

Is the Bush Administration Fascist?

The idea that the Bush administration is imposing fascism on the United States has become increasingly commonplace in leftist and liberal circles. It's often taken as a given in political discussions, at protest rallies, and on the Internet. Sometimes this is little more than name calling, but over the past six years, a number of critics have offered serious arguments to back up the claim, and the claim deserves serious attention.

This is hardly the first time that U.S. leftists have warned against the rise of a fascist state. FBI/police repression against the Black Panthers, Joe McCarthy's cold war witch hunts, even Franklin Roosevelt's early New Deal experiments with state-sponsored cartels – sections of the left have labeled all of these as fascist. But George W. Bush has come to embody the f-word for a whole generation of activists.

The Bush administration is the most authoritarian presidency in living memory. Witness the USA Patriot Act and other measures that shred civil liberties, the mass round-ups of South Asian and Middle Eastern men, the systematic – and now openly defended – use of torture and warrantless wiretapping. Witness the proclamation of permanent warfare, the invasion and occupation of two sovereign nations, the claim that the United States can rightfully invade and conquer just to block a possible threat. Witness the blend of apocalyptic nationalism and religious zealotry that divides the whole world into absolutes of Good and Evil. And, many would argue, witness the suppression of voting results and political manipulation of the courts that put Bush in the White House to begin with.

There's no question that ugly changes are taking place, with serious implications for political activism and daily life now and in the future. But to call this a trend toward fascism doesn't help us understand what is going on in the United States, and it doesn't help us understand fascism. Calling the Bush administration fascist promotes a distorted picture of U.S. politics or history. In some versions, the f-word is essentially a scare tactic to rally people behind Democrats such as John Kerry, whose 2004 campaign literature urged that we "keep 95 percent of the Patriot Act and strengthen the rest." In other versions, the charge of fascism reflects conspiracy theories that the Bush administration itself somehow orchestrated the September 11th attacks.

Even when it's coupled with a deeper critique of the U.S. political system, the claim of impending fascism lumps together radically different forms of right-wing authoritarianism under one label. This confusion hurts our ability to develop clear and effective anti-right-wing strategies.

There are several versions of the claim that Bush & Co. are driving us into fascism, each with its own set of weaknesses. Most of them, however, reflect the widespread idea that fascism equals an extreme version of capitalist repression, an authoritarian regime that does the bidding of corporate elites. For example, some Bush critics define fascism as the merger of state and business interests – a formulation so broad that it could fit any capitalist state. Most famous on the left is the Communist International's 1933 definition, which is still in use today: "Fascism is the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital." This might describe a company town from the robber baron era but it's a feeble caricature of fascist politics.

Fascism has taken many forms, and an accurate, nuanced picture of it is difficult to capture in a single sentence. The following points, in my view, describe most of fascism's core features and offer a profile that contrasts sharply with Bush-style authoritarianism:

- *Radical break with the established order.* Fascism overthrows old political elites and sweeps away established forms of political rule. It posits society as an organic hierarchy and rejects the Enlightenment principles of pluralism, equality, and individual rights. In the name of a fascist cultural revolution, it tries to reshape all institutions to embody a unified ideology imposed from above. Some kinds of fascism go further and revolutionize the socioeconomic order, too, as when German Nazism restructured the industrial heart of Europe with a system of exploitation based largely on plunder, slave labor, and genocidally working people to death.
- *Totalitarian mass politics.* Fascism doesn't just terrorize and repress. It also inspires and mobilizes large masses of people around a vision of collective rebirth in a time of crisis. Building a mass movement outside traditional channels is central to fascism's bid to win state power. As a regime, fascism uses mass organizations and rituals to create a sense of participation and direct identification with the state. Fascism celebrates the nation, race, or cultural group as an organic community to which all other loyalties must be subordinated. In place of individual liberties or social justice, fascism offers its followers a culture of action, virility, heroic sacrifice, cathartic public spectacle, and being part of a vast social organism.
- *Twisted anti-elitism.* While it intensifies oppression and murderously attacks the left, fascism also

appropriates leftist anti-elitism in distorted form. In place of a structural analysis that focuses on dismantling systems of power, fascists portray evil elites as an insidious cultural or racial threat to be purged. For example, fascism attacks bourgeois values and "parasitic" business elements (sometimes, but not always, defined as Jewish) while defending the underlying institutions of private property and class exploitation. Historically, this approach has enabled fascism to tap into real social grievances, such as those of some middle-class groups who resent the power of big business but also have a stake in class privilege and feel threatened by working-class movements or oppressed communities below.

- *Autonomy from business control.* In or out of power, fascism is not a capitalist puppet but an autonomous force, whose agenda sometimes clashes with capitalist interests in important ways. Business support was crucial to both Italian and German fascists in their drives for power, and they in turn aided big business by smashing the labor movement, imposing top-down stability, and promoting centralization of capital. But as these fascist regimes consolidated themselves, big business increasingly lost political control: it lost the power to determine the main direction of state policy. In Germany, the Nazi program of conquest and genocide simply overrode capitalist priorities – such as exploiting scarce skilled workers instead of slaughtering them – even if big industrialists made millions along the way.

In contrast to fascism, the Bush administration represents a much more conventional form of capitalist authoritarianism. Bush has significantly eroded the liberal-pluralist political

system by increasing state repression, claiming a presidential blank check to ignore the law, and promoting an atmosphere of political conformism and national siege mentality. Some pro-Bush factions promote populist hostility toward so-called liberal elites. But the Bush regime is in fact controlled by traditional political elites within established institutions – it lacks fascism's totalitarian mass mobilization, promotion of a new outsider elite, and vision of sweeping cultural and political change. Even in the crisis atmosphere following the September 11th attacks, President Bush urged people to live their lives as normally as possible. And while fascism challenges capitalist control of the state and attacks bourgeois values such as individualism and consumerism, the Bush administration is solidly and unambiguously pro-capitalist.

Some might argue that these distinctions are merely semantic and irrelevant given the political realities today. But fascism as described here isn't just dead history or a lunatic fringe. As the September 11th attacks themselves made plain, some of U.S. imperialism's most militant and committed enemies are on the far right. In the past decade, movements with strong fascistic tendencies have had a major political impact in several parts of the globe – from Italy to Afghanistan, from India to Russia to Guatemala. In the 1992 and 1996 Republican presidential primaries, Patrick Buchanan rallied millions of U.S. voters behind a program that combined anti-immigrant scapegoating, homophobia, and patriarchy with an anti-interventionist foreign policy and a critique of corporate globalization. The Buchanan campaigns stopped short of fascism, but they demonstrated something of fascism's potential.

None of this is meant to belittle the Bush administration's disastrous policies. The point is that militaristic repression – even full-scale dictatorship – doesn't necessarily equal fascism, and the distinction

matters. Some forms of right-wing authoritarianism grow out of established political institutions while others reject those institutions; some are creatures of big business while others are independent of, or even hostile to, big business. Some just suppress liberatory movements while others use twisted versions of radical politics in a bid to "take the game away from the left." These are different kinds of threats. If we want to develop effective strategies for fighting them, we need a political vocabulary that recognizes their differences.

To understand more fully what's wrong with claims that the United States is becoming fascist, we need to look at some of the specific arguments offered. Laurence W. Britt's 2003 article, "Fascism Anyone?" describes fascism in a way that implicitly identifies it with current U.S. developments. The article first appeared in *Free Inquiry* magazine and has been widely quoted on the Internet. It is one of the discussions of fascism most frequently cited by Bush opponents.

Britt outlines fourteen characteristics shared by regimes that were either "fascist or protofascist": Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal, Papadopoulos's Greece, Pinochet's Chile, and Suharto's Indonesia. In second-hand versions (and Britt's own comments about the article) the "protofascist" qualifier usually disappears and the list becomes simply "fourteen defining characteristics of fascism."

Most of the characteristics in Britt's list are not specific to fascism but are shared by many conservative governments: nationalism, militarism, scapegoating of enemies, "rampant" sexism, obsession with national security and with crime, protecting the power of corporations and suppressing the power of labor, and close ties between religion and the ruling elite. Other features seem at first to be more specific to fascism, or at least a dictatorship of some kind: disdain

for human rights and intellectual freedom, controlled mass media, corruption and cronyism, and fraudulent elections. But even these characteristics are defined so broadly as to blur all major differences between classic fascism and the U.S. political system today. Consider, for example, how Britt spells out Feature #6, "a controlled mass media":

Under some of the [fascist and protofascist] regimes, the mass media were under strict direct control and could be relied upon never to stray from the party line. Other regimes exercised more subtle power to ensure media orthodoxy. Methods included the control of licensing and access to resources, economic pressure, appeals to patriotism, and implied threats. The leaders of the mass media were often politically compatible with the power elite. The result was usually success in keeping the general public unaware of the regimes' excesses.

This is slippery analysis. It leaves us no way to distinguish between a political dictatorship and a pluralistic system dominated by economic elites – let alone between fascism and a traditionalist military regime.

It's easy to find commonalities between the U.S. system and fascism, but that is nothing new. The U.S. power structure has always used the state to defend capitalism. It has always been built on a system of racial oppression. It has always promoted militarism and expansionism. It has always used political repression to silence radical dissent. And, at least since Andrew Jackson's followers created the Democratic Party in the 1820s, it has always used mass political organizations to mobilize members of dominant groups around oppressive agendas.

In certain crisis periods, furthermore, the U.S. power structure has expanded and intensified repression dramatically. This happened, for example, in 1917-1920, when

radicals, labor organizers, and immigrants were rounded up by the thousands, people were jailed for criticizing the government, anti-Black and anti-Mexican pogroms claimed scores of lives, and the government recruited a wide range of civic organizations to spy on their neighbors. Other repressive highpoints included World War II (the "anti-fascist" war), when 110,000 people were put in concentration camps because of Japanese ancestry and the FBI compiled dossiers on millions of workers, and the early cold war period, when anti-communist and anti-gay witch hunts created a pervasive climate of fear. Between the late sixties and mid seventies, dozens of Black and American Indian activists were murdered as part of an FBI-spearheaded crackdown against the radical left.

So if the United States is fascist, when did it start? Has the U.S. always been fascist? Has it moved in and out of fascism? If fascism equals capitalist repression plus militaristic nationalism, there's no clear dividing line between then and now.

A recent attempt to draw such a dividing line, while making the case that the U.S. is becoming fascist, comes from Michael Novick, editor of *Turning the Tide*, a Los Angeles newspaper affiliated with the Anti-Racist Action network. In a Summer 2003 editorial entitled "Fascism and What is Coming," Novick argues that "in general, fascism can best be understood as bringing the methods of imperial rule in the colonies into the metropole" (i.e., the industrialized capitalist countries) – a conception he attributes to Black Panther leader George Jackson. This doesn't mean that fascism is a top-down, ruling-class affair. "All forms of imperialism...have always been cross-class projects, in which working and other 'subordinate' classes have always participated independently and directly, not merely under the direction of the bourgeoisie or 'ruling' class."

Novick (who is a friend) argues that the U.S. "has always had elements of what became known as fascism" directed

against communities of color but "the fundamental basis of white privilege is that white working class people [have been] spared such fascist methods of rule so long as they remain[ed] loyal." Now, however, these forms of oppression and exploitation "begin to make themselves felt against [white Americans] as well, even as they are being courted and propagandized to adopt a new and more intimate and totalitarian identification with the rulers and empire." This "process of fundamentally transforming the nature of the US state...is happening primarily from the top down – orchestrated by the Bush regime and its supportive faction of the bourgeoisie."

Novick's approach has some important advantages. He certainly doesn't promote romantic illusions about the U.S. system or history and, unlike Britt, he offers a clear and specific description of fascism. Novick is also right to draw connections between imperialism and fascism – or at least some forms of fascism. Italian Fascism's adoption of antisemitic laws in the late 1930s was partly rooted in its development of a racist apartheid system in conquered east Africa. German Nazism's eastward expansion was very much an attempt to apply colonial methods of conquest within Europe. A generation before the Nazis murdered millions of Jews and other European peoples, Imperial Germany systematically tried to wipe out the Herero and Nama peoples in South West Africa (now Namibia). One of the top administrators of South West Africa was the father of Hermann Goering, one of Hitler's closest assistants. As Novick notes, Nazi genocidal policies were also strongly influenced by the model of U.S. genocide and mass enslavement.

Novick has cautioned me that his article was intended to promote discussion, not to offer a full analysis covering every aspect of fascism's dynamics. Indeed, there are two major problems with Novick's argument. First, his 2003 article seems to exaggerate the erosion of white privilege in the

United States. It's true that there have been major changes over the past forty years. But as most of Novick's own work makes clear, there are still profound differences between how whites and people of color are treated by U.S. capitalism and the state. If anything, the Bush regime has intensified these differences, not lessened them. When I raised this point with him, Novick emphasized that white privilege remains an important reality, even as white workers are being increasingly penalized and oppressed by an imperialist system in crisis. But this seems to undermine Novick's claim that fascism is being extended to the white population – if, as he says, being spared from fascist methods of rule is "the fundamental basis of white privilege."

Second, as a description of fascism in general, "imperial methods of rule brought home" just doesn't work. Consider the following:

- Fascist Italy did not bring home its methods of imperial rule. In Libya, Mussolini's armies put half the population in concentration camps and executed tens of thousands of civilians. In Ethiopia, they used poison gas extensively, burned hundreds of villages, and systematically exterminated the country's intellectual class. Fascist repression within Italy itself never approached the level of these crimes. Under Mussolini's government, Italian political dissenters were much more likely to be jailed than killed.
- One of the most vicious fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s was Romania's Iron Guard. Their preferred tactics included hanging Jews by meat hooks and flaying them alive. But Romania had no colonies, no imperialist legacy, and the Iron Guard had no expansionist aims. Its fascist violence was rooted not in colonialism, but in the much longer history of anti-Jewish pogroms within Europe itself.

- If fascism equals imperialist methods brought into the metropole, then by definition non-metropole regions can't experience fascism. Yet Novick also says that "fascism has always presented itself as a competing ideology for state building and economic advancement in colonized societies" and specifically mentions "Arab Muslim fascists" and "Hindu supremacist fascists." In our follow-up discussion, Novick argued that fascism in colonized or semi-colonized societies represents "a desire to absorb and outdo the powers of the master on his own terms." While this is an interesting point worth further exploration, it requires Novick to broaden his original description of fascism.

The Revolutionary Communist Party, a Maoist group, makes the case for impending fascism differently. In a leaflet widely distributed since late 2004, the RCP argues that Bush and his cronies are "Christian Fascists...who aim to make the U.S. a religious dictatorship and to force this upon the world." The leaflet proclaims that "over the years these Christian Fascists have dug in at every level of the courts, the army and Congress," they are supported by "the most powerful capitalists," and their drive to establish a full scale dictatorship is "coming straight from the White House." In a December 2004 article in the RCP's newspaper, Travis Morales expands on the leaflet. He argues that the Christian right has a comprehensive agenda to transform society to fit their interpretation of biblical law, which radically clashes with core principles of bourgeois democracy. Morales also notes that the Christian right has a large, well-organized mass following or, as he puts it, "a social base of unthinking followers."

A major strength of this argument, unlike the others we've discussed, is that it centers the specter of fascism on

a specific political movement, which clearly does have a repressive ideology, a mass base, and substantial power within the Republican Party and the state.

Still, the RCP's position has several key weaknesses. First, it doesn't clearly define fascism or distinguish it from other forms of right-wing authoritarianism. Second, it exaggerates the Christian right's power within the Bush coalition, which also includes neoconservatives and traditional business conservatives, among others. Christian rightists make up a large, well-organized part of Bush's popular support, and they are a force to be reckoned with. But neoconservatives, following a basically secular ideology, have largely spearheaded the so-called war on terror, the main framework for Bush's expansion of repression. Since John Ashcroft left the attorney general post in early 2005, it's hard to think of a single Christian right figure who holds a top position in the Bush administration.

Third, the RCP's argument glosses over important ideological differences within the Christian right itself. A hard-line faction, largely inspired by the doctrine of Christian reconstructionism, advocates a full-scale theocracy and rejects in principle the existing pluralist system. This faction is associated with the most militant, terroristic wing of the anti-abortion movement and arguably does represent a kind of Christian fascism. However, a larger and more powerful faction of the Christian right, including the movement's flagship organizations such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women of America, has taken a more opportunistic approach. Their main goal has been to amass power through the existing political system, rather than to overthrow it. There are interconnections between these two factions, and the hardliners might eventually pull the bigger faction toward a more radical break with the existing system, but so far that has not happened.

The U.S. political system has always been a mix of pluralism and authoritarianism. The authoritarian side has been advancing for decades with measures such as Nixon's RICO law and Clinton's "Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act." The Bush presidency has moved this process several steps forward. The authoritarian trend finds grassroots support among Christian rightists and other conservatives but is fundamentally driven by established elites and moves within elite-controlled channels. Fascists – pitching to social sectors that have a stake in an oppressive social order but are threatened by big business – oppose this trend and the forces behind it. Within the United States, neonazis denounce the Patriot Act and the Iraq war, as well as the flight of industrial jobs overseas and the mass influx of immigrants of color, as fruits of a globalist elite corporate conspiracy. Internationally, the Bush administration's expansionist policies have helped make authoritarian far right forces, both secular and religious, a rallying point for militant opposition to imperialism. (Like the Christian right, the Islamic right includes both fascist and non-fascist sectors.)

Don Hamerquist writes in the lead essay of *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement* (Kersplebedeb, 2002) that the main danger from fascism, at this stage, is not that it's about to become ruling class policy or even that it terrorizes communities of color (since official capitalism devastates these communities far more systematically). Rather, fascism's main danger is its potential to rally mass support away from any liberatory anti-capitalist vision. Many leftists don't take this threat seriously or even have a vocabulary to discuss it, but it is real and growing. "In many countries," J. Sakai notes elsewhere in the same book, "the far right has replaced the left as the main political opposition." Not all of the forces Sakai is talking about should be labeled as fascist, but the category of fascism provides an important reference point for understanding them.

As the example of the Christian right indicates, the line between elite-sponsored authoritarianism and fascist insurgency is not impermeable. Rightist formations can be coopted by elites or radicalized into militant opposition, just as some leftist formations may move between revolutionary and reformist politics. In addition, some fascists deliberately blur the line between far right and radical left in an effort to build broader alliances among militant opponents of the state. Given these complexities, it's all the more important for us to understand and name the different forms that right-wing authoritarianism can take. This is not just a two-sided struggle.

Footnotes