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Far Right

Europe's Political Turmoil — Part II

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Description:

We have already seen examples of the havoc that the far right in power could wreak against immigrants and refugees, against civil liberties, against vulnerable populations even within the limits of constitutional rule. But given Europe's history, the question inevitably arises: would the far right in power stay within constitutional limits? Could further advances for the far right ultimately lead once more to the establishment of fascist regimes in Europe?

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Answering this question requires clarity about the nature of fascism, and an ability to distinguish between different European political contexts.

Popular accounts of fascism on the left tend to focus on repression of labor and of popular movements. But Marxist theories of exceptional regimes in general, going back to Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire, stress that they are also responses to the bourgeoisie's inability to sustain its direct class rule. In Marx's words, "The bourgeoisie apotheosized the sword; the sword rules it." [2]

In particular, Bonapartism and fascism can be means of resolving tensions among different fractions of capital that the "executive of the modern state[, as] a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie," [3] has proved unable to resolve through the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy.

Nicos Poulantzas' account of the rise of German and Italian fascism, which concluded that the major defeats for the working class had preceded the fascist seizure of power, emphasized such intra-capitalist tensions as crucial explanatory factors. [4]

Events in Europe since the Brexit referendum suggest that capital in many countries is now wrestling with bigger internal contradictions than at any time since the Second World War. The big multinational companies and banks, whose supremacy was virtually uncontested on the right and center left for 70 years, can no longer count on having things their own way: clearly they lost the Brexit referendum.

More nationalistically inclined sections of capital can count on mass support from broad middle-class layers, and from sections of the working class for which nationalism and/or racism trump class interest as German and Italian fascism could in their time. Theresa May's travails as Britain's prime minister show the increasing difficulty of resolving these contradictions by normal constitutional means.

Shutting Down Democracy

Already in some parts of Europe, the far right in power has gone far beyond true bourgeois democracy toward what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán proudly calls "illiberal democracy."

Over the last several years, Turkey and Poland as well as Hungary have all (in different ways) combined superficial adherence to constitutional rule and multi-party elections with increasing subordination of the state and society to the ruling far right party. In all three countries, judges have been purged and replaced with others subservient to the country's rulers.

In Turkey and Hungary, one opposition media outlet after another has been closed down or bought out and university administrations (and in Turkey, massively, faculty) have also been purged. There is no reason to assume that the far right in government in a Western European country would be immune from the temptation of resorting to similar tactics. There is already a scandal in Austria involving political intervention in the security services by far right ministers.

On the other hand, bourgeois ideologues have a point when they argue that constitutional government and the rule of law have advantages from a capitalist point of view.

German and Italian fascism preserved capital's economic power, but at the cost of capitalists' political disenfranchisement. As Putin's rule today in Russia shows, the result can be considerable economic insecurity for those units of capital without solid ties to the regime.

The loss of the ability to make course corrections through periodic elections can also increase the risk of disasters, as German and Italian capital experienced in 1945. The stronger the social roots and the greater the fund of political experience of a particular capitalist class, therefore, the more likely it is to preserve some elements of a constitutional state particularly if it has not been shaken to its foundations by a major military defeat or economic crisis.

So circumstances can determine how far and fast a country goes towards establishing an exceptional regime. Even among fascist regimes, Nazi Germany was unusual in the speed with which it moved toward full-fledged totalitarianism in 1933-4. Fascist Italy moved somewhat more slowly and a bit less far in the 1920s.

In Western Europe today, following over 70 years of relative stability and without any huge military or economic crisis at the moment, the danger of moves away from bourgeois democracy, even if and where the far right wins a share of power, is less in some countries than in others.

In countries like France or the Netherlands, if far right parties should enter government in coalition with the traditional right although sudden, drastic changes in the relationship of forces can never be ruled out the traditional right today seems unlikely to give up its own interests and positions as quickly and thoroughly as Mussolini's and Hitler's coalition partners did in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although it may strike *Against the Current* readers as odd, the experience so far of Trump's U.S. presidency suggests likely limits to the imposition of authoritarian rule by the far right in Western Europe. Trump has unfortunately achieved a solid right-wing majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, but that does not necessarily mean that the right-wing justices will be as supine to him as Turkish judges are to Erdogan.

And if there seems to be no short-term prospect of Trump's closing down or buying out the *New York Times*, the publishers of *Le Monde* could presumably take comfort from that fact, even if Le Pen were to become president.

In short, full-fledged fascism seems relatively unlikely in Western Europe in the near future. Focusing right now on that danger could risk diverting attention from the many, extremely serious dangers that the far right's arrival in power definitely would entail, especially for racialized and sexualized minorities and for labor. The challenges the left faces in its fight against reaction are daunting enough as it is.

Strategic Debates

Given the steady retreat of the traditional right and center left and their capitulations to anti-immigrant demands, the radical left has to play a major role in resistance to the far right, but the radical left is divided. Faced with the rise of racism, the first impulse of many radical left parties is to change the subject to something else.

The leadership of the Dutch Socialist Party, the country's one reasonably consistent anti-neoliberal parliamentary force, exemplifies this attitude. When the far right does something particularly outrageous, the Socialists will issue a dignified, measured condemnation. But its leaders argue openly that it can only lose on both sides by focusing on issues of racism: among voters of immigrant origin, whom they see as increasingly succumbing to religious and ethnic agendas that the SP cannot accept, and among white voters, who may vote far right if their prejudices are openly criticized.

This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. While the Dutch Labor Party was decimated in the 2017 parliamentary elections, the SP, its traditional rival on the left, lost slightly too, while Greens and liberals with progressive social rhetoric but right-wing economics gained as did the far right. In Germany, too, the Greens' gains have recently kept pace with those of Alternative for Germany, despite the Greens' neoliberal economic stances and growing willingness to join center right coalition governments, largely because of their liberal image on immigration. By contrast, the German Social Democrats' continual concessions to right-wing xenophobia have done nothing to shore up their old working class base.

When an election clearly hinges on issues around immigrants, evasions and shilly-shallying on those key issues, even when combined with decent positions on healthcare and housing, only convinces many voters of a party's irrelevance.

Moreover, by ignoring the concerns of racialized voters, the reformist left is dooming itself to slow-motion decline. Especially in the big cities and among young people, immigrant communities are not only a key force to mobilize in order to defeat the far right, but also the future of the working class. Appealing to a shrinking pool of older white voters is a recipe for failure.

Even worse than dodging issues of racism is accommodating to racism. The Dutch SP has done this lately too, notably by going along with the idea that asylum seekers should be processed in centers somewhere in Africa instead of on European soil.

Anyone who has seen the images of slave auctions and atrocities against immigrants in Libya should reject such proposals out of hand. Yet in Germany, Die Linke leader Sahra Wagenknecht has made similar proposals for immigration restrictions in the program of a parallel movement she has just founded, Aufstehen.

In France Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the biggest radical left force Unsubjugated France (*France Insoumise*), continues to flirt with occasional support for French imperial interventions and for measures against public manifestations of Islam, in the name of France's secular, republican tradition. With positions like these, radical left parties risk abdicating any significant role in the fight against the far right.

Another issue that divides the radical left is the question of alliances with other parties against the far right. In many countries, big demonstrations against the far right used to feature speakers from across the political spectrum, including the non-fascist right. Back then, though, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the traditional right liked having an anti-fascist profile. This is much less the case today, when these parties see themselves as the far right's electoral rivals if not its potential partners in government.

In fact social democratic parties too are increasingly competing with the far right for votes, by championing

restrictions on immigration and making calls to get tough on crime that target racialized young people. Worse, heading toward the next elections the Danish Social Democrats are hinting that they might prefer to form a government with backing from the far right Danish People's Party rather than allying with other left parties.

In these circumstances, it makes no sense for the radical left to try to work in top-down coalitions against the far right with leaders of right-wing and center-left parties. What makes sense is the century-old Marxist united front tactic: appealing primarily to grassroots supporters of the reformist left who have decent anti-racist reflexes, and working with top reformist leaders only when they can be pressured into joining practical, activist initiatives.

In practice, admittedly, life is complicated. Activists on the British Labour Party left, for example, have to contend with the reality that their only short-term hope of blocking a reactionary Tory Brexit is to secure the election of a Labour government, which would inevitably be stacked with stalwarts of the pro-neoliberal, pro-EU Labour right.

Some compromises, however, are inadmissible. The Labour Party leadership's recent decision to accept the idea that fundamental criticism of the state of Israel is anti-Semitic is a classic case of a tactic that weakens the radical left, demoralizes solidarity activists, alienates many supporters in immigrant communities, and ultimately plays into the hands of the far right.

The key to defeating the far right is not too-clever institutional maneuvers, but extra-parliamentary mobilization. Only action in the workplaces and on the streets can ensure that, if Europe's center truly cannot hold, it is not the reactionary right but the radical left that emerges triumphant.

[Against the Current](#)

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[1] Part 1 of this article is here: [Europe's Political Turmoil \(Part I\)](#).

[2] Karl Marx, [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte \(1852\)](#).

[3] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, [Manifesto of The Communist Party \(1848\)](#).

[4] Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, translated by Judith White, London: Verso, 1979, 139, 172-3, 199, 71-2.