

What Is Fascism and How Can We Resist It in the United States?

written by Frieda Afary | January 31, 2025



The election of Donald Trump as a second-term U.S. president is a catastrophe for the United States and the world. Although some have called Trump a fascist (Paxton, 2024 and Stanley, 2018 and 2024), there has been insufficient discussion in the mainstream media and the Left on what fascism is, what makes Trump a fascist, and what is required to resist fascism in the United States today.

In this article, I would like to summarize the views of some scholars of fascism, pinpoint the features that make Trump a fascist, and draw some conclusions for resisting fascism in the United States today.

What Is Fascism?

The following is the etymology of the word as described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024):

The word *fascism* comes from the Latin *fascēs*, which denotes a bundle of wooden rods that typically included a protruding axe blade. In ancient Rome, lictors (attendants to magistrates) would hold the fasces as a symbol of the penal power of their magistrate. The first European fascist, Benito Mussolini, adopted this symbol both to recall the greatness of the Roman Empire and to reinforce his authority as the eventual dictator of Italy. Fascist regimes like his required their citizens to be as unified as the tightly bound fasces.

In his *Anatomy of Fascism* (2004), Robert Paxton argues that fascism is an ideology specific to the twentieth century and beyond. It is the product of the age of mass politics and characterizes a specific type of response to economic, social, and political crises. Fascism is a popular movement against liberalism, socialism, and Marxism. Its classic examples are Italy under Mussolini (1922–1943) and Nazi Germany under Hitler (1933–1945), regimes that brought about mass violence, a world war, and the deaths and extermination of millions. In the United States, Paxton argues, the rule of the Ku Klux Klan in the South from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1960s should be viewed as an early form of fascism. Nazi Germany also learned much from the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow South. (Wilkerson, 2020)

Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues

with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints, goals of internal cleansing and external expansion. (Paxton, 2004, p. 218)

The specific features of fascism according to Paxton are the following:

Adoration of male leadership and superiority of the leader's instinct over reason and thought.

Utter contempt for reason and intellect.

The belief that one's group is a victim.

Belief in the superiority of one's nation or race.

Need for a purer community by exclusionary violence.

Promotion of "internal cleansing" and external [imperial] expansion through wars.

Justification of any action against internal or external enemies.

Right determined solely by the prowess of one's group in a Darwinian struggle with other groups.

Paxton emphasizes that most fascist regimes use anti-capitalist language. However, at most, fascism replaces market capitalism with monopoly and state capitalism. It replaces class struggle with productivism, Social Darwinist "survival of the fittest," and a Hobbesian "war of all against all."

He also warns against analyses that identify fascism as a mental disorder. Most fascists are ordinary people and can even be viewed by members of society as "good people."

How Does Fascism Work?

In order to understand how fascism works, Paxton thinks that we need to understand the distinction between fascism and authoritarianism. While authoritarian rulers want to demobilize the public and cling to the status quo, fascists want to excite the public with rhetoric and political spectacle. They offer "a new way" with a single-party state and economic programs.

In his opinion, a more important distinction between fascism and authoritarianism is that while under authoritarianism, people are *forced* to live under an undemocratic society, under fascism, most people *voluntarily give up* democratic institutions.

Paxton also notes that the fascist relish for war and exclusion can come in new forms, not always as anti-Jewish but also anti-Muslim, and with new symbols and new internal enemies such as immigrants.

He recognizes the following key elements in the fascist ascendancy to power:

Polarization.

Deadlock.

Mass mobilization against internal and external enemies.

Complicity by existing elites who choose to bow to the fascists and facilitate their ascendancy.

Paxton emphasizes, however, that as a form of rule, fascism is destabilizing. It is doomed to destroy itself and many humans through endless internal wars and imperial expansionist wars.

Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) also singles out imperialism and internal wars of "purification" as fundamental elements of fascism. Her work analyzes the ways in which fascism uses imperialist expansion, anti-Black racism, and antisemitism to promote its aims.

Arendt argues that fascist regimes build on the fragmentation of their societies, the atomization of their populations, and the anger of those who have lost their former economic and social status. It bribes them in various ways and promotes unquestioning obedience to the leader.

Paxton does not agree that German society in the pre-World War II period was atomized. However, he does agree that the bulk of the German "Aryan" population was bribed by the Nazi regime and remained silent about the atrocities of the Nazis because they benefited from the regime. The concentration camps and the Holocaust of the Jews in particular became a source of job creation and job promotion for many Germans.

Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (2018) explores the specific ways in which fascism ideologically conditions large segments of the population under its rule. He focuses on the ways in which fascism takes advantage of economic and social dissatisfaction to promote dehumanization of segments of the population labeled as "the enemy." According to his study, fascism operates in the following ways:

- Promotes mass imprisonment, expulsion and mass extermination of those "enemy" segments.

- Creates a mythic past and rewrites history to promote an extreme nationalism.

- Promotes propaganda.

- Promotes anti-intellectualism.

- Denies reality by replacing reasoned debate with lies, fear, and anger.

- Promotes hierarchy based on the "natural" dominance of a group and not based on knowledge.

- Promotes "law and order" by dividing society into the chosen and the lawless.

- Opposes any challenge to patriarchal manhood. Promotes the patriarchal man as the protector of women.

- Turns the rural population against the urban population through anti-city rhetoric.

- Promotes the chosen nation as the "hard workers," "makers" in contrast to the Others as "lazy" and "parasites."

- Continues "waving the banner of nationalism in front of the working class in order to funnel the state spoils into the hands of oligarchs."

All of the features Stanley singles out apply to Donald Trump. In fact, Stanley's book was written as a response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Let's examine Trump's fascist features further.

What Makes Trump a Fascist?

Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) is about xenophobia, mass deportation of

undocumented immigrants, and an assault on the “enemy within,” which he defines as liberals, socialists, Marxists, or any leader, judge, attorney, journalist, activist, or intellectual who opposes him and has challenged him.

Given that 77 million U.S. citizens voted for Trump in the 2024 election, it can be argued that he has persuaded 77 million people to give up democratic institutions voluntarily.

Trump also exhibits the following features that are compatible with the fascist playbook:

Claims that Americans have been victimized.

Promotes extremist theocratic nationalism.

Promotes the cult of the leader who is “always right.”

Promotes monopoly capitalism in the name of being for “the little guy.”

Promotes patriarchy and seeks to crush any efforts at gender fluidity.

Promotes disinformation, book bans, and erasure of history.

Promotes economic wars against friendly nations and jingoistic threats against others.

One aspect that distinguishes Trump from classic fascism is that he does not advocate a strong welfare state for his MAGA base. This is why Robert Paxton had hesitated calling Trump a fascist up until a few years ago. After the January 6, 2021, white supremacist coup attempt, however, Paxton changed his mind and identified Trump as a fascist. In that coup attempt, he saw a violent extremist movement “bubbling up from below ... and that’s very much like the original fascisms. It’s the real thing.” (Zerofsky, 2024)

Although Trump does not offer a welfare state to his base, he could use the mass incarceration of undocumented immigrants and other “enemy” groups as a means of generating revenue through prison slave labor. He could also follow the model of the Convict Leasing System of the post-Reconstruction U.S. South that would involve arresting people from targeted groups and turning them into slaves hired out for work. (PBS, 2011) In either case, MAGA supporters could be employed as prison/labor camp wardens and police state agents.

The current system of mass incarceration in the United States includes approximately 2 million people in prisons and jails. (Sentencing Project, 2024) Many of those incarcerated do perform various forms of labor for a pittance. However, most U.S. prisons are currently not-for-profit entities.

Trump’s talk of being for “peace” and against U.S. wars abroad also flies in the face of reality. His support for Vladimir’s Putin’s brutal imperialist war against Ukraine, and Benjamin Netanyahu’s genocidal war on Palestinians, as well as Trump’s own jingoistic threats against the equally jingoistic Chinese government all reveal his strong militarist ambitions. Trump’s tariff wars against friendly nations such as Canada, Mexico, and European states should also count as wars with highly damaging consequences for those countries and for the U.S. public.

How Can Trump’s Fascism Be Effectively Resisted?

Examining the features of fascism, as articulated by the various scholars discussed above, we could argue that fascism requires mass rejection of reason/critical thought and mass following of the ideology of Social Darwinism and survival of the fittest. It also requires the complicity of leaders who

may not believe in fascism but bow to it and facilitate its growth.

During her presidential campaign, Kamala Harris called Trump a fascist. However, the Democratic Party leadership is not offering us any direction on how to fight against fascism. Many of its leaders are now talking about finding “common ground” with the Trump administration and wishing it well. A few are even calling on Biden to grant Trump a pardon. (Sifry, 2024 and Bouie, 2024) To the extent that they do talk about any “resistance,” it is about relying on the U.S. Congress at a time when the Democrats do not have a majority in the House of Representatives, will lose their majority in the Senate starting in 2025, and face a Supreme Court with an extreme Right majority that has already given absolute immunity to Trump.

When fascism backed by Big Tech billionaires like Elon Musk wins electorally, most Democrats seem to be willing to play ball with it. The Democrats’ talk of “common ground,” however, along with the dismissal by Department of Justice Special Prosecutor Jack Smith of the criminal cases against Trump for his role in the January 6, 2021, violent white supremacist coup attempt, are indeed examples of the type of complicity that the historian Robert Paxton has warned us about.

This complicity can lead us to forget some facts about the 2024 election. Trump did not win by a landslide. The U.S. public is still split down the middle. Trump received 77.3 million votes versus Harris’s 75 million votes. That amounts to a 49.8 percent share of the popular vote for Trump versus Harris’s 48.3 share. There was only 1.5 percentage points between the two. (CNN, 2024)

At the same time, in the latest election, Trump gained 47 percent of the Latino male vote, 24 percent of the Black male vote, and 53 percent of white women’s votes.

The main issues that the Trump campaign used to gain votes were the following:

Misogyny/misogynoir and the weaponization of gender debates.

Antiimmigrant hatred and the view that undocumented immigrants are “criminals” and “parasites.”

The view that naked capitalist exploitation is the pathway to economic growth for the working class and the middle class.

The claim that Trump would bring about “peace” to end wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

A serious resistance movement against fascism needs to ponder these facts. It needs to work thoughtfully and act strategically to reach as many people as possible to discuss these very issues and offer convincing fact-based explanations and alternatives to change minds and hearts.

In order to resist fascism in an effective way, we need both mass street demonstrations, and the ideas, language, and explanations that help us combat disinformation, ideological conditioning, and hate. We need to offer the vision of a humanist alternative to capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

After the November 5 election, a coalition of nationwide progressive organizations such as Indivisible, Public Citizen, Move On, and the Working Families Party called on people nationwide to step forward and host a series of public in-person and virtual meetings to talk about forming a resistance movement. That network, which called itself “Worth Fighting For,” will come to an end before Trump’s inauguration on January 20. At this point, most progressive organizations are working at the local and state level. No organization or network of organizations is taking responsibility for building a truly nationwide resistance movement against fascism. Unfortunately,

an array of small organizations, immigrant rights groups, and community groups without nationwide coordination and funding will simply not be enough to resist fascism.

The Trump administration, however, is ready to launch its assault on immigrants, shut down the opposition media, and prosecute democratic leaders, lawyers, judges, journalists, intellectuals, and activists who have stood up to Trump and his MAGA movement.

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