

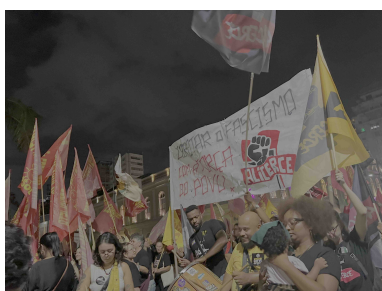
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Anti-fascism

Three general characteristics of the new era of fascism

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Fascism has been, over the last decade, and especially more recently, an object of vigorous debate on the left. But, as a long editorial from the Salvage collective bemoaned about debates over what to make of Russia's war on Ukraine, much of this debate has been stuck in the ditch of historical analogy. Is Trumpism more like Mussolini's or Hitler's fascism? When we stack up all the measures of rights violated and attacked, does the far right today pass the test of comparison with major fascist events of the 20th century?

Two thinkers in particular have tried to bypass this problem of analogy by arguing that what we face today is a "late fascism" (Alberto Toscano) or a "post-fascism" (Enzo Traverso): a phenomenon of the far right that depends on and mobilizes cultural memory about the fascism of old, but in forms particular to our historical moment. But part of this "second time farce" analysis includes that 21st century fascism has no particular form: no universal characteristics, no particular policies or modes of governance. The problem I've had with this approach is that, taken to its conclusions, we lose any useful apprehension of fascism as something distinct from bourgeois democracy, with all its exceptions and varieties of violence.

I've just finished attending the first day of the anti-fascist conference in Porto Alegre, Brazil — a gathering of thousands of anti-fascists from all around Latin America, with a smaller representation of delegates from other parts of the world. There were far too many simultaneous panels for me to be able to assess the dynamics of the conference as a whole, but from the panels I have attended, and the conversations I've had, one useful problem that has emerged is an answer to the question of the definite forms that fascism is taking today.

From the various perspectives of anti-fascists gathered here, there are emerging three general characteristics of 21st century fascism: war as a solution, tightening borders and citizenship, and the end of the universal human rights consensus. That does not mean that fascism has only three characteristics. It means that I noticed these three characteristics emerge out of the discussions I took part in on day one of this conference. But I do think it's significant that such syntheses are emerging, and worth noting in order to discuss, debate, and improve our understanding together.

First characteristic: Fascism depends on war as a solution to national problems

Decades of neoliberal policy have produced a crisis of social reproduction for the working class and of productive growth for the world capitalist class. For the capitalist class in the US, this crisis takes the form of collapsing global hegemony, a problem for which, as Porto Alegre city councilor Giovanni Culan said, "war is the only way out, and Trump is the personification of that violent solution."

For the capitalist classes and governments in the Global South, the crisis is the dissolution of their sovereignty — a sovereignty that had been eroded during the decades of neoliberalism, but which now takes the form of empire's overt threats of wars, coups, and assassinations. That's why, Culan said, "we oppose the US kidnapping of Venezuelan president Maduro and Congresswoman Celia Flores and the strangling of Cuba."

This form of imperialist domination means that, as Brazilian Workers Party (PT) representative Valter Pomar said, "the hearts of governments in Latin America are in Washington," subordinated to their masters, not with the people's "popular sovereignty." This dynamic has the effect of increasing the rise of the far right in Latin America, as people's needs are subordinated to empire, and poverty and despair grow.

So, to paraphrase Aimé Césaire, fascism rises in the body of empire and bursts out of the skin as a weeping sore,

first in the neocolonies. It spreads, not like the waves or seeds of a peoples' movement, but like a disease, along the channels of capital, circulating out into the world, and pumping back into the heart, stronger and more self-confident because of the infections it was able to spread elsewhere. War-as-solution is an outcome of this dynamic, and one that further subordinates capitalist national governments of the Global South, no matter whether progressive or reactionary in policy, to empire.

Second characteristic: Fascism arms borders against migrants

At a panel on the the far right's uses and abuses of migrants, Bea Whitaker argued that imperialist domination has driven out migrants from the Global South, and fascists have responded with brutal state force to block their arrivals and police the presence of those who get over their walls.

The European Union's first serious migration controls of the contemporary era, she said, were in the 1990s, in response to the arrival of people fleeing wars. Then, in the 2000s, especially after the uprising in Tahrir Square, millions of migrants arrived in the EU. "Countries created a wall out of laws to stop migrants from coming in, and to regulate those migrants who did arrive," she said. Then "the EU created an agency called Frontex to police migrants," chasing them with ships, airplanes, radars, cameras, and "every single kind of robot you can imagine." The EU then outsourced the making of that tech, and the operation of it, to private companies. Whitaker said, "This is a paradise for those companies that make weapons and surveillance devices. We're talking billions of euros. And it has become more profitable for these companies to sell their products to Frontex than on the private market."

Veronica Carrillo, from the Mexican Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Detention, said that this dynamic described between the EU and African and West Asian countries is mirrored in the US treatment of Latin Americans. In the Trumpist world, outsourcing migrant policing includes mobilizing far-right governments in Latin America to take part in policing their own peoples. The strongest example is Trump's commissioning of El Salvadoran prisons as hell sites where deported migrants can be disappeared. There are countless other examples of the US state funneling public resources into the pockets of private carceral corporations. Carrillo says that far-right states "are using our resources to build their fascist parties and politics, to mobilize public resources against workers, not against the capitalist system," all by heaping blame on migrants as the cause of the world crisis, rather than its worst victims.

A critical contradiction of our moment is that neocolonialism and imperialism undermined and smashed the developmentalist goals of the anti-colonial and independence movements of the postwar period. And on top of the resulting, echoing, economic and social crisis in many countries in the Global South, more wars and climate disasters have driven more people into global migration than at any other point in human history. Fascism has an answer to this contradiction: build the wall. And privatize it.

Third Characteristic: Fascism is done with human rights

The border solution to the racist migrant panic produces the third characteristic as a necessary component. As Bea Whitaker said, the EU's anti-migrant mobilization "is absolutely against every single convention of human rights, and they know it. They are breaking the principles of the EU about human rights." And rather than create loopholes or justifications, the whole legal, political, and social body of Europe turns away from the bodies of migrants washing up on its shores.

There is a telling anecdote about this in David Scott Fitzgerald's 2019 book, *Refuge Beyond Reach*. He says that after the border patrol sunk a boat of migrants, a body washed up near the shore of a Greek fishing village. A fisher, horrified, reported the person's body, which he found from his boat and pulled out of the water. The Greek state responded by seizing his boat as part of its investigation, depriving this fisher of his income, punishing him for making the report. The fishers in his community got the message, and when they came across bodies after that, they pushed them back out to sea. It's not that our sense of whose lives matter is dictated from above, but the state can show whose lives will officially be saved, and how disposable you are too.

Veronica Carillo said that in Trump's anti-migrant terror, human rights are wholly absent. And by introducing a new language of brutality in place of the universal human rights story, fascist governments are turning social tensions back on workers to feel and navigate differently according to their legal citizenship status.

Human rights was always a rubric that referred back to a particular person's relationship to a process of property valorization. But it was possible for socialists to speak back the language of human rights to further the freedom claims of workers and dispossessed people, or to interrogate human rights issues to reveal the craven hypocrisy of the capitalist class. As fraught and laden with capitalist power as they are, governments abandoning the rhetoric and formal legal frameworks of human rights is characteristic of the fascist turn.

The dynamics surrounding Putin's selective use of human rights frameworks tell us something else about this trend. Mikail Lobanov said that Putin has always used repression as part of his particular model of governance, so playing fast and loose with human rights is nothing new to him. But Putin knows that, for the West, human rights claims can work as claims against the sovereignty of formerly colonized countries and work as an instrument of imperialist intervention, while identifying the West with human rights. So Putin has figured out how to use international human rights structures as a part of managing political repression: providing an extra-systemic way out if there is pressure for a particular prisoner, and also as evidence for Putin's myth that foreign governments are intervening in Russia's sovereignty.

Because he understands Putin's maneuver, Kseniia Kagarlitskaya said that her father, Boris Kagarlitsky, refused to be added to a prisoner exchange list at the beginning of his ongoing five-year prison sentence for his journalism. He gave two reasons: first, that exile is also repression, so it's no release. And second, that he believes political prisoner exchanges are part of a system that regularizes repression; that the detentions should be abolished, not manipulated.

A unitary problem

What these three characteristics have in common is that bourgeois governments led by politicians who are fascist or influenced by fascism, are abandoning the well-practiced routines of consent-building (amongst parts of their constituencies) and diplomacy (with certain countries) internationally. What's taking the place of this hegemonic bloc-building strategy is a greater emphasis on violent force as governance and international relations.

It is possible to explain these as extreme or exceptional moments in policy development by a more or less normal bourgeois state. But understanding these three characteristics as parts of a 21st century fascism provides us with a unitary problem, which we can then strategize to confront, fight, and defeat, in a unified way. This has epistemological as well as strategic value.

Let's keep an eye out for more constituent features of this contemporary fascist menace.

Three general characteristics of the new era of fascism

Source: [Against the Current](#)

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