the model of Italian fascism, but with an even greater ruthlessness, and with the significant addition of a program of racial purification that was foreign to Mussolini, and that ended in the annihilation of six million Jews.

Besides Italy and Germany, there were significant fascist movements in Austria, Hungary, England, Romania, Spain, Flanders, and Finland in the interwar period, though none of these gained control of their governments (except in Spain, in minor alliance with Franco's Falangists). France had its own native quasi-fascist movement even before the Italians, the extreme right-wing Catholic, *Action française* that rallied anti-Semitic forces during the Dreyfus affair.

Fascist parties continued to exist after the defeat of Italy and Germany in World War Two, but as largely marginal phenomena, getting nowhere near state power. A partial exception is the Italian fascist movement, which, backed clandestinely by state security forces, fought against the worker and student Left from 1968 to 1977. It took a page from Hitler's book, pursuing a “strategy of tension,” i.e., blowing up public and civilian buildings and blaming it on the Left. Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, also achieved some political success as a parliamentary deputy through her thinly veiled fascist party, Social Action. This postwar version of fascism is marked by its inability to rely on mass rallies as instruments of mobilization as well as its substitution of a terrorist underground for publicly visible squads such as the *fasci* and SA. Let's call parties of the Social Action variety, “neo-fascist.”

But we need to consider a more recent development. Over the past twenty years or so, parties have emerged, once again in Europe, that clearly have their historical origin in classical fascism, but renounce racism, anti-Semitism, and totalitarian revolution (at least for the moment) in order to operate in the relatively stable environment of representative government. By so doing, they have come close to winning state power. In fact, we are likely to see the election of one or more of these post-fascist parties soon in Germany (AfD), France (FN), or perhaps the Netherlands (PPV). The parties are nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-globalist, and anti-Islam, normally demanding, not only an end to new immigration, but the expulsion of the existing immigrant population as well, many of whom are from former colonies in Africa and the Middle East. The Brexit vote, including the party that led it, UKIP, can also be seen as a slightly muted version of this new development.

Now the question that concerns us is: Does Trump belong in this collection of classical fascist, neo-fascist, and post-fascist movements and parties, and if so, where precisely ought we to locate him? It seems to me that the best way to approach the question is to list the basic characteristics of the classical fascism of the interwar period, namely Italian fascism and German National Socialism, and to see how many of them Trump and his “movement” embody. One of the problems with the usual discussion of fascism is that people are looking for all or nothing answers. But fascism can be a matter of degree, as recent developments in Europe demonstrate. So, I am going to present a checklist for recognizing fascism and locating it on a scale of more and less fascist phenomena, with the stipulation that exhibiting one or two items on the list does not a fascist make. Fascism overlaps with many political movements. A fully fascist movement – one that repeats classical fascism – must have a check alongside each of the twelve items on this list. The fewer items that are checked, the less fascist is the person, party, or movement under consideration, and conversely, the greater the number of items checked, the closer the object of inquiry comes to the classical fascist paradigm.

There is one complication, which should already be evident from the above accounts of Italian fascism and German National Socialism. As the Marxist sociologist and political theorist, Nicos Poulantzas pointed out, there are three phases in the history of successful fascist movements: the mobilizing phase, the phase of achieving state power, and the phase of consolidating state power and its subsequent expression in a fully fascist regime. Now if Trump turns out to be some species of fascist, he has completed what must be seen as the mobilizing phase, and is now in the second phase of achieving state power (i.e., the period of presidential “transition”). Although these are the only phases for which we currently have evidence, I will nevertheless follow the analysis of Trump by speculating about the crucial third phase of consolidation.

Classical fascism involves:

- 1) Mass politics. Fascism brings people out in the streets, especially in large rallies. In this it differs from traditional conservatism of the William F. Buckley-National Review variety, which shuns the masses and is distinctly elitist in character. Although Trump’s rallies were part of his presidential campaign, they were also large, boisterous political mobilizations that made his talk of a mass “movement” something more than wishful thinking. A full point for Trump.

2) Hostility to banks and big corporations. Fascist ideology sees these as tools of underlying and more nefarious forces; Jews, Globalists, the Trilateral Commission, the Masons, the Illuminati, etc. The situation changes when fascist movements win state power, because they must then reconcile with their former big-business enemies. Trump made Wall Street a political target in his rallies, especially following release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, claiming that it was part of a globalist conspiracy to prevent him from becoming president. Another full point.

3) Populist reforms. Extension of pensions, jobs programs, and the right to employment were part of the Nazi agenda, while workers' representatives were included in Mussolini's "corporations" (labor-management councils), though limited by racial criteria in the first case and ideological criteria in the second as well as the first. Trump embraces populist reforms, including Social Security, Medicare, public works programs, and parental leave, but has not proposed racial or ideological restrictions. He would, however, withhold benefits from those without US citizenship. Let's give him half a point.

4) Idea of Revolution. Italian Fascism and German National Socialism regarded themselves as revolutionary movements. The idea of revolution involved two things: the conception of fundamental social transformation and the notion that violence in achieving it is both necessary and desirable. Trump has not adopted a revolutionary perspective. He is the opposite of avant-garde. Instead of fundamentally transforming society, he wants to return to an idealized past, i.e., to "make America great again." Zero points.

Items 1-4 are examples of what we might call "stealing the clothes of the Left." There is an old saying that goes back to the late 19th century: "Anti-semitism is the socialism of fools." Fools' socialism is evident in the name chosen by the German fascists, National Socialist German Workers' Party. But there are two caveats. First, it is important to recognize that the socialist elements incorporated into fascist programs and ideologies are parodies of genuine socialism. Racial limitations to social programs are never found on the Left, and conspiracy theories are found there less frequently and more marginally than is the case with fascism, unless you consider the critique of capitalism a form of conspiracy-mongering. A significant part of the Left in many countries and historical periods thinks of itself as revolutionary, but there is a long-running dispute among leftists about whether violence is necessary to achieve radical social transformation. Even in the case of armed left-wing revolutionary movements, the revolutionaries normally regard violence as an unfortunate necessity rather than the virtue of warriors and the vitality of the state, a common fascist position. The second caveat is that fascism jettisons its leftist elements (except mass rallies and some social programs), when in power. That is also when fascist leaders move to annihilate the "fascist Left," as when Hitler destroyed the SA – which took the Socialism part of National Socialism seriously – in the Night of the Long Knives. The destruction of its "Left" faction clears the way for the fascists' rapprochement with banks and big companies.

5) A largely middle-class base that is downwardly mobile or at least afraid of falling. The base can also include relatively well-off blue-collar workers subject to similar conditions. But in general, the majority of the industrial or manual working class tends to support the Left or centrist parties. In spite of news reports that suggest a mainly blue-collar base for Trump, most Trump supporters are middle class, although he does have the support of a good number of fairly

well-off blue collar workers, especially in areas hit hard by industrial flight. A full point for Trump.

6) Paramilitary groups under the control of the fascist party and its leader that wage a violent struggle against the movement's political enemies (the SA in Germany, the *fasci* in Italy). White supremacist militias, the KKK, and neo-Nazi groups supported Trump in the presidential race, threatened violence in case he was defeated on November 8, and have since held rallies and marches celebrating his victory. But since the militias etc. are not under Trump's command, I give him only one-half of a point.

7) Rejection of representative democracy, although this does not prevent fascists from running for office, as the history of National Socialism demonstrates. But fascists use their elected or appointed positions to destroy representative institutions. The jury is still out on this matter with respect to Trump. However, his claim that the presidential election was rigged (when he thought he was losing) and his intention to weaken the libel laws so he can sue newspapers for opposing him ought to leave us very uneasy. One-half of a point.

8) Cult of the leader. Followers regard the leader of the fascist movement as having nearly superhuman powers of intelligence, courage, perseverance, and so on. I think we have to give Trump a full point for this. He is certainly convinced of his own multifaceted superiority, and the people attending his rallies seemed to agree with him.

9) Authoritarianism. Rejection of liberal restrictions on the exercise of state power; veneration of the military, the police, and the traditional, male-dominated middle-class family. Full point for Trump.

10) Aggressive nationalism. The nation takes on the role the working class plays in genuine socialist movements. But unlike socialism, which seeks the transcendence of class society in a new, egalitarian international community, fascism renounces moral universalism. It seeks only the salvation of a specific nation-state. And that nation-state is defined by what it excludes, i.e., foreign and especially domestic enemies. According to fascist ideology, domestic enemies "stab the nation in the back" by making it possible for foreign enemies to defeat it. Trump is very much in line with this aspect of fascist ideology. For example, according to him, the political elite in both parties has weakened the nation. Clinton and Obama created ISIS. Clinton wanted to allow tens of thousands of Syrians into the US, an enormous Trojan Horse. The Republican leadership in Congress is spineless. Full point.

11) Anti-communism. The fascist movements of the period between the two World Wars were reactionary in the literal sense that they were reactions against the communist revolutions or near revolutions in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Italy, and to the threat of such revolutions elsewhere. To say the least, the collapse of the Soviet bloc has weakened communist movements in Europe and the US. Some groups on the Right in the United States still see communists under every bed, especially the one in the White House master bedroom where Obama sleeps. But they have little influence. There is no communist movement or viable communist party in the US (or Western Europe). But if a socialist movement emerges, say out of the Sanders campaign, we can be sure that many right-wing organizations, not all of them close to fascism, will accuse it of

being communist. During the campaign, Trump did not adopt anti-communism as a major theme, though he assumed that stance when campaigning among Cuban emigres in Florida. Castro's recent death has now given him the opportunity to inject the theme into international politics. One-half point.

12) The Party Principle. Finally for fascists, the party is the necessary expression and instrument of fascist politics and ideology. In its capacity for historical longevity, it even transcends the charismatic leader. Right now, the Republican Party is in disarray. Trump has not only defeated but humiliated his establishment enemies, such as Paul Ryan. He now essentially owns the party. We don't know yet what he is going to do with it. But shaping it in an overtly fascist direction is not beyond the realm of possibility. One-half point.

I have given Trump full points for items 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10, while giving him half-points for 3, 6, 7, 11, and 12 for a total of 9 1/2 of 12 possible points. So what does this make him? He does not meet all the criteria necessary to count as a classical fascist. He is not a neo-fascist of the post-war Italian variety because he has no underground terrorist apparatus, and is able to mobilize tens of thousands of supporters at rallies. And he is also not a post-fascist of the contemporary European sort because he embraces rather than avoids racist tropes, however much he might preserve a margin of plausible deniability. Trump represents a unique kind of non-classical fascism rooted in the specific history of the United States as well as the social, economic, and political conditions of the present. His racism draws from a tradition of repression of Black people that goes back to antebellum slavery, an anti-Latino sentiment older than the Mexican-American War, and an anti-Muslim attitude that is especially appealing to the revanchist Christian Right. His aggressive masculinity is consonant with the similar posture of Italian and German fascists, especially the SA and *fasci* shock troops, and the German *Freikorps* before them and certainly thrills the still-marginal white supremacist militias, KKK, and neo-Nazi groups in the US. But it also appeals to the desire of the US Christian Right to undo the advances made in recent decades by women as well as the gay, lesbian, and transgender populations.

Under our current historical circumstances, it may be impossible for fascist movements to repeat themselves in classical interwar European form. If that's the case, then no viable movement will exhibit all twelve items on the list. But that does not prevent the idea of fascism from being an indispensable tool of political analysis, especially in the current period,

Let me end by pointing to some developments to watch for as Trump enters the period of consolidation of power that may indicate a move toward institutionalized state fascism:

1) An attempt to distance himself from his populist program in the interest of rapprochement with Wall Street and the world of Big Business in general. I hasten to add that this does not necessarily mean that he will abandon all of his reforms. But a shift in allegiance to the economic establishment he railed against in his campaign is to be expected as Trump consolidates his power. Indeed he has already named a hedge fund manager, a corporate lobbyist, and a former banker with Goldman Sachs to his transition team, and will almost certainly appoint an established Wall Street figure as Treasury Secretary.

2) Attack on liberal protections against the exercise of repressive state power. Alteration of the libel laws, allowing repression of newspaper and other reporting. End of the right of Democrats in the Senate to filibuster. Maximization of rule by presidential decree. Use of the NSA surveillance apparatus against political enemies. The end or significant erosion of protections against police violence. Purge of the general staff of the army and other branches of the military. Appointment of Supreme Court justices whose principal charge is to engineer a return to the heterosexual, male-dominated family. In this respect, Trump's choice of Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions as Attorney General is already a move in the direction of intensified repression. Sessions, whose history of racist comments led the Senate to block his appointment to a federal judgeship by Ronald Reagan, is a strong supporter of mandatory sentencing, and a critic of the American Civil Liberties Union, Black Lives Matter, and the NAACP. Several members of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division have announced plans to resign if the Senate approves Session's appointment. Mike Pompeo, Trump's choice for director of the CIA, is an advocate of expanded surveillance. And his Chief Security Advisor, Lt. General Mike Flynn, has called Islam "a cancer," supports a ban on Muslim immigration, advocates water-boarding, and carries a chip on his shoulder against the military establishment for being forced to resign from his post as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

3) Increasing significance of the party. Political elimination of establishment opposition within the Republican Party (Ryan, McCain, etc.). Transformation of the party in Trump's image. None of this has happened yet, and Trump will face serious opposition from some congressional Republicans if he tries to move in this direction, but such a move remains a possibility.

4) Domination of the means of mass communication. Development of a state-friendly media apparatus. Public money for Breitbart and Fox News perhaps, or significant private funding brokered by the state. Increased sophistication in propaganda in response to the need to reach the majority of the U.S. population. Trump's appointment as Chief Strategic Advisor of Stephen Bannon, former director of the Alt Right internet news site, Breitbart, could provide a bridge between the federal government and media of the extreme Right.

We need to be aware that we are moving rapidly, from the mobilization stage, through that of acquisition of state power, to the very dangerous period of its consolidation. It is important to remember, however, that the United States includes a multiplicity of diverse political and civil-society institutions that are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to subordinate to a single totalitarian principle or power. In addition, an active anti-Trump movement in support of those threatened by Trump's nativism and racism is already in the early stage of development. Finally, Trump's blue-collar supporters will be judging him on his ability to restore jobs to devastated industrial areas as well as reverse wage-stagnation for those already employed. It would be disastrous for the Left to make the liberal error of rejecting these people as uneducated or immoral "white trash." Many of our future supporters are among them, as long as we abandon the posture of moralistic condemnation or condescension and make a concerted attempt to win them to our side as comrades in a common struggle.