

Interview with Alberto Toscano: The Fascism of Our Times

Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

1. Thank you for talking to us about your most recent work and your thoughts on the recreation, reemergence or simply presence of new forms of reaction, reactionary and obscurantist positions in the contemporary situation. We would like to start with an observation and a rather big question. The observation is one with which you also begin your 2023 book *Late Fascism* with, notably the worldwide proliferation and ascendancy of far-right movements and parties. The question is: What speaks for and what speaks against classifying them as fascist (as is so often and so frequently done in an unreflective manner)?

Thank you for initiating and hosting this conversation, and for your indefatigable work with *Crisis and Critique*. To draw up a double-entry ledger without remainders, we would need preliminary to stabilise our definition of fascism, an operation which I think – and argue in the book – poses some challenges, since it tends to deny that fascism is, to quote the Ecuadorian Marxist sociologist Agustín Cueva, ‘open to historicity’. But if we take as our yardstick the fascist movements and regimes that shaped the Second Thirty Years’ War in Europe, two principal disanalogies come to mind. The first is both sociological and subjective in character: contemporary reactionary formations are not, by and large, mass movements recruiting, *inter alia*, veterans of total war into para-military organisations and political parties with a capillary penetration into everyday life, civil society and state apparatuses. Though the *Männerbund* hasn’t disappeared entirely, the contemporary far Right is predominantly an electoral amalgam of publics that are fragmented or ‘gelatinous’ (to borrow a Gramscian adjective), not a machine to vertically organise a militant membership from the summits of the state all the way to the neighbourhood and the street. It operates in a social field marked by disaffection and disaffiliation, and while it can powerfully crystallise sad passions of all sorts, it does not offer counter-revolutionary forms-of-life in the same way its forebears did. Which brings me to the second disanalogy: while it trucks in the palingenetic tropes of historic and generic fascism – *reconquistas*, renaissances, redemption and revanches, ‘make X great again,’ and so forth – it is ultimately more in the business of *conserving* or *restoring* privileges or statuses real and imaginary, than in that of promising a future, however archaic, or fashioning a New Man. While prone to recycling some of the *topoi* of the revolutionary conservative intelligentsia of the first half of the twentieth century, its primary manifestation, as I’ve noted elsewhere, is to be a protest vote for the status quo.¹ These disanalogies can be connected to the dearth of revolutionary anti-capitalisms menacing the established order, which the far Right would then be obliged to counter by a kind of inoculation or inverted mimesis. The lack of a credible emancipatory anti-systemic challenge explains much of the conservatism in both the

practice and imaginaries of the far Right – though we also should not underestimate how much the twin pressures of long-term economic stagnation and protracted climate crisis combine to massively narrow any horizon of political expectation. The exclusionary, and if need be violent or exterminatory defence of a finite and beleaguered privilege is the *leitmotiv* here, not a sacrificial utopia of national or racial domination. A big caveat is in order here: this rough sketch principally speaks to the late fascism of the ‘Global North’. While many of these tendencies are planetary, I think that we would need to recalibrate our optic and our categories to account for the singularities of far-Right politics in geopolitically crucial settings such as Russia, India and Israel, all of which have recently been the object of vivid debates about the applicability of the fascist problematic. The further consolidation of Russian authoritarianism in the context of the war on Ukraine has prompted Ilya Budraitskis², for instance, to see in Putin’s regime a *sui generis* fascism without ‘movement’, while both India and Israel (whose convergence³ has been the object of much recent analysis) manifest an integration of delegated militia, mob and settler violence into ethno-racial state projects which is a far tighter fit for classical definitions of fascism than anything we might find on the shores of the Atlantic.

2. You argue in the book that fascism structurally comes with what Ernst Bloch once called a ‘swindle of fulfilment’ but also raise the question if this is even any longer the case for contemporary fascist dynamics (in the sense that previously there was or at least might have been in it an emancipatory impulse, which it translated and fundamentally misarticulated, but that it nevertheless needed as a mobilizing force). The swindle then consisted in promising change but actually performing the operation of social reproduction (qua mobilizing an antagonism in the superstructure that pretends to be one of and in the base). Does the contemporary new right, in your view, still work through such an operation (and we are here only extrapolating from one account you give of fascist movements)?

I think the utopian energies of the contemporary Right – which after all is a symptom of its age, or its conjuncture – are mostly rather feeble, with the salient and aforementioned exceptions of the fundamentalist religious justification for projects of Jewish and Hindu supremacy, that is to say of utopias of domination, purification and expulsion in which redemption is always shadowed by the possibility or fantasy of genocide. Even these formations, however, are structured by the pettiness (in the sense both of ‘petty bourgeois’ and ‘petty sovereign’) of what I termed antagonistic reproduction, namely the prosaic interest in excluding racialised and stigmatised others from material goods, property, social space, etc. In that sense, the swindle of fulfilment – the illusion that reactionary rule will satisfy deep-seated desires for abundance or freedom, its character as

a ‘perverted utopia’ – can manifest as the fulfilment of the swindle, so to speak, namely as cover for base acts of dispossession and appropriation. This is the sense in which, to cite two famously controversial books on the aetiology of National Socialism, we may be dealing more with *Hitler’s Beneficiaries* than with *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. This gets back to something I was trying to articulate in my first answer, namely that the successes of the contemporary far Right are, for the time being, predicated on not demanding any transformative changes to the behaviour or selfhood of its supporters. In effect, much of its propaganda is precisely based on the claim that ‘liberal metropolitan elites’, ‘the Left’, ‘woke capital’, etc. are demanding disruptive transformations to everyday life, whether by limiting a fossil-fuel based imperial mode of living (whence the projection of sinister traits onto everything from veganism to induction stoves), or by questioning the heterosexual family as the keystone of the social order (whence the orchestrated moral panics around transness, ‘gender ideology’, etc.).

3. What do you, against this background, make of the contemporary right-wing talking points about remigration? For example, the German right-wing had a secret gathering near Berlin a while back and started discussing this as a political strategy, which when it came out created a mild scandal, but the very electorally strong Austrian right wing party is openly discussing remigration plans, England is already openly planning deporting as well - against all even jurisprudential opposition - to Rwanda; and we can certainly also recall that the Germans in the 1930s planned to for a while move the Jewish population first to Poland into Ghettos, to bring back Germans into the Reich but ultimately also to move them to Madagascar. Is there a fascist geo-politics that remains the same (or is this part of the way fascism draws on racism and could you say maybe a word about that as well)?

Calls for the ‘voluntary repatriation’ of racialised groups and for the deportation of minorities, migrants or refugees have been part of the repertoire of the far Right in Europe for a very long time. What is more striking now is how they have become the purview of the ‘mainstream’ conservative Right, increasingly indistinguishable from its formerly toxic cousins. Taking a broader view, I think we can remind ourselves that the formation of the modern capitalist nation-state has been accompanied not just by biopolitics broadly construed, but by a practice and ideology of population transfer and partition, which has eventuated in countless instances of ethnic cleansing (both Michael Mann’s *Dark Side of Democracy* and Mark Mazower’s *No Enchanted Palace* are instructive on this score). To the extent that fascism is a particularly pathological expression of this history, I think we can also periodise it in ways that

might illuminate our current predicament. ‘Classic’, interwar fascism is a late-imperialist phenomenon, in which relative laggards like Germany and Italy try to create the conditions for settler-colonialism in the age of monopoly capital, so to speak – witness the Generalplan Ost, or Italy’s efforts at colonisation in Lybia and the Horn of Africa. What many commentators in the 1960s and 1970s try to theorise as a ‘new fascism’ was not just a new type of counter-revolution negatively determined by the new revolutions of the world sixties, it was also, as the Polish Marxian economist Michael Kalecki saw in his 1964 essay ‘The Fascism of Our Times’, mainly driven by ‘the potential emancipation of the oppressed nations, or decolonization in the broad sense’. Kalecki gives as a major example the fascism of settlers fighting for a ‘French Algeria’. If we think of how that counter-revolutionary project to maintain White supremacy in the ‘overseas territories’ directly nourished the French far Right, from the OAS to the Front National, we can also reflect on how the expansionary project of settler-colonialism morphed into the rearguard efforts to defend it and how this in turn fed the reaction against the ‘post-colonial’ transformation of the metropole. Racial fascism can thus mutate from expansionary to exclusionary forms, with the irony that the heirs of political ideologies that strove to enact a ‘great replacement’ – of the native by the settler – now reanimate century-old panics about ‘the rising tide of colour’.

4. The ‘fascist virus’ (Polanyi), as you show in one of the chapters of your book, comes with a peculiar ability of fascism to align itself to the concept of freedom and even more with what could appear as its opposite, namely liberalism. Fascism is, as you argue, not the obverse or opposite, but fully compatible with liberalism: it mobilizes the latter’s authoritarian dynamic for a seemingly rebellious cause, which is what you call the authoritarian rebel (and it brings back to mind – but with an uncomfortable twist – Hobsbawm’s book on ‘primitive rebels’) and which allows for even more authoritarianism that feels rebellious but ultimately is fully compatible with economic gain (Götz Aly has elaborated this argument quite extensively with regard to German fascism). What does all this mean for the role of the state – as fascism is still about state-control? In other words, what is an anti-state-statism?

I don’t wish to claim, in an *a priori* manner, a secret identity or symbiosis between liberalism and fascism, but rather to reflect on how ‘actually-existing’ liberalism has been haunted – as Domenico Losurdo argued, borrowing from George Frederickson – by ‘*Herrenvolk* democracy’, or by what Ernst Fraenkel analysed as a ‘dual state’, with its normative and prerogative halves, on either side of lines of colour, class and colonisation. The critical and historical question that preoccupies almost all the thinkers

I draw on in my work, from Herbert Marcuse to Cedric Robinson, from Theodor Adorno to Angela Davis, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is how the potentials for fascization are seeded and harboured by capitalist societies whose dominant ideology has been some variant of liberalism. The ascendancy of the anti-state state – a conception advanced by Gilmore which has the signal advantage of moving the discussion from an internal ideological history of neo-liberalism to the political economy and geography of the (racial) state – offers another angle through which to periodise fascism and fascist potentials, and to break the ultimately comforting identification of fascism with ‘statolatry’ or totalitarianism. It was in this vein that I also sought to underscore those moments in interwar fascism itself which presage our ‘neoliberal’ present, namely by attending to how Mussolini at the time of the March on Rome explicitly identified fascism with an ultra-liberal political economy that required state and para-state violence to be made safe from the interferences of class struggle. In this connubium between ‘strong state’ and ‘free economy’, fascism proper can shade into a host of authoritarian liberalisms and neo-liberalisms. The classification and political diagnosis of these reactionary capitalist formations was a particularly lively and urgent field of debate among Latin American Marxists and dependency theorists faced with the military dictatorships of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, something which I’ve tried to explore in a recent article for *South Atlantic Quarterly*.⁴

5. What is the difference between the new right and historical far-right movements and parties? Between the new right and “traditional” fascism, if there is such a thing? We are asking this because we would like you to tell us more about what precisely defines what you call “late fascism” (apart from the fact that it means to think what fascism through the perspective of its history)?

My preceding answers have hopefully sketched out some of the axes along which we can explore analogies and disanalogies, continuities and discontinuities, not least by trying to periodise fascism itself with the aid of other historicising parameters (colonialism/decolonisation, liberalism/neoliberalism, industrial/post-industrial, etc.). ‘Traditional’ fascism was already ‘late’, in the sense of characterising regimes emerging in polities that were belatedly trying to force themselves into the planetary politics of inter-imperial and (settler-)colonial competition (Germany, Italy, Japan). But it was also a formidably consequential effort to modernise the institutions and technologies of state power and mass politics at a moment when there was an ample consensus that the liberalism of the nineteenth-century could no longer serve a hegemonic function in an age of intensified class conflict and ‘global civil war’. ‘Lateness’ today has a different valence. It speaks to the fact that as a ‘fix’ for capitalist crises the contemporary projects of the far Right – animated as they

are by many of the same energies and myths as their antecedents – are particularly feeble, we could even say obsolescent (which is not to say inconsequential or harmless, far from it). The persistence of daydreams about ‘national capital’, sterile campaigns for increased natality of ‘native’ populations, or, even more grotesquely, reactionary narratives about a resurgent ethno-national ‘working class’ (‘the forgotten men and women’, etc.) – all of this is far more delinked from the ‘base’ than the (murderous and in their own way belated) projects of autarchy and revanchism that defined traditional fascism. Paradoxically, the contemporary far Right, when it is not simply advocating for the authoritarian defence of current ethno-national entitlements, draws on tropes familiar from the history of fascism (e.g. the Great Replacement) to turn nostalgically to the social compact that defined *post*-fascism (the *trentes glorieuses* of ‘Fordism’, *before decolonization*).

6. This year marks the 110th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. Today wars and violent conflicts are present in almost all areas of the world: the Middle East, Africa, Europe, not to mention the civil wars in Haiti or Myanmar, etc. And other wars are looming. What is your assessment of this situation against the background of new right movements and parties gaining successes everywhere? Some commentators have compared our contemporary situation with that of the pre-First World War conjuncture. With the recent wars, however, this comparison does not seem to hold anymore.

In the European panorama, it is worth noting that classic liberals, conservatives and some social democrats are much more bellicose when it comes to the war in Ukraine than the far Right (while they all converge on apologies for Israel’s exterminatory war on the Palestinian people). The far Right is still animated by rhetorics and imaginaries of social violence and social war – namely against migrants – but it is largely indifferent to the *Kriegsideologie* that was so critical so reactionary subjectivity (and not just to fascism) in the run-up and aftermath to the Great War. Today’s reaction wants security at all costs, but the costs are devolved onto others. ‘Sacrifice’ is not a major term in its lexicon (this is also true of the increasingly fascistic language of Israeli settler-colonialism, whose exterminatory violence is exacerbated by an aversion to the casualties that come with boots on the ground – much as we saw with the US in Iraq and Afghanistan).

7) 2024 is election-year in India, Russia, Europe, the US, the UK and other places. New right movements are aligning their forces in what we might call a paradoxical internationalism of nationalists. The left seems weaker than even 50 years ago. What do you think could change this situation (if anything)?

In the short run, and in the sites you list, I don't glimpse any particularly hopeful prospects. In part, this is because of the underlying pessimism and cynicism that marks the structure of feeling of this far-Right turn, namely the sense that in a world of economic stagnation, diminishing opportunities and looming (or indeed present) catastrophes, securing one's precarious privileges and perquisites (real, symbolic or imaginary as they may prove to be) is the only game in town. To the call 'Don't despair! Organize' one may want to respond that our conundrum is how to 'organize despair'. As I put it in a recent article⁵: 'if we recognize that this worldwide reactionary political cycle is an effect of the cramping of our political horizons, then our response must be different. We might need to think about German philosopher Walter Benjamin's call [borrowed from Pierre Naville] to "organize pessimism" and what that looks like today: not offloading the pathologies of contemporary capitalism onto the wretched of the Earth, nor looking for scapegoats to assuage our dread, but collectivizing our catastrophic condition – realizing that the imaginary security of a few can't be bought at the cost of the disposability of most of humanity. In the conspiratorial imagination of today's far Right, we can glimpse, as in a funhouse mirror, what the Left we need looks like. To the far Right, the Left is an agent of monumental change: on the brink of destroying the oil industry, abolishing prisons and police, undermining private property and upending white Western civilization. In other words, the Left of the far Right's nightmares is systematically undoing the causes of so much of our misery – it is organizing despair.' As the massive disjunction and even antagonism in the US between the arena of 'progressive' politics and the wave of pro-Palestine encampments has recently foregrounded, the electoral domain, while it is an understandable focus of energies (not least in terms of the profoundly regressive consequences of far-Right legislation on climate, reproductive justice, social rights, and so on), is a profoundly inhospitable one for radical emancipatory projects, especially when these lack real, which is to say threatening, social power (as Mario Tronti once put it, at the 2006 Historical Materialism conference in London, 'we must make the capitalists afraid' again). That kind of social power has only been (precariously) provided by moments and movements of rupture, most recently, and very imperfectly, in the long and fractious wake of the financial crisis of 2007-8.

8) Do you think that there is a (historical and / or political) responsibility of the left in the genesis of the new right? We are thinking here, *inter alia*, of Benjamin's claim that every fascism is the result of a failed revolution.

I would be wary of harping on responsibility in terms of guilt, not least because of the dubious masochistic pleasures the Left takes in

dwelling on its errors; but I certainly think that Benjamin's dictum can be empirically corroborated and remains an important guidepost for analysis. Somewhat churlishly, we could say that late fascism is the result of a whole host of failed (or absent) *reforms*. It is perhaps not an accident here that much of the far Right's culture wars – beside trying to raise psychological wages nothing is done about the stagnating monetary ones – are focused on reformist politics (on ecology, gender, diversity, rights) which it systematically and wilfully misrecognises as radical or even revolutionary (multiculturalism is taken for Maoism, and so on).

9) To end, we would like to return to another trope repeatedly brought up in discourses on the new and old right. It is a question, so to speak, about the (new?) aesthetics of the new right. Is there a relation between the new right and the idea that fascism effectuates an aestheticization of politics?

On the culturally aspirational fringes of the far Right (from Bronze Age Pervert to *flashwave*) there are some desultory efforts at aestheticization that don't exactly compete with Jünger, Marinetti or Mishima, to put it all too mildly. In this arena especially, I think late fascism reveals itself as a pathetic but not innocuous pastiche of its forerunner.

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1 Toscano 2024a
2 Budraitskis 2022
3 Gopalan 2023
4 Toscano 2024b
5 Toscano 2023

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