

What is Fascism ? ¹

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Only a few years ago, an article with a title such as this would have seemed of merely historical interest—akin, perhaps, to a paper on the Second International or Rosa Luxemburg's theory of imperialism. But fascism is no longer of merely antiquarian interest, if indeed it ever was. As the crisis of world monopoly capitalism intensifies, fascism is once more a real political issue in the advanced capitalist societies; and some historical analysis of its constitutive structures is absolutely indispensable to the political task of rooting it out. This isn't easy, for a number of reasons. For one thing, fascism is a phenomenon of considerable complexity, and for that reason among others lends itself temptingly to vulgarly reductive explanations whose theoretical bankruptcy leads straight to political impotence. For another thing, there isn't always enough time to plough one's way through the history and theory of fascism when the National Front are gathering at the local town hall. And so Front-hunting can become a seductive displacement of the real task of examining what fascism actually signifies. There is, too, the problem of knowing how seriously at the moment to take fascism in our society—of steering a line between that bland dismissal of it on which it historically thrives, and diverting one's political energies from the major tasks which confront us—the destruction of the bourgeois state through the building of revolutionary proletarian leadership—to a more immediate but (at present) structurally less determinant issue. In this, the issue of fascism is rather like that of sexuality: it's never easy to draw the line between pathological obsession and ascetic underplaying.

To risk a reductive formulation: fascism is essentially the attempt to ensure the rule of monopoly capitalism in its purest, most untrammelled, most invulnerable form. But of course monopoly capitalism is extremely reluctant to do any such thing. Bourgeois society has expended an enormous amount of historical energy in the evolution of its liberal-democratic ideologies, and won't willingly dispense with this elaborate ideological stabilisation of the class-struggle in order to hand over political power to a shabby bunch of paranoid petty-bourgeois thugs whom it wouldn't tolerate in its drawing-rooms. It is only in a last, desperate resort that the bourgeois state abandons its richly resourceful ideologies of 'free', collusive acquiescence in the mechanisms of class-power, and instead, to adopt a Brechtian image, 'lays bare

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the device'. This, of course, is a welcome fact to revolutionaries, since it gives them some breathing space. In the end there is only one thing which a revolutionary has to fear, and that is the army. Nothing else, in the final instance, is really important. But the bourgeois state will only use the army if it really has to, because the potentially disastrous crumbling of ideological credibility entailed by such a tactic is (most of the time, anyway) not worth the short-term political gains. (I am referring, naturally, to the use of the army in the capitalist homelands, not to its ideologically acceptable deployment for oppressing aliens like the Irish.) And so we have the police instead, who are not pleasant but are at least unarmed. But if the bourgeois state has to use the army then of course it will, so the breathing space has decided limits. There are no limits to which monopoly capitalism will not go to ensure its continuing hegemony; anyone who regards that statement as a piece of leftist paranoia has only to think of Buchenwald.

No traditional bourgeois political party has ever entirely adopted fascism. Such parties have allied with fascism in order to take it over and manipulate it, only to discover that, as far as who was using whom went, the jackboot was on the other foot. Fascism strips the veils of social democratic decency from the monopoly capitalist machine: the relations between the dominant social class and the state become less and less discreetly mediated through apparatuses like parliament and political parties, and become more and more brutally visible and direct. The apparent relative autonomy enjoyed under bourgeois-liberal rule by such state apparatuses as the police and army evaporates under fascism to expose the true integration of these institutions in the state itself. Yet for all that, fascism is far from being merely some enforced imposition of capitalist hegemony on society as a whole. For just as capitalism in its liberal forms governs largely with the consenting complicity of the governed, so fascism—which is effectively a slave-society—differs from classical slave-society in that it, too (at least to begin with) is an enormously *popular* movement, with its roots deeply sunk in every sector of the social formation. (In this it differs from the political form known to Marxism as 'Bonapartism'.) Fascism combines a highly militarist theory of *putschism* with a pervasive *populism*; to put it another way, if the Nazis' practice of overthrowing the German state was in some ways a mirror-image of the ultra-leftist policies of the German communist party at its worst, so, conversely, its radical saturation of the whole of German society with clubs, guilds, leagues, and associations spanning the entire range of social and cultural life resembled in some sense the entrenched, pervasive social corporatism of the German social democratic party of the time.

Fascism, then, only emerges when it has to. The German economy crashed in 1929, membership of the Nazi party had increased by 800% in 1930, 1932 saw 20 million Germans on the dole. But an objective economic crisis of capitalism isn't in itself sufficient to bring fascism to birth; for fascism to grow rapidly that crisis must coincide with a defeat and demoralisation of the working class. The story of

German fascism begins back in 1918-19 with the smashing of the short-lived German workers' republic, and unfolds itself through the whole series of ensuing betrayals of the German proletariat by the SPD (social democratic party) and the hairbrained ultra-leftist antics of the KPD (communist party). In Italy, it was the defeat of the proletarian insurrection of 1920, and the consequent deep demoralisation of the workers, which scooped out the vacuum into which fascism—previously tiny—proceeded to rush. It is a dangerous leftist myth that fascism is the product of a frightened counter-reaction by the bourgeoisie to thrusting proletarian insurgency. On the contrary, it signifies a massive offensive by the bourgeoisie at a time when the working class is disorganised and defensive, betrayed by a reformist leadership, lacking a revolutionary alternative. The ingredients of fascism, then, are multiple: economic and political crisis, proletarian defeat, failure of social democracy, absence or impotence of revolutionary leadership.

Politically, fascism originates neither in the board-room nor the factory floor, but among the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie. It is, characteristically, the political product of those hordes of little possessors and investors who see their savings being cut to shreds, who fear being depressed into the proletariat below them yet simultaneously revolt against the ineffectual ruling class set above them. Trained in the habits of nationalism, élitism, hard work, meritocracy, fear of workers' insurrection, respect for efficiency, rationalisation and the state machine, the petty bourgeoisie becomes the breeding ground in which fascist ideology begins to germinate. It is a class which fears the threat posed by large-scale capital to its own survival, defining itself as a 'neutral' class between bourgeoisie and proletariat; and because its nuclear, scattered economic situation makes it frequently incapable of organising its own political institutions, it tends to rely upon a 'neutral' state posed above all classes as the representative of its own interests.

Fascism is in this sense the product of a severe crisis within a petty bourgeoisie which finds itself buffeted by economic depression and the intensifying power of 'big' capital, but lacks a political voice; finding itself represented by neither bourgeois nor social democratic political machines, it turns to a fascist party to further its demands. The story of fascism, indeed, is among other things the story of the petty bourgeoisie being taken for the longest political ride of its fraught and uncomfortable history. Fascism rallies the petty bourgeoisie to the support of a crisis-ridden monopoly capitalism by exploiting its mixed and ambiguous ideology, manipulating it as a force for suppressing proletarian organisation. It presents itself to the petty bourgeoisie as a popular, *radical* force which shares their animus against the 'idle rich' and the 'plutocrat' and admires the truly *productive* worker (whether capitalist or proletarian); but it also offers itself as a traditionalist movement, restorative of the discipline, pride, piety and domestic values of the days when the nation was truly the nation. The 'radicalism' of fascism is not (in the early stages at least) entirely spurious: the

Nazis actually launched some strikes, and the so-called 'night of the long knives' was necessary to void the movement of those who had taken its leaders seriously in their talk of hitting at the rich. But the typical process of the classical fascisms is more complex. Fascism is at first despised and rejected by the ruling class, then sporadically used at points of political crisis, then abandoned when the political situation temporarily stabilises. Once the crisis refuses to dissolve and grows to immense proportions, fascism begins to win the covert support of major capital in the form of considerable financial donations. The next step is for fascism to seize political power, presenting itself in the form of an alliance between monopoly capital and the petty bourgeoisie, still in some ways with a radical face, still making certain concessions to the masses in the very act of destroying their organisations and replacing them with state-controlled ones. The petty bourgeoisie becomes the *governing* class, staffing the state apparatus, but governs on the basis of the *dominant* interests of monopoly capital. Once it has safely ensconced itself in power, equipped with a programme which is more or less a set of petty-bourgeois grouches, it begins the process of selling out the interests of that class. In the end, even though petty bourgeois *ideology* may still be used as a medium in which to promote monopoly capitalist interests, fascism totally abandons the class on the back of which it climbed to power.

If a severe general crisis of monopoly capitalism, and a coupled crisis of proletarian leadership, are classical preconditions for the emergence of fascism, so also is a particular form of political crisis within the ruling bloc itself. Fascism typically emerges to resolve a situation in which no single class or fraction of a class within the ruling bloc is capable of assuming hegemony; a cohering or mediating force is needed to weld these fractions together on the basis of the dominance of one of them, and it is this force which fascism provides. Its historic mission is to unify the hegemonic bloc of society by effecting certain realignments within it. In Germany, for example, the rapid development of monopoly capitalism during the 1920s produced certain contradictions between this segment of the ruling class and large-scale agricultural capital; the mission of fascism was to resolve these conflicts in the interests of the former. There were also conflicts between 'big' and 'middle' capital, which it was fascism's role to neutralise in favour of the first. Its economic programme—forcible cartelisation, price-stabilisation, denationalisation, public works, war-economy and so on—benefited large-scale industrial capital at the expense of other sectors of ruling-class interest; but because the medium of this reconstruction was state-finance, it was essentially *finance* monopoly capital which became the dominant 'level'. In Italy, fascism also served to ensure the domination of industrial over agrarian capital; the fascist party was essentially a product of the developed north of the country, and broke the political power of the agrarian south.

The ideological conditions in Germany were peculiarly propitious

for the growth of fascism. Brought to power by the Bismarckian 'revolution from above', the German bourgeoisie was never able to consolidate its rule by producing its own specific ideology. In place of the appropriate bourgeois ideology of liberalism, Germany produced instead a transformed feudalist ideology with strong militaristic elements, ripe for transmutation to fascism. The German petty bourgeoisie was also ideologically backward; traditionally dependent on the haute bourgeoisie, it generated no ideology equivalent in force to the Jacobinism of its French counterpart. Yet the elements of such ideology as it had were peculiarly appropriate to be confiscated by fascism. In its fetishising of the state, cult of the 'chief', aggressive nationalism, authoritarianism and 'technicism', German petty bourgeois ideology was in many ways more available to the ideological demands of monopoly imperialist capitalism than was classical bourgeois liberalism. The fascist cult of the family, for example, corresponds to the ideological conditions of a fragmented, individualist petty bourgeoisie which defines itself in 'domestic' rather than class terms; but the images of corporatism, authority and hierarchy generated by such ideology are clearly suitable to the political needs of monopoly capital. It could be said, then, that fascist ideology is essentially a specific mutation of monopoly imperialist ideology as such, effected through an alliance with the ideology of the lower middle class.

It is important to dismiss the conservative and liberal myth that fascism represents some transcendence of capitalism to 'bureaucratic collectivism'. It is probable that the intervention of the fascist state in German and Italian industry did not go much beyond what we have in the West today; the Nazis refrained from nationalising most industry, and their own state-owned enterprises come off rather badly in a comparison with the performance of the private sector. As Franz Neumann puts it in his classic work on fascism, *Behemoth*, fascism is 'a private capitalist economy, regulated by the total state'. It can be seen, in that sense, as a forerunner of the planned corporate economies of contemporary capitalism, following logically from the increasing growth of monopoly and cartelisation during the Weimar period in Germany. The fascist state becomes the continuous supervisor of capitalist production, with the aim of pulling the society out of the world market and building a closed economy with state monopoly of foreign trade and control of costs and prices. The inevitable consequence of such protectionism, once the shattered economy has recovered and grown too powerful for such strict national boundaries, is, of course, imperialist expansion. But such expansion is not a mere 'accident' of fascism. On the contrary, classical fascism is nothing other than the militarist concentration of all national forces, classes and resources in preparation for imperialist war.

Whether or not that preparation involves racism and anti-semitism is historically variable. It obviously does so in the case of Nazism, where the Jew and foreigner are selected as devices for the displacement of internal class-struggle to national corporatism and inter-

national aggression; but though all fascism involves such chauvinist corporatism at the ideological level, fascist formations such as the Iberian ones, which are not to be categorised with the 'classical' fascisms in terms of their economic goals, do not need to express this chauvinism in racist terms. (In 1932, the Chief Rabbi of Italy was a member of the fascist party.)

What is common to all fascist formations, however, is the markedly high degree of 'relative autonomy' which the formation grants to the ideological region. In Nazi Germany, for example, Polish metal workers whose skills were of considerable importance to the war-economy were exterminated for ideological reasons, and the *Hausfrau* mythology kept women out of factories at a time when extra labour-power was urgently needed. Moreover, the complicated and expensive machinery required for the 'final solution' tied up transport and resources which could otherwise have been put to significant military use. All ideological formations have a degree of relative autonomy of the economic and political interests they legitimate, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the case of fascism. The fascist state, similarly, has a high degree of relative autonomy of the interests it promotes—necessarily so, since its role is to intervene to reorganise the various 'levels' within the ruling bloc. It cannot be seen merely as a direct 'agent' or 'instrument' of monopoly capitalism: the Nazi party was not merely the subservient tool of such interests, and could indeed pursue policies which in the short term were detrimental to them. But in the final instance, its imperialist goals coincided with the goals of monopoly capitalism.

What political lessons can we learn from classical fascism? We know that it is a law of fascism that it can develop extremely rapidly in the appropriate conditions; but we need to specify more precisely what the conditions were which allowed Hitler to come to power. If one wanted a single-word answer to the question of why German fascism flourished, one could do worse than reply: Stalin. For the Comintern's grotesquely misconceived analysis of fascism was certainly a crucial factor in its success. To begin with, the Comintern badly underestimated and misunderstood the function of social democracy within the working class, seeing it simply as a set of illusions generated by the relative affluence of the 'labour aristocracy'—illusions which would crumble with progressive capitalist collapse. The narrow 'economism' and 'catastrophism' of this simple-minded 'theory' ignored the fact that social democratic parties (i.e., ones with bourgeois politics and a working-class base) are *structurally* necessary for political and ideological control of the proletariat, not mere excrescences on the body politic. The Comintern accordingly defined social democracy as 'social fascism': fascism and social democracy were seen merely as two different instruments of monopoly capitalist rule. Fascism was defined as a transitory stage which would fall by its own contradictions, and would meanwhile press the contradictions of capitalism to the limit; German fascism would thus speed on proletarian revolu-

tion. The true enemy was social democracy, which the German communists, working alongside the Nazis, set out to overthrow. Betrayed by its social democratic leadership (who vowed 'constitutional' opposition on the Nazis coming to power), sold out by a Comintern which instructed the German communist party to enter into no united front with the 'fascist' social democrats, the German proletariat were powerless before the rise of Hitler. Social democracy had saved the bourgeoisie from the working class; now it was the turn of fascism to save the bourgeoisie from social democracy.

The political lesson of all this is plain. Only an organised, revolutionary working-class movement can defeat fascism, and yet the Western proletariats today are as deeply contaminated as ever by bourgeois ideology. Even so, it is important not to overestimate the strength of fascist movements. The groups and classes they draw into them—petty bourgeois, peasant, unemployed, lumpenproletariat—are notoriously difficult to organise and liable often enough to collapse at the first defeat. Moreover, the organised industrial working class is rarely directly penetrated by fascism; the Nazis' claim to be a workers' party is hardly born out by the electoral statistics. The English working class fought impressively against fascism in the 1930s, despite the demoralisations of their massive defeat in the General Strike of 1926 and the subsequent years of economic depression. (Indeed it was that demoralisation of the English proletariat which provides one reason why British capitalism did not need to resort to fascism; for if fascism thrives on the political vulnerability of the proletariat, it nonetheless needs to destroy their organisations of economic power, which in Germany—in contrast to Britain—were still considerable.) British fascism today—the National Front—is still peripheral, riven by internal conflicts between hard-core Nazism and electoral respectability. The struggle against it is, of course, a specific task: fascism must be prevented from organising, demonstrating and propagandising. We should be grateful for the fact that we do not live in a society where we are free to say anything we like in public; it is at least a start that anyone publicly advocating racial hatred is liable to criminal prosecution. Yet the fight against fascism is also an inseparable aspect of the fight against the kind of society which produces it, and so indivisible as a task from the problem of building revolutionary leadership. Fascism is not the chief enemy, but neither is it to be ignored. If the notoriously loose and emotive use of the term 'fascist' common to some sectors of the left is a dangerous political imprecision, it can at least serve to remind us that fascism is never far beneath the surface of bourgeois democracy.