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by TONY MCKENNA
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Trump, Obama and the Nature of Fascism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The latest Trump scandal hitting the news – the interment of children in cages, the forcible separation of screaming toddlers from their parents. It seemed to have touched a level of inhumanity which is breathtaking, even by the standards of the current US administration; an administration which already feels like the court of Caligula set to an episode of bad reality TV, with a soundtrack handily provided by the loony toons. Fortunately, the president has stepped back, has issued a decree which will reverse the vile and traumatising project of cleaving immigrant parents from their kids – though the practise of

locking them all up in the same cage still seems to fall somewhat short of a positive exercise in empathy and human rights.

As a result of such events, Facebook was deluged with a variety of memes: but all carrying the same essential message. Trump, it was averred, is a fascist. Some of these were done with wit and verve: the image of a famous brand of margarine appeared, with Trump's big sniggering face gurning out, underwritten by the slogan 'I Can't Believe It's Not Hitler'. Others were significantly more serious; a host of images appeared split into two halves: on the top a photo of immigrant children who have been imprisoned in 2018 in American border camps, on the bottom images from Nazi concentration camps of emaciated Jewish children – wide, haunted eyes gazing out from behind writhing barbed wire. Others pointed out with mournful gravitas that Hitler did not begin with the Final Solution, that he worked his way up to it, and all it took was good people not to act. Trump 2018, then, reimagined in the guise of early thirties Nazi Germany.

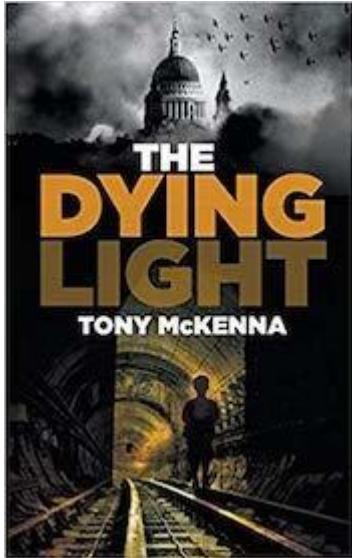
It is easy to understand such comparisons; the dehumanising of others, the reduction of people – both rhetorically and literally – to the status of caged animals has been part and parcel of Trump's ongoing polemic and political project, and has clear affinities with fascist thought in terms of its othering of minorities, immigrants, and the disempowered more generally. But fascism is about more than just ideology.

Fascism evolved out of the need to neutralize strong mobilizations of the working class, so for instance, Hitler's antecedents, the Freikorps, developed out of the struggle against the proletarian revolution which took place in Germany in November 1918, as they helped suppress the uprising, murdering its leaders, most famously Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Mussolini's movement and his Black Shirts evolved out of the need to destroy a very powerful workers' movement which had formed works councils amid sweeping industrial unrest in the north in cities like Turin during the early twenties, and a Socialist Party which had hundreds of thousands of members.

In the case of Hitler himself, in combating a militant, highly industrialised German working class, he had not only forged his own party apparatus, but had amassed a personal army of hundreds of thousands of troops in 1932 (the year before he took power) – an army not only separate from the national army but also one far greater in number. He was able to do away with the liberal democratic institutions because of this, and because the ruling elite backed his play, for they themselves felt that the working classes were a threat to the capitalist system per-se and could no longer be contained within the parameters of parliamentarianism. Fascism, then, is the most extreme, barbaric and lethal form of

counterrevolution which involves crippling every democratic expression of the masses through the most prolonged and bloody form of open civil war.

None of these conditions pertain in the US. Unfortunately, the workers movements are relatively 'passive' having been in retreat for many years. In addition, Trump has no organised, auxiliary army which could bolster any attempt on his part to smash the



worker's organisations at a stroke, to absorb the unions into the state wholesale, and to abolish the political-democratic apparatus; perhaps more importantly, the American ruling class, have no interest in supporting such an offensive for the simple reason that class antagonism has been managed incredibly effectively within the particular American style of 'oligarchic' democracy – even at a time of severe economic crisis.

Within two months of having been in power, Hitler was able to purge much of the police force in Germany, replacing its chiefs with his own people, and was able to authorise an emergency decree which justified the use of lethal force against communists and leftists more broadly, not to mention the Jews who were regularly subsumed under these categories whatever their political allegiances. Hitler was able to do this because it was the culmination of an ongoing life and death struggle enacted against the German working classes who posed a significant threat to the social order.

Within the first two months of his inauguration, Hitler had sent 25,000 social democrats, communists and liberals to internment camps. Within that same two month window, he had introduced a decree which allowed him to circumvent juries, and subject political opponents to military courts. In the same period the press was muzzled. *This is what Hitlerism really was*; the stark, violent process by which the democratic powers of the

masses and any and every possibility of resistance is physically decapitated, without preamble, without hesitation – only the lethal sound of the swishing blade.

Now consider Trump's resume. After he first took office, his most racist and rabidly reactionary act of legislature was the attempt to introduce the notorious 'Muslim travel ban', a ban which was in effect for several months, but was repeatedly blocked by Supreme Court judges before being repealed. In April of that first year Trump was unable to fill 85% of positions in the executive branch that he required in order to run the swift, decisive, and more authoritarian form of government he craved; one which was capable of acting uniformly and sidestepping bureaucracy. And the American media have not only *not* been stifled by Trump; rather they are perhaps more openly hostile to him than any other president in American history.

That Trump would like to run the presidency on fascist terms; that he would happily bridle the press, send dissenters *en masse* to prison; that his political ideology is riven with all sorts of fascist yearnings and aspirations is beyond question – but the more significant issue is whether there exists the objective set of material and social forces which could allow such ideological strands to reach fruition through the formation of a militarised fascist state. At this point in time, there simply does not.

But why is that important? Why is it important that we don't give the Trump administration the designation 'fascist', given the boost his presidency has provided to fascist, far right tendencies within the American political landscape like the KKK, and the increasing mistreatment and brutalisation of immigrants and minorities which has come with it? Surely debating the finer details of the concept is to get bogged down in esoteric trivia, and miss the broader humanitarian point. To ignore the suffering of these people.

In fact, the issue of a correct definition of fascism is a vital one. If one abstracts the ideological components of fascism from the historical processes which create it, certain political implications inevitably follow. If you separate out fascism from its basis in class struggle, you come to create an ahistorical depiction which involves the following: on the one hand a demagogic, populist leader figure who espouses fascist ideology, and on the other, the ahistorical abstraction of something called 'the people' to whom this figure appeals.

There is usually a tertiary element, some mediating factor – an economic crisis perhaps – and because of this, 'the people', who are invariably poor, ill-educated and desperate, then buy into the spiel the wannabe dictator is selling. They attend his rallies, they hungrily hoover up his lies, they buy into the grotesque racism and rabid nationalism because they

are poor and angry and resentful and stupid, and easily dazzled by the flashing colours of a fluttering flag.

Such a vision is middle-class liberal to its core. I am tempted to say it is Clintonite or Obama-esque. Many of Obama's and Clinton's most vocal supporters are nice, educated liberals who now spend a good deal of time wringing their hands in sorrow, lamenting the fact that the administration of the soft, well-spoken, liberal-intellectual Mr Obama has been usurped by the vulgar fascism of the gaudy upstart, the belligerent, crass and supremely unlettered Mr Trump. In their eyes, the Trump administration is fascist or quasi-fascist because it is more than just a more reactionary administration; it represents a political dark age, the period by which the respectable, rational, reasonable and professional guardians of the liberal status quo have been vanquished by the forces of a more atavistic and sinister primitivism.

And why, why has this happened? Because the people at the bottom have not been properly educated; they have not been sufficiently 'taught' about 'injustices' and it is this which led 'to the embrace of a populist demagogue', to 'a fascist's win' and 'America's moral loss'. The good, venerable liberals 'warned', of course, they even 'begged', but the teeming masses are a volatile, emotive and combustible bunch, the mob when roused rarely tends to respond to the laments and pleas of their educated betters; the humane, middle classes who are most equipped to act in the people's best interests.

It is remarkable how closely Obama himself cleaves to such a narrative. Responding to Trump's victory, without a hint of irony or introspection, Obama wistfully opined: 'Maybe we pushed too far...Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe.' You get what happened right? Trump got in because the ill-educated masses couldn't appreciate the wisdom, the universalism, the sheer humanity of the Obama-liberal project, and just wanted to sink back into a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* of localised tribal impulses and antagonisms. The fascist urge was simply too strong to resist. When one of his aides assures the ex-president that, had he been allowed to run against Trump he would have won a third term, Obama demurs because he again feels that the masses are too dim-witted to appreciate his splendid forward thinking: 'Sometimes I wonder whether I was 10 or 20 years too early.'

Of course, the more cynical among us might want to point out that there was another factor which reduced the Democratic vote in the 2016 election, specifically the 8 years of the Obama presidency which preceded it. The years of military strikes in one country after the next: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. In fact

Obama launched ten times more air strikes in comparison with the George W Bush presidency which came before. Obama presided over a further militarisation of a police force which saw the slaying of unarmed blacks spike. And, on the question of immigration, Obama deported more people than all the other presidents combined. Trump's policy of separating out children from their parents was introduced on the 4th June 2018, and it marked a more reactionary development, for sure, but one which was in keeping with the punitive cruelty of the Democratic immigration policy which had gone before – it simply represented an enhancement of it. During Obama's administration children were also kept caged in holding pens in immigration camps. Accounts of their physical, mental and sexual abuse were rife. Only these things received nothing like the same kind of media coverage.

Clinton lost to Trump, not because millions of poor people were mobilized by a fascist message; but because millions of poor people didn't turn out to vote; they understood that Obama was a friend of war, a guardian of Wall Street, and a keeper of the neoliberal status quo. They didn't require more of the same in Clinton. But the actual facts of Obama's presidency are increasingly drowned out by the howls of 'fascist' which are hurled at Donald Trump week by week, month by month. This is nothing new, incidentally. Every single thoroughly reactionary Republican president of the past fifty years has had this charge levelled at them: Nixon, Raegan, both Bushes and now Trump. They were all fascists in their day.

But in allocating to an administration the label fascist – even if it is headed by a person with clear fascist ideological tendencies – we run the risk of underestimating not only the everyday run-of-the-mill racist and war mongering policies enacted by the 'respectable' parties of the parliamentary mainstream; we also fail to comprehend the symbiotic connection which opens up between the period of Obama and the time of Trump. Trump's regime is, for the most part, more reactionary, and more overtly and rabidly racist than the Obama administration ever was; this cannot be denied. Trump's accession marks a truly awful period in American politics.

But it reached its fruition precisely because the Obama administration had exhausted its facile promises of hope and change in the flames of international war and the unrelenting economic oppression of the poorer layers of the domestic population. It is the continuation of such politics by more extreme means, with the ideological veneer of progressivism set aside, born from the thickening disillusionment of the poorer layers in a decaying political system and their increasing lack of interest in the ballot box (for very

good reason). It has the features of ineptitude and corruption which are the product of such a development.

But is not a fascist administration. It does not mark a qualitative break in what has come before. The latest farrago involving immigrant children is unutterably awful, but its closest parallel in US history – if not the immigration policies of Obama himself – might be something like the locking up of the families of Japanese Americans in WW2. That policy was carried out by the Democratic Party headed by Roosevelt. The same party which, by the way, supported slavery, used nuclear weapons against Japanese cities and escalated the war in Vietnam to a shrieking crescendo.

In describing the Trump administration as fascist we subscribe to a liberal logic which separates out the material realities of fascism from its ideological expression. This helps whitewash the reality of the Democratic Party as a party of war and the financial elite, and instead recasts it in the type of morality play where the beleaguered and high minded liberals like Obama and Clinton become the last bastions of reason and humanity against an ever encroaching darkness – only their tragic struggle against barbarism is doomed to founder on the rocks of the prejudices and the whims of an easily excitable and unsophisticated mob. It is a vision which combines hatred of the lower classes with a drooling sycophancy toward the elite. As tragedy goes, it is more *Vanity Fair* than Shakespeare.

Don't buy into it.