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by ANIS SHIVANI
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Quit America! The Case for Moral Disengagement from American Politics

“There are a lot of killers. What, you think our country’s so innocent?”

— Donald J. Trump, Feb. 6, 2017

There continues to be a gross underestimation, even amongst politically aware liberals, of what we are really up against, and how to counter it. Increasingly, our fellow citizens are resorting to the concepts of fascism to describe the current situation, but this is not necessarily followed by any cogent reflection on what the political subject under fascism needs to do. Ordinary liberal prescriptions have no chance of success under a regime that has moved into an overt fascist mode; moreover, the unacknowledged continuities from the recent neoliberal past, which led to the fascist overture in the first place, mar any consistency of thought amongst intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens.

The time has come to explore modes of existence that only make sense under a fascist regime, or rather, they are the only modes that make sense under fascist conditions. Above all, the question of moral disengagement from any existing political practice must be taken seriously, and this includes so-called “resistance.” Are there things that pass under the activist rubric today that are actually strengthening rather than weakening fascism? If that is the case, then those activities must undergo severe scrutiny, because it may well be that what seems like activism is actually passivism, and vice versa.

I started writing about a “soft” American totalitarianism for the first time in 1998, in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. American civic institutions seemed to me to have stopped functioning for the first time in 1994, after the Gingrich takeover, which made me

take a step back, only to reemerge, awakened, when the Lewinsky scandal happened. I was not interested in the content of the scandal, which was a mere pretext to engineer reaction in a form we had never seen before without the instrument of twenty-four-hour cable news, but the way in which perceptions were being manipulated seemed to me to be mortally dangerous for democracy.

After 9/11, I resorted to the vocabulary of fascism for that whole decade, often comparing and contrasting Bush's early years to the Hitlerian model, since this was what I knew best then. However, once I started studying Italian fascism seriously about a decade ago, it has seemed to me that the original Mussolinian model is more apt, because of some important missing elements in the way fascism has been developing in this country. During the 2016 election campaign, I identified points of similarity between Trump and Mussolini, and considered whether he was better seen as a fascist or a populist authoritarian. Clearly, in the time since he took over he has entered an overtly fascist stage, with elements of both Mussolini and Hitler in play.

But I think that instead of these admittedly helpful historical comparisons it might be more clarifying now to conceptualize a new form of fascism: the third important variant, if you will, following the original Mussolini model and the later Hitlerian model, which was a development of and departure from the original in many respects.

Italy was a weak state, certainly militarily so, and had been undergoing serious strife between labor and capital in the years immediately preceding Mussolini's takeover; when Mussolini asserted Italy's grievances against the so-called "plutocratic powers" (above all Great Britain and France), he was arguing from a position of weakness. Germany was a much stronger state, obviously, in the military, economic, and cultural sense, but Hitler's aim was also to become the world's greatest power, even if starting from a position much stronger than Italy's. America, when it started going down the fascist route (I would say coinciding with the termination of the cold war), was already the world's undisputed dominant power, arguably stronger than the Roman and British empires ever were at their peak. Starting with the Bush II regime, and now accelerated manifold in the Trump regime, American fascism has been pleading irresolvable grievances (against internal and external abusers) from a position of unparalleled strength! That is a remarkable deviance from past fascist models, and it changes everything.

Furthermore, I would argue that everything Trump has done so far or plans to do fits perfectly well within the neoliberal model, whether it's massive tax cuts for corporations, cutting back social security, Medicare, and essential social services, privatizing healthcare,

converting infrastructure building to an essentially privatized domain, and certainly repressing immigrants by driving them underground or expelling them. All of it is a continuation, if an acceleration, of neoliberal practices familiar from more than thirty-five years of governance. I suspect that on trade the classic neoliberal position will soon assert itself, and it may be worth taking a pass on trade for a while, from the neoliberal point of view, as long as other elements of the agenda get a radical boost.

So I would argue that if we're seeing fascism, it is a peculiar form of fascism indeed, because it looks like one hundred percent neoliberalism from where I am. Nonetheless, it is fascism of a kind, it is neoliberalism's fascist mode. Modern capitalism has a tendency to keep falling into the fascist style from time to time, and this became inevitable for us once the Soviet Union fell and there was no ideological check on American capitalism. The equations became imbalanced, there was excessive power which had nowhere to flow, and it was destined to go this way and it has.

What is truly unfortunate is that globalization's reform elements—I mean international action on human rights issues such as the environment, agricultural equity, urban poverty, medical care, the price of drugs, indebtedness and servitude, and war crimes—were all on the agenda in the late 1990s, but the onset of overt fascism in America made the entire world, particularly Europe, put these global civilizational issues on the back-burner. Europe was trending strongly toward global cosmopolitanism, which might have ended up being a transitional stage toward worldwide democratic socialism, but America, in resurrecting an imaginary global Islamic enemy for the past twenty years (recall that the first Osama bin Laden video surfaced in 1998, and that Clinton's launch of missiles against this protagonist's alleged strongholds in Afghanistan and Sudan also occurred in the year of Lewinsky), has probably irrevocably damaged the global cosmopolitan agenda. Citizenship, throughout the 1990s, after the Soviet Union ended as a theoretical pole, was being reconceptualized as transnational, contingent, and fluid, a right not tied to nationalism, which was a radical change that had been awaited by the world's enlightened thinkers for more than two hundred years. It was the ultimate promise of liberalism being slowly fulfilled, but sadly, because of the rise of American fascism, it was not to be. That dream is all but dead now. Europe, taking its cues from America, has vastly retreated on immigrant rights, refugee and asylum claims, and human rights administration even within the European Union.

The question for those currently mounting a resistance, aside from its inherent limitations (even Gandhi with his "successful" salt march of 1930 and other civil disobedience actions

didn't see much significant results, it took the collapse of the British empire after World War II for India to finally gain independence), is what it is that American liberal activists are trying to get back to.

First, the Republican party, under Ronald Reagan, became the prime transmitter of neoliberalism. Then, once Clinton transformed the Democratic party, both parties became equal bearers of neoliberal ideology. So what is the aspiration to return to? The Democratic party under Obama? It was an ideal carrier of neoliberalism, in every area of governance one can think of. No doubt Trump wants to exert existing immigration powers to a genocidal level, and he will, but the powers were granted to him under the neoliberal administrations of Clinton and Obama, and fortified by additional powers sought by Bush II.

Clinton's 1996 anti-immigrant legislation was arguably the most draconian American immigration law ever passed (for example, in retroactively punishing legal residents for minor crimes, henceforth called "aggravated felonies," providing the authority to expel immigrants who had lived here for decades, and enshrining the loathsome concept of expedited removals, meaning deportation without judicial hearings), and likewise Obama continued the "enforcement"-first policy, for example by deputizing state and local authorities to act as immigration police. Everything Trump wants to do to embark on his ethnic cleansing campaign has been gifted to him by neoliberal presidents of either party.

And aside from the repression of immigrants, who have been living under a reign of terror since 1996, what else do we want to go back to? The fascist Trumpian reaction occurred only because neoliberalism set up a situation of economic inequality that was completely unsustainable. When less than ten people own more wealth than half the world's population, that is not a situation that can lead to any good outcome; it simply cannot be perpetuated beyond a certain point, as we are seeing in the collapse of American democracy today.

The petty bourgeois liberals who so eagerly supported Hillary Clinton, and were so adamant against Bernie Sanders's meager demands on behalf of aspirational millennials for a modicum of democratic socialist reforms, will be relieved to know that Tom Perez, Barack Obama's labor secretary and Hillary Clinton's potential vice-presidential nominee, an exemplary neoliberal, has managed to defeat Sanders's choice, Keith Ellison, a true progressive who would have started setting the Democratic party on a different path. We are talking about a democratic revolution as the price worthy of participating in American social and political life at this dangerous juncture, and we can't even get the Democratic

party chairman who is the choice of the candidate who would have soundly defeated Trump!

Fascism always comes about because of the failures of liberalism. Sometimes these failures are exaggerated, as was true before the Mussolini ascendancy, but in the American case all the data says that for the health and well-being of the people, neoliberalism over the last thirty-five years has been a colossal failure. Thus the polity, at least since the 1990s, has been wishing death upon itself, as evidenced in the most successful Hollywood productions and other creations of popular culture. Had Hillary Clinton not announced her candidacy, there would have been no Bernie Sanders, and certainly no candidate Trump; but this is not to blame Hillary, she is merely representative of where the Democratic party, that is to say the liberal establishment, is: when they had the chance during the primaries, the entire party establishment supported Hillary over Bernie. Though they may be suppressing their true leanings for the moment, under the onslaught of a storm that promises to take down every American's security, property, and investments, one senses the Hillary supporters ready to take the fight to the Sanders camp, as soon as the opportunity presents itself again.

The Democratic party today is a fairly accurate reflection of where the country's liberal institutions, from broadcasting and arts and media organizations, to the sensibility in the academy and government at all levels, pretty much rests: focusing on an exaggerated concept of personal responsibility, which is at the least neoliberal and at its worst fascistic. The publishing industry, my own personal bailiwick, operates entirely within the neoliberal paradigm, as I know from twenty years of experience; the well-known American publishing houses are simply extensions of the same thinking that infects CNN or any media organization, a mindset that can neither name the ideology it perpetuates (neoliberalism), nor mount any democratic resistance against it.

To agree with my case for moral disengagement, you would have to be persuaded that each effort of engagement, from activism to voting to articulation of demands of any sort, makes the situation worsrather than better. If participation leaves things unchanged, then it may not be enough of a case for disengagement; if participation, including voting, makes things better, then no doubt my case is invalidated.

My argument has to do not with the scope of what needs to happen—just think of the intolerable situation with regard to totalitarian-style gerrymandering, the influence of the billionaire class on campaigns, or the rabid exclusion of third parties, all of which

guarantee neoliberal hegemony—but the logic of American fascism: to resist it, in any form whatsoever, only makes it stronger.

When there was a tiny bit of protest, in the form of the Naderite antiglobalization campaign in 1999-2000, we got George W. Bush; after eight intolerable years of Obama's neoliberalism, which worsened inequality on a frightening scale, the only thing the Sanderite protest got us was Trump. Essentially, neoliberalism is saying, be quiet and accept things as they are, or we will give you something much, much worse. And that's where we are today, once again, as some of us, shell-shocked already, look back with nostalgia to the years of Obama, Clinton, and even Bush II.

Fascist formalities have become instrumentalized, under neoliberal hegemony, as the means to suppress demands for equality. Fascism's forms are ever-present, deriving strength from collective belief in American ideals, occurring again and again, and with stronger and stronger force, incarnated at will.

For things to get better, there would have to be nothing less than a democratic revolution, because the situation before, as I explained, was only slow death, a silent strangling that would have continued under a Hillary Clinton presidency: the same terrorist oppression of immigrants, the same radical exclusion of poor, uneducated people of any color from the "meritocracy," all of it couched in the respectable language of neoliberal personal responsibility, unlike Trump's crude expostulation of the same basic ideology in overt fascist terminology. The Democratic party would have to cease to exist as the ideal neoliberal vehicle for the resistance to be said to have worked; is that even possible to conceive? Other than Sanders, I do not know of any member of congress who is not beholden to neoliberalism in its essence. There would have to be room for true democratic expression, including for democratic socialism, whether under third parties or a rejuvenated progressive wing of the Democratic party.

All of this is so far from the realm of possibility, under normal modes of activism, that the imagination comes up short. On the contrary, the typical forms of resistance, accepting the neoliberal order as given, only worsen the undemocratic nature of our polity. After eight years of activism and resistance under Obama, what have we accomplished? At the state and local levels, more overtly fascist politicians are in control in almost unprecedented numbers, recalling earlier segregationist eras. Human rights, particularly immigrant rights, are more compromised by far than they were at the beginning of the Obama administration. The same goes for any measure of democracy or equality.

Civil resistance, in order for it to work, must escalate gradually; marches and protests are fine, but this is pretty much the level where the liberal activists seem comfortable. Will there be escalating general strikes? The strike announced for February 17, 2017 encountered immediate resistance from those amongst the petty bourgeoisie; they are said to be fighting a new Hitler, but they cannot imagine taking a day off from work, which would interfere with their routine “obligations”; weekend protests with friends are fine. In order for civil resistance to work, people have to put their bodies on the line, have to court mass arrests, have to gum up the works and grind down the machinery of fascist oppression to a halt. We are simply not up for the challenge, despite what some naïve citizens still think of as the main weapon on our side: the internet. If we are up against a true Hitler, who has the National Guard at his beck and call and who has already signed executive orders to implement mass deportations by decree, then the internet is of little help; it makes us feel better to vent, but that is about it.

Of course, I could be wrong about all this, and it could be that resistance leads Trump to have second thoughts, makes civil servants across the government push back vigorously against fascism, and revives both the Democratic and Republican parties to go back to their respective liberal and conservative roots rather than the two-headed neoliberal monster they’ve become. We could have a mass movement of compassion toward immigrants, Muslims, and poor and unhealthy people in this country. The media could become a repository of diverse opinion. We could see mass support for disengagement from our wars in the Middle East and retreat from our worldwide assault on human rights. Of course, all of that could happen, in which case, go ahead, participate, engage, remain hopeful that we can go back to the thing that we’ve lost, or make it even better, and I will accept that I’m wrong.

But I know that there is nothing to hope for from our entire (neoliberal) intellectual establishment; how can there be a chance for resistance to work in that situation? They, the country’s thinkers, especially those who consider themselves progressive, are the conveyors of the virus that has led to fascism. We are not yet ready to give up empire (we call it our “world standing”), and therefore the fascism that goes with it; we just want a nice human face on it, an Obama or a reformed Hillary Clinton.

Why do I think that resistance makes fascism worse? Because it creates the illusion, for a while (as under the Obama administration), that things are getting better, but they only get worse. Resistance legitimizes, and fascism, especially, thrives on it. The two missing elements in the Bushian version of fascism were the lack of a charismatic leader and the

potential of a fascist militia, the first of which has at last come true and the second of which now seems a real possibility. I would say that it's because America is fascist but also the world's strongest power, and administratively already possesses total capacity to destroy any entity, internally and externally, the way it wants to, that resistance only strengthens the fascist regime because it gives it something to fight against. Fascism needs an enemy to build itself against, but what if the enemy were to retreat and disappear? What would it fight against?

Again, what is there to go back to, if in fact the aim of the resistance is to recapture what we have lost? The liberal intelligentsia, for the past two decades, has been convulsed with identity politics; in these early days of the renewed anti-Muslim and anti-Latino genocide we're witnessing, what has saved, to the extent that anything has, immigrant lives? The judiciary, going back to constitutional principles, which has nothing to do with identity politics.

We are possibly witnessing the implosion of American capitalism (i.e., neoliberalism) and hopefully the empire as well, while liberals, those who are protesting today, did not protest the mass incarceration and forceful expulsion of individuals who had been in this country for decades, did not protest the drone wars and illegal killings and fomenting of civil wars and mass displacement under our auspices ever since 9/11. The Obama presidency is destined to go down in history as a footnote; we are simply picking up fascist steam now from where we left off in 2003, before the Iraq War started going awry. The world war that began on 9/11 has resumed, we never left it in the intervening years, because we never sought accountability.

It is all too easy, as many liberals are doing today, to experience nostalgia for Bush the younger, but every fascistic impulse Trump is expressing today was fully manifest in the early Bush II years; that was the truly horrifying era that we, as a nation, never really wanted to account for and reconcile, when we embarked on illegal surveillance, torture, and detention. There is not an external enemy to fight, the enemy is all the liberal institutions (which in a perverse way Trump is saying too), the enemy is all of us who have implicitly supported domestic and international illegality for the nearly two decades after 9/11; Trump's fascism is simply the next, perhaps last, stage of that process.

I started having the thought of total disengagement in the early years of the Obama administration, and it is only now that I'm articulating it, but I think I was on the right track even then. What if, instead of eight years of Obama-era activism, the people had delegitimized politics by not voting, not participating, not commenting, simply retreating

into private life? And by that I mean constructing healthy, nonconsumerist, creative lives, carved with difficulty out of the disastrous environment capitalism forces us to live in, but otherwise oblivious to it? Is that not all the more necessary now that neoliberal capitalism, from everything I understand of it, is in a mortal fight to the end with the health of the planet and all living species, a fight that for a while now I have believed cannot last beyond the middle of this century?

We empowered Trump by empowering Obama, focusing, unfortunately, on the politics of personality, since our liberal intelligentsia is the least equipped of any comparable entity in modern history to articulate matters at a coherent conceptual or theoretical level. We empowered Obama's war against Muslim nations and against Muslim and Latino immigrants at home, by asking for small mercies, by being pleased with legalistic cover for what are ultimately irredeemable illegalities. How will the next Democratic president, a Kamala Harris or Cory Booker, be any different? The point is to end empire, the point is to want to accelerate its end, which Trump surely is embarked on doing already.

Let me go back to some historical parallels, particularly from my study of fascist Italy. The conservative (corporate) establishment of that time chose Mussolini's law and order message over the turbulence Italy's socialist parties had heralded during the Biennio Rosso (1919-1920), the two years of red uprising after the end of World War I. Had the communists and socialists been able to get along, there would have been no fascism. In our case, we don't have communist or socialist parties, just variants of slightly more progressive thinking than the reigning neoliberalism, but even these sides cannot get along, because, for one thing, identity politics fatally compromises class consciousness of any kind. There is no viable political party to represent the interests of the people!

Mussolini faced resistance from socialists, such as Antonio Gramsci and others whom he imprisoned, in the first three years of his reign, before he consolidated his dictatorship and ended all pretense of democratic institutions in 1925. I have to say that the amount of resistance we've already seen in response to Trump, from the judiciary to inside the intelligence bureaucracies to ordinary people who have come out in historic numbers to try to protect the rights of their fellow citizens who happen to be from other countries, is surprising and welcome, and unlike anything we saw in the Bush years. I see this situation as comparable to that between 1922-1925 in Italy, before Mussolini, in the crisis that ensued after the murder of the leading opposition socialist, Giacomo Matteoti, silenced the press and any political opposition once and for all.

Does that mean that there will be a declaration of emergency, following which the press will be silenced? No, again because we are the world's dominant power, and the ideology (neoliberalism) that has spawned fascism was already prevalent in the media, the academy, and all the institutions of civil society, so there need not be that level of disruption.

I would ask the question, what enormity can one think of that would bring American society to a halt? Mass deportations? They're already happening, but what if they escalate to a target of ten to twenty million people? I don't think we have the power to resist. The escalation of multiple wars in the Middle East seems possible and would just be a continuation of Clinton-Bush-Obama policies, but what about the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons against, say, Iran? Would that be the turning point that brings society to a halt, and renews democracy?

I have thought for a long time that there is no bridge too far to cross, no enormity so great that it would end our ideas of American exceptionalism, an innocence that the resisters are feeding into, strengthening it all the time, even as the noose tightens around our necks.

But what does it mean to disengage? People have children to feed, jobs to perform, which in many cases may be jobs that help people, in education and social services for example. But there are also single people, younger people, those with greater mobility and options. If one can leave the country, I would say, do so; America is not a project worth salvaging. A fascist power that is the leading roadblock to world progress, in places as far away as South America and India, is not something to devote one's only precious life to. Even if Hitler is winning, do you want to join him as an ally, do you want to entertain ideas of moderating and refining and containing him, do you want to keep looking for the good Germans to overturn the oppressive order once and for all? And what if, in that effort, you become collateral damage?

Instead of the wasted energy spent during the Obama years to try to normalize what is ultimately not normalizable, i.e. the unconstitutional regime that has existed since 9/11, what if young people had refrained from investing hope in politics? All kinds of ethical choices outside capitalism then become possible, ranging from living communally on a small scale, reclaiming territory outside the stressful purview of urban gentrification, growing one's own food and exiting the capitalist health care system, and engaging in barter and cooperation to create a sustainable and aesthetically fulfilling existence. Call it socialism, call it anarchism, but to want to want to reform the unreformable only empowers those who want to take away the very possibility of alternative spaces.

If I were a little younger, I would leave America and put down roots somewhere else; if there is a country where there seems a greater hope for promoting democracy, then that is a choice people should explore. Is America so much better than every place else? Why can't we take our democratic ideas elsewhere and make those places, not at the center of the fascist hegemony, better, by our example and productivity? Why should we feed this particular machine with our minds and bodies?

What needs to happen is to strengthen countries like Canada and those in Europe that are still struggling against fascism, and everywhere else there is hope in Latin America and Africa and Asia, against the global hegemony America wants to impose. If one is older or is restricted or does not have the mobility I speak of, then one can stay in place, but at the very least one should downshift, retreat from capitalism, and morally disengage from anything having to do with saving this country's place in world politics (i.e., empire). One can, out of a sense of duty, provide for one's children and family, but not be morally committed to the idea of America, which has become toxic beyond rescue, because it is not America of the old we're talking about, but a new form of neoliberal fascism that is in mortal combat with the principle of life itself.

The preservation of life is all-important, not the principle of America, and let me say that I am sure that these two principles are in absolute conflict at the moment. Moral disengagement is a form of civil resistance, perhaps the most powerful form.

The main counterargument to what I'm saying would be, Are we just going to let the fascists take over? Will we let them do whatever they want to do, deport ten million people, start catastrophic wars? Well, aren't we already? That moment was long ago, when we could have chosen social democracy over neoliberalism, but we as a people, particularly our intelligentsia, decided not to, over a period of thirty years; more specifically, we deliberately sacrificed whatever remained of our democracy to make sure that the collective good had no chance of ascendancy, when we went for Hillary over Bernie.

Suppose all public resistance, i.e. engagement, ceases tomorrow. What would happen? Would Trump be more or less emboldened to expel ten million people or start an unprecedented international conflict? He's going to do it regardless, but his power in doing so will be much greater, it will again come packaged as a real war of ideas, when he does so, if resistance in the way we think of it continues. In the absence of reaction, his actions will go forward anyway but will not have the same meaning. Mass deportation has been going on for twenty years, the wars of empire in their current form have been going

on for twenty-five years, and they will continue to happen, but our participation gives more strength to these violations, gives them legitimacy because there is an appearance of a democratic contest.

If we have to boycott someone, shouldn't we start with the Democratic party? Can resistance operate through a vehicle so compromised? Shouldn't we delegitimize it by non-participation?

I am arguing that the only moral thing to do in reaction to the fascist onset is to disengage, in every way possible: physically, economically, spiritually, philosophically. And I am arguing that to engage in any way is to be morally supportive of fascism—which probably includes this screed as well, and any thought processes I might have toward fascism, because in that way too I am strengthening it. I only know that the normal democratic means are no longer relevant, since we have nobody in power to represent our moral position, and nor are we likely to, now that things have gone this far.

Mussolini experienced the peak of his power long after the consolidation of his dictatorship in the 1925-1929 period; it was in the 1930s, all the way up to the Ethiopian war in 1936, that consensus was greatest toward the fascist principle. It took abject defeat in World War II to finally end fascism, and for people to come out of the woodwork and claim that they had always been antifascist, even if they hadn't expressed it so. Hitlerism likewise only ended with total defeat in war. Every totalitarianism, once it gets going past a certain point, ends in the same familiar way, there is simply no historical precedent for a peaceful conclusion. I need not spell out in any more detail what awaits American fascism, and what people have to think about doing for their own safety and well-being, to protect the only life they have been given and that is now under dangerous assault by the determined enemies of life itself.

This essay is excerpted from the book [Why Did Trump Win? Chronicling the Stages of Neoliberal Reactionism.](#)