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Fascism: Now You See It, Now You Don't!

"We need to understand that, contrary to what we are told by the U.S. media, fascism is not an extreme development, limited in time and place, that occurred a long time ago. Quite the contrary. Fascism is extended, generalized, and exists everywhere."

– Vicente Navarro

Only one country in the world has, in recent history:

+ endeavored to overthrow more than 50 foreign governments

+ established an intelligence agency that killed at least 6 million people in the first 40 years of its existence

+ developed a draconian police-vigilante network to destroy any domestic political movements that challenged its dominion

+ constructed a mass incarceration system that cages a greater percentage of the population than any other country in the world, and which is embedded within a global secret prison network and torture regime.

Whereas *democracy* is the common term used to describe this country, we learn that *fascism* only occurred once in history, in one place, and that it was defeated by the aforementioned democracy.

The expansiveness and elasticity of the notion of *democracy* could not contrast more starkly with the narrowness and rigidity of the concept of *fascism*. After all, we are told that democracy was born some 2500 years ago and that it is a defining feature of European civilization, and even one of its unique cultural contributions to world history. Fascism, by contrast, purportedly erupted in Western Europe in the interwar period as an aberrant anomaly, temporarily interrupting the progressive march of history, right after a war had been fought to make the world 'safe for democracy.' Once a second world war destroyed it, or so the narrative goes, the forces of good then set about taming its evil 'totalitarian' twin in the East in the name of democratic globalization.

As value-concepts whose substantive content is much less important than their normative charge, democracy has been perpetually expanded, whereas fascism is constantly constricted. The Holocaust industry has played no small part in this process through its endeavors to singularize the Nazi war atrocities to such an extent that they literally become incomparable or even 'unrepresentable,' while the purportedly democratic forces of good in the world are repeatedly held up for emulation as the model for global governance.

Concepts-in-Class-Struggle

The ongoing debate over the precise definition of fascism has frequently obscured the fact that the nature and function of definitions differ significantly depending on the epistemology employed, meaning the overall framework of knowledge and truth. For historical materialists, concepts like fascism are sites of class struggle rather than quasi metaphysical entities with fixed properties. The search for a universally acceptable definition of a generic concept of fascism is therefore quixotic. This is not, however, because concepts are relative in a purely subjectivist sense, meaning that everyone simply has their own, idiosyncratic definition of such notions. It is that they are relational in a concrete, material sense: they are objectively situated in class struggles.

It is bourgeois ideology that presumes the existence of a universal epistemology outside of class struggle. It acts as if there was only one concept of each social phenomenon, which corresponds of course to the bourgeois understanding of the phenomenon in question. What this ultimately means, from a materialist perspective, is that the bourgeois ideology inherent in the very idea of a universal epistemology is itself part of class struggle insofar as it surreptitiously endeavors to disappear all rival epistemologies.

If we dig deeper into the differences between these two epistemologies, which are rival accounts of the very function of concepts and their definitions, we see that materialists—in stark contrast to the idealism of bourgeois ideology—understand ideas to be practical tools of analysis that allow for different levels of abstraction, and whose use-value depends on their ability to map material situations whose complexity surpasses their own. Within this framework, the goal is not to define the essence of a social phenomenon like fascism in a manner that could be universally accepted by bourgeois social science, but rather to develop a working definition in two senses. On the one hand, this is a definition that works because it has a practical use-value: it provides a coherent outline of a complex field of material forces and can help orient us in a world of struggle. On the other hand, such a definition is understood to be heuristic and open to further elaboration because Marxists recognize that they are subjectively situated in objective sociohistorical processes, and that changes in perspective and scale might require modifying it. This can be clearly seen in the three different scales that I will use for developing a working definition of fascism: the conjunctural, the structural and the systemic.

Multi-Scalar Analysis

The historical materialist approach to fascism accords a primacy to practices, and it situates them in relationship to the social totality, which itself is analyzed through heuristically distinct but interlocking scales. The conjunctural, to begin with, is the social totality of a specific place and time, such as Italy or Germany in the interwar period. Historically speaking, we know that the term fascism (*fascismo*) emerged as a description of Benito Mussolini's particular brand of organizing, but that it was only theorized gradually, in fits and starts. In other words, it did not appear as a doctrine or coherent political ideology that was then implemented, but rather as a rough and loose description of a dynamic set of practices that changed over time (early on, unlike later, fascism in Italy was reformist and republican, advocated for women's suffrage, supported some limited pro-labor reforms, feuded with the Catholic Church, and was not openly racist).

It was only after the fascist movement had evolved and began to gain power that attempts were made by Mussolini and others to retroactively consolidate their disparate and shifting practices in such a way that they could be presented as fitting within a coherent doctrine. On numerous occasions, Mussolini himself insisted on this point, writing for instance: "Fascism was not the nursling of a doctrine previously drafted at a desk; it was born of the need of action, and was action; it was not a party but, in the first two years, an anti-party and a movement." José Carlos Mariátegui has provided an insightful, fine-grained analysis of the internal struggles operative early on in the Italian fascist movement, which was polarized between an extremist faction and a reformist camp with liberal leanings. Mussolini, according to Mariátegui, occupied a centrist position and avoided unduly favoring one group over the other until 1924, when the socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti was assassinated by fascists.

This brought the battle between the two fascist cliques to a fever pitch, and Mussolini was ultimately forced to choose. After making an unsuccessful overture to the liberal wing, he sided with the reactionaries.

Since its inception, then, the concept of fascism has been a site of social and ideological struggle, if it be the clash between extremists and reformists within the fascist camp, or more generally between fascists and liberals within the capitalist camp. These conflicts were themselves ultimately nested within the overall conflict between capitalists and anti-capitalists. It is from this vantage point of interlocking levels of struggle that we can establish a first working definition of fascism, once it came to be more or less consolidated, by identifying how it emerged within a very specific conjuncture and stage of global class warfare. In the threatening wake of the Russian Revolution (which was followed by failed revolutions in Europe and later the Great Depression in the capitalist world), Mussolini and his ilk used mass communications and propaganda to slowly but surely mobilize sectors of civil society—and particularly the petty-bourgeoisie—with the backing of big industrial capitalists, around a nationalist and colonial ideology of 'radical' transformation in order to crush the workers movement and launch wars of conquest. At this level of analysis, fascism is practically speaking, in the words of Michael Parenti, "nothing more than a final solution to the class struggle, the totalistic submergence and exploitation of democratic forces for the benefit and profit of higher financial circles. Fascism is a false revolution."

This conjunctural analysis is, of course, markedly distinct from liberal accounts of fascism, which tend to focus on surface phenomena and superstructural elements that are severed from any scientific consideration of international political economy and class warfare. If it be a politics of hate, a logic of 'us and them,' a rejection of parliamentary democracy, a question of aberrant personalities, a dismissal of science, or other such characteristics, the liberal approach to fascism is preoccupied with epiphenomenal traits at the expense of the social totality. It is the latter, however, that gives these traits—when they do in fact exist in some form or other—their precise meaning and function. It is worth recalling, in this regard, as Martin Kitchen pointed out, that "all capitalist-countries produced fascist movements after the crash in 1929."

If the bourgeois concept of fascism obscures the social totality of the conjuncture within which European fascism historically emerged under that name, it casts an even longer shadow over the structural and the systemic dimensions of fascism as a practice. As we shall see in the case of George Jackson, Marxists have insisted on the importance of inscribing the conjunctural analysis of European fascism within a structural framework in order to reveal the forms of fascism operative within conjunctures where liberal theorists often claim they either do not exist at all or they are somehow less severe. The interwar period in the United States, for instance, when compared to what was going on in Italy and Germany, reveals striking structural similarities.

Finally, the broadest scale of analysis, which appears to be invisible to liberals, is the capitalist world system. As historical materialists like Aimé Césaire and Domenico Losurdo have argued, the barbarism of the Nazis should be understood as a specific manifestation of the long and deep history of colonial butchery, which has brought capitalism to every corner of the globe. If there is something exceptional about Nazism, Césaire claimed, it is that concentration camps were being built in Europe instead of in the colonies. In this way, he invites us to situate the conjunctural and structural scales of analysis within a systemic framework, meaning one that accounts for the entire global history of capitalism.

The bourgeois concept of fascism seeks to singularize it as an idiosyncratic phenomenon, which is largely or entirely superstructural, in order to foreclose any examination of its ubiquitous presence within the history of the capitalist world order. In contrast, the historical materialist approach proposes a multi-scalar analysis of the social totality in order to demonstrate how the conjunctural specificity of interwar European fascism can best be understood as nested within a structural phase of capitalist class warfare, and ultimately within the systemic history of capital, which came into the world—in the words used by Karl Marx to describe primitive accumulation—"dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt." As one scales out or in, the precise account and operative definition of fascism can change because of the material variables involved, and some have therefore preferred to restrict the term *fascism* to its conjunctural manifestations (which can, at times, be useful for the sake of clarity). However, even if the latter tactic is used, a full analysis of fascism within the social totality ultimately requires an integrated account in which it is recognized that the conjunctural is situated within the structural, which is in turn embedded within the systemic. Fascism, as a practice, is a product of the capitalist system, whose precise forms vary depending on the structural phase of capitalist development and the specific sociohistorical conjuncture.

The Ideology of Fascist Exceptionalism

Simone de Beauvoir once quipped that "in bourgeois language, the word *man* means a bourgeois." Indeed, when the members of the colonial ruling class known as the American founding fathers sent forth their solemn declaration to the world that "all men are created equal," they did not mean that all human beings were actually equal. It is only by understanding their unstated premise—that *man* means *bourgeois*—that we can fully comprehend their intent: the non-humans of the world can be subjected to the most brutal forms of dispossession, enslavement and colonial carnage.

This duplicitous operation, by which a particular (the bourgeoisie) attempts to pass itself off as the universal (humanity), is a well-known characteristic of bourgeois ideology. Its inverted form, however, is perhaps even more deceptive and insidious, because it has not—to my knowledge—been widely diagnosed. Rather than universalizing the particular, this

ideological operation transforms the systemic into the sporadic, the structural into the singular, the conjunctural into the idiosyncratic.

The case of fascism is exemplary. Whenever its name is invoked, we are ritualistically redirected by the dominant ideology to the same set of specific historical examples in Italy and Germany, which are supposed to serve as the general standards by which to judge any other possible manifestations of fascism. According to the most un-scientific of methodologies, it is the particular that governs the universal, rather than the other way around. In its most extreme ideological form, this means that if there are no jackboots, *Sieg Heil* salutes and goose-stepping soldiers, then we cannot possibly be within what is commonly known as fascism.

This ideology of fascist exceptionalism is a natural outgrowth of the bourgeois notion of fascism. By conceptualizing Germano-Italian fascism as sui generis and defining it primarily in terms of its epiphenomenal characteristics, it severs it from its deep roots in the capitalist system, and it obfuscates structural parallels with other forms of repressive governance around the world. This ideology thus plays a crucial role in class struggle: it takes a general feature of life under capital and it transforms it into an anomaly, which some have even sought to elevate, in the case of Nazism, to the metaphysical status of being incomparable in its irreducible singularity. The particular thereby serves to conceal the general.

A Dragon in the Belly of the Beast

George Jackson stalwartly rejected the ideological particularization of fascism and pointed out all of the structural similarities between European fascism and repression in the United States. Unsurprisingly, a liberal critic once proclaimed that the U.S. was not fascist simply because Jackson said it was, thereby dismissing out of hand his structural analysis as simply a subjective opinion (a classic case of liberal projection). Jackson's argument, however, was not reducible to an ex cathedra pronouncement but was instead based on a careful, materialist comparison between the situation in the United States and the one in Europe. "We are being repressed now," he wrote. "Courts that dispense no justice and concentration camps are already in existence. There are more secret police in this country than in all others combined—so many that they constitute a whole new class that has attached itself to the power complex. Repression is here."

When Jackson refers to the U.S. as "the Fourth Reich" and compares American prisons to Dachau and Buchenwald, he is obviously breaking with the exceptionalist protocol that drives the Holocaust industry by elevating European fascism to the singular status of the incomparable. And yet, what he is in effect doing in his analyses of the U.S. is that he is simply rejecting the a-scientific approach to fascism described above, which emphasizes idiosyncrasies in order to obscure structural relations. Instead, he begins the other way around, with a materialist analysis of the modes of governance operative in America, and here's what he found:

The new corporate state [in the U.S.] has fought its way through crisis after crisis, established its ruling elites in every important institution, formed its partnership with labor through its elites, erected the most massive network of protective agencies replete with spies, technical and animal, to be found in any police state in the world. The violence of the ruling class of this country in the long process of its trend toward authoritarianism and its last and highest stage, fascism, cannot be rivaled in its excesses by any other nation on earth today or in history.

Those who would dismiss this as hyperbole, thereby refusing to even engage in historical comparisons, simply reveal one of the most insidious consequences of the ideology of fascist exceptionalism: any materialist analysis of comparable situations is a priori *verboten*.

Rather than recoiling in horror from the term *fascism*, which has been ideologically reserved for a few, now distant, historical anomalies, or what George Seldes called "faraway fascism," Jackson draws the most logical conclusion from the point of view of historical materialist analysis: what's happening before his eyes in the United States is an intensification and globalization of what transpired, under slightly different conditions, in Italy and Germany. In fact, he directly identifies the driving forces behind the perception management that attempts to blind us to American fascism as themselves being a cultural product of this very same fascism:

Right behind the expeditionary forces (the pigs) come the missionaries, and the colonial effect is complete. The missionaries, with the benefits of Christendom, school us on the value of symbolism, dead presidents, and the rediscount rate. […] In the area of culture […] we are bonded to the fascist society by chains that have strangled our intellect, scrambled our wits, and sent us stumbling backward in a wild, disorganized retreat from reality.

Moreover, Jackson, like other Marxist-Leninists, identifies the nucleus of fascism in "an economic rearrangement": "It is international capitalism's response to the challenge of international scientific socialism." Its nationalistic garb, he rightly insists, should not distract us from its international ambitions and its colonial drive: "At its core, fascism is capitalistic and capitalism is international. Beneath its nationalist ideological trappings, fascism is always ultimately an international movement." Jackson thereby responds to the ideological over-inflation of the concept of democracy by extending the notion of fascism to include all of the violence, repression and control operative in the imposition, maintenance and intensification of capitalist social relations (including the reformist welfare state). Some might prefer to distinguish between this form of general fascism, which would include authoritarian and liberal rule, and a more specific definition of fascism as the extensive use of state and para-state repression for the ultimate purpose of increasing capitalist accumulation. These are not, however, necessarily mutually exclusive definitions since the violence of capitalist social relations takes many different forms—direct repression, economic exploitation, social degradation, hegemonic subjection, etc.—and *this* is what Jackson brings to the fore.

Seeing through the Bourgeois Concept of Fascism

The bourgeois concept of fascism aims at dissimulating its structural and systemic character, as well as the deep material causes driving its conjunctural emergence, in order to present it as absolutely exceptional, by cordoning it off in a specific time and place. It seeks to convince us, at all costs, that fascism is *not* an essential aspect of capitalist rule, but rather an anomaly or an exceptional break with its normal functioning. Moreover, it presents it as far away, burying it in a past that has been overcome by democratic progress, brandishing it as a future threat if people do not conform to the dictates of liberal rule, or sometimes locating it in distant lands that are still too 'backward' for democracy.

The materialist approach to fascism refuses the blinders imposed by the perception management inherent in the bourgeois concept, and it clearly identifies the ideological double gesture of capitalist rule: it overinflates and even universalizes its purportedly positive traits, constructing a mythological history of so-called Western democracy, and it erases or particularizes its negative characteristics by making fascism into an idiosyncratic anomaly. By beginning the other way around, historical materialism examines how actually existing capitalism relies on two modes of governance that function according to the deceptive logic of the good cop / bad cop interrogation tactic: wherever and whenever the good cop is not able to inveigle people into playing by the rules of the capitalist game, the bad cop of fascism is always lurking in the shadows to get the job done by any means necessary. If the latter's stick appears to be an aberration when compared to the carrot of the good cop, this is only because one has been hoodwinked into believing in the false antagonism between them, which dissimulates the fundamental fact that they are working together toward a common goal. While it is certainly true, from a tactical organizing perspective, that dealing with the histrionics of the good cop is usually far preferable to the barefaced barbarism of the bad cop, it is strategically of the upmost importance to identify them for what they are: partners in capitalist crime.

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