

Four theses on Fascism, Pogroms and Liberation

written by Jonas Marvin | August 15, 2024



Fascism is terrifying. The sight of hundreds of racists tearing through your community and intimidating racialised minorities strikes you with an almost paralysing fear. It disempowers you, recasts where you live in a darker light and breeds a disabling paranoia about the people you share the world with. I fucking hate fascism.

On Saturday 3rd August, a demonstration of over two hundred fascists marched through my town centre, intimidated communities, waged hours of street fighting, laid siege to a local Mosque and closed down small businesses. Five days later, a far smaller number of fascists were repelled from attacking an immigration lawyer's house by community mobilisations, and on Saturday 10th August, a Unity Rally brought hundreds together in defiance of racism and fascism. There is an onus upon us nationally to analyse the situation we are in and how we overcome it. The following four points are in part a dialogue with Alberto Toscano's *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* and the theoretical resources it excavates. I had decided to read this text as the reports of riots in Southport and elsewhere were emerging. I think it serves as a useful text for antiracists to think alongside in this troubling moment.

1. Street fascism has benefitted from a perfect storm.

Despite the electoral defeat of a Tory Party which had spent six years lurching increasingly rightwards, the election of Nigel Farage and three other Reform MPs has legitimated and emboldened the far-right. Reform's electoral success strengthens the fascist movement's national ecology and provides it with an opportunity for expansion and popularisation. A complementary dynamic between far-right influencers and a "networked fascism" on X, Telegram channels and Facebook groups thrives. This is stoked by the favourable climate Elon Musk has created for fascist digital activism. Steadily over the past five years, the far-right has been rebuilding through anti-lockdown protests, mobilisations against climate reforms such as ULEZ, and the violent intimidation of refugees with a particular focus on those in hotels. That the past week's pogroms have taken place in the early days of a Labour government, wildly imagined on the far right as favouring "open borders", is no accident. With the Tories in power, the far-right's rhetoric was being reproduced in the corridors of power, even if it felt its policy aims were being betrayed. Under Labour, characters such as Tommy Robinson feel freer to paint an antagonistic story of collusion between violent and predatory Muslim men and their Labourist enablers. Although these claims are ludicrous, they are not new.

Undoubtedly, the prime responsibility for creating an environment which ignites violent race riots

lies with the political class. Both Labour and Tory politicians have spent decades enacting policy and sermonising that the problems with this country are the fault of the nation's racialised minorities. The War on Terror's domestic front saw the Muslim population criminalised, spied on and harassed. New Labour's triangulation of the Murdoch press and its creation of a new social codification of "asylum seeker" was followed by Theresa May's Hostile Environment and its conversion of public sector employees into legally obliged border cops. The Brexit referendum, dominated by anti-migrant racism, heralded a rupture with Fortress Europe and the eventual embrace of the Rwanda scheme as a violently disastrous rendition of Fortress Britain. Underpinning this cross-party pact on official state racism is the sense that the nation's "household budget" cannot accommodate new arrivals and must cater to its own, especially in a time of imperial and climate catastrophe. But what drives contemporary British racism is the notion that the Muslim minority is an invasive threat to Western civilisation, its cultural fabric and the innocence of white women and children. The feverishly insurrectionary explosions of the past week may have been sparked by the tragic murder of three children, but the febrile environment which led to these pogroms has long been hardwired into British political culture.

2. Palestine doesn't just teach us.

Reckoning with the contribution of the Black radical tradition to theories of fascism, Toscano details the prison exchanges between George Jackson and Angela Davis. Jackson, a member of the Black Guerilla Family and inmate at San Quentin prison, diagnosed fascism as an "episodically logical stage" in the development of capitalism, encompassing a restructuring of state power taking advantage of a revolutionary miscarriage. Davis, on the other hand, identifies an "incipient fascism" mobilising intensified "forms of terror and pre-emptive repression against racialised and subaltern populations." In the vision of this renowned Marxist-Feminist, the pre-emptive violence of liberal democracy rouses and stimulates extra-parliamentary forces. Toscano explains how these forces assert that:

"state and culture have been occupied by the left, that discrimination is now meted out against formerly dominant ethno-national majorities and that deracinated elites have conspired with the wretched of the earth and deviant others to destroy properly national populations that can be rescued only by a revanchist politics of security and protectionism."

It seems to me that the recent incarnation of fascist revival in Britain resembles the fascist insurgency mobilised against the 2020 US Black Lives Matter movement in its latter phases. The presence of multicultural, proletarian mass demonstrations, with a large Muslim contingent, in solidarity with the Palestinian people has become a dreaded fixation of the political elite. Suella Braverman's labelling of the Palestine solidarity marches as "hate marches" and Nigel Farage's perpetual call for them to be banned; the Labour Party's unsubstantiated insistence that pro-Gaza election candidates were guilty of harassing Labour MPs; the rolling out of tough sentences for direct action activists; the increased profiling and harassment of local Palestine solidarity activists; and the inflaming of the far right to assault movement activists in tandem with Zionists - all of these factors taken together constitute an effort to delegitimise one of the largest, most multiracial, internationalist social movements in British history. The contention that Palestine teaches us how to liberate ourselves is accompanied by the growing reality that it condenses the British Right's murderous anxieties about the wretched of the earth at home and abroad.

Socialists should bear this in mind. I was recently struck by a point made by a Facebook friend in response to the Southport riot. They were adamant that neither liberal anti-racism as a personalising

brand of social action, nor an anti-racism which evades the mass mobilisations of the Palestine solidarity movement will produce any lasting results. In the imagery of the far-right, Israel is an outpost of white European civilisation against Islamic barbarism. For us, the Palestinian freedom struggle cuts against the imperial, nationalist and racialised features of global capitalism. To not thread solidarity with Palestine through our antifascism is to weaken our battles with the far right and the state. When you see localised crowds of Muslims defending themselves against fascist pogroms, the Palestinian flag is almost always present. One way in which liberal antiracism distinguishes itself from the crowd today is precisely in its disavowal of the centrality of the Palestinian freedom struggle to the global fight against racism. The antifascist movement should heed this lesson.

3. The racist rot starts from the top?

It can be satisfying to comfort ourselves. When I stalk through the Facebook pages of the most visible fascists in my city, I see that some of them occupy the subject position of the squeezed petty bourgeoisie we are warned about in classic Marxist theories of fascism such as Leon Trotsky's *Fascism: What it is and how to Fight it*. We may feel validated when we read that a company owner who participated in the riots ended up sobbing forlornly in the courtroom. One may even feel a sense of confirmation when drawing connections between the events in Tamworth, a Staffordshire town which saw a hotel housing refugees set on fire, and its large population of military personnel. But having your worldview corroborated is not quite the same as having it confirmed. Although it's true that it is the state and the politicians who bear key responsibility for the reproduction of popular racism, we do have to explain why, according to YouGov, six in ten Britons have "sympathies for the views of the protesters".

Perhaps fascism can be surmised, in the words of the great Black radical W.E.B Du Bois, as the "counter-revolution of property". But one would probably be surprised how few of the young white men who have burnt down police stations and smashed through shop windows own their homes. In the allegory of activist antifascism, maybe these lads are simply the "monkeys" to the Faragist "organ grinder". But if we are to truly diagnose this moment we cannot be content with an analysis that claims the white rioters as duped, a consequence simply of the left's defeats and betrayals, liable to be rioting against the wealthy and the powerful were it not for such a weak socialist movement. We do actually have to grasp why it is that white youth would decide to unleash their rage by striking a lone South Asian man walking down the street. We have to diagnose why, after blockading a junction in Middlesbrough, whites would check the skin colour of drivers before allowing cars to pass. We cannot avoid staring the ideological roots of these pogroms frankly in the face.

Du Bois, in a one-off comment in his magisterial *Black Reconstruction in America*, described a phenomenon called the "psychological wage". It is a kind of psychological compensation received by low-waged white workers in the American South, and delivered through material means: "public deference and titles of courtesy..." including "free admittance into public functions, public parks, and the best schools" alongside access to leniency, certain public jobs and voting rights. The question of what has happened to this "psychological wage", particularly as the economic wage stagnates, has plagued my thinking since Brexit.

For some time, I have been sceptical of the idea that such a psychological wage meaningfully exists in contemporary Britain. White workers are certainly afforded a litany of racialised advantages compared to their non-white counterparts, most notably avoiding the worst consequences of a racially-stratified labour market, housing sector and racist state violence. But if the proletarian element of these race riots signifies anything, I would suggest it is an intermittent attempt to forge a psychological wage in the face of capitalist realism's zero-sum abyss. The proletarian racist laments

the image of a national social democratic moment when the white worker was a beneficiary of the racialised, imperial division of labour. This struggle to reinvent the psychological wage is a crisis impulse of proletarians drawn to rightwing politics, best understood in the words of Ernst Bloch, as “non-synchronous people”. Those whose space and time of reproduction and exploitation – atrophying towns and areas subject to decades of “organised abandonment” – sit out of step with the global rhythms of capital accumulation even as they suffer capitalism’s devastations. One may work part-time or even 9-5, but with seven of the ten most deprived areas in England experiencing riots according to the *Financial Times*, there is a palpable sense that time has stopped, and so with it the possibility for renewal.

According to Ipsos Mori’s post-election polling, not only did Reform garner 8% of 18-24 year olds, 13% amongst 25-34 year olds and 14% among 35-44 year olds, it also scored an impressive 25% amongst C2s (namely skilled workers) and 17% among DEs (working class and non-working). Despite the outdatedness of pollster methodologies and their approaches to class – namely the large number of Black and female workers who are lumped in with higher grades – this data, taken with the visible presence of young whites, should give us some cause for concern. So should the fact that Reform came second in a third of all seats that experienced riots. If Farage’s Reform can transcend its simple economic libertarianism, exploiting Tory decline and Labour failure, it could forge a worrying new bloc in British politics. A far-right electoral faction supplemented by an online culture and, in Richard Seymour’s language, “inchoate” street ecology, tying together propertarian middle class reaction with proletarian rage, would be dangerous. This heterogeneously classed fascist movement, tied together by a libidinal union, violently raging against Muslim communities and the “invasive boats” filled in Andrew Tate’s words with “military-aged men”, is precisely the growing possibility we have to smash.

Without encouraging complacency, it is worth noting that the psychological wage has been disembowelled in more ways than one. Multiple surveys show that the British public is becoming increasingly more progressive over race. According to the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, 45% of the public – up from 25% in 2000 – thought that equal rights for Black and Asian people “had not gone far enough”. Similarly, according to the *UK in the World Values* survey, British attitudes towards migration are amongst the most positive internationally. The resources for mass anti-racism do exist in the popular culture of large parts of the British population. The experience of everyday multiculturalism is cherished by many and struggles against racism have had significant effects on the consciousness of millions. The question is how to articulate these sentiments into a broader project that can halt fascism and racism.

4. What kind of Anti-fascism?

Inevitably, the antifascist movement is already stirring with the classic conversations about strategy. After a decade in which organised street fascism has been relatively weak, different wings of the antifascist movement had become pretty comfortable in their tactical and cultural siloes. The divide between an antifascism which prioritises physical confrontation and one which seeks peaceful community mobilisation has been allowed to grow, fostered by mutual sectarianism. Although I instinctively find the tension somewhat needless, it is the effect of real mediations which shape the way people behave. Black bloc antifascism and community self-defence are rarely attractive to a mass audience but their purchase is exacerbated by the inadequacies and discrepancies of a timid, liberal anti-racism which flinches from challenging structural racism. But nor are the constraints imposed upon antifascists who negotiate with the state and community leaders without consequence. Having to navigate official negotiations with community relations officials and the police can constrain unofficial organising and the ability to physically repudiate the fascists from our communities. My point is that these two wings could be contiguous, with genuine cooperation opening up the possibility of a dialectic of accountability, but they need to be conceived and

practised as such. The priority needs to be mass community mobilisation in which you can outnumber and demoralise the fascists, emboldening those who seek to defeat the far right's street presence, whilst also making the hardcore fascists look distasteful amongst their soft support.

This said, there have long been tensions in the British socialist movement between an antifascism which prioritises confronting organised street fascism and a Black radicalism which warns against stopping short of challenging state racism. Whilst this historic binary has always been susceptible to strawmanning, it's a useful difference to think with. The British Left, from Cable Street and the Battle of Lewisham, to defeating the British National Party and marginalising the English Defence League, has had consistent success in challenging the rise of street fascism. Yet we have had notably less success challenging state racism. One of the many vital reasons we must begin to think about conjuring a dynamic whereby mobilisations against fascism can also be wielded against state racism is that it does also benefit antifascist and socialist politics. If we can disrupt the swing towards increasingly violent and extreme forms of state racism, it brings us closer to challenging the cycle of repeat far-right insurgency too.

As Daniel Trilling has written, the state's border regime, dispersing the 'migration problem' to towns and communities where the zero-sum impulses of neoliberal defeat are keenly felt, actively emboldens the far right. As the *Financial Times* reported, pogroms mostly occurred in towns and cities where large asylum seeker populations coalesced with high levels of deprivation. There is a truth to the idea - articulated compellingly by the Black radical tradition - that to be a racially oppressed minority, such as a refugee in this country, is to feel subject to a kind of fascism. It is true as well that the proliferation of state technologies which reproduce this structure of feeling also fuel the rise of the far right. British politics has long been trapped in a doom loop between accelerated state racism and concomitant fascist rage. This cycle needs to be broken.

This is even more important when one considers the depoliticised, law-and-order response of Keir Starmer's government and its popularity amongst the public. 68% of the public agree that those who commit public damage deserve sentences longer than a year according to research from More in Common. The tendency to resolve the far-right threat with authoritarian solutions enacted by a probable austerian government is a recipe for disaster. Not only can the state not be trusted to use similar methods against antifascists and minority communities, but the incubation of far-right sympathisers as young as 14 into the country's overcrowded, dehumanising prison system may not have the deterring effects many expect.

Across large swathes of the planet, we inhabit what Alberto Toscano describes as a "time for fascism". This "crisis-time" is the terrain upon which fascism "appears as a possibility, a contender, a solution." This by no means suggests that we in Britain are on the cusp of fascist governance. But what I have tried to convey in this piece is that the conditions for far-right insurgency are ripe. From the racist pogroms to the Harehill riots, the sense of pent-up frustration with the state of affairs is pronounced. We are governed by a Labour Party that seems determined to refuse a redistributive agenda. The party of government's right flank is also determined to triangulate the anti-migrant sentiment visible in these past few weeks. Labour MP for Barking Margaret Hodge has already raised her head above the parapet to claim that the Labour Party is "too frightened to talk about immigration." With this state of affairs, socialist politics needs to find the beat of its own "crisis-time". The past week of antifascist mobilisation has seen off the immediate threat and perhaps highlighted the unevenness and porousness of street fascism in Britain. But we need to be able to construct a counter-hegemonic force that puts an end to the cycle of state racism and far-right violence. This will involve more than simply combining antiracist universalism with radical redistribution. The far right operates upon a libidinal economy which unevenly activates racialised outbursts of violent desire in the face of social catastrophe. Accustomed to its orthodoxies and routines, there is a question mark over whether or not the socialist movement can unleash a

liberatory unconscious of its own onto the fabric of British politics. This will almost certainly require a vision of futurity currently absent on the Left.