

Understanding and Locating Fascism

Common Characteristics of Fascist Movements

- Motivated primarily by backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution
- Fears of left and political gains
- Characterizes themselves as being a voice of the “people”
- Capitalizes on sense of alienation and disenfranchisement, often finding sympathizers in rural and working-class who then scapegoat the Other(s) who are typically more vulnerable
- Looks for sense of belonging and affirmation of identity that has often been lost due to economic instability, weakened labor unions, loss of job/status
- Create “cult of personality”--take on the aura of invincibility
- Glorify nation/national power and the “greatness” of the nation while fanning flames/encouraging xenophobia
- Disregard international law
- Grounded in fears of difference, disdain for modernity and intellectualism
- Romanticize and privilege “tradition”
- Harness the power of spectacle and cultivate media for propaganda purposes
- Seeks to simplify complex social issues

Stages of Fascism

Robert Paxton, a professor of history at Columbia University, identifies five stages of fascism, which may help us diagnose our current moment from a theoretical background:

- 1) The initial creation of fascist movements
 - Prefaced by a backlash to liberal progress, usually brought about through social reforms
 - Capitalizes on a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement, proto-fascist movements scapegoat the “Other” through a national identity that opposes these progressive gains (e.g. Paxton locates a possible genesis of fascism in the Ku Klux Klan’s rise during Reconstruction.)
- 2) The rooting of fascist movements in political parties
 - Happens rarely, marks a fascist movement’s rooting in the political mainstream
 - Often characterized by a period of political deadlock, inadequacy of liberal state which appears in decline
- 3) The acquisition of power
 - Coup attempts alienate the military and police, and the Left is better at direct action anyway
 - Fascists must cooperate with conservative elites (and vice versa) in order to gain power
 - Fascists are *invited* to power because the government is jammed by polarization, leaders are afraid they cannot keep a politically mobilized population under control, and conservatives are unwilling to work with the Left but unable to defeat it on their own
- 4) The exercise of power
 - Unlike authoritarianism (where power is concentrated), fascism is marked by a four-way struggle for rule between the fascist leaders, their party, the state institutions (departments, police, judges, etc.) and traditional elites (churches, business, etc.)
 - The party sets up “parallel institutions” outside the official state, e.g. militias, secret police
- 5) Radicalization or entropy
 - Entropy: Fascist Italy eventually subsided into “routine” authoritarianism
 - Radicalization: Nazi Germany carried out its “ultimate fantasies of racial cleansing”

Contemporary Considerations

- ❖ Fascism lends itself to truncated tools of new social media--memes, twitter posts (which makes the fact that Trump uses Twitter frequently worthy of note)--fascism promises simple solutions in a complex world (that is often the appeal) such that it easily distilled and disseminated via memes/Twitter
- ❖ This moment is likely to once again bring up the debates and tensions between liberal-left and radical-left (particularly related to tactics) yet political alliances are crucial now
- ❖ Maintain an international and historical perspective
- ❖ Don't get bogged down in fighting with people on "our side" - don't gloss over differences or ignore important debates but spend most of our time and energy focused on fighting against what's wrong and building our vision of a just society
- ❖ Continue to prioritize and support the leadership of marginalized people (queer/trans, people with disabilities, people of color, women, working class and poor people, people with less formal education, etc.)
- ❖ Look for opportunities to build across sectors, in order to strengthen and grow One Big Movement (e.g. connecting fight against police violence to tenant organizing to educational justice)
- ❖ Build movements that are independent from the main political parties (e.g. Democrats) – this is not a comment on whether or not people should work to reform the Democratic party since people will make different choices about that. But overall our organizations should remain independent of the main parties.
- ❖ Use a wide variety of tactics – including the willingness to be disruptive and shut down the ability of the system to function (blockades, strikes, occupations, etc.)
- ❖ Include arts & culture, which keep people connected to life, freedom and spirit (why we are fighting in the first place)
- ❖ Do not place too much faith in "democratic institutions" (legislative process, courts, etc.) (particularly given the structural racism embedded in them).
- ❖ Use moments of crisis for bold experimentation – putting out of vision for a just world and building spaces where that vision is built now
- ❖ Move beyond/outside the "activist mentality" to engage in more radical unionism, greater understanding of poverty and of poor people's movements; disrupt and discard middle-class condescension

Resistance Tactics

- ❖ Protect communities (such as mosques, Planned Parenthood...)
- ❖ Counter-recruit
- ❖ Write literature in language for lay-people
- ❖ Find commonalities in basic human needs--not just survival needs but for freedom, dignity, feeling safe in public...
- ❖ Rapid Response Networks
- ❖ New Sanctuary Movement
- ❖ Public shaming (reveal connections of those in power to fascist, white supremacist, white nationalist (etc.) groups as a way to ferret them out and expose them)

Questions to consider:

What characteristics of fascism are present or missing in the US at this time?

What resistance tactics are likely to be effective or ineffective for us, here and now?