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The Problem is Fascists, Not Those Who Stand Up To Them

By Pete Dolack
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The ongoing debate of recent weeks around how, or if, to confront demonstrations of white supremacists and fascists is the latest manifestation of arguments the Left and liberals have been having for many years. For this is not simply a question of tactics but incorporates broader ideas of how we conceptualize the threat from the extreme Right.

For decades, the liberal “solution” to fascists, including marches by undisguised neo-Nazis, has traditionally been to go to the other side of town, pray and hope they go away. Critiques of antifa and other groups who courageously stood up to the white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, are variations on that pacifist theme. We need do no more than refer to Cornel West’s support of “the anti-fascists, and then, crucial, the anarchists, because they saved our lives, actually. We would have been completely crushed, and I’ll never forget that.”

The problem with liberal-pacifist responses is that, if adopted, the only result would be to embolden the fascists. The white-nationalist gangs behind the Charlottesville rally unmistakably intended to intimidate. Remember that another demonstration was scheduled for Boston the following weekend and several others were planned. Instead, because they were confronted in Charlottesville, their Boston rally became a fiasco for them and appearances in other locations were called off. Communities showed what they think of them. The result for speaks for itself.

The foremost problem with liberal-pacifist responses is that it tells people they have no right to defend themselves. That should be rejected, emphatically. The violence of hate-mongers like those carrying the torches in Charlottesville and any violence that is used in defense by people who have no choice but to physically defend themselves has no equivalence. Should people have just stood there and allowed violence to be perpetrated against them and allow gangs of white supremacists and fascists to intimidate the majority — the vast majority — into silence? Do we really need to ponder this question?

Sufficient numbers in themselves stop fascists

Fighting back needn't be physical, and generally does not need to be if there are sufficient counter-forces. I'll draw here on two examples from late 1990s in New York City.

In the first example, a small band of neo-Nazis were running loose on Staten Island, the city's right-wing outpost situated at a distance from the rest of the city. There were five of them, apparently inspired by a truly loathsome "novel" called *The Turner Diaries*, which features scenes of vast groups of people hung by Nazis during a race war. (To give you an idea of the demographics there, Donald Trump won Staten Island even though he received only 18 percent of the overall New York City presidential vote.)

A small group that I was then a member in, New York Workers Against Fascism, organized a coalition to confront the neo-Nazis. It was quickly decided to organize a series of peaceful demonstrations on the belief that a violent response would only alienate the community we were attempting to rally against the neo-Nazis. At one rally, in a park, the neo-Nazis actually showed up in uniform, across a busy street, and started giving Hitler salutes while shouting "white power." They were simultaneously pathetic and representative of a potentially highly dangerous trend. In this instance, we had to hold back a group of anarchists from Love and Rage who wanted to charge, one of whom angrily told me "I came here to smash fascists." I answered that today we were going to smash them peacefully. Conceding to the coalition's consensus, he didn't charge although he remained angry. Tactics had to be a serious consideration here.

Note the coalition did not go to another part of the island and pray the neo-Nazis would go away. In this case, a confrontation needed to be non-violent, although we did have some baseball bats hidden in case we were attacked. Fortunately, they stayed hidden as the coalition significantly out-numbered the neo-Nazis.

A few years later, a Ku Klux Klan group decided to have a rally in Manhattan. Setting aside the idiocy of them thinking they could get a foothold in a place like New York City (fascists aren't the brightest bulbs, to put it mildly), one can't help but wonder how they thought they could get any reception other than the one they got. Their appearance was scheduled for Foley Square, a downtown location with wide spaces. Eight of them showed up, guarded by hundreds of police officers and surrounded and heckled by about 80,000 counter-demonstrators. Yes, we outnumbered them 10,000 to one! The Klan ended its event early and were said to have received an escort by the police to the Holland Tunnel, the nearest exit from the city.

Similarly, the white supremacists were badly outnumbered in Boston last month and had to be protected from the people of Boston by rings of police and metal barricades. They had to slink home. They were successfully confronted. Not by praying they would go away but by so outnumbering them that they had to concede defeat and realize how unpopular their racism and misogyny is, even if they are highly unlikely to admit to themselves.

Communities are entitled to defend themselves

Questions of tactics, based on the immediate situation, the size of the forces on the two sides and the community being defended and/or reached out to, should predominate. Should we condemn antifa for a physical defense in light of the other outcomes discussed here? Emphatically no. The situation in Charlottesville called for such a defense, as Professor West directly said. The next time a community needs to defend against physical jeopardy, we can only hope there will be people ready to provide it.

Let's not forget what fascists stand for. They stand not simply for hate, but for supremacy of one group over another, violence to enforce such supremacy and ultimately the annihilation of demonized peoples and groups. We all understand what fascism led to Nazi Germany.

The Holocaust should not be out of our minds when fascists carrying torches march in formation chanting "Jews will not replace us." When we think about where fantasies of white supremacy lead, such as in the apartheid systems of South Africa and the United States South of the pre-civil rights era, and in slavery, ideologies of white supremacy should not be taken lightly. When we see the results of misogyny globally, especially but far from only in régimes run by religious fundamentalists, talk of making women subordinate to men can't be laughed off as anything but the fantasy of losers who can't get a girlfriend.

Liberals who don't want to confront these threats but insist on an absolutist free-speech position, even to the point of saying we should engage with fascists, are playing with fire. You don't "debate" people who deliver their message only with violence. You don't debate whether one racial group is superior to another. You don't debate whether we should adopt social forms reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. You don't debate whether the Holocaust happened or if there is an international Jewish conspiracy. Just as the proverbial "you can't yell fire in a crowded theater" put limits on free speech, advocating the annihilation of people (always conveniently different) is outside any reasonable definition of free speech. Yes, that means "no platform for fascists" — we shouldn't apologize for such a stance, which is what the non-violent confrontations recounted above amount to.

All working people are ultimately threatened by fascist ideologies. Beyond all the reasons already discussed (more than sufficient in themselves), there is the question of who fascist movements serve. That there is no immediate danger of a fascist takeover in the United States (or almost any other global North country, Hungary and Poland excepted) does not mean we should ignore the class nature of fascism.

Who would a dictatorship serve?

As always, we should carefully distinguish between right-wing demagogues like Donald Trump (whose election is ultimately a product of decades of routine Republican Party rhetoric) and his ability to actually implement fascist rule. Once again, it might be best to see the Trump phenomenon as constituting the seeds for a potential fascist movement rather than a fully-fledged fascism. That ought to be scary enough, and enough for all of us to make a stand against it. To say this is not to ignore the glaring connections between the Trump administration and white supremacists and the so-called “alt-right” (let’s retire that silly term and just call them fascists or fascist wannabes), but rather to note that most of the U.S. ruling class — industrialists and financiers — backed Hillary Clinton and not President Trump in the 2016 election.

That matters, because at its most basic level, fascism is a dictatorship established through and maintained with terror on behalf of big business. It has a social base, which provides the support and the terror squads, but which is badly misled since the fascist dictatorship operates decisively against the interest of its social base. Militarism, extreme nationalism, the creation of enemies and scapegoats, and, perhaps the most critical component, a rabid propaganda that intentionally raises panic and hate while disguising its true nature and intentions under the cover of a phony populism, are among the necessary elements, although not sufficient in themselves.

Despite national differences that result in major variations in the appearances of fascism, the class nature is consistent. Big business is invariably the supporter of fascism, no matter what a fascist movement’s rhetoric contains, and is invariably the beneficiary. For even if it is intended to benefit them, these big businessmen are giving up some of their own freedom since they will not directly control the dictatorship; it is a dictatorship *for* them, not *by* them. After using violent militias to gain power, those militias are quickly sidelined.

Hitler would never have reached power without significant material support from German industrialists. German industrialists and aristocrats, and the conservative politicians who served them, thought they could control Hitler if they put him in government. They couldn’t, but profited enormously as wages for German workers declined sharply and were enforced by labor codes that even a Nazi paper once said were “reminiscent of penal codes.” It was little different in Mussolini’s Spain or Franco’s Spain or Pinochet’s Chile.

Think it can’t happen in your country? It can. Any country dominated by the capitalist system is at risk of fascism because fascism is capitalism with all the democratic veneers stripped away, when capitalists come to believe they can’t continue to rule and maintain profits any other way. That fascist groups, even the Nazi Party, start out as small bands of deluded misfits lashing out at scapegoats because they don’t have the intellectual capacity to understand the world they live in, in no way alters this picture.

Better to definitively defeat fascist grouplets now, before they have any chance of becoming tools. Anti-fascist organizers are doing humanity a service, whether peacefully counter-demonstrating or using more militant tactics such as those of antifa.