

Theses on Fascism and Trumpism

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Fascism/Trump

Many pundits and scholars at least in the United States seem to want to draw a parallel between the inter-war right-wing dictatorships and President Donald Trump. Timothy Snyder's claim that "our political order faces new threats not unlike the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century" is somewhat typical of this idea. The idea appears on both the center-left and the far-left, although these two political camps draw somewhat different conclusions from the supposed parallel. For the centrists the lesson is to avoid "extremism" and rally support for a broad coalition in support of restoration of the "rule of law" or "democracy." For the far left the conclusion is to combat fascism in the streets through direct action. Obviously these analyses are simply lightly refurbished versions of the debates of the 1920s and 1930s on how to resist the interwar dictatorships effectively. My central claim in this paper is that both interpretations overlook a profound difference between the inter-war period and today. Fascism, as I will suggest, could arise only in conditions of a highly mobilized civil society, itself the product of mass-mobilizing warfare, the challenge of the Russian Revolution, and the interaction between an essentially traditional agrarian order and global competitive pressures in agriculture which produced a striking wave of peasant self-organization from the late nineteenth century right through to the 1930s. "Trumpism," by contrast, arises in the context of a fragmented and depoliticized civil society: a product of the absence of mass-mobilizing warfare, of a revolutionary threat from the left, and of a traditional agrarian order. Paradoxically, Trumpism shares much more with nineteenth-century Bonapartism in which a charismatic figure emerges in the context of a fragmented and weak civil society, than it does with twentieth-century fascism.

My claim

My procedure is quite simple. I shall present a set of contrasting theses on fascism and Trumpism. I then will pull together their implications for the different forms of rule characteristic of these two forms of right-wing regime.

A brief roadmap

Both fascism and Trumpism can be identified in terms of five clusters of features:

- (1) historical period (two theses);
- (2) political context (three theses);
- (3) social base (one thesis);
- (4) seizure of power (one thesis);
- (5) outcomes (three theses).

I shall thus contrast fascism and Trumpism according to ten contrasting theses.

Thesis 1 (historical period): The period of imperialism

Fascist regimes arose in the period of imperialism. Nicos Poulantzas put it best when he wrote, “he who does not wish to discuss *imperialism* should also stay silent on the subject of fascism” (1974, 17).¹ In all capitalist countries there was a shift toward “organized capitalism” between 1871 and 1914. This was associated with the saturation of domestic markets and created enormous pressures for war within the core of the world capitalist system over the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. Increasingly this turned states into rivals on the global stage. This switch over to imperialism affected every advanced capitalist country and led to demands for a greater role for the state. It was also the structural fact behind the outbreak of the First World War.

Thesis 1 (historical period): A low-pressure geopolitical environment

Trumpism, in total contrast to interwar fascism, arises in a low-pressure geopolitical environment. It is perhaps easy to forget this with the constant stream of inane provocation pouring forth from the White House, but the fact remains that the main military conflicts shaping the contemporary world are between the advanced capitalist world and rather minor border threats. These are of two types: so-called rogue regimes and “terrorists.” There are no pressures toward military conflict within the core of the capitalist world. It is just possible that China may seize the moment, but for now the Middle Kingdom remains a geopolitical midget.

1 Poulantzas, Nicos. 1974. *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*. London: New Left Books.

Thesis 2 (historical period): The post-war period

Fascist regimes arose in the aftermath of World War One and that war's central political outcome, the Russian Revolution. In Lenin's famous words the revolution broke out in the "weakest link" of the imperialist chain. Fascism, again to quote Poulantzas, arose in the "second two weakest links" in the chain of imperialist countries after Russia (Italy and Germany). Italy and Germany were cut out of the imperial game, and their social elites, as I will argue, were profoundly weakened by the post-war crisis.

Thesis 2 (historical period): Post-2008

Trumpism has not arisen after a mass-mobilizing war. Instead it emerged in the long aftermath of an economic collapse and the subsequent response that has done nothing to address the underlying issues that caused the collapse. As such, this is part of a wider pattern of revolt that has been roiling Europe, and also Turkey. These rolling revolts, which have taken both rightist and leftist forms, are a consequence of the etiolation of the material basis of consent for capitalist rule in the advanced capitalist world.

Preliminary conclusion 1

If fascism arose following a period of mass-mobilizing warfare, and Trumpism arose after an economic collapse and then anemic recovery, what are the consequences of this for the characteristics of each form of right-wing government? As Theda Skocpol has shown, mass-mobilizing warfare has generally produced high levels of civil voluntarism and political participation. This was very much true of the post-war period in Europe. Fascism itself originally began as a veteran's organization. No such associational explosion preceded Trumpism. Like Obama before him, Trump remains an electoral phenomenon. He does not have a continuous organizational basis in civil society.

Thesis 3 (political context): The structure of the social elite

Fascist regimes arose in a context of serious intra-dominant class conflict. One line of conflict arose between export-oriented and globally competitive industries, and less internationally competitive heavy industries requiring state support. Another line of division was between the relatively unproductive and indeed only partly "capitalist" agrarians in the east (Germany) and south (Italy) and industrial capitalists as a whole. For specific historical reasons in neither Germany nor Italy could the various wings of the dominant class in the post-war period be unified either in a single political organization,

or in a functioning system of party alternation. Nevertheless, agrarians in both Italy and Germany retained an organizational link to the rural masses, a link that proved of great importance in the rise of fascism.

Trumpism also arises in the context of serious intra-dominant class conflict. In a context of structurally stagnating rates of return, owners of money and means of production demand increasingly direct handouts from the state, leading to the immediate politicization of their conflicts of economic interest. This leads to dominant class fragmentation rather than cohesion as conflicts develop over what industries and sectors will receive state largess. One of the most remarkable developments over the past couple of years is the politicization of intra-dominant class conflicts: fossil fuels and extractive industries back Trump, health insurance companies defend the massive corporate handout known as the ACA and so on. All these interest conflicts are carried on with great sound and fury, even though the class terrain on which they are currently being waged is relatively narrow. But Trumpism, unlike fascism, lacks support from a pre-capitalist agrarian elite with a powerful presence in civil society.

Thesis 4 (political context): The threat from below

The crisis of intra-dominant class hegemony in Italy and Germany was exacerbated by an explicitly anti-capitalist labor and working class movement organized into the strongest mass parties in existence in their respective countries (PSI/PCI and the SPD/KPD). This anti-capitalist sentiment was shared across the entire range of the labor movement. The debate between “reformists” and “revolutionaries” within the socialist area was tactical. The Russian Revolution had a profoundly contradictory impact on these movements. It radicalized one wing of the labor movement (the communist parties), but at the same time split the movement after 1921. But in any case there was a huge challenge from below which both threatened the social elite and provided an organizational model of mass politics that the fascists adopted. (Obviously, in the Italian case because much of the political leadership had previous experience in the parties of the left.)

Trumpism also arises in the context of a threat from below. However, unlike in the fascist cases, where the crisis emerged as a direct political challenge, in the United States such a political challenge in the form of an autonomous party organization could not appear. Thus the crisis took the form of disintegration within the parties themselves (the Sanders and Trump phenomena), not the rise of an alternative mass organization. This has an important consequence; it means that the organizational dynamics that created fascism as, in Juan Linz’s words, a latecomer to political space, are not in operation here. These different patterns of political contestation mean that Trumpism completely lacks a mass party organization in the fascist sense. The dynamics of contention that could produce such organizations are missing.

Thesis 5 (political context): The crisis of the revolutionary movement

Fascism arose out of a defeated revolution. Although an objectively revolutionary situation had existed in the period from 1918 to 1920 in Italy and from 1917 to 1923 in Germany the revolutionary breakthrough failed. Socialists retreated to defending a set of economic demands within capitalism, thereby weakening their hold over the middle strata (the petty bourgeoisie) and the peasantry, who then became available for fascist mobilization.

Thesis 5 (political context): Failed reformism

Trumpism emerges not from a failed revolutionary threat, but from the failed reformism of the Obama years. The bailout of large financial institutions, with no significant prosecutions, combined with a health care plan premised on massive handouts to private insurance companies fatally weakened progressive initiative during the Obama years. This bears a faint, but instructive resemblance to the years 1918–1920 in Italy and 1917–1923 in Germany. Obama's economic recovery meanwhile was meek. Therefore, while remaining personally popular, he left the Democratic Party in a shambles. Again, the specifically counter-revolutionary energy so characteristic of fascist movements is impossible for Trumpism to recreate.

Preliminary conclusion 2

One of the social conditions that produced interwar fascism was the ability of large agrarian organizations to either directly mobilize peasant organizations, or to form alliances with peasant organizations that had formed autonomously. The social elites that support Trump lack much capacity to directly mobilize a following. This is in part because they don't rely on an extensive labor force that can be dragooned into political support for the right. They substitute a media strategy for this organizational weakness, but this does not produce a mass movement. Furthermore, interwar fascism was not only politically, but also organizationally a response to the mass party form which had been created first by the German SPD; there is absolutely no counterpart for such a thing in the period prior to the rise of Trump. Finally, fascism was a form of counter-revolution emerging in response to an objectively revolutionary situation in the periods 1918–1920 and 1917–1923. But there was no such revolutionary situation in the United States under Obama.

Thesis 6 (social basis): Fascism and the *Petite Bourgeoisie*

Fascist movements fused together both salaried employees and small shopkeepers, as well as petty agrarian direct producers in a paramilitary party organization aimed primarily against socialism. (The political sociology of these movements is somewhat controversial. Italian fascism was never primarily an electoral movement, unlike German National Socialism that had a longer electoral history. One fairly common finding is that fascist movements did well among state employees.)

Thesis 6 (social base): Trumpism and the *Petite Bourgeoisie*

Trump's core social support comes from a combination of relatively affluent southern white voters (traditional petty bourgeoisie) and a small sliver of working class swing voters in the Upper Midwest. But the highly educated, "the new petite bourgeoisie," seem mostly hostile (Skocpol and Williamson; exit polls). Trumpism emerges out of the fragmentation, rather than unification, of the petty bourgeoisie. One reason perhaps that Trump cannot mobilize this group as a whole is that the political meaning of the state is completely different for him than it was for the interwar fascists. Poulantzas following Lenin characterized the "petty bourgeois" view of the state in the epoch of Fascism as "*power fetishism*." As he put it, "the petty bourgeoisie believes in the 'neutral' State above classes," and "identifies with the State" (Poulantzas 1974, 241; see footnote 1). The belief in a "neutral state" is completely alien to Trumpism, however; in fact, the segment of the population that really holds this view is the "new petty bourgeoisie," particularly left-liberal intellectuals.

Preliminary conclusion 3

In part because it arose in response to a mass challenge to the state from below organized in militant anti-capitalist political parties, the "middle strata," especially those dependent on state employment, swung over to fascism. At least some of these people were attracted by the technocratic dream of a society without politics. There is little good evidence on the particular fractions of the middle strata that are attracted to Trumpism, but the complete absence of a technocratic wing is very notable.

Thesis 7 (getting power): An invitation by the elites

In both Italy and Germany fascist parties were invited into power by conservative elites. Victor Emanuel named Mussolini Prime Minister, just as Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor. In neither case did fascist parties win governmental power by winning a majority of the vote. The NSDAP's electoral high-water mark was July 1932: 37 percent. The PNF was always more of a paramilitary than an electoral organization. Its greatest electoral success came in 1921 as part of the "national bloc" in which it took 36 out of 535 parliamentary seats. However, this invitation followed an intense "struggle period" in both cases: one that was considerably longer in Germany than in Italy. During this period fascist parties built organizations, which meant that they had a mass base of support when they came to power.

Thesis 7 (getting power): The popular vote?

Trump got elected with 46 percent of the popular vote, better than either Mussolini or Hitler. But he still lost the popular vote by 3 million. In this sense the simplest reason that Trump won is the Electoral College. Trump received an 11 percentage point boost from the Electoral College, whereas Clinton was penalized by 6 percentage points. But perhaps an important distinction between Trumpism and fascism is the rapidity of the reality star's political rise. There is no period corresponding the "struggle period" in Trump's rise. The only organization that he has to speak of is a family firm, not a political party.

Preliminary conclusion 4

While interwar fascist regimes came to power on the basis of fascist parties and movements that gestated within strongly organized and highly politicized civil societies, Trumpism came to power on the basis of a fragmenting traditional party system, and a largely passive electorate. Its characteristic organizational form is not the political party but rather the family. I return to this point below.

Thesis 8 (outcomes): A restoration of profitability and crushing the working class

For both the Italian and German cases one main social outcome was restored profitability on the basis of the destruction and re-incorporation of the socialist union and party structures into the fascist party-state complex.

Thesis 8 (outcomes): Exacerbation of inequalities

Trump and the Republicans seem determined to exacerbate the very social inequalities that brought Trump to power in the first place. One distinct possibility is the emergence of Latin American levels of social inequality with highly negative consequences for democratic institutions.

Thesis 9 (outcomes): Building the para-state

Fascism in Germany and Italy was associated with an expansion of a parallel or para-state outside the older core of the ministerial bureaucracy. The party itself, welfare organizations, leisure time organizations, public–private partnerships of various sorts all expanded massively. This “para-state” was the main political legacy of fascism.

Thesis 9 (outcomes): Dismantling the regulatory state

The fundamental political dynamic of Trumpism is toward a destruction of federal agencies. The idea seems to be a return to a pre-progressive era (not just pre-New Deal era) political order, without substantial regulatory capacity. This stands in complete contrast to interwar fascism.

Thesis 10 (outcomes): War

Both the Italian and German regimes had a strong internal dynamic for external aggression. In the German case the re-armament drive created a set of bottlenecks that locked the country onto a path to war. The pressures in Italy were more political. Mussolini’s adventures in Ethiopia and Albania were attempts to project the implausible notion of Italy as a great power.

Trump inherited an unbalanced geopolitical situation. The vast inequality between US military power and that of any potential peer builds irresponsibility and adventurism into US foreign policy. This of course precedes Trump, but he seems determined to take full advantage of it. The one bright spot is that Trump for personal reasons seems uninterested in confronting Russia.

Conclusion

I would now like to draw the threads of the analysis together. There are four clusters of factors that distinguish fascism from Trumpism. While the first arose out of an experience of mass-mobilizing war, the second arose out of the long aftermath of a financial crisis. While the first emerged out of a quasi-revolutionary situation, the second emerged in the absence of an organized left. While the first galvanized the middle strata behind it, the second did not. While the first was both a project to discipline and to build state power, the second aims to dismantle the “administrative state.” Out of this set of contrasts I would particularly like to emphasize one general feature that distinguishes the two cases. While fascism was a product of intense civil society and associational development, Trumpism is an expression of the etiolation and weakening of civil society. That is why Trump is more similar to Bonaparte, and particularly the second Bonaparte, than to the interwar fascists. This difference is particularly evident in the basic institutional conflict that characterizes the dynamics of each form of right-wing regime. Fascist regimes were plagued by struggle between the state and the party. Their leaders sat atop these two competing organizations and played them against one another. Mussolini’s and Hitler’s families, however, played very little role in the power-politics of their regimes. In contrast to Mussolini and Hitler, the institutional conflict that characterizes Trumpism is what Weber would have called the “logic of the household” and the “the logic of bureaucracy.” All of Trump’s supposed “violations of democratic norms” are not that at all. Instead they are violations of “bureaucratic norms.” Trump is constantly reviled in the media for failing to understand the difference between loyalty to the person and loyalty to the objective order of the state. The sort of threat that Trump poses therefore is not that he might establish a neo-totalitarian nationalist regime, but rather that he might establish a neo-patrimonial Bonapartist regime based on the logic of the household.

Having pointed out the differences between the two experiences I want to suggest that there are parallels between the contemporary situation and the interwar period. Trump and even more Mussolini and Hitler are commonly presented as “anti-democratic” leaders. That is a profound mistake. In fact these leaders arose, both in the 1930s and today, by articulating a demand for a profound renewal of political institutions that would render the state more responsive to the populace than it had been previously. Their rise to power is closely linked to the political left’s failure to fully embrace a plausible project of democratization in both cases, but for very different reasons. The key task for the left is to lead a democratic revolution while avoiding the technocratic project of “defending existing institutions,” which to a large degree is anti-democratic.

This suggests a second, more institutional, parallel among the cases. Inter-war Germany and Italy, as well as the contemporary United States, are all different varieties of what Arno Mayer famously called persistent “Old Regimes.” The point should be quite obvious, but is sometimes forgotten. There are two points to emphasize here. First, the Federal Constitution is not so much a system of “checks and balances” as a systems of

checks on the power of the one body that somewhat imperfectly reflects the popular will: the House of Representatives. This is the explicit purpose of the Senate, the judiciary, and the executive. Second, the presidency – and this has become abundantly clear under Trump – is an intrinsically Bonapartist or Caeserist institution. The US cabinet is, structurally speaking, a *claque*; in normal times these features are obscured by what are often euphemistically called “norms,” which as pundits endlessly state “give the appearance of independence.” But Trump’s assumption of the position of a unitary executive goes with, not against, the basic set up of the American capitalist republic. His neo-patrimonial style of rule fits the intrinsically patrimonial structure of the executive branch.

This creates both a strategic opening and a strategic trap for the forces of the left. As for the strategic opening, the goal should be to democratize the institutions. Robert Reich’s call for a National Popular Vote Interstate Compact is one good suggestion for a starting point here. But this should be followed up with other broader discussions, particularly discussions aimed at reducing the outsized influence of the judiciary. The trap is the obverse of this; the temptation to appear as the responsible defenders of the indefensible. This rises to the most absurd levels when commentators and pundits speak of the intelligence agencies in terms of a Montesquieuan division of powers. The choice then is clear: either extend the democratic revolution that began in the 1930s, but was disastrously checked, or bind oneself to the defense of institutions that are rapidly and rightly losing popular support.