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## History Lessons for Antifascists



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In the dominant liberal political imaginary, fascist and far-right movements are framed as problems of hate and extremism. [1] The global extremism industry – a network of government ministries, intelligence agencies, military and police forces, university research centers, think tanks, media outlets, and government-oriented NGOs – dutifully serves the ruling class by occluding liberalism's complicity with fascism by placing antifascist movements on an extremism spectrum that also includes violent fascist formations, a mystification aimed at policing the Left and criminalizing antifascists. [2]

Given the tangle of distortions concerning how fascism is understood, research-based information and analysis from radical and critical perspectives are crucial for antifascist resistance. [3] Antifascist histories and the lessons that can be drawn from past struggles

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have been the focus of two recent U.S.-based academic projects. A conference on “Anti-Fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” hosted by Hofstra University and organized to coincide with the centenary of the March on Rome, brought together scholars and activists from the United States, Canada, and Europe in early November 2022. [4] Also launched at the same time, The April Institute is a collective organized to advance public knowledge about the long history of antifascism in the United States. In stressing the importance of antifascist projects informed by scholarship that excavates movement histories, this work differs from much of the research in the field, whose narrow focus on hate crime, terrorism, and ideologically-motivated violent extremism (IMVE) deploys conceptual frameworks which shore up agendas set by the state security apparatus but contribute little to an understanding of the dynamics of fascism in crisis-riven capitalist societies. [5]

In noting the prevalence of distorted and shallow understandings of fascism, the result of which is that “the public understanding of contemporary fascist tendencies lacks the context of their deep historical roots” such that “those engaged in resistance are deprived of the insights gained by a long antifascist tradition,” the Institute’s mandate reflects its antifascist activist alignments: (i) “To promote a deeper understanding of the troubling history of fascist movements in the United States and to cultivate our ability to identify contemporary warning signs”; (ii) “To recognize, communicate, and celebrate the rich tradition, creativity, and success of antifascist organizing and cultural production in the United States”; and (iii) “To consider the social and material conditions that give rise to fascist movements as well as the ways we can imagine, build, and sustain inclusive and democratic communities.”.[6]

As part of its inaugural six-part series on “U.S. Fascism and Antifascism: Past and Present,” the Institute organized panels featuring prominent Marxist, anarchist, and progressive scholars discussing the themes of “U.S. Fascism: Origins, Patterns and Continuities” and “Antifascist Histories: Models for Resistance.” [7] Its ambitious schedule of programming for 2023 involves four research and public education projects: (a) exhibitions on Black antifascism in the wake of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia; a second on fascist politics and antifascist resistance at the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville; and one on a mass-based antifascist league during the 1930s; (b) promotion of new interdisciplinary scholarship; (c) collaboration with secondary and post-secondary educators; and (d) a variety of physical and digital memorialization projects.

A sense of the collective’s activist orientation can be gained from the work of Anna Duensing, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Virginia and an Institute co-founder.

In a presentation for the Activist History Review, Duensing sketches an analytical model of “strategies” used by antifascist activists to expose and oppose fascism in its various iterations: aggressive white nationalist scapegoating; systems of racial hierarchy and exclusion; a state terror apparatus backed by elites and enforced by mob rule that “blurs the lines between state actors and civilians”; conspiracist Red-baiting during the Cold War; racial bigotry and antisemitism; and “the playing-up of a revolutionary bogey-man on the left.” For each of the five strategies she offers an example:

**Education:** This entails “pursuit of the truth,” the production of knowledge to understand the use and abuse of history for political ends, and the extensive documentation and archiving of fascist violence. In this regard Ida B. Wells’ truth-telling about racist pogroms was crucial for the development of anti-lynching campaigns.

**Intelligence:** This involves the gathering and analysis of information for exposure and public education campaigns. Duensing cites the work of Stetson Kennedy, whose book *The Klan Unmasked* (1954) details the clandestine operations he ran to undermine the KKK in the postwar period.

**Militancy:** Against what Duensing calls “the liberal handwringing over whether public demonstrations by fascists should be allowed,” antifascists have adopted a broad repertoire of tactics, from public demonstrations and deplatforming to community defense. An example of the latter is the NAACP organizer, Robert F. Williams, whose book *Negroes With Guns* (1962) documents successful grassroots campaigns of “counter-violence” against the North Carolina Klan.

**Community:** Under this category Duensing refers to local care practices and mutual aid projects organized “when the state has failed” poor communities. The Black Panther Party’s delivery of social programs (food distribution and medical services) and support for cultural and education initiatives is an oft-cited example.

**Movement-building:** This refers to the “slow, methodical grassroots work of organizing” at various scales, from workplaces, schools, neighborhoods to broader campaigns. Duensing argues that the “immense coalition-building capacities of antifascism” can contribute to other Left movements. Her example is Ella Baker, who understood the role of racism in fascism, imperialism, labor exploitation, the oppression of women, and mass incarceration in her five decades of political organizing.

A study of strategies that have shaped antifascist mobilizations over the past century, offers lessons, according to Duensing, for thinking about an “effective and long-term

response to the loose coalition of forces that we saw at the Capitol ... [an] entanglement that we will continue to see in the coming weeks and months.”

Learning from earlier examples of antifascist militancy can also dispel myths surrounding contemporary approaches. While reactionary politicians seek to criminalize antifascist activism as ‘extremism’ or ‘terrorism,’ and some progressive commentators decry confrontational tactics, a study of past antifascist mobilizations can serve to contextualize recent efforts to fight the far right, thus disclosing lines of continuity throughout antifascist history. The activists who stood against the coalition of neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and heavily armed “patriot” groups in Charlottesville engaged in “direct action used by people, rather than the state, to confront racism at its violent points of irruption,” showing that it is “courageous resistance in the streets that has responded to the confusion we see all around us. While the forces of liberalism counseled us to ignore an emboldened racist far right as so many buffoons, others took on the responsibility of being the primary force of confrontation, from the J20 actions in DC to Charlottesville.” [8]

In his study of the roots of U.S. fascism, historian Gerald Horne (who presented his research at an Institute panel) asks whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century will see extensions of fascism beyond its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century precursors. After documenting fascism’s U.S. roots in the system of slavery, Indigenous genocide, settler colonialism, imperialism, and Jim Crow apartheid, Horne concludes:

“Preliminary signs are not encouraging, and it is not simply because the parallels with high fascism are so foreboding – genocide, mass dispossession, demagoguery, chauvinism, wars of aggression, religion instrumentalized, runaway patriarchy, class collaboration especially in the Pan-European community, and as a direct result labor subdued along with its complement, the left-wing. Encouraging, however, is that ... resistance persists.” [9]

The fight against fascism continues. It is an intergenerational and collective effort, one that requires clarity and courage. The April Institute offers antifascists and the broader Left important resources for this ongoing work.

## **NOTES.**

[1] In discussing the “effacement of fascism in the liberal political imaginary,” Gabriel Rockhill argues that an “epochal conception of history,” which undergirds the notion that “there’s a risk that the nation-state would become fascistic, like France or the United States in the Trump Era,” is mistaken, given that this overlooks “the fact that fascism and authoritarian rule are integral to how liberal nation-states that are capitalistic have always functioned.” He continues: “The way they [liberalism and fascism] relate is as two modes

of governance that I refer to as the good cop/bad cop of capitalist rule. The two modes of governance function in very close complicity with one another. They often will toggle back and forth between them. For poor communities of color in the United States it's usually the fascistic authoritarian rule of the prison-industrial-complex, but for whites – not understood as a color but as a social economic category – they're usually subjected to liberal rule. ... The risk is not that fascism will come about. The reality is that it has always already been here. Liberals have to train themselves to see its existence.” Transcribed excerpts from a presentation by Gabriel Rockhill, “Toward a Counter-History of French Theory: Understanding the Global Political Economy of Ideas,” Critical Theory Workshop, Paris, July 15, 2019.

Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6NNh2EIOa4> [09:02 mins. – 17:07 mins]

See also his “Liberalism & Fascism: The Good Cop and Bad Cop of Capitalism.”

[2] See Chamsy el-Ojeili and Dylan Taylor, “The Extremism Industry: A Political Logic of Post-Hegemonic Liberalism,” *Critical Sociology* 46: 7-8 (November 2020), 1141-1155. The authors, sociologists based in New Zealand/Aotearoa, argue that political forces designated as ‘extreme’ are characterizations that “serve to mystify their targets while simultaneously legitimating established political elites.” Noting the “extraordinary ascension of ‘extremism’ over the last couple of decades,” they show that the “intellectual production of the extremism industry” is based on a “‘rough consensus’ ... on who we are speaking of when we speak of ‘extremists’: Islamists, activists from outside of the established parties of the political Left and Right, animal liberationists, extra-parliamentary environmental radicals, the militants of Antifa, for instance.”

[3] For example, CounterPunch continues to serve as an indispensable archive of antifascist interventions with its publication of commentators such as Carl Boggs, Anthony DiMaggio, Henry A. Giroux, Thomas Klikauer, Vicente Navarro, Eve Ottenberg, Gabriel Rockhill, Paul Street, and others.

[4] The schedule and twenty-eight videos of conference presentations are available online: <https://www.hofstra.edu/cultural-center/anti-fascism-21st-century/>

[5] The British antifascist campaigner Liz Fekete has argued that an “antifascist lens” makes visible the “pattern of collusion, direct or indirect, between the military, police and the intelligence services” with far-right movements: “Fascism does not hatch eggs only on the margins of society; it breeds within authoritarian structures, within those spaces most shielded from public scrutiny, such as the police and intelligence services, which provide the perfect incubators.” She concludes that the “counter-extremism industry ... in treating

left resistance to this political violence as just another form of extremism, is making it easier for states to criminalise anti-fascists.” See Liz Fekete, *Europe’s Fault Lines: Racism and the Rise of the Right* (London & New York: Verso, 2018), 49, 50.

[6] The name chosen for The April Institute is apt on a number of levels. April 1945 witnessed the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, marked the victory of the Resistance in Northern Italy, and saw the suicide of Hitler and the summary execution of Mussolini. Its likely etymological root in the Latin verb *aperiō* (to disclose, uncover) points to the work of unearthing antifascist histories to guide political mobilizations against contemporary fascism. <https://aprilinstitute.org/about/>

[7] Available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/@April\\_Institute](https://www.youtube.com/@April_Institute)

[8] Anonymous, “An Open Letter to Cornel West: On Charlottesville,” *The Philosophical Salon*, September 2017: Available online: <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/an-open-letter-to-cornell-west-on-charlottesville/>

[9] Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1836: Texas Slavery & Jim Crow and the Roots of U.S. Fascism* (New York: International Publishers, 2022), 569-570.

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