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Debate

Fascism, populism and conservatism

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In 1941, at Hitler's military apex, Bertolt Brecht wrote *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, wherein he reduces Hitler the politician and his lackeys to a vulgar band of bandits from 1930's Chicago.

The following epilogue was written after the war:

Therefore learn how to see and not to gape.

To act instead of talking all day long.

The world was almost won by such an ape!

The nations put him where his kind belong.

But don't rejoice too soon at your escape —

The womb he crawled from still is going strong.

This warning did not come out of the blue. Here and there, the monster creeps out of its den. Neo-Nazi groups no longer hesitate taking to the streets. They benefit from the general political rightward shift, as embodied by demagogic, populist autocrats like Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines, Erdoğan in Turkey, Kaczyński in Poland, Modi in India, Orbán in Hungary, Putin in Russia and the incomparable Trump in the U.S. A gang of chauvinist nationalists, enemies of the unions and, if not all of them, harsh/strict neoliberalism.

The idea of solidarity, characteristic of the socialist movement, was tarnished as 20th century rubbish, a leftover from the ideas of Enlightenment progress and the French Revolution. But is this right-populism the trailblazer of a fascist renaissance, or will it rise in a new form of ruling class authoritarianism in altered social and cultural conditions?

What is fascism anyway? From a historical perspective this political form has manifested clear, describable content. In light of that, we should avoid calling each form of authoritarianism fascism — it's not helpful. More generally, and more to the point, it does not help us gauge the reality of the threat it poses. After all, each society subject to social inequality is characterized by one form of oppression or another. In the following paragraphs I will refer to the account offered by American historian Robert Paxton, specialist in the French Vichy regime of the second world war.

Fascism

"Strictly speaking, as an ideal type, fascism is a mass anti-liberal, anticommunist movement, radical in its willingness to employ force and in its contempt for the upper-class values of the time, sharply distinct not only from its enemies on the left but also from its rivals on the right, traditional conservatives. Where conservatives want social structure to be hierarchical, fascist mass rallies in uniform colored shirts display a leveling egalitarianism before the leader. Economically, fascists make their appeal to the solitary 'common man' against the organized 'interests' of society,

from bankers and landlords to trade unions. Where conservatives show distaste for mass participation and prefer government by a few established families, fascists – children of the era of mass politics instead of survivors of elitist nineteenth-century Europe – attempt to marshal mass affirmations. Fascists often prefer a Dionysiac pagan vigor to the social bulwark of established churches. They mock the softness, the conformity, the empty manners of conservatives. Totally devoid of any sentimental conservative attachment to the vanishing Europe of grandpapa, fascists revel in dynamism, change, and a 'new order.'

There are common points, of course: authoritarianism, hatred of liberals as weak-kneed harbingers of leftist social revolution, defense of property. But that common ground tends to be drowned out by discordant clashes of tone and value, especially among fascists enjoying the freedom of those out of power.

The study of fascism is complicated by the fact that no fascist movement has ever reached power on its own terms. None has come to power without being assisted by conservatives, under conditions in which fascists and conservatives mute their differences and undergo a certain amalgamation in the face of higher interests: achieving office and staving off a communist threat. Conservatives have frequently found the organized mass support and private armies of fascism a welcome ally against the Left; fascists have frequently found conservatives holding the keys to power. Mussolini was financed by industrialists and landowners when his nationalist-syndicalist *squadristi* turned their attention to beating up reformist socialists. It was King Victor Emmanuel III, with the advice of parliamentary leaders, who summoned him to form a government in 1922. Mussolini threatened to march on Rome, but he arrived in fact by Pullman car. Hitler received conservative money and support and was called to power by President von Hindenburg, on the advice of conservatives like Franz von Papen and General von Schleicher. Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera's Falange had only a minor and diminishing role in Franco's military-clerical group that destroyed the Spanish Republic.

All these leaders, upon taking power, headed coalitions of fascist and conservative elements joined together in the common endeavor of obtaining office and preventing communist revolution. All of them, moreover, had to put down opposition from purer-minded fascist ideologues whose radical frenzy had helped them acquire a mass following in the first place. Mussolini had to get rid of his early syndicalist followers like Massimo Rocca. Hitler cynically liquidated Ernst Röhm and Gregor Strasser along with other inconvenient past allies and accomplices in the Night of the Long Knives, 30 June 1934. Franco gradually muted the Falange. No undiluted fascist regime has wielded power.

It helps to set up a spectrum of radical right regimes, ranging from those in which fascists dominated the partnership to those in which conservatives dominated the partnership. Hitler's Germany clearly occupies one end of the spectrum. The Nazi party and the paramilitary organizations eventually broke the power of even such conservative elite groups as the diplomatic corps and the army. In Italy, by contrast, king, church, and army retained sufficient autonomy to regain their independence and overthrow Mussolini and the party in order to make a deal with the advancing Allies in July 1943. Dr. Salazar's Portugal perhaps occupied the other end of the spectrum, in which conservative, Catholic authoritarianism was almost untinged by mass anti-traditional authoritarianism. The Vichy National Revolution clearly occupied a place on such a spectrum nearer the conservative than the fascist end. Pétain felt himself closer to Franco and Salazar than to Hitler." This, then is the account provided by Robert O. Paxton in his *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (1972).

It is perhaps not wrong to name some contemporary movements in Asia as fascist. In Pakistan there are some Islamic movements who have armed gangs that regularly use violence against ideological opponents, particularly leftist parties and emancipated women. Then there is the anti-Muslim movement in Modi's India, where the Hindutva ideology bears fascist tendencies.

Populism

We cannot simply designate right-wing, far-right and populist movements as fascist. The political goals of these groupings differ in their contexts and missions. The interbellum witnessed a struggling bourgeoisie gripped by fear of a revolution by the large socialist and communist organizations. That fear was not unfounded. The economic crisis forced capital's hand into destroying the workers' resistance in order to pull the rate of profit back up. In order to realize this it was necessary to forge an alliance of conservatives with the far right. However, the current situation does not present the ruling classes with a socialist threat. They are instead left to face the contradictions produced by neoliberal globalization, conflicts on the world market and the various consequences these have for the population.

The populist and far-right resistance against these conditions lays the blame not on capital, but on the decaying profiteering elite of traditional party politics. "We are the people, you are the elite," proclaim the populists. "Our leaders are the embodiment of the people and so they are always right."

Populism lives off class contradictions but is devoid of class consciousness, be it of the conservative bourgeoisie or that of the workers' movement. In practice, its ideology is petty-bourgeois. It gives voice to the fears of people who feel threatened by changes in their environment and working conditions, people who feel powerless to do anything about it or about the way their lives' expectations and job security are disturbed. Their reaction is not one of attempting to keep what they have, it is reactionary. They dream of a world where everything was good, despite it never having existed.

Herein lies populism's connection with the conceptual worlds of conservatism, the far-right and fascism. As long as populism is not co-opted by the ruling class, it will remain a marginal, albeit dangerous, tendency. It can only be fought with a consistently anti-capitalist politics, and not with an alliance with the ruling "democratic" elites (useful voting, cordon sanitaire, etc.).

Conservatism

As implied by its name, conservatism stands for the conservation of the political community and its established economic and cultural values as they developed at the end of the 18th century, following the American and French revolutions: the capitalist society. Its liberalism was not pure, seeing as how it also carried remnants of the ancien regime. Just think of how diplomacy was, until quite recently, largely in the hands of the aristocracy.

For as long as possible, conservatism has tried to limit democratic process to the domain of elites: industrialists, financiers, and land owners. They who possess nothing cannot shoulder responsibility: so went the argument against universal suffrage.

Despite differences between liberal and religious elites, where the former referred to the Enlightenment, which the latter rejected, both defended, in varying degrees and methods, a number of cultural values they believe developed in a natural manner: the traditional family and its structure; patriarchy and the obedience and respect it demands; the subordination of women to men; a certain (often hypocritical) puritanism (sex, drugs); racism (social and biological); positive views on colonial past; repressive politics (law & order, zero tolerance); fear of "the other" (Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.); climate change denialism and opposition to environmental protection. Resistance to abortion and euthanasia, or at least a certain ambivalence to them, are typical to conservatism, allowing, again, for some variations.

Conservatism is scared of the abrupt change that can undermine social relations. It realizes it has to yield to the demands of the popular classes, but it only gives in under pressure. "Change in order to remain the same," as says the prince in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. As the Irish Edmund Burke, mentor of Flemish

nationalist leader Bart de Wever, put it in his criticism of the French Revolution, only calm, historically natural growth can produce acceptable change. Mass democracy does not provide the established powers with any guarantees in the maintenance of the social harmony from which they benefit.

There are voices today that decry the "excess of democracy". The masses are too stupid to know how to best direct society. Populism and fascism are, according to the conservative elites, the consequence of this "excess of democracy". The dreams, which flow from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and point to progress and the perfectability of people, ultimately lead to chaos, civil war and tyranny. Only tradition serves as the basis for the needs of the people, afflicted as they are with evil, wolves under wolves. Conservatism is pessimistic. Its reactionary celebrities includes the likes of Thierry Baudet, T. Dalrymple, Jordan Peterson, among others.

Flanders

Who were the conservative forces in Flanders' recent history? In the first place, it was the Church, which portrayed modernity as the devil's workshop: dancing, film, co-education all had to be banned. Literature was censored, a task carried out by, among others, the *Scriptores Catholici*, the writers' organisation controlled by the Church. Thousands of young people from Catholic organisations swore never to read anything by Gerard Walschap, who left the Church. These conditions continued as late as the 1950's, when a professor at the Catholic University of Leuven, the critic Albert Westerlinck, argued that quality literature was not possible under puritan Catholic censorship. The city was considered a breeding ground for moral decadence, while rural life accrued praises for its simplicity and godliness, as evidenced by the rural literature of writers like Ernest Claes and Felix Timmermans. The *Davidfonds*, the Flemish Catholic cultural society, subjected the titles it published to a morality rating.

The morals of the Church left strong marks on the ideology of Christian democracy and its various "positions", including those of its workers' movement. The Flemish Movement was similarly subject to strong Catholic influence. Today's society is wholly urbanized, stocked with all forms of consumer entertainment. No religious opium is equal to this. Although the Church lost its moral authority in Flanders since about the 1960's, it continues to wage a rearguard struggle against abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality.

In liberal and its associated circles, the conservative reaction is less intense when compared to that of the Church, despite its real strength in some respects. For a long time, socialist circles feared the consequences of women's suffrage, and they defended petty bourgeois morality in matters of marriage, sexuality and education. Having said this, conservative sections in Flanders do not all take a rigid posture towards social change. Christian democracy has accepted the right to abortion, as it has towards civil same-sex unions. This is out of a recognition of reality or a sense of pressure from social movements. In this respect, Christian democracy has lost its political dominance and with it its leadership in conservatism.

The NV-A, the dominant Flemish nationalist neoliberal party, became the most important conservative power, albeit in new circumstances. Bart de Wever's party is deeply neoliberal and subscribes to a pessimistic worldview. It goes about critiquing socially accepted values (on abortion, sex, feminism) in a careful manner so as not to scare off voters. Although it is not a populist party as such, people like Theo Francken do engage in populism on issues of immigration and refugees. One of the reasons behind this was (and is) the need to take the wind out of the sails of *Vlaams Belang*, which it has partly succeeded in doing for the time being. Historically, the board of this far-right party has a Flemish-national fascist background and engages in populist demagoguery. The NV-A is thus home to a diverse field of far-right views, as seen in the fighting team of *Shield and Friends*, although this does not serve the party board. Some Flemish nationalists have turned their backs on the NV-A because they realized the party sees Flemish independence as impossible to realize, and so is instead focused on making Flanders into the dominant economic-political power within Belgium.

Fascism, populism and conservatism

Flemish nationalism has never been able to break with its ties to the far right ideology it internalized after the First World War. Following the defeat of Nazism, it was granted a marginal role within the People's Union, the post-war petit-bourgeois Flemish nationalist party, which presented itself as a democratic parliamentary party. But the fascist Flemish world continued to live underground, in friends' circles, publications, youth groups, etc. Today, together with other far-right remnants in Europe, the Flemish far right is starting to operate in the open. We must certainly not underestimate them.

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Translated by Federico Lafaire This piece was originally [published on SAP-Rood, Belgian section of the Fourth International](#)