

## Prisoner prophet: revisiting George Jackson's analysis of systemic fascism | MR Online

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The rise of Donald Trump has brought talk of fascism to the forefront. While comparing U.S. Presidents to Hitler is certainly nothing new—both Obama and W. Bush were regularly characterized as such by their haters—Trump's emergence on the national political scene comes at a very peculiar moment in U.S. history. In response to this seemingly hyperbolic trend, Godwin's Law has become a well-known rule of thumb, proclaiming that "as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1."

Anyone that has participated in an online political discussion knows Godwin's Law to be reliable. It is almost inevitable that folks will compare modern-day politicians to a perceived authoritarian figure (most popularly, that of Hitler). Claiming this law is a way to shame those who make the comparison, as if it has reached the level of the boy who cried wolf, growing increasingly nonsensical as time goes on.

Enter Trump, a man who reached the highest office of the land by appealing to fascistic tendencies, both through his projections and by the misdirected pool of angst that has accumulated during capitalism's late stage—neoliberalism. Under a neoliberal agenda that has dominated the political landscape since Reagan, capitalism has been unleashed like never in history, leading to massive inequality, obscene amounts of wealth being transferred from public coffers to private hands, and an overall erosion in American life that effects everything from medical care and debt to education and public utilities.

The unleashing of the capitalist system has left many financially desperate and hopeless. And it has left most wondering why things are so bad. Capitalism has shaped every aspect of American culture, including the ways in which we view and think about the world. One of the most penetrating notions is that of individualism. American life has long been tied to ideas of "rugged individualism," "exceptionalism," and "pioneering" and "exploration." Over centuries, the country's collective psyche has owned this—to the point where systemic problems are routinely framed as individual ills, and broad areas of study are reduced to "generalizations" by snarky social media comments. Thus, the most important tool we have as historians, social theoreticians, and activists—systemic analysis—has been essentially shut down by dominant culture.

The term "systemic fascism" may seem redundant to some, but the redundancy has become necessary to combat the individualistic modes of thinking that have trapped much of the American public. This framing tendency has never been more evident than in the liberal obsession with Trump, the individual. Even among sectors of the Left, who have joined in the liberal chorus, everything has become about Trump—Trump the racist, Trump the fascist, Trump is destroying America, Trump is an embarrassment to the highest office in the land, our problems are due to Trump. These sentiments are the result of a collective myopia that is produced by capitalist culture and its hyper-focus on the individual—a key propaganda tool that is used to not only obscure the reasons that most of us struggle, but also to avoid any sort of collective solution to our problems.

On August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971, George Jackson was shot and killed by a prison guard in San Quentin during an alleged escape attempt. He was 29 years old. Jackson, who was imprisoned a decade earlier on an armed-robbery charge, died three days before he was to begin a murder trial stemming from the death of a guard. A year earlier, Jackson made national headlines when his 17-year-old brother, Jonathan Peter Jackson, had attempted an armed insurrection at the Marin County Courthouse in San Rafael, California in order to free the "Soledad Brothers" (George, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette), the trio of inmates who were accused of killing the guard in retaliation for the murder of three Black prisoners a month prior.

Jackson was a scary figure in the American conscience. On the heels of a tumultuous decade that included a fierce Civil Rights movement, a corollary black power movement, and a series of liberation movements rooted in radical democracy, the country was still reeling. Major figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X were known by all, but many of the radicals working in the trenches of these revolutionary movements were discarded, both through a deliberate erasing from above and a general fear of facing hard truths about American history and society.

During his time in prison, Jackson developed and refined thoughtful analysis through voracious reading that informed his experience as a Black man growing up in a white-supremacist society. While he became known more for the violent incidents that were destined along his revolutionary path, Jackson was a prolific writer and theorist, particularly on the topics of capitalism and fascism. Along with fellow prisoner W. L. Nolen, Jackson founded the Black Guerilla Family, a black liberation organization based in Marxist and Maoist theory. Jacksons' ideological formation had taken place with the help of Nolen during the late 60s while in San Quentin. As he later explained in his collection of prison letters, "I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels, and Mao when I entered prison, and they redeemed me."

While other valuable works on systemic fascism—most notably Robert Paxton's 2004 *The Anatomy of Fascism*—have made their rounds during Trump's political emergence, Jackson's analysis has remained largely uncovered. To continue to ignore it would be a mistake for two reasons. First, it comes from a genuine working-class view, unadulterated and immune from the confines of academia. In other words, Jackson's insight was formed purely from a place of organic class-consciousness and subsequently refined and confirmed through self-study. Second, it comes from the view of a hyper-marginalized member of the working class from within the epicenter of imperialism. As a Black man in America, and thus a subject of America's internal colonization, Jackson could not ignore the powerful, underlying effects of white supremacy on the class nature of systemic fascism. The unique history of American slaves and descendants of slaves makes this inclusion an absolute necessity for any analysis of American fascism.

## Capitalism and State Repression

Understanding fascism as the inevitable systemic conclusion to Americanism is crucial. Only then can one realize that Trump is not "bringing fascism to America," but rather that fascism was built into the American project from day one. The most reductive way to view fascism as a process is to gain an understanding of the social and economic systems that breed not only extreme hierarchies, but also extreme forms of domination and subjugation within these hierarchies. In the United States, the most influential system is capitalism. It exceeds all else, including politics and government, because it is rooted in the one thing that dominates all else—money. Capitalism concerns itself with two goals: growth and profit. In its narrow-minded pursuit, things like humanity, democracy, freedom, liberty, Earth, and the environment cannot be considered. They are nuisances to be co-opted or destroyed. And, the late stage of capitalism that we are living through is the culmination of this co-optation and destruction.

In order to understand the systemic fascism that is rising before our eyes, we must understand the historical seeds of Americanism that have provided it with a fertile breeding ground. Jackson understood this better than most, as laid out in his two prominent works, *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. The authoritative nature of capitalism, which relies on inherently dominant mechanisms of private property and labor exploitation, is key in this development, as has been seen in four major phases: (1) capital accumulation that has produced a completely unchecked capitalist class, (2) a formation of the corporate state through the literal purchasing of governmental institutions by the capitalist class, (3) increasing economic hardship for a majority of Americans, and (4) a complete reliance on state violence both home (militarized policing) and abroad (imperialism/war) to control working-class angst and develop new markets outside of the United States to replace living-wage labor.

As early as 1970, Jackson recognized this coming era because he understood America's roots and the historical trajectory of capitalism. More specifically, he recognized the emergence of monopoly capitalism as a formative stage in the transition from bourgeois democracy to the early stages of fascism. "The trends toward monopoly capital began effectively just after the close of the Civil War in Amerika. Prior to its emergence, bourgeois democratic rule could be said to have been the predominant political force inside Amerikan society," explains Jackson. "As monopoly capital matured, the role of the old bourgeois democracy faded in process. As monopoly capital forced out the small dispersed factory setup, the new corporativism assumed political supremacy. Monopoly capital can in no way be interpreted as an extension of old bourgeois democracy. The forces of monopoly capital swept across the Western world in the first half of this century."

This transition opened the door for the neoliberal era, which began shortly after Jackson's death and was designed to cement the capitalist system in a newly formed corporate state. The most obvious elements of this pattern are that of political cooptation and direct state repression.

"Corporative ideals have reached their logical conclusion in the U.S. The new corporate state has fought its way through crisis after crisis, established its ruling elites in every important institution, formed its partnership with

labor through its elites, erected the most massive network of protective agencies replete with spies, technical and animal, to be found in any police state in the world. The violence of the ruling class of this country in the long process of its trend toward authoritarianism and its last and highest state, fascism, cannot be rivaled in its excesses by any other nation on earth today or in history.”

The ultimate expression of this state repression is, and always has been, found in the nation’s criminal justice system. With the advent of laws, so-called rights, criminal procedures, police, courts, and prisons, the illegitimate systems of dominance (such as capitalism and white supremacy) have long been given a façade of legitimacy, and thus have become naturally classist and racist. In the end, these systems of so-called justice only target those at the bottom of socioeconomic hierarchy, serving the same purpose that a head on a spike served in Medieval times—a warning against all those who dare challenge the embedded power structure. Jackson elaborates,

“The hypocrisy of American fascism forces it to conceal its attack on political offenders by the legal fiction of conspiracy laws and highly sophisticated frame-ups. The masses must be taught to understand the true function of prisons. Why do they exist in such numbers? What is the real underlying economic motive of crime and the official definition of types of offenders or victims? The people must learn that when one “offends” the totalitarian state it is patently not an offense against the people of that state, but an assault upon the privilege of the privileged few. Could anything be more ridiculous than the language of blatantly political indictments; “The People of the State vs. Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee” or “The People of the State ... vs. Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins.” What, people? Clearly the hierarchy, the armed minority.”

This national system of domination and incarceration mimics its international cousin of imperialism, which exists to serve capitalism by carving out new markets, gaining control of resources, and forcing populations into wage servitude. This process comes full circle from its international face (imperialism and foreign occupation) into a national face (domestic occupation and mass incarceration). Jackson continues,

“In order for capitalism to continue to rule, any action that threatens the right of a few individuals to own and control public property must be prohibited and curtailed whatever the cost in resources (the international wing of the repressive institutions has spent one and one-half trillion dollars since World War II), whatever the cost in blood (My Lai, Augusta, Georgia, Kent State, the Panther trials, the frame-up of Angela Davis)! The national repressive institutions (police, National Guard, army, etc.) are no less determined. The mayors that curse the rioters and the looters (Mayor Daley of Chicago has ordered them summarily executed in the streets) and ignore the fact that their bosses have looted the world!”

In terms of domestic authoritarianism, the ultimate tool is the prison system. In the United States, especially following a series of 1960s radical grassroots movements once referred to by the ruling class as an “excess of democracy,” much of the state’s repressive apparatus has transformed from covert (i.e. COINTELPRO) to overt (prison industrial complex, “The New Jim Crow”). Jackson had pinpointed this repressive institution prior to its massive expansion that began in the 1980s, providing insight to both the capitalist underpinnings of the prison system and the cultural baggage that comes with it.

“The purpose of the chief repressive institutions within the totalitarian capitalist state is clearly to discourage and prohibit certain activity, and the prohibitions are aimed at very distinctly defined sectors of the class—and race—sensitized society. The ultimate expression of law is not order—it’s prison. There are hundreds upon hundreds of prisons, and thousands upon thousands of laws, yet there is no social order, no social peace. Anglo-Saxon bourgeois law is tied firmly into economics. One can even pick that out of those Vital Statistics. Bourgeois law protects property relations and not social relationships. The cultural traits of capitalist society that also tend to check activity—(individualism, artificial politeness juxtaposed to an aloof rudeness, the rush to learn “how to” instead of “what is”)—are secondary really, and intended for those mild cases (and groups) that require preventive measures only. The law and everything that interlocks with it was constructed for poor, desperate people like me.”

Jackson recognized the inherent connection between authoritarianism and capitalist modes of production, and most specifically the working class’s subordinate relationship to capital. This systemic class analysis is something sorely missing today, further obscured by the focus on Trump as an individual phenomenon capable of shaping society. Uncovering these important roots comes in the deduction of capitalism as an inherently fascistic system, reliant on the forced separation of the masses from the land, and thus feeding on coerced labor since day one. “The nature of fascism, its characteristics and properties have been in dispute ever since it was first identified as a distinct phenomenon growing out of Italy’s state-supported and developed industries in 1922,” Jackson writes. “Whole libraries have been written around the subject. There have been a hundred

'party lines' on just exactly what fascism is. But both Marxists and non-Marxists agree on at least two of its general factors: its capitalist orientation and its anti-labor, anti-class nature. These two factors almost by themselves identify the U.S. as a fascist-corporative state."

## **Redirecting Revolutionary Rage Into Empty Outlets**

An important part of Jackson's analysis is the role that is played by moderates and liberals within a political system that is arranged for the specific purpose of placing everyone in a war for inches—a war that is fought on a predetermined battleground which benefits the ruling class, whether the capitalists themselves, the military industrial complex, the prison industrial complex, or the politicians that exist to protect these embedded systems. In other words, electoral and legislative reforms are designed to appear as "progress" atop a landscape where meaningful/revolutionary progress has been rendered structurally impossible. This lesson is perhaps the most valuable for today's Left which, despite decades upon decades of evidence to the contrary, continues to give in to delusions of electoral and legislative potential.

As Jackson tells us, "elections and political parties have no significance when all the serious contenders for public office are fascist and the electorate is thoroughly misled about the true nature of the candidates." This applies to candidates from both capitalist/imperialist parties whom are (knowingly or unknowingly) the products of carefully-constructed systems of dominance. The point of the Constitution, Bill of Rights, three branches of government, and all their "checks and balances" was not to promote and encourage real democracy, a government of and for the people, but rather to obstruct such a thing, therefore "protecting the opulent minority from the majority." Within this arrangement, protest is allowed, voting is allowed, relative free speech is allowed, and even some forms of civil disobedience are allowed because such actions can be contained and rendered harmless from a structural point of view. Thus, fascistic tendencies have been allowed to flourish under the cover of liberal democracy, evidenced by the fact that any activity which develops as a true threat to its growth is brutally shut down.

"Fascism has established itself in a most disguised and efficient manner in this country. It feels so secure that the leaders allow us the luxury of a faint protest. Take protest too far, however, and they will show their other face. Doors will be kicked down in the night and machine-gun fire and buckshot will become the medium of exchange. The establishment does everything in its power to ensure that revolutionary rage is redirected into empty outlets which provide pressure releases for desires that could become dangerous if allowed to progress...

One has to understand that the fascist arrangement tolerates the existence of no valid revolutionary activity. It has programmed into its very nature a massive, complex and automatic defense mechanism for all our old methods for raising the consciousness of a potentially revolutionary class of people. The essence of a U.S.A. totalitarian socio-political capitalism is concealed behind the illusion of a mass participatory society. We must rip away its mask. Then the debate can end, and we can enter a new phase of struggle based on the development of an armed revolutionary culture that will triumph."

Under bourgeois democracy, elections largely represent an illusion of choice but still allow for some short-term concessions from the ruling class, if only as a way to quell inevitable clashes. Since the emergence of monopoly capital and neoliberalism, elections have become even less effective, rarely leading to even minor reforms or concessions. In fact, "with each development in the fascist arrangement," with each vote for representatives within this arrangement, "the marriage between the political elite and economic elite becomes more apparent. The integration of the various sectors of the total economic elite becomes more pronounced." This natural fusion was never more realized than in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time of historic capitalist crisis and political upheaval. Jackson illustrates the liberal response to the mass desperation that struck the land, ultimately choosing to solidify the capitalist hierarchy at the expense of the revolutionary moment and the prospects of radical democracy:

"There was positive mobilization of workers and the lower class, and a highly developed class consciousness. There was indeed a very deep economic crisis with attendant strikes, unionizing, lockouts, break-ins, call-outs of the National Guard. The lower class was threatening to unite under the pressure of economic disintegration. Revolution was in the air. Socialist vanguard parties were leading it. There was terrorism from the right from groups such as Guardians of the Republic, the Black Legion, Peg-leg White-type storm troopers and hired assassins who carried out the beginnings of a contra-positive suppressive mobilization. Under the threat of revolution, the ruling class, true to Marxian theory, became all the more co-optive and dangerous. F.D.R. was born and bred in this ruling class of families. His role was to form the first fascist regime, to merge the

economic, political and labor elites. Governing elites/corporative state/fascism—his role was to limit competition, replace it with the dream of cooperation; to put laissez faire to rest, and initiate the acceptance of government intervention into economic affairs.”

## **The Only Real Resistance to Fascism is Socialism**

In discussing the emergence of monopoly capitalism, Jackson echoed the later theoretical developments of Malcolm X by recognizing an inevitable war between the oppressed of the world and their oppressors. “To fight effectively, we must be aware of the fact that the enemy has consolidated through reformist machination the greatest community of self-interest that has ever existed,” Jackson tells us. While the forces of monopoly capital, white supremacy, and imperialism gained strength, an “opposite force was also at work, i.e., ‘international socialism’—Lenin’s and Fanon’s—national wars of liberation guided not by the national bourgeois but by the people, the ordinary working-class people.”

As capitalism in mature form, fascism can only be effectively countered by socialism—the development of radical democratic economies where the people own the means of production and operate them in a way that benefits all of society, eliminating the brutal competition for basic human needs for which capitalism has thrived on for so long. And socialism must develop in a way that represents a formidable attack against the absurd levels of capitalist brutality we are witnessing, which include an arsenal of weaponry and resources, and the will to cause mass environmental and human destruction like never before. In other words, as the default conclusion to capitalism, fascism can only be countered with deliberate, conscious, and forceful organizing. Jackson elaborates:

“At its core, fascism is an economic rearrangement. It is international capitalism’s response to the challenge of international scientific socialism. It developed from nation to nation out of differing levels of traditionalist capitalism’s dilapidation. The common feature of all instances of fascism is the opposition of a weak socialist revolution. When the fascist arrangement begins to emerge in any of the independent nation-states, it does so by default! It is simply an arrangement of an established capitalist economy, an attempt to renew, perpetuate and legitimize that economy’s rulers by circumflexing and weighing down, diffusing a revolutionary consciousness pushing from below. Fascism must be seen as an episodically logical stage in the socio-economic development of capitalism in a state of crisis. It is the result of a revolutionary thrust that was weak and miscarried—a consciousness that was compromised.”

Socialism, as a radically democratic system, must develop from below. It must do so in a way that overcomes the dark forces created throughout dominant culture by capitalist degradation and alienation. As a country defined by a racial caste system which has obstructed class consciousness, we must recognize that any class struggle formed absent a crucial understanding of white supremacy is doomed to fail. Because, without recognizing and eliminating these internal divisions rooted in conditioned fear, the working class will remain a splintered and impotent force against fascist advancement. Ultimately, ours is a material struggle, but it is one that has been fortified on a “psycho-social level.” Jackson provides crucial insight,

“We are faced with the task of raising a positive mobilization of revolutionary consciousness in a mass that has “gone through” a contra-positive, authoritarian process. Racism enters, on the psycho-social level, in the form of a morbid, traditional fear of both blacks and revolutions. The resentment of blacks, and conscious or unconscious tendencies to mete out pain to blacks, throughout the history of Amerika’s slave systems, all came into focus when blacks began the move from South to North and from countryside to city to compete with whites in industrial sectors, and, in general, engage in status competition. Resentment, fear, insecurity, and the usual isolation that is patterned into every modern, capitalist industrial society (the more complex the products, the greater the division of labor; the higher the pyramid, the broader its base and the smaller the individual brick tends to feel) are multiplied by ten when racism, race antagonism, is also a factor. There is certainly no lack of evidence to prove the existence of an old and built-in character assassination of programmed racism (what class controls the nation’s educational facilities, prints the newspapers and magazines that carry the little cartoons, and omits or misrepresents us to death?) has always served to distract and defuse feelings of status deprivation suffered by the huge sectors just above the black one. Then also to account for the seemingly dual nature recognizable in the authoritarian personality (conformity, but also a strange latent destructiveness), racism has always been employed as a pressure release for the psychopathic destructiveness evinced by a people historically processed to fear, to feel the need for a decision-maker, to hate freedom.”

In conclusion, Jackson provided us with an optimistic call to action just prior to his death, urging the working-class masses to squash fascist tendencies and conflicts within our milieus, while keeping our collective eye on

the prize—a new society for all people, built on cooperation and a mutual respect for all life.

“There must be a collective redirection of the old guard—the factory and union agitator—with the campus activist who can counter the ill-effects of fascism at its training site, and with the lumpenproletariat intellectuals who possess revolutionary scientific-socialist attitudes to deal with the masses of street people already living outside the system. They must work toward developing the unity of the pamphlet and the silenced pistol. Black, brown and white are all victims together. At the end of this massive collective struggle, we will uncover our new identity, the unpredictable culmination of the revolutionary process. We will be better equipped to wage the real struggle, the permanent struggle after the revolution—the one for new relationships between people.”

Understanding the systemic nature of fascism, while certainly daunting, should not be disheartening. It provides us with the truth behind the dark days we are witnessing. It allows us to uncover the roots to our current place in history. And, most importantly, it gives us a material perspective on where we've been, where we are, and where we're heading as a nation—replacing the hopelessness of confusion with the purposefulness of understanding. George Jackson is one of many revolutionary prophets who dedicated his life to passing on the insight needed to take control of our collective future—a future that will be determined by our conscious, deliberate actions from this point forward, and ours alone. A future that must be won through a hardened attack against powerful people guarding centuries-old systems of oppression. Cowardice, inaction, apathy, and infighting may ultimately be our downfall, but George Jackson and others like him made sure that ignorance is not.

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