

MAKING SENSE OF FASCISM

BY MATTHEW N. LYONS



EDITOR'S NOTE

This is an abridged version of Matthew N. Lyons' essay "Two Ways of Looking at Fascism," originally published in the July 2008 issue of *Socialism and Democracy* (Vol. 22, No. 2), available online at:

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We believe this essay provides an extremely valuable analysis of the class politics, ideology, and historical evolution of fascism. For all the recent popularity of antifascism, there has not been a particularly strong increase in our analyses of fascism. Right now, the far right is pivoting from four years in power with the Trump administration to a more outsider and system-oppositional position. Less traditional and more insurgent right-wing tendencies like the Boogaloo movement are quickly gaining popularity, obfuscating some of the conventional lines between the left and the right. We believe the analysis presented here can help us understand these changes taking place and inform our revolutionary antifascist organizing going forward.

We wanted to bring this analysis to a wider audience and were concerned that the length and density of the original essay would be a barrier to some people. In an effort to make the essay more accessible, we shortened the essay by about half and lightly edited the remainder for clarity and continuity. We also omitted all of the footnotes. In doing so, the essay loses some of its detail and specificity, as well as some of Lyons' critique and elaboration on the material he discusses. We encourage you to read the full essay and further explore the authors and ideas that he discusses and cites in the footnotes there.

In addition, we recommend Lyons' book *Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right's Challenge to State and Empire* (PM Press and Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2018), as well as the antifascist blog *Three Way Fight*, to which Lyons is frequent contributor (<http://threewayfight.blogspot.com/>).

-- The Editors

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INTRODUCTION

Fascism is an important political category, but a confusing one. People use the word fascism in many different ways, and often without a clear sense of what it means. While many types of authoritarian and militaristic policies are a serious threat, they're a world apart from fascism's volatile mix of oppression and anti-elitism, order and insurgency. Fascism doesn't just terrorize and repress; it uses twisted versions of radical politics in a bid to "take the game away from the left," as neo-Nazi leader Tom Metzger urged his followers in the 1980s. We need different strategies to fight these different forms of right-wing authoritarianism, and we need a political vocabulary that lets us tell them apart.

Claims of fascism tend to reflect two underlying problems. The first is the idea that fascism is essentially a tool or strategy of big business to defend capitalist rule, and the second is vagueness about what delineates fascism from other forms of capitalist repression.

Fascism is an important reference point—not just as a developed political force but also as a tendency or potential within broader movements. It is both distinct from and at odds with top-down capitalist authoritarianism. In addition, while fascism takes shape in a capitalist context, it isn't a functional consequence of capitalist development, analogous to imperialism. Rather, it is a political current, which—like socialism, liberalism, or conservatism—embodies its own set of ideas, policies, organizational forms, and bases of support. Like all major political currents, fascism exists in multiple variations and evolves dynamically to address new historical conditions. This means that no definition of fascism is the one true, final answer. But defining—or at least describing—fascism can help us to grasp fascism's key features, delineate its relationship with other forces, and explore how it develops and how it can be fought.

This essay offers a concept of fascism that speaks to its double-edged reality—bolstering oppression and tyranny but also tapping into real popular grievances and overturning old conventions and forms of rule. To do this, I bring together two distinct but complementary approaches. First, I draw on a current within Marxist thought that emphasizes fascism’s contradictory relationship with the capitalist class. As a movement or a regime, fascism attacks the left and defends class exploitation but also pursues an agenda that clashes with capitalist interests in important ways.

These independent Marxist writers are strong in analyzing fascism’s class politics—its relationship with capital and other class forces, its roots in capitalist crisis, and its impact on the socioeconomic order. They are weaker in discussing fascist ideology, which is important for positioning fascism within the political right and for understanding why people—sometimes millions of people—are attracted to fascist movements.

To address these issues, I next draw on the work of Roger Griffin, who treats fascism as a form of revolutionary nationalism that attacks both the left and liberal capitalist values, an approach that resonates strongly with some of the most promising leftist discussions of fascism. Griffin’s focus on ideology neglects fascism’s structural dimensions but offers a helpful complement to a class-centered analysis.

Lastly, I offer a new draft definition of fascism that incorporates aspects of both approaches and discuss how this hybrid vision can help us understand fascist movements and tendencies today.

CLASS POLITICS

From Bonapartism to Right-Wing Revolution

Many Marxists have treated fascism as a tool of big business to defend capitalism in times of crisis. There have been several different versions of this approach. The Communist International (Comintern) argued in the late 1920s that fascism wasn't really a distinct political movement, but rather a counterrevolutionary trend within all bourgeois parties. This meant that the rising Nazi movement in Germany posed no specific danger. In fact, it was more important for Communists to fight against the Social Democratic Party to win workers to revolutionary politics. This conception blocked German Communists from seeking an alliance with Social Democrats against their common Nazi enemy—the one thing that could have saved Germany from Nazi rule at that point.

After Hitler's rise to power, the Comintern shifted course and declared that "Fascism is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital." By identifying fascism with a specific wing of the capitalist class, this approach soon contributed to a new Popular Front strategy of broad anti-fascist alliances with Social Democrats and liberal capitalists. In practice, this meant abandoning revolutionary politics for liberal reformism. Over the following decades, this definition became the most well-known and influential leftist definition of fascism.

However, these approaches oversimplify fascism's complex relationship with capitalism. Certainly, both Italian and German fascists received crucial support in winning state power from sections of the business community, the military, and the state apparatus. Once established, the fascist regimes aided capitalism and boosted profits by suppressing the left, smashing the labor movement, and—at first—stabilizing the economy and society. Both Mussolini's and Hitler's governments initially included some traditional conservatives as junior members, and old elites kept control of some sectors, such as the army. The "radical" wings of the fascist movement that wanted to challenge old elites more directly were either frustrated,

as in Italy, or suppressed, as in Germany.

But as the fascist regimes consolidated themselves, the capitalist class increasingly lost political control: it lost the power to determine the main direction of state policy. Fascism installed a new political elite that advanced its own ideological agenda. While capitalists remained an important constituent in the overall system of rule, they were progressively reduced to a reactive role at the level of national policy, adapting themselves to the fascists' agenda, not the reverse.

British Marxist historian Timothy Mason in "The Primacy of Politics" (1966) argued that "both the domestic and the foreign policy of the National Socialist government became, from 1936 onwards, increasingly independent of the economic ruling classes, and even in some essential respects ran contrary to their interests."

In Mason's view, the representatives of capital handed state power to Hitler in the mistaken belief that they would be able to retake it once the Nazis had crushed the left and restabilized civil society. During the first few years of Nazi rule, business elites played little role in shaping foreign or military policy but continued to control economic policy. But starting in 1936, the Nazis intensified rearmament and demanded economic self-sufficiency for Germany. Leaders of heavy industry opposed this shift toward economic isolation because they relied on international trade. The shift not only "broke the economic and political supremacy of heavy industry," it also "meant an end to the formation of any general and unified political will or representation of interests on the part of German capital . . . all that was left were the special interests of individual firms," but big business lost its collective voice as a player in shaping overall policy.

Capitalists took advantage of the rearmament drive and the German military victories to expand, increase profits, and smash foreign competitors. But the overall direction of the Nazi war policy was based on political aims, not economic ones.

In this context, Mason emphasized, the Nazi state pursued ideo-

logically driven goals—the genocide and mass enslavement of Jews and other peoples—that were “in flat contradiction to the interests of the war economy.”

The dynamic under Italian Fascism was strikingly similar. Historian Franklin Hugh Adler describes how Mussolini’s regime helped industrialists to intensify workplace exploitation and control—both by destroying working-class organizations and by overruling the Fascist movement’s own syndicalist wing. At the same time, the Fascist state pursued a long series of policies that industrialists did not initiate and did not want, from overvaluing the lira’s exchange rate to imposing a corporatist bureaucracy on the economy, from encouraging Italians to move to the countryside and have lots of babies to allying with Hitler against Britain and France.

Adler’s discussion suggests that capitalists held onto more political power under Italian Fascism than they did under German Nazism. But in both cases they increasingly lost control of core government policy.

Mason’s analysis meshes closely with the Bonapartism theory of fascism first proposed by August Thalheimer in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Thalheimer rejected the Comintern’s campaign against “social fascism” and called instead for broad-based working-class defense against the Nazis through extra-parliamentary action.

Thalheimer argued that the fascist dictatorship, like that of Louis Bonaparte, represented “the autonomisation of the executive power,” in which the capitalist class gave up control of the state in order to protect its socioeconomic status.

Like Bonapartism, Thalheimer argued, fascism came to power after “an unsuccessful proletarian onslaught ended with the demoralization of the working class, while the bourgeoisie, exhausted, distraught and dispirited, cast around for a saviour to protect its social power.” Parliamentary governments helped lay the groundwork for fascism with their own anti-labor repression, but fascism itself “only begins at the point when and where the bayonet becomes independent and turns its point against bourgeois parliamentarians as well.”

Thalheimer saw the fascist party, like Louis Bonaparte's Society of December 10th, as consisting of "socially uprooted elements from every class, from the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the urban petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the workers," while the fascist militia paralleled the Bonapartist army, "and like it provides a source of livelihood for the socially uprooted." Fascist ideology echoed Bonapartism in its nationalism, rhetorical denunciations of economic and political elites, and glorification of the heroic leader.

Thalheimer regarded fascism as inherently unstable, a regime pulled simultaneously in opposite directions. "Fascism, like Bonapartism, seeks to be the benefactor of all classes; hence it continually plays one class off against another, and engages in contradictory maneuvers internally."

Hungarian Marxist philosopher Mihaly Vajda incorporated a Bonapartist approach into a general theory of fascism in his book *Fascism as a Mass Movement*, which was published in 1976.

Vajda argued that fascism is "a capitalist form of rule" in which "the bourgeoisie does not itself exercise political power, and. . . lacks a voice in the decisions of those who are ruling politically." Vajda asserted that "fascism in no way restricted the bourgeoisie's economic power within the factory. It did not thwart their economic interests and even helped them obtain increased satisfaction." On the other hand, fascism "creates extraordinary political conditions and replaces normal bourgeois everyday life with a situation of constant tension, and the bourgeoisie finds this at least 'uncomfortable.'" Beyond that, fascism "openly contradicts the interests of the ruling class in some cases," specifically in the conduct of World War II.

Vajda addressed several other aspects of fascism, such as its social psychology and the contrasting historical functions it served in Italy and Germany. He emphasized that a fascist regime comes to power as a mass movement, which gives it both organized popular support and a recruiting pool for the new political elite. The fascist movement centers on combat organizations such as the stormtroopers, whose paramilitary activism is the driving force in fascism's bid for state power.

Vajda also argued that fascism has a distinctive ideology: a form of aggressive, totalistic nationalism. Within the nation-state, this doctrine subordinates “every kind of particularity to the ‘total,’ ‘natural-organic’ whole, ‘the nation’”; externally, it promotes national uplift “even at the expense of the very existence of other nations.” Fascist ideology negates bourgeois democracy and liberalism and rejects the principle of human equality in favor of national chauvinism or racism. But fascist ideology does not challenge the principle of private property; therefore its vision of national unity “is not a negation of the basis and framework of the existing class society.”

The 2002 book *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement* is concerned with fascism today as much as “classical” fascism—its points of reference are not just Hitler and Mussolini but also the World Church of the Creator and Alexander Dugin, Israeli West Bank settlers and the Taliban.

The primary essays by Don Hamerquist and J. Sakai, respectively, emphasize that fascism is an independent political force, not a capitalist puppet or policy. But Hamerquist and Sakai go much further than this, presenting fascism as a right-wing revolutionary force. In Sakai’s words, “Fascism is a revolutionary movement of the right against both the bourgeoisie and the left, of middle class and declassed men, that arises in zones of protracted crisis.” It is not revolutionary in the socialist or anarchist sense: “Fascism is revolutionary in a simpler use of the word. It intends to seize State power for itself . . . in order to violently reorder society in a new class rule.”

Hamerquist and Sakai argue that most leftists seriously underestimate fascism’s potential to attract mass support within the United States and worldwide. Capitalism’s developing contradictions create growing opportunities for a resurgence of fascist movements. Fascism is a dynamic political force that includes a range of factions and tendencies and is evolving in response to changing conditions. Fascist groups feed on popular hostility to big business and the capitalist state, and some of them present an oppositional militance that looks more serious and committed than that of most leftist groups today. The main danger of fascism today, Hamerquist ar-

gues, is not that it will seize power, but that it “might gain a mass following among potentially insurgent workers and declassed strata through an historic default of the left” causing “massive damage to the potential for a liberatory anti-capitalist insurgency.”

A related danger that Hamerquist raises is a convergence between fascists and sections of the radical left. He points to leftward overtures from sections of the far right, and tendencies within much of the left that mesh dangerously with fascism, such as male supremacy, glorification of violence, leader cultism, hostility to open debate and discussion, and elitism.

Hamerquist warns that U.S. fascist groups are actively organizing around a number of issues that leftists often consider to be “ours,” such as labor struggles, environmentalism, opposition to police repression, U.S. imperialism, and corporate globalization. As Sakai points out, both Mussolini and Hitler galvanized people largely by attacking established elites and promoting an anti-bourgeois militance that seemed much more exciting and dynamic than conventional left politics.

Both Hamerquist and Sakai argue that fascism’s radical approach shapes its relationship with capitalism. Sakai describes fascism as “anti-bourgeois but not anti-capitalist.” Under fascist regimes, “capitalism is restabilized but the bourgeoisie pays the price of temporarily no longer ruling the capitalist State.”

Sakai argues that fascism radically reshapes the capitalist social order to create an economy of “heightened parasitism”: “a lumpen-capitalist economy more focused on criminality, war, looting and enslavement.” He also links fascism to middle-class and declassed strata threatened or uprooted by rapid social and economic change—historical losers who hate the big capitalists and want to get back the privilege they used to have.

Hamerquist takes fascist anti-capitalism more seriously. He notes that current-day fascist movements encompass various positions on how to relate to the capitalist class, from opportunists who want to cut a deal, to pro-capitalist revolutionaries who want to pres-

sure big business into accepting fascist rule, to some Third Positionists who want to overthrow the economic ruling class entirely. However, where it has been tested, fascist anti-capitalism has meant opposition to “bourgeois values,” specific policies, or a “parasitic” wing of capital (such as “Jewish bankers”)—not the capitalist system. On the other hand, it would be dangerous for leftists to dismiss the prospect of a militantly anti-capitalist fascism simply because it doesn’t fit our preconceptions.

As Hamerquist reminds us, Marx warned that the contradictions of capitalism might end, not in socialist revolution, but in “barbarism,” “the common ruin of the contending classes.” Fascist revolution could be one version of this scenario.

Hamerquist and Sakai agree that we need to rethink old leftist assumptions about fascism’s racial politics. As Hamerquist puts it, “there is no reason to view fascism as necessarily white just because there are white supremacist fascists. To the contrary there is every reason to believe that fascist potentials exist throughout the global capitalist system. African, Asian, and Latin American fascist organizations can develop that are independent of, and to some extent competitive with Euro-American ‘white’ fascism.” Coupled with this, some white fascists support Third World anti-imperialism or even disavow racial supremacy.

Sakai notes that the mass displacement of Black workers over the past generation, coupled with the defeat of 1960s left Black radicalism, has fueled an unprecedented growth of authoritarian rightist organizations in the Black community. Sakai also argues that fascism’s key growth area now is in the Third World, where “pan-Islamic fascism” and related movements have largely replaced the left as the major anti-imperialist opposition force.

Unfortunately, Sakai and Hamerquist have little to say about what fascism means for women. All fascist movements are male supremacist, but they have embodied a range of doctrines on women and gender issues, both traditionalist and anti-traditionalist, and even including twisted versions of feminism. Fascism has sometimes recruited large numbers of women as active participants, largely by

offering them specific benefits and opportunities—in education, youth groups, athletics, volunteer work, and certain paid jobs—even as it sharpened and centralized male dominance.

For a fuller and more systematic look at what makes a movement fascist and how it relates to other right-wing forces, I turn now to someone outside the Marxist tradition.

IDEOLOGY

The Myth of National Rebirth

British historian Roger Griffin is a self-described liberal who has drawn on a wide body of historical material to develop an innovative theory of fascism. His approach builds on the work of historian George Mosse, whom he credits with “establishing several points which herald a new phase in fascist studies”:

First, though Nazism is to be conceived as unquestionably a manifestation of generic fascism, it is no longer to be seen as paradigmatic or its quintessential manifestation. Second, at bottom fascism is neither a regime, nor a movement, but first and foremost an ideology, a critique of the present state of society and a vision of what is to replace it. Third, when this vision is dissected it reveals fascism to be a revolutionary form of nationalism . . . Fourth, its ideology expresses itself primarily not through theory and doctrines, but through a bizarre synthesis of ideas whose precise content will vary significantly from nation to nation but whose appeal will always be essentially mythic rather than rational. Equally importantly, it is an ideology which expresses itself through a liturgical, ritualized form of mass political spectacle. Like Mosse, Griffin takes seriously fascists’ own statements of belief. He argues that an analysis of fascist ideology should be based on how its proponents themselves articulate a social critique and vision, which is crucial for understanding what draws people to support fascist movements.

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Another basic premise of Griffin's work is that "generic" fascism (as opposed to the specific Fascism headed by Mussolini) is a theoretical construct that can only approximate historical phenomena. Definitions of fascism, Griffin argues, are not objectively "true" in the descriptive sense—rather, they are more or less useful as conceptual frameworks for interpreting and classifying events and mapping relationships.

Griffin's definition of fascism can be boiled down to three words: "palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism." Each of these terms needs explanation.

Palingenetic: From the Greek *palin* (again or anew) + *genesis* (creation or birth). It refers to a myth or vision of collective rebirth after a period of crisis or decline.

Populist: A form of politics that draws its claims of legitimacy from "the people" (as opposed, for example, to a monarchical dynasty or divine appointment) and uses mass mobilization to win power and transform society.

Ultra-nationalism: It treats the nation as a higher, organic unity to which all other loyalties must be subordinated. Ultra-nationalism rejects "anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of Enlightenment humanism which underpins them."

As a form of populist ultra-nationalism, fascism fundamentally rejects the liberal principles of pluralism and individual rights, as well as the socialist principles of class-based solidarity and internationalism, all of which threaten the nation's organic unity. At the same time, fascism rejects traditional bases for authority, such as the monarchy or nobility, in favor of charismatic politics and a new, self-appointed political elite that claims to embody the people's will.

Fascism seeks to build a mass movement of everyone considered part of the national community, actively engaged but controlled from above, to seize political power and remake the social order. This movement is driven by a vision “of the national community rising phoenix-like after a period of encroaching decadence which all but destroyed it.” Such rebirth involves systematic, top-down transformation of all social spheres by an authoritarian state, and suppression or purging of all forces, ideologies, and social groups the fascists define as alien.

By demanding a sweeping cultural and political transformation and break with the established order, the vision of renewal sets fascism apart from conservative forms of ultra-nationalism as a revolutionary ideology. The fascist revolution, Griffin argues, is above all a cultural one. “In the new order ‘culture’ would cease to be an individualized, privatized, marginalized sphere of modern life.” Instead it would be “the ‘megamachine,’ the matrix for all the mythopoiea, rituals, institutions, values, and artistic creativity of an entire society.”

Fascism also pursues major objective structural changes. “While neither the Fascist nor Nazi state wanted to abolish capitalist economics and private property, they had no scruples about involving themselves with the economy on a scale unprecedented in any liberal state except in wartime.” “Both regimes also indulged in a massive programme of social engineering which involved creating mass organizations for every social grouping, retooling the educational system, symbolically appropriating all aspects of leisure, sport, culture, and technology.”

In emphasizing fascism’s revolutionary side, Griffin obscures the extent to which fascism has acted as a bulwark of capitalism and established social hierarchy. Nevertheless, Griffin’s focus on fascism’s myth of collective rebirth represents a conceptual breakthrough. It clarifies fascism’s apparent contradiction between forward- and backward-looking tendencies. As Griffin notes, although some forms of fascism invoke the glories of an earlier age, they do so as inspiration for creating a “new order,” not restoring an old one. Fas-

cism “thus represents an alternative modernism rather than a rejection of it.”

Griffin’s definition of fascism is flexible enough to encompass many different versions of fascist politics. Fascism may or may not involve paramilitary organization, a cult of the supreme leader, corporatist economic policies, or a drive for imperialist expansion. And while all forms of fascism are racist, in the sense that they promote ethnic chauvinism and mono-cultural societies, this racial ideology may or may not be defined in biological terms and can range from relatively mild ethnocentrism all the way to systematic programs for genocide.

Griffin’s model is also specific enough to map fine-grained distinctions and relationships between fascism and other branches of the right. Griffin distinguishes fascism from formations that share a related ideology but make no effort to build a mass base or to overthrow a liberal political system.

Griffin’s definition of fascism also excludes most of the dictatorships that have often been labeled fascist. He has suggested the term *para-fascist* to describe many of these. A **para-fascist** regime is imposed from above and represents traditional elites trying to preserve the old order, but surrounds its conservative core with fascist trappings like an official state party, paramilitary organizations, a leader cult, mass political ritual, and the rhetoric of ultranationalist regeneration. Para-fascist regimes may be just as ruthless as genuine fascist ones in their use of state terrorism. Unlike true fascism, para-fascism does not represent a genuine populist mobilization and does not substantively challenge established institutions.

Griffin is also alert to ways that fascism has changed. For example, many fascists have concealed their politics behind a democratic façade through the use of coded rhetoric, helping to blur the line between hardline conservatism and the far right. Others like Third Position groups have embraced the “leftist” anti-capitalist current on the margins of traditional fascism. Another trend is a shift toward increased internationalism—a sense of belonging to an international movement, and a belief that fascist principles can regener-

ate many nations, not just one's own.

Unlike his definition of fascism, Griffin's discussion of the social and political factors that promote fascism's rise and allow it to seize power is too static. Contrary to his argument, oppositional forces can organize on a mass scale (and even take power) under many different political systems, not just liberal democracies. Even weaker is Griffin's claim that fascists will never again be able to break out of their marginal status to bid for state power, because "the structural factors that turned Fascism and Nazism into successful revolutions have simply disappeared." The naiveté and shortsightedness of these assertions is jarring, and seem limited by Griffin's liberalism and lack of radical analysis.

Another weak spot in Griffin's discussion concerns fascism's relationship with religion. He argues that fascism is a secular ideology that is fundamentally incompatible with "genuine" or "authentic" religion. But if analysis of fascist ideology is supposed to "penetrate fascist self-understanding . . . in order to grasp how people saw the movement," then we need to try to understand what religion has meant to fascists—not dismiss their beliefs as phony or corrupt because they don't match an external yardstick.

Also, contrary to Griffin, there are good reasons to extend the concept of fascism to include some religious fundamentalist movements. This means rethinking the idea that fascism is always a form of nationalism. In the era of globalization, fascism is less closely tied to nationhood than it was seventy-five years ago. A British Third Positionist magazine declares, "Highly centralized states are likely to lead to extreme conflict in these times. The practical alternative of decentralized states based on homogeneous groupings co-operating through Confederacies and allowing bi-lateral agreements between Regions is the only long-term answer." However, such decentralist visions remain totalitarian in that they seek to impose rigid ideological conformity on all spheres of society, but would enforce this through local, regional, or nongovernmental institutions, not nation-states.

COMBINING TWO APPROACHES

In their analyses of fascism, Griffin and the independent Marxists I discussed share several important points. In broad terms, both regard fascism as an autonomous political force, a distinct form of right-wing politics that opposes the left but also challenges the established order, including conventional capitalist politics and culture. Two of the Marxists (Hamerquist and Sakai) join with Griffin in labeling fascism as revolutionary. Within both approaches there is also a recognition that fascism is not a static entity, but one that evolves to address new historical conditions and opportunities. Along with these points of commonality, Griffin brings an incisive and detailed portrait of fascist ideology, while the Marxists bring a careful assessment of fascism's contradictory relationship with capitalism.

As a step toward bringing the two approaches together, I offer the following draft definition: **Fascism is a revolutionary form of right-wing populism, inspired by a totalitarian vision of collective rebirth, that challenges capitalist political and cultural power while promoting economic and social hierarchy.**

In this definition, **revolutionary** implies an effort to bring about a fundamental, structural transformation of the political, cultural, economic, or social order. Fascism seeks, first of all, to overthrow established political elites and abolish established forms of political rule, whether liberal-pluralist or authoritarian. Second, fascists also attack “bourgeois” cultural patterns such as individualism and consumerism and aim to systematically reshape all cultural spheres—encompassing education, family life, religion, the media, arts, sports and leisure, as well as the culture of business and the workplace -- to reflect one unified ideology. Third, some (not all) forms of fascism promote a socioeconomic revolution that transforms but does not abolish class society—as when German Nazism restructured the industrial heart of Europe with a system of exploitation based largely on plunder, slave labor, and genocidally working people to death.

By **right-wing** I mean a political orientation that reinforces or intensifies social oppression as part of a backlash against movements

for greater equality, freedom, or inclusiveness. **Populism** means a form of politics that uses mass mobilization to rally “the people” around some form of anti-elitism. Combining these, **right-wing populism** mobilizes a mass movement around a twisted anti-elitism (often based on conspiracy theories) at the same time that it intensifies oppression. In place of leftist conceptions of class struggle, fascists often draw a phony distinction between “producers” (including “productive” capitalists, workers, and middle classes) and “parasites” (defined variously as financiers, bureaucrats, foreign corporations, Jews, immigrants, welfare mothers, etc.). Right-wing populism appeals largely to middle groups in the social hierarchy, who have historically formed an important part of fascism’s mass base.

The phrase **totalitarian vision of collective rebirth** draws on Griffin’s work but broadens his category of ultra-nationalism to encompass certain religious-based and other non-nationalist movements. The fascist vision is **totalitarian** in that it (a) celebrates one group—national, ethnic, religious, or racial—as an organic community to which all other loyalties must be subordinated, (b) uses mass organizations and rituals to create a sense of participation and direct identification with that community, (c) advocates coordinated top-down control over all institutions, and (d) rejects in principle the concepts of individual rights, pluralism, equality, and democratic decision-making. The **collective rebirth** aspect of the vision declares that the community must be rescued from a profound inner crisis, largely by purging “alien” ideologies and groups of people that are considered threats to the community’s unity and vitality. This vision often draws on romanticized images of the past but points toward a radically new cultural and political order.

Fascist regimes **challenge capitalist political and cultural power** by taking dominance of the state away from the representatives of big business and subordinating capitalist interests to their own ideological agenda. At the same time, fascism **promotes economic and social hierarchy**, either within or (potentially) outside a capitalist framework. Historically, fascists have colluded with capitalists and bolstered the economic power of big business. Although fas-

cists have often targeted specific capitalist features and even specific sectors of the business class, no fascist movement has substantively attacked core capitalist structures such as private property and the market economy. A fascist revolution of the future might radically reshape economic exploitation but would not abolish it.

This definition—with its twin focus on ideology and class rule—offers a fuller, more rounded model of fascism. In the process, it gives us a more powerful tool to map divisions, relationships, and changes in right-wing politics, and to understand how these dynamics relate to changes in capitalism.

The past thirty years have seen an upsurge of right-wing movements in many parts of the world. Many of these movements promote some form of authoritarian populism—either nationalist or religious in focus—that incorporates themes of anti-elitism and collective regeneration out of crisis. In this context, some commentators treat explicit racism or antisemitism as the decisive markers of fascism, but racism and antisemitism can be found among non-fascists as well, and not all fascists today fit the classic profile for ethnic bigotry. A more critical dividing line is between “reformists” who are content to work within existing channels and “revolutionaries” (including but not limited to fascists) who advocate a radical break with the established order. This division often cuts across movements rather than between them. The United States has seen two major examples of this in recent years: the Patriot movement and the Christian right.

The Patriot movement, which included armed “citizens militias,” represented the United States’ first large-scale coalition of committed Nazis and non-fascist activists since World War II. The Patriot movement promoted the apocalyptic specter of an elite conspiracy to destroy U.S. sovereignty and impose a tyrannical collectivist system run by the United Nations. The movement’s program centered on forming armed militias to defend against the expected crack-down, but more extreme proposals circulated widely, such as bogus “constitutional” theories that would re-legalize slavery, abolish women’s right to vote, and give people of color an inferior citizen-

ship status. A loose-knit and unstable network mainly based among rural, working-class whites, the Patriot movement attracted millions of supporters at its height. It fed not only on fears of government repression but also on reactions to economic hardship connected with globalization (such as the farm crisis of the 1980s), the erosion of traditional white male privilege, the decline of U.S. global dominance, and disillusionment with mainstream political options.

The Christian right has promoted a program of cultural traditionalism in response to perceived social breakdown and a supposed elite secular humanist conspiracy to destroy American freedom. The movement's agenda centers on reasserting traditional gender roles and heterosexual male dominance, but also includes strong subthemes of cultural racism. The Christian right is based mainly among middle-class Sunbelt suburbanites and has fostered a dense network of organizations that actively engage millions of people. The movement includes a small fascist wing, spearheaded by advocates of Christian Reconstructionism who reject pluralist institutions in favor of a full-scale theocracy based on their interpretation of biblical law. However, the bulk of the Christian right has (so far) advocated more limited forms of Christian control and has worked to gain power within the existing political system, not overthrow it.

In many other parts of the world, too, fascism operates as a tendency or a distinct faction within a larger movement. In Europe, many right-wing nationalist movements encompass small hardcore neofascist groups alongside mass parties such as the National Front (France), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPO), and the National Alliance (Italy). All three of these parties were built largely by (ex?)-fascists and promote political themes (especially anti-immigrant racism) that are widely identified as the opening wedge for a fascist agenda. Both the FPO and the National Alliance have participated in coalition governments at the national level. This may be part of a longterm strategy to "fascisticize" the political climate and institutions from within, but it also suggests the possibility that fascists—like socialists—can be coopted into a liberal capitalist political system.

The Islamic right encompasses a great diversity of organizations, political philosophies, strategies, and constituencies across the Muslim world. Some branches represent a kind of right-wing populism that aims not to reject modernity but reshape it. These branches use modern forms of political mobilization to rally Muslims against western imperialism, Zionism, global capitalist culture, and/or local elites. They envision a collective religious and national (or international) rebirth through re-Islamicizing society or throwing off foreign domination.

India's massive Hindu nationalist movement advocates Hindu unity and supremacy as the key to revitalizing India as a nation. The movement promotes hatred of—and mass violence against—Muslims and claims that India's political leaders have long pursued anti-Hindu policies and favoritism toward Muslims and other minorities. Hindu nationalism, or "Hindutva," has disproportionately appealed to upper-caste, middle-class Hindus from northern and west-central India. The movement centers on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an all-male cadre organization that promotes a paramilitary ethos and a radical vision to reshape Indian culture along authoritarian corporatist lines. The RSS's political spinoff, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has often favored a more pragmatic electoral strategy that blends a toned-down version of Hindu chauvinism with populist economic appeals.


This array of movements looks different from classical fascism, in large part, because the capitalist world has changed. Classical fascism took shape in an era of European industrialization and nation-building, competing colonial empires, and an international Communist movement inspired by the recent Bolshevik Revolution. Now both old-style colonialism and state socialism have almost vanished, while corporate globalization is shifting industries across the world and reshaping nation-states. Far-right movements are responding to these changes in various ways. They promote nostalgia for old empires but also right-wing anti-imperialism, old-style nationalisms but also internationalist and decentralized versions of authoritarian politics. They tap into a backlash against the left but also grow where the left's weakness has opened space for

other kinds of insurgent movements. And they promote different versions of anti-elitism, often targeting U.S. or multinational capital but sometimes focusing more on local elites.

Many commentators have argued that fascist movements today represent a right-wing backlash against capitalist globalization. Far-right politics are indeed largely a response to capitalist globalization, but this response is more complex than a simple backlash. For example, the Patriot/militia movement in the United States denounced “global elites,” the “new world order,” the United Nations, international bankers, etc. But their attack on government regulation has, as People Against Racist Terror pointed out, dovetailed with “the with the actual globalist strategy of the [IMF] and World Bank to end all environmental and labor codes that restrict untrammelled exploitation.” In India, Hindu nationalists have denounced multinational capital and globalized culture, but the movement’s dominant approach has been to seek a stronger role for India within the context of global capitalism, promoting policies that are tailored to India’s rising upper and middle classes, not historical “losers” trying to gain back their old status by attacking the forces of change.

CONCLUDING NOTE

The concept of fascism as a right-wing revolutionary force has spawned the idea that we are facing a “three-way fight” between fascism, conventional global capitalism, and (at least potentially) left-ist revolution. This approach is an improvement over widespread dualistic models that try to divide all political players between the “forces of oppression” and the “forces of liberation.” As some radical anti-fascists have pointed out for years, “my enemy’s enemy” is not necessarily my friend. At the same time, like any theoretical model, the three-way fight itself only approximates reality. There are more than three sides in the struggle, and to understand the different forces and their interrelationships, we have a lot of work to do.



"Fascism is a revolutionary form of right-wing populism, inspired by a totalitarian vision of collective rebirth, that challenges capitalist political and cultural power while promoting economic and social hierarchy. This definition—with its twin focus on ideology and class rule—offers a fuller, more rounded model of fascism. In the process, it gives us a more powerful tool to map divisions, relationships, and changes in right-wing politics, and to understand how these dynamics relate to changes in capitalism."

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