

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES ANTI-RACISM ACTIVISM FASCISM

Anti-Fascists Will Fight Trump's Fascism in the Streets

In stark contrast with many liberals, antifa activists refuse any dialogue with Trumpism.

By Natasha Lennard

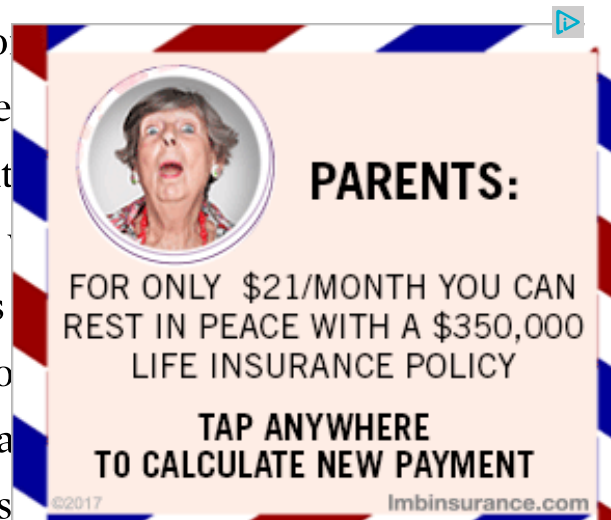
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Anti-Racist Action protesting neo-Nazis holding anti-immigration rally in Smith County, Texas. (AP Photo/Tyler Morning Telegraph, Tom Turner)

To call Trumpism fascist is to suggest that it demands from us a unique response. We *can* deploy the “fascism” moniker to Trump’s ascendance by recognizing features like selective populism, nationalism, racism, traditionalism, the deployment of Newspeak and disregard for reasoned debate. The reason we *should* use the term is because, taken together, these aspects of Trumpism are not well combated or contained by standard liberal appeals to reason. It is constitutive of its fascism that it demands a different sort of opposition.

Liberals cling to institutions, faithless electors, they see late-night talk-show debates, investigations and justice interference and business grasp at hypotheticals about things not as they in fact are tied to the mythos of Reason



deranged. Meanwhile, it is the radical left—so often tarred as irrational—who are calling upon both US and European histories of anti-fascist action to offer practical and serious responses in this political moment. For all the ink spilled about rising fascism, too little has been said about anti-fascism.

Anti-fascist, or antifa, doesn’t only delineate that which opposes fascism. It is a set of tactics and practices that have developed since the early 20th century (and the

rise of fascism in Italy) as a confrontational response to fascist groups, rooted in militant left-wing and anarchist politics. As organizers from anti-fascist research and news site Antifa NYC told *The Nation*: “Antifa combines radical left-wing and anarchist politics, revulsion at racists, sexists, homophobes, anti-Semites, and Islamophobes, with the international anti-fascist culture of taking the streets and physically confronting the brownshirts of white supremacy, whoever they may be.” As with fascisms, not all anti-fascisms are the same, but the essential feature is that anti-fascism does not *tolerate* fascism; it would give it no platform for debate.

The history of anti-fascism in 20th-century Europe is largely one of fighting squads, like the international militant brigades fighting Franco in Spain, the Red Front Fighters’ League in Germany who were fighting Nazis since the party’s formation in the 1920s, the print workers who fought ultra-nationalists in Austria, and the 43 Group in England fighting Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists. In every iteration these mobilizations entailed physical combat. The failure of early-20th-century fighters to keep fascist regimes at bay speaks more to the paucity of numbers than the problem of their direct confrontational tactics.

A more recent history of antifa in both Europe and the United States illustrates the success these tactics can have, particularly when it comes to expunging violent racist forces from our neighborhoods and defending vulnerable communities, while also creating networks of

support that do not rely on structurally racist law enforcement for protection against racists. Anti-fascist tactics focused primarily around physical force proved effective in forcing neo-Nazi groups out of entire neighborhoods in Europe and the United States in the 1980s. Back then, as longtime organizer and member of the Industrial Workers' World General Defense Committee (GDC) Kieran Knutson told *The Nation*, fascist and anti-fascist formations grew out of youth subculture scenes. Taking on and largely defeating neo-Nazi gangs, multi-racial crews of anti-racist skinheads and punks coalesced and grew into semi-formal Anti-Racist Action (ARA) chapters nationwide. "At its peak, in an era without cell phones or internet, ARA had over 100 chapters across the US and Canada," explained Knutson, adding that students, older leftists, feminists and more joined efforts to counter a broader group of racist organizations, from the white power music scene to KKK rallies. The network faded in the 2000s, drifting in part to the anti-globalization movement, but as Knutson "the several thousand veterans of this movement are still out there—many still involved politically in anti-racist, feminist, queer, labor, education and artistic projects."

The need for this sort of community and street resistance will not be contingent on Trump carrying out repressive policies—the emboldening of far right racists is a *fait accompli*. At the end of November, the Southern Poverty Law Center released a report documenting nearly 900 separate incidents of hate crimes.

1 MOST POPULAR
1 ALYNCHING ON THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND CAMPUS

2
2 DEMOCRATS ARE LAUNCHING A COMMISSION TO PROTECT AMERICAN DEMOCRACY FROM

against immigrants, Latinos, African Americans, women, LGBT people, Muslims and Jews in the ten days that followed Trump's win.

3

**TRUMP
TAKE IT FROM ME, A DELTA
EMPLOYEE: PASSENGERS AND
WORKERS ARE IN THIS FIGHT
TOGETHER**

Physical confrontation is just a small aspect of antifa direct action, but the history of anti-fascist, anti-racist

4

**THIS IS A THUNDERBOLT OF
RESISTANCE**

action is not one of so-called alt-right protests of disapproval or donning safety pins. Fascism is imbued

5

**THESE PROTESTERS ARE
HITTING TRUMP WHERE IT
ACTUALLY HURTS**

with violence and secures itself politically through the use or threat of it, so it is inevitable that anti-fascists

have to countenance some involvement in violence themselves," wrote M. Testa, author of *Militant Anti-Fascism: A Hundred Years of Resistance*.

The ability to "countenance" some involvement with violence is itself a privilege that so many people of color and LGBTQ individuals in this country cannot enjoy—violence is not countenanced but systematically thrust upon them. The question of whether the counter-violence should be a tool of resistance in the Trump era will no doubt cleave some anti-Trump unities currently breaching the liberal center, the left, and far left. Those of us who long before Trump have defended counter-violence against oppression—as in Ferguson, as in Baltimore, as in Watts, as in counter-riots against the Klu Klux Klan, as in slave revolts—know where we stand. The number of people willing to engage with explicitly anti-fascist organizing and rhetoric has certainly increased with Trump's rise, "As an empirical measure, our Twitter followers have almost quadrupled from the beginning of this year," organizers for NYC Antifa told

me via e-mail, “new groups are popping up everywhere, and we are fielding requests from all over the country about how to get involved.” Whether this means a significant number of people are willing to engage in anti-fascist physical confrontation in Trump’s America remains to be seen.

“We don’t think it’s useful to rehash the same old [violence versus non-violence] arguments,” NYC Antifa noted. “If Trump tries to register Muslims and engage in mass deportations, a Change.org petition is not going to stop it.” (Indeed, mass deportations and the mass surveillance of Muslims under the Obama administration would not have ended with a petition either.)

But the old canard of violence versus non-violence is already finding a new twist: whether or not to give the racist, anti-Semitic, Nazi Richard Spencer a platform. The NPI held their annual conference

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fascist activists exposed the event, its attendees, and where its members were dining, and attempted to not only protest but disrupt and shut down the conference, as well as Spencer’s dinner plans (succeeding, at least, in dousing the white nationalist in “a foul smelling liquid”). News and monitoring sites like NYC Antifa, Anti-fascist News and It’s Going Down have been reporting on the NPI, exposing their members and their conferences since before Trump’s candidacy. “Now that Steve Bannon, who has positioned himself as a champion of the alt-right, is heading to the White House, the NPI’s

seig-heiling and fashion sense is a trending topic covered by most major media outlets,” NYC Antifa noted, “Yet, for the most part, all these journalists do is reproduce Spencer’s sentiments, which he frames in liberal rhetoric to gain appeal, and feign outrage. Our approach is to expose and confront them.”

The forms of physical force that served against neo-Nazis in the street in the 1980s are harder to deploy against the contemporary suit clad neo-Nazi holding a conference with professional security details, or a position in the White House. It will be an uphill battle to beat the alt-right in the dromological battlefield of social media resonance. For one, fascism lends itself to meme form, as fascist form itself purports to give a simple solution to a complex problem; memes aren’t inherently fascist, of course, but their reductive format is well-suited to fascist content. Leftists have reductive phrases and catchphrases, too, and no one would diminish the popularity of Birdie Sanders. But weaponizing meme form is, I believe, easier for a political project that itself takes the form of reduction and over-simplification.

The antifa task, I believe, is not to make better memes, but to expose the fascists behind the Pepe avatars, reveal their connections, and chase them away. Committed neo-Nazis deserve no more privacy than they deserve public platforms, or safety, even though antifa groups have been known to grant second chances. “We’ve had success with this tactic, and have gotten people to leave groups who did not want to be publicly shamed,” the

NYC Antifa organizers told *The Nation*. “One guy’s boss was Jewish and he didn’t want it known he was working with Holocaust deniers. We took him off our website after he promised to leave the group he was in. We believe second chances are important—our goal is to get people to leave racist and fascist movements.”

The alt-right might not seek us in the streets, and might trounce us in trolling, but disruption, confrontation, doxxing and altercation remain tactics anyone taking seriously a refusal to normalize Trump-era fascism should consider. Liberals who reject such a strategy in defense of the right to free of speech and assembly engage in an historical NIMBYism, in which only in the past, or in other countries, has militancy against white supremacy been a legitimate resistance. They forget, too, that while the First Amendment ensures that the government will not interfere with free speech, this has no bearing on neo-fascists having the right to be heard or countenanced by the rest of us. For the radical left, no such bad thought takes hold, because militant tactics against white supremacy never stopped being necessary—in the fight against slavery, Jim Crow, red-lining, and mass incarceration—with or without explicit white nationalists in center political stage.

As a recent statement from Antifa NYC noted, “Before the election, collectives in different cities were organizing in support of people dealing with exploitative bosses and slumlords, With larger participation, these networks could become increasingly viable in a post-

Trump world.” Founded by a cadre of activists in New York who grew close during Occupy in 2011, anarchist community space, The Base, opened three years ago as a hub for autonomous organizing around prisoner solidarity, offering support for local residents facing abuse and coercion from landlords, reading groups, self-defense trainings, and more. Following Trump’s victory, the number of people joining their projects has skyrocketed.

Eight months ago, a number of organizers from The Base launched the Rapid Response Network, which aims to establish neighborhood groups, connected via a hotline, that can provide safety, first aid, and assistance in the event of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on undocumented individuals, as well as a physical presence and defense from in the event of racist street attacks. Such networks have been a staple of anti-fascist, militant anti-racist organizing—deployed by anti-state groups from the Black Panthers to the Anti-Racist Action skinheads battling an upsurge in neo-Nazi gang violence in the 1980s. “When we held our first training meeting, 15 people turned up. Since the election that number has quadrupled. Two hundred people have expressed interest on Facebook for the next session. We’ve had to find a bigger venue and add sessions” a Rapid Response Network organizer and founder who goes by Layla told *The Nation*. (It is common for anarchist and antifa groups, eschewing individualism and facing harassment from active neo-Nazi groups to refuse to give full names to the press; I’m respecting that here).

Alongside efforts like the Rapid Response Network, which focuses on neighborhood defense, activist collectives are working with interfaith groups and churches in cities around the country to create a New Sanctuary Movement, continuing and expanding a 40-year-old practice of providing spaces for refugees and immigrants, which entails outright refusal to cooperate with ICE. Anti-fascist mobilizations are forming voluntary networks like Community Action Team NYC (CATNYC) which are willing to travel to different neighborhoods and physically confront the rising tide of racist violence and harassment.

Since networks like RRN and CAT are still in their developmental stages, Trump's inauguration is an opportunity—with regards to spectacle—to set the tone of resistance to come. On January 21, the day *after* the inauguration, an expected 200,000 people are expected to march in DC in the "Women's March," which, according to original organizers is "not a protest" but an effort to "send a bold message to our new administration on their first day in office, and to the world that women's rights are human rights," which they (wrongly) suggest "transcend politics." It will be a show of solidarity and togetherness, a presence far better than an absence. A policy platform released by march organizers last week offers a progressive and strong message of intersectional feminism. However, a procession of hundreds of thousands of people moving through barricaded streets carrying props and banners can be easily forgotten and ignored—the most historically large marches in recent

history have failed to pass muster in history making beyond their size alone. When the status quo is not threatened, its upholders tend not to listen. We rallied in our peaceful millions against the Iraq War, too. The Women's March nevertheless promises to bring thousands of people together—at worst a liberal parade, at best a jumping of point for the necessary work of local organizing to begin. If it is not a site of protest, I hope it will still be a place of politicization.

Meanwhile on January 20, the call for the actual inauguration day is unequivocal protest. More than 50 anarchist, anti-fascist, anti-racist groups from across the country have called for a [#J20 Disruption](#). “We call on all people of good conscience to join in disrupting the ceremonies. If Trump is to be inaugurated at all, let it happen behind closed doors, showing the true face of the security state Trump will preside over,” the announcement reads, “We must take to the streets and protest, blockade, disrupt, intervene, sit in, walk out, rise up, and make more noise and good trouble than the establishment can bear. The parade must be stopped. We must delegitimize Trump and all he represents.” One member of the “D.C. counter-inaugural welcoming committee” commented anonymously that housing space for 1,000 visiting radicals, in both church halls and houses, had been organized by their group alone. New York anarchists are raising funds to rent whole buses to attend. And, as historic anti-fascist mass protest dictates, there are plans for a large black bloc—a spectacle both

intentionally threatening and anonymizing. The expectation of altercation with Trump supporters who will also descend on DC is high.

The different approaches to the Inauguration suggest a cleaving in responses to Trump along well worn liberal, liberal-left and radical-left fault lines when the need to build political alliances is urgent. The decision to join the Women's March or Disrupt #J20 should not be a benchmark for division. This line instead should only be drawn when someone, in professed name of democracy, would sooner condemn or even imprison anti-fascist, anti-racist actors before they would see a ceremony affirming and buoying fascism meet with interference.



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9 COMMENTS

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