The Changing Face of Anti-Fascism

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By Spencer Sunshine (/author/itemlist/user/51878), Truthout | Report

Immigrant workers and volunteers protest outside Trump Hotel Las Vegas, on October 19, 2016. (Photo: Todd Heisler / The New York Times)

The mainstream media have given a lot of coverage to today's organized racist and fascist groups -- especially the far-right coalition of fascists, white nationalists and other Trump supporters that refers to itself as the "alt-right" -- but most media have ignored the new wave of antifascism. Antifascism has been around for as long as

fascism has, and antifascists -- also known as "antifa" -- are mostly left-wing activists who track and counter-organize against fascists and other far-right activists. In the last year, the antifascist movement has grown exponentially in the United States. And the movement -- which was the first to warn about the "alt-right" -- has changed both in terms of the complexity of its approach, and composition of its membership, compared to its recent past.

The last heyday of the organized US racist movement was in the 1980s through the mid-1990s. The movement had two wings: one that appealed to the mainstream, and one that engaged in violent, aggressive attacks. This wave of organized racism did not break on its own. The more radical wing, in particular, was opposed by antifascist groups like Anti-Racist Action (ARA), (https://antiracistaction.org/history) SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) and RASH (Red and Anarchist Skinheads) (http://focused-arrows.blogspot.com/). These largely started as local groups to beat off the first wave of Nazi skinhead gangs that had tried to take over the punk rock scene. Nazi skinheads, an incredibly violent movement, murdered at least 40 people (https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/01/16/american-skinheads-fighting-minorities-and-each-other/7807cc0e-9136-4e99-9c9c-67d358244634/?utm_term=.67cf6d5d256c) between 1988 and 1996. As part of their work, antifascist groups also gained a rough reputation, engaging in direct confrontation with Nazi skins and organizing rowdy counter-demonstrations against racist marches. The antifascists also successfully fought the Nazi takeover of the punk rock scene, either driving them entirely out or forcing them into isolated and marginalized corners.

ARA had 200 groups (https://issuu.com/randalljaykay/docs/antiracistactionbulletinoctober2001) at its height in 1997. Many of these groups were in the United States; others were in Canada and Latin America. But the far right had already hit its peak, and by the mid-2000s most of the ARA groups disappeared. However, in the late 2000s and the early part of this decade, a handful of new antifa groups formed -- such as Portland, Oregon's Rose City Antifa (http://rosecityantifa.org/) and NYC Antifa (https://nycantifa.wordpress.com/) -- which looked and acted differently. A symbol of this change was the widespread adoption of the label "antifa" by US groups, in place of "anti-racist." In 2013, the ARA Network folded and was superseded by the Torch Network (https://torchantifa.org/), but some local groups continue to use the ARA name. Starting in late 2015, in tandem with Trump's success, a wave of new anti-fascist groups has sprung up. In 2014, there were less than two dozen US antifa groups, primarily located in the big urban left-wing

hotspots; today there are groups all over the country, including Lincoln, Nebraska, (https://antifagreatplains.wordpress.com/) and Central Pennsylvania (https://centralpaantifascist.wordpress.com/).

Newer antifa groups have a much more complex range of tactics and politics than their immediate precursors. For example, in the '90s, antifa were largely punks and skinheads in their teens and twenties, and for many it was their first political experience. Today, that demographic has changed. For example, none of the members of the Chelsea East Boston Antifascist Coalition (CEBAC), founded the day after Trump's election, had an antifa background. What they did have was political experience as activists on immigration, LGBTQ, reproductive rights and fat positivity. CEBAC has said, "Our diverse identities as queer, formally undocumented, Middle Eastern, Latino, mother, Jewish, were all components in the formation of this group and the desire to fight fear with preparedness."

In the old days, the model was to form a "crew" -- usually of young men -- to combat Nazi skinheads. As the years went on, these crews started to develop beyond this model and engaged in more educational work. Some groups used an early form of "doxxing" -- the practice of revealing personal information about someone (such as phone numbers and addresses) -- and occasionally ARA used the legal, but very personal, tactic of having demonstrations outside of the homes of known racist organizers.

Today, antifascists still engage in direct confrontations -- but this has become less of a central focus and more like one tool in a toolbox. In most cities, the Nazis have left the punk scene, so there are fewer places where fascists and antifa directly battle it out for the same, contested terrain. There have been clashes against public racist and fascist events in the last year -- including in Atlanta, Anaheim and Sacramento. But public marches have also become a less favored tactic for the racist right, many of whom have instead concentrated on holding academic-style conferences, publishing journals, making podcasts and using social media. In tandem with this shift, antifascists have greatly increased their work on intelligence gathering, doxxing and pressure tactics.

There are several reasons for this change in the antifascist approach.

Collapse of State and Regional Monitoring Groups

The 1980s and 1990s saw a number of national-level "monitoring groups" -- organizations that tracked and countered the far right, including the Southern Poverty Law Center (https://www.splcenter.org/) (SPLC), Political Research Associates

(http://www.politicalresearch.org/), the Center for Democratic Renewal and Anti-Defamation League (http://www.adl.org/). With access to a larger funding base, these groups produced documentation about Klan, Nazi and other racist organizing. The SPLC, which continues to monitor organized racist and fascist groups today, pioneered innovative lawsuits which bankrupted major racist leaders, including Tom Metzger's White Aryan Resistance (https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/berhanu-v-metzger), the United Klans of America (https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/donald-v-united-klans-america) and the Invisible Empire (https://www.splcenter.org/seeking-justice/case-docket/mckinney-v-southern-white-knights).

But in addition to these national organizations, an array of local, state and regional groups existed. These included Georgia's Neighbors Network (https://radicalarchives.org/2013/01/16/neighbors-network-publications/); Portland, Oregon's Coalition for Human Dignity; the Montana Human Rights Network (http://www.mhrn.org/) and North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence. Activists in these groups were able to produce detailed local documentation about far-right organizing, and engage in a hands-on, grassroots organizing approach from inside their communities.

Before the rise of the internet, monitors had to attend racist rallies in person; photography was risky and expensive; and to get access to racist magazines, you had to open post office boxes under false names and purchase their literature. Some members -- who, of course, had to be white -- would infiltrate racist rallies and organizations in person. Monitoring was an expensive, risky and time-intensive practice.

But as the large wave of organized racism receded, so did both the urgently felt need -- and available funding -- for mid-level groups. Most folded by 2000 or soon after, with the Montana Human Rights Network as the rare exception. The national groups have also changed. Of the older national-level monitoring groups, the SPLC is the sole organization that continues to be focused primarily on documenting and advocating against organized racist and fascist movements. (While the Anti-Defamation League, Political Research Associates and former members of the Center for Democratic Renewal -- now working with the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (http://www.irehr.org/) -- continue to do monitoring work, their primary focus has shifted to different forms of right-wing activism or other matters.)

Due to these changes, antifa groups have largely taken on the role of the mid-level state and regional organizations that had disappeared. Antifascists produce the majority of research on, and opposition to, local racist organizing -- work these more mainstream organizations used to do. In fact, today antifa groups are often the only local groups doing tracking and counter-organizing against organized racists. NYC Antifa says, "In New York City, no mainstream groups do anything when fascists have public events." If one wants to learn about local racist organizing, they are better off looking at local antifascist blogs, as one won't get this information from the local liberal nonprofits.

Using the Internet for Monitoring

Today, the internet -- and social media in particular -- has changed both far right recruitment and monitoring. Racist publications are easily available to potential members -- but also to monitors. Far rightists proudly proclaim their allegiances on discussion boards and social media networks, and engage in "online radicalization (https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/19/unrepentant-and-radicalized-online-look-trial-dylann-roof)" -- but this also allows antifascists to track participants in these groups. Racists stream videos of their own events and put their pictures online, greatly reducing the dangerous task of surreptitious photography.

Once personal information is compiled, a favored tactic is now doxxing: publishing photos and personal information online. Despite Trump's mainstreaming of racism, the public taboo against open advocacy of white supremacy remains, and most racist activists take pains to hide their identities. Being "outed" can ruin family and social relationships, as well as cause problems at work.

Antifascists also use doxxing to expose racist groups that engage in attempts to cross-recruit from the Left, as well as to expose racist bands -- music being a main avenue of racist recruitment. Antifa also pressure venues (https://nycantifa.wordpress.com/2016/05/28/shut-down-the-pro-nazi-rac-oi-fest-tonight-at-the-black-bear/) to cancel the bands -- or face boycotts. Getting a reputation for being a "Nazi club" is not good for business in most cities.

The European Antifa Movement

The European anti-fascist movement has been one of the influences on the current rising movement in the US, and it is also the origin of the "antifa" name. In many countries, antifascism is a mass social movement of its own. In Germany in particular, groups exist in all cities -- Berlin, for example, is home to multiple groups. While

European antifascist groups also do fight trainings and organize mass demonstrations against racist groups, they have a much stronger emphasis on educational and cultural work than their US counterparts.

People-of-Color-Led Social Movements

Grassroots people-of-color-led social movements, especially the immigrant rights movement, Black Lives Matter and #NoDAPL, have also changed antifascist organizing. These movements have helped antifascists reorient from primarily being in the punk rock scene to positioning themselves as part of a larger, multi-layered struggle against white supremacy as it exists throughout the United States. While these social movements engage in organizing against multifaceted forms of structural oppression in our society, antifa focus on the self-conscious fascist and white nationalist movements. One often sees antifascist flags at immigrants' rights protests and Black Lives Matter demonstrations.

Despite these shifts in antifascist organizing, the one thread that remains is that it takes far-right organizing more seriously than the mainstream media. As early as 2005 (https://radicalarchives.org/2010/11/15/griffin-na-as-wn-trojan-horse/), antifascists warned that aesthetic and intellectual changes in far-right organizing were afoot. In 2010, antifascist researcher Matthew Lyons had already analyzed (http://threewayfight.blogspot.com/2010/09/alternativerightcom-paleoconservatism.html) how Richard Spencer's Alternative Right website was offering a new approach, commonly referred to as the "alt-right." Antifascists held demonstrations in Washington, D.C., against Spencer's National Policy Institute conference in both 2013 (http://onepeoplesproject.com/index.php/en/archive/88-the-so-called-qalt-rightq/1274-natl-policy-institute-2013-the-fall-begins) and 2015 (http://idavox.com/index.php/2015/11/03/ghouls-hold-halloween-white-supremacist-conference-in-washington-d-c/). If the media had paid more attention to antifascist insights and organizing, it would have been less surprised by the rise of the alt-right.

Today, contemporary antifascists draw from a more diverse background of participants and use an expanded array of tactics to confront organized racist currents. Mainstream media and liberal activists ignore the work of the antifascist movement at their own peril. With the rapid expansion of fascism, antifascism is looking to be an increasingly important social movement in the US political landscape.

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