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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

SEPTEMBER 28, 2018

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29.09.2018

Is the U.S. in a Pre-Fascist Period?

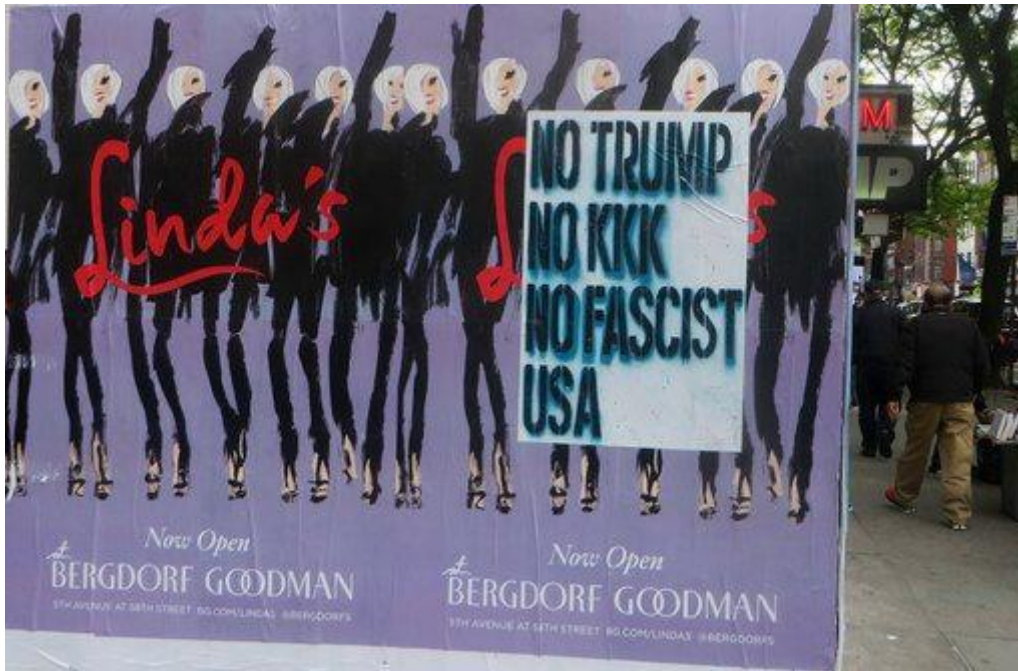


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Since Pres. Donald Trump's election, a variety of well-intentioned commentators have raised a chorus of concern that the U.S. was entering – or is in – a pre-fascist period. If so, what is to be done? If not, what does the Trump presidency – and the conservative, religious right and corporatists who back him – signify in terms of the coming of “fascism” to American?

The radical filmmaker – and media showman – [Michael Moore](#) is among the latest to warn about the emergence of a pre-fascist state. As part of efforts to promote his latest

film, *Fahrenheit 11/9*, he has appeared on *Democracy Now!*, various MSNBC shows and other outlets often quoting from Bertram Gross's 1980 book, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (1980): "The next wave of fascism will come not with cattle cars and camps. It will come with a friendly face."

Overlooked by Moore, Gross was revising William Shirer, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (1960), more ominous quote: "Perhaps America will one day go fascist democratically, by popular vote."

Moore's concern is shared by Madeleine Albright, Pres. Clinton's secretary of state, Democratic Party stalwart, faithful Hillary Clinton backer and, as a Czechoslovakian child, survived the early German occupation. In *Fascism: A Warning*, she notes, "Every age has its own fascism." Drawing a wider, more global, picture than Moore, she sees fascist tendencies on the rise in governments in Russia, the Philippines, Hungary and Poland as well as Egypt, North Korea, Turkey and Venezuela. With regards to the U.S., she is caution, noting that Pres. Trump is not a fascist but "the most anti-democratic leader that I have studied in American history."

Albright's analysis is anchored in Italy's experience under "Il Duce," "the Duke," "the Leader," Benito Mussolini, who was the prime minister from 1922 until 1943. He saw his mission in simple terms: "to break the bones of the democrats ... and the sooner the better." Albright notes, "this was how 20th-century fascism began: with a magnetic leader exploiting widespread dissatisfaction by promising all things." She warns, "... fascism can come in a way that it is one step at a time, and in many ways, goes unnoticed until it's too late."

Another former government functionary, Melba Gandy, who worked in the Johnson White House (1966-1968) and for the Foreign Service in Pakistan (1968-1969), is more alarmed by the rise of pre-fascism in the U.S. "History tells us fascism doesn't simply suddenly appear," she warns. "Its hold on a formerly free society is carefully planned and executed by (usually) a small group of people who will benefit from its institution."

Gandy identifies a series of "tools" by which fascists can use to manipulate the public and secure power. One includes "rigging elections, as in the Brexit referendum, the last French presidential election, and the last North American presidential election" She also notes, "the objective of the manipulation is to exaggerate the internal national divisions, and raise fear to a level at which enough of the population will willingly accept leadership from the fascist manipulators to install them in positions of power."

In addition, the issue of fascism is the subject of serious academic study. A number of recent scholarly studies include: Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*; Henry Giroux's *American Nightmare: Facing the Challenge of Fascism*; and Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*.

Finally, in the days following Trump's inauguration, *CounterPunch* published an essential article by Richard Falk, "[The Dismal Cartography of the Pre-Fascist State](#)." In it, he warns:

To speak as if the United States is a fascist state is to falsify the nature of fascism, and to discredit critical discourse by making it seem hysterical. There is no doubt that the pieces are in place that might facilitate a horrifying transition from pre-fascism to fascism, and it could happen with lightning speed.

Falk concludes by noting, "It is also sadly true that the election of Donald Trump makes fascism a sword of Damocles hanging by a frayed thread over the American body politic."

Is the U.S. in a pre-fascist period? One way to begin to address this question is to consider other "pre," "proto" or "quasi" fascist periods in recent U.S. history. Two such periods stand out — the WW-I era and the WW-II period.

Many Americans objected to the U.S. entry into the "Great War." Foremost among the groups that campaigned against entry were the Socialist Party of America (SP) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In addition, a host of other groups organized popular resistance to the war, among them were the No-Conscription League, the Anti-Enlistment League, American Union Against Militarism, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's Peace Party and the American Friends Service Committee. In 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act and, in 1918, extended it with the Sedition Act that broadened the range of offenses, notably speech that opposed the government's war efforts. Resistance led the federal government to repressive actions including the Postmaster General's suppression of radical periodicals shipped by the U.S. mail and the trial and imprisonment of SP leader, Eugene Debs, for making an antiwar speech.

Parallel to federal efforts to suppress popular campaigns opposing entry into the war, the forces of moral order, especially those known as "social purity activities," sought to use the war to forcefully contain unacceptable practices. As the war approached, moralists pushed local governments to close 125 red-light districts under the requirements of "war discipline." During the war, their successful campaign led to the arrest, forceful medical testing and/or imprisonment of some 30,000 women for being carriers of venereal disease,

thus “domestic enemies” undermining the war effort. In addition, the temperance campaign secured the restriction of alcohol sales to men in uniform and followed with the passage of the 18th Amendment that outlawed alcohol production, distribution and sales just after the war ended.

Following the war, the federal government launched what is known as the “first red scare.” On June 2, 1919, anarchists bombed the home of A. Mitchell Palmer, the U.S. Attorney General, setting the stage for what became known as the “Palmer Raids.” Between 1918-1921, the Department of Justice conducted raids and arrested some 4,000 suspected foreign-born anarchists, communists and other radicals. These efforts culminated in the deportation of 500 radicals, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. It shouldn’t be forgotten that amidst the federal campaign, individual states took similar actions. In Massachusetts, it culminated in the trial – and ultimate execution – of two anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

Two decades later, America’s victory in WW-II helped fuel the “second red scare” and might well be considered a “pre-fascist” period. Not unlike the fascist campaign that took place in Europe in the late-20s and early-30s (i.e., pre-WW-II), the postwar era in the U.S. witnessed an “anti-communist” – i.e., anti-radical – offensive that touched nearly-all aspects of American life. These campaigns have been carefully detailed elsewhere.

WW-II broke out in Europe on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Five days later, on the September 6th, Pres. Franklin Roosevelt issued an oral Presidential Directive “providing that the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice should take charge of investigative work in matters relating to espionage, sabotage, and violations of the neutrality regulations” Under FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s supervision, the agency engaged in a far-reaching surveillance campaign of those it identified as subversives or radicals; the campaign persisted into the late-60s under what was dubbed the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO).

Parallel to the FBI surveillance of possible threats, the U.S. Congress – both the House and Senate – took up the challenge posed by suspected spies and others. In September 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) subpoenaed 79 movie-industry professional in Los Angeles to testify as to their membership in or support for the Communists; this effort culminated in the refusal by the “*Hollywood Ten*” — 10 motion-picture producers, directors and screenwriters – to cooperate and their eventual trial and imprisonment. The following year, HUAC convened a special hearing in New York, “Regarding Communist Espionage in the U.S. Government,” with Rep. Richard Nixon

presiding. The hearing followed one two days earlier at which Alger Hiss categorically denied the he was a communist.

The anti-communist hysteria reached its zenith on Friday, June 19, 1953, when [Julius and Ethel Rosenberg](#) were executed for espionage, electrocuted at the Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, NY.

In September 1953, three months after the Rosenbergs were executed, Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) grilled subversive writers, most notably Howard Fast, as to their role promoting the communist threat. During '54 and '55, Sen. Estes Kefauver (D-TN) conducted hearings, first, on the role of comic books in the alleged increase in juvenile delinquency and, second, on pornography's role in undermining the nation's moral order. Still other hearings were held about homosexual working for the U.S. government, with hundreds losing their jobs. This state of suspicion filtered throughout the country, leading to the arrest and prosecution of teachers, seamen and workers in all walks of life. It was an all-American reign of terror.

When considering the issues of fascism — or pre-fascism — in the U.S., it is useful to recall two essential works on the subject, Wilhelm Reich's [The Mass Psychology of Fascism](#) (1933) and Hannah Arendt's [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#) (1949/1951 English ed.). Both Reich and Arendt lived through German fascism and brought original analyses to the issue. In their works, the rise of fascism is considered more as a “socio-political” phenomenon, one driven by a deepening social or “humanitarian” crisis, rather than merely a “political” issue, led by the “fearless leader.” It's this deeper crisis that fuels the political instability and the rise of a tyrannical, autocratic state, fascism.

For Reich, Nazism was a reactionary force. “In its pure form, fascism is the sum total of all irrational reactions of the average human character,” he wrote. He challenged both the orthodox psychiatric community and Marxism by insisting:

To the narrow-minded sociologist who lacks the courage to recognize the enormous role played by the irrational in human history, the fascist race theory appears as nothing but an imperialistic interest or even a mere “prejudice.” The violence and the ubiquity of these “race prejudices” show their origin from the irrational part of the human character. The race theory is not a creation of fascism. No: fascism is a creation of race hatred and its politically organized expression.

He concludes, “Correspondingly, there is a German, Italian, Spanish, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish and Arabian fascism.”

Reich also notes, “True, it [fascism] may have the aspect of revolutionary emotions. ... Fascist rebelliousness always occurs where fear of the truth turns a revolutionary emotion into illusions.”

Unlike Reich, Arendt was neither a student of Freud nor a Marxist nor an associate of the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, both saw anti-Semitism as identifying a “[perfect target](#)” and that totalitarianism operated under German fascism but also in the Soviet Union.

Arendt was a student of (and love with) the philosopher [Martin Heidegger](#), a Nazi supporter and anti-Semite. She was Jewish who, after escaping from Germany to Paris, was rounded up and imprisoned in a French internment camp where she led a valiant walkout.

Arendt shares some of Reich’s concerns about the role of the fragmented, powerless individual – who she describes as “atomized, isolated individuals” — as the fertile ground from which fascism grows. The Nazis attract the loyalty of “neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls.” She warns: “Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement.”

[She adds](#), “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

The roots of a “pre-fascist” society lie in the social crisis faced by a nation state. As examined by Reich, Arendt, Shirer and many others, the “classic” conditions found in Germany and Italy included not only a general economic-social crisis and an ever-increasingly tyrannical state (embodied in a glorious leader), but also the emotional despair of a significant proportion of its people. For these analysts, the traditional safeguards of bourgeois “democracy” have failed.

To seriously consider the warnings raised by Moore, Albright and others as to whether the U.S. is in a “pre-fascist” period one needs to ask whether America is in a period of crisis comparable to that faced, for example, by Germany during the Weimar years of the 1920s?

The U.S. is suffering. For all Pres. Trump’s bluster, his call to “make America great again” is recognition of this fact. Inequality is mounting; wages have remained flat for four decades. Trump’s base of support – white working and “middle” class voters – are living this new reality.

U.S. capitalism is undergoing a period often dubbed “globalization,” a phase best described as *institutionalized instability* – a phase of development in which nothing is certain, except the uncertainty of the hold-your-breath experience of daily life. The U.S. is undergoing a structural realignment. Globalization is recasting both manufacturing and finance, with nation-state loyalties of the 1 percent — the old ruling class — being superseded by new internationalist obligations.

Are the U.S.’s over-bloated military-industrial budget and stalled war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East signs that its global military hegemony is coming to an end? China is emerging as a very real challenge to U.S. economic hegemony and how this plays out over the next couple of decades will determine much of the U.S.’s economic future. And the environmental crisis seems to be only getting worse.

These challenges to traditional economic order are fermenting social instability and one reaction to it has been a rise in violent political confrontations. Among the most violent recent engagements between “white nationalists” and “antifa” – anti-fascist — militants took place in Charlottesville, VA, and other showdowns have erupted in Washington, DC; Berkeley, CA; and Newnan, GA (southwest of Atlanta). More can be expected as political tensions continue to mount.

Is this period of instability “pre-fascist”? Much depends on how U.S. socio-economic restructuring plays out – and how the fears experienced by Trump’s hard-core supporters perceive their future and if their numbers increase. Will their “[white skin privilege](#)” be all that they are left with? Will their personal fears be manipulated by America’s “fearless leader,” turning their rage into a violent hatred into of the “other”?

Much of the answer to the question as to whether the U.S. is in a “pre-fascist” period depends of role played by the “insurgent,” “democratic socialist” or “Bernie-ite” factions within the Democratic Party. Do they – along the growing, nationwide groundswell of race-, gender- and community-based activists who daily fight the good fight — represent something new, a true radical alternative? Will they lead a campaign to dismantle the national security state, one in which no one’s privacy is guaranteed and that could facilitate the imposition of a true state tyranny? Will they move to establish a new tax system that radically redistributes social wealth, thus loosening the power/influence of the 1 percent and guarantees a socially-secured “good life” for all, thus easing the deepest fears of Trump supporters? Or will they be co-opted by the corporatist political

establishment, like organized labor was a half-century ago, and cheer on the next accommodationist Clinton?

Answers to these questions will determine if we are in a pre-fascist period.