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<http://monthlyreview.org/2014/09/01/the-return-of-fascism-in-contemporary-capitalism/>

The Return of Fascism in Contemporary Capitalism

by Samir Amin
September, 2014

It is not by chance that the very title of this contribution links the return of fascism on the political scene with the crisis of contemporary capitalism. Fascism is not synonymous with an authoritarian police regime that rejects the uncertainties of parliamentary electoral democracy. Fascism is a particular political response to the challenges with which the management of capitalist society may be confronted in specific circumstances.

Unity and Diversity of Fascism

Political movements that can rightly be called fascist were in the forefront and exercised power in a number of European countries, particularly during the 1930s up to 1945. These included Italy's Benito Mussolini, Germany's Adolf Hitler, Spain's Francisco Franco, Portugal's António de Oliveira Salazar, France's Philippe Pétain, Hungary's Miklós Horthy, Romania's Ion Antonescu, and Croatia's Ante Pavelic. The diversity of societies that were the victims of fascism—both major developed capitalist societies and minor dominated capitalist societies, some connected with a victorious war, others the product of defeat—should prevent us from lumping them all together. I shall thus specify the different effects that this diversity of structures and conjunctures produced in these societies.

Yet, beyond this diversity, all these fascist regimes had two characteristics in common:

(1) In the circumstances, they were all willing to manage the government and society in such a way as not to call the fundamental principles of capitalism into question, specifically private capitalist property, including that of modern monopoly capitalism. That is why I call these different forms of fascism particular ways of managing capitalism and not political forms that challenge the latter's legitimacy, even if "capitalism" or "plutocracies" were subject to long diatribes in the rhetoric of fascist speeches. The lie that hides the true nature of these speeches appears as soon as one examines the "alternative" proposed by these various forms of fascism, which are always silent concerning the main point—private capitalist property. It remains the case that the fascist choice is not the only response to the challenges confronting the political management of a capitalist society. It is only in certain conjunctures of violent and deep crisis that the fascist solution appears to be the best one for dominant capital, or sometimes even the only possible one. The analysis must, then, focus on these crises.

(2) The fascist choice for managing a capitalist society in crisis is always based—by definition even—on the categorical rejection of "democracy." Fascism always replaces the general principles on which the theories and practices of modern democracies are based—recognition of a diversity of opinions, recourse to electoral procedures to determine a majority, guarantee of the rights of the minority, etc.—with the opposed values of submission to the requirements of collective discipline and the authority of the supreme leader and his main agents. This reversal of values is then always accompanied by a return of backward-looking ideas, which are able to provide an apparent legitimacy to the procedures of submission that are implemented. The proclamation of the supposed necessity of returning to the ("medieval") past, of submitting to the state religion or to some supposed characteristic of the "race" or the (ethnic) "nation" make up the panoply of ideological discourses deployed by the fascist powers.

The diverse forms of fascism found in modern European history share these two characteristics and fall into one of the following four categories:

(1) The fascism of the major "developed" capitalist powers that aspired to become dominant hegemonic powers in the world, or at least in the regional, capitalist system.

Nazism is the model of this type of fascism. Germany became a major industrial power beginning in the 1870s and a competitor of the hegemonic powers of the era (Great Britain and, secondarily, France) and of the country that aspired to become hegemonic (the United States). After the 1918 defeat, it had to deal with the consequences of its failure to achieve its hegemonic aspirations. Hitler clearly formulated his plan: to establish over Europe, including Russia and maybe beyond, the hegemonic domination of "Germany," i.e., the capitalism of the monopolies that had supported the rise of Nazism. He was disposed to accept a compromise with his major opponents: Europe and Russia would be given to him, China to Japan, the rest of Asia and Africa to Great Britain, and the Americas to the United States. His error was in thinking that such a compromise was possible: Great Britain and the United States did not accept it, while Japan, in contrast, supported it.

Japanese fascism belongs to the same category. Since 1895, modern capitalist Japan aspired to impose its domination over all of East Asia. Here the slide was made “softly” from the “imperial” form of managing a rising national capitalism—based on apparently “liberal” institutions (an elected Diet), but in fact completely controlled by the Emperor and the aristocracy transformed by modernization—to a brutal form, managed directly by the military High Command. Nazi Germany made an alliance with imperial/fascist Japan, while Great Britain and the United States (after Pearl Harbor, in 1941) clashed with Tokyo, as did the resistance in China—the deficiencies of the Kuomintang being compensated for by the support of the Maoist Communists.

(2) The fascism of second rank capitalist powers.

Italy’s Mussolini (the inventor of fascism, including its name) is the prime example. Mussolinism was the response of the Italian right (the old aristocracy, new bourgeoisie, middle classes) to the crisis of the 1920s and the growing communist threat. But neither Italian capitalism nor its political instrument, Mussolini’s fascism, had the ambition to dominate Europe, let alone the world. Despite all the boasts of the Duce about reconstructing the Roman Empire (!), Mussolini understood that the stability of his system rested on his alliance—as a subaltern—either with Great Britain (master of the Mediterranean) or Nazi Germany. Hesitation between the two possible alliances continued right up to the eve of the Second World War.

The fascism of Salazar and Franco belong to this same type. They were both dictators installed by the right and the Catholic Church in response to the dangers of republican liberals or socialist republicans. The two were never, for this reason, ostracized for their anti-democratic violence (under the pretext of anti-communism) by the major imperialist powers. Washington rehabilitated them after 1945 (Salazar was a founding member of NATO and Spain consented to U.S. military bases), followed by the European Community—guarantor by nature of the reactionary capitalist order. After the Carnation Revolution (1974) and the death of Franco (1980), these two systems joined the camp of the new low-intensity “democracies” of our era.

(3) The fascism of defeated powers.

These include France’s Vichy government, as well as Belgium’s Léon Degrelle and the “Flemish” pseudo-government supported by the Nazis. In France, the upper class chose “Hitler rather than the Popular Front” (see Annie Lacroix-Riz’s books on this subject). This type of fascism, connected with defeat and submission to “German Europe,” was forced to retreat into the background following the defeat of the Nazis. In France, it gave way to the Resistance Councils that, for a time, united Communists with other Resistance fighters (Charles de Gaulle in particular). Its further evolution had to wait (with the initiation of European construction and France’s joining the Marshall Plan and NATO, i.e., the willing submission to U.S. hegemony) for the conservative right and anti-communist, social-democratic right to break permanently with the radical left that came out of the anti-fascist and potentially anti-capitalist Resistance.

(4) Fascism in the dependent societies of Eastern Europe.

We move down several degrees more when we come to examine the capitalist societies of Eastern Europe (Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece, and western Ukraine during the Polish era). We should here speak of backward and, consequently, dependent capitalism. In the interwar period, the reactionary ruling classes of these countries supported Nazi Germany. It is, nevertheless, necessary to examine on a case-by-case basis their political articulation with Hitler's project.

In Poland, the old hostility to Russian domination (Tsarist Russia), which became hostility to the communist Soviet Union, encouraged by the popularity of the Catholic Papacy, would normally have made this country into Germany's vassal, on the Vichy model. But Hitler did not understand it that way: the Poles, like the Russians, Ukrainians, and Serbs, were people destined for extermination, along with Jews, the Roma, and several others. There was, then, no place for a Polish fascism allied with Berlin.

Horthy's Hungary and Antonescu's Romania were, in contrast, treated as subaltern allies of Nazi Germany. Fascism in these two countries was itself the result of social crises specific to each of them: fear of "communism" after the Béla Kun period in Hungary and the national chauvinist mobilization against Hungarians and Ruthenians in Romania.

In Yugoslavia, Hitler's Germany (followed by Mussolini's Italy) supported an "independent" Croatia, entrusted to the management of the anti-Serb Ustashi with the decisive support of the Catholic Church, while the Serbs were marked for extermination.

The Russian Revolution had obviously changed the situation with regard to the prospects of working-class struggles and the response of the reactionary propertied classes, not only in the territory of the pre-1939 Soviet Union, but also in the lost territories—the Baltic states and Poland. Following the Treaty of Riga in 1921, Poland annexed the western parts of Belarus (Volhynia) and Ukraine (southern Galicia, which was previously an Austrian Crownland; and northern Galicia, which had been a province of the Tsarist Empire).

In this whole region, two camps took form from 1917 (and even from 1905 with the first Russian Revolution): pro-socialist (which became pro-Bolshevik), popular in large parts of the peasantry (which aspired to a radical agrarian reform for their benefit) and in intellectual circles (Jews in particular); and anti-socialist (and consequently complaisant with regard to anti-democratic governments under fascist influence) in all the landowning classes. The reintegration of the Baltic states, Belarus, and western Ukraine into the Soviet Union in 1939 emphasized this contrast.

The political map of the conflicts between "pro-fascists" and "anti-fascists" in this part of Eastern Europe was blurred, on the one hand, by the conflict between Polish chauvinism (which persisted in its project of "Polonizing" the annexed Belarussian and Ukrainian regions by settler colonies) and the victimized peoples; and, on the other hand, by the conflict between the Ukrainian "nationalists," who were both anti-Polish and anti-Russian (because of anti-

communism) and Hitler's project, which envisaged no Ukrainian state as a subaltern ally, since its people were simply marked for extermination.

I here refer the reader to Olha Ostriitchouk's authoritative work *Les Ukrainiens face à leur passé*.¹ Ostriitchouk's rigorous analysis of the contemporary history of this region (Austrian Galicia, Polish Ukraine, Little Russia, which became Soviet Ukraine) will provide the reader with an understanding of the issues at stake in the still ongoing conflicts as well as the place occupied by local fascism.

The Western Right's Complaisant View of Past and Present Fascism

The right in European parliaments between the two world wars was always complaisant about fascism and even about the more repugnant Nazism. Churchill himself, regardless of his extreme "Britishness," never hid his sympathy for Mussolini. U.S. presidents, and the establishment Democratic and Republican parties, only discovered belatedly the danger presented by Hitler's Germany and, above all, imperial/fascist Japan. With all the cynicism characteristic of the U.S. establishment, Truman openly avowed what others thought quietly: allow the war to wear out its protagonists—Germany, Soviet Russia, and the defeated Europeans—and intervene as late as possible to reap the benefits. That is not at all the expression of a principled anti-fascist position. No hesitation was shown in the rehabilitation of Salazar and Franco in 1945. Furthermore, connivance with European fascism was a constant in the policy of the Catholic Church. It would not strain credibility to describe Pius XII as a collaborator with Mussolini and Hitler.

Hitler's anti-Semitism itself aroused opprobrium only much later, when it reached the ultimate stage of its murderous insanity. The emphasis on hate for "Judeo-Bolshevism" stirred up by Hitler's speeches was common to many politicians. It was only after the defeat of Nazism that it was necessary to condemn anti-Semitism in principle. The task was made easier because the self-proclaimed heirs to the title of "victims of the Shoah" had become the Zionists of Israel, allies of Western imperialism against the Palestinians and the Arab people—who, however, had never been involved in the horrors of European anti-Semitism!

Obviously, the collapse of the Nazis and Mussolini's Italy obliged rightist political forces in Western Europe (west of the "curtain") to distinguish themselves from those who—within their own groups—had been accomplices and allies of fascism. Yet, fascist movements were only forced to retreat into the background and hide behind the scenes, without really disappearing.

In West Germany, in the name of "reconciliation," the local government and its patrons (the United States, and secondarily Great Britain and France) left in place nearly all those who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. In France, legal proceedings were initiated against the Resistance for "abusive executions for collaboration" when the Vichyists reappeared on the political scene with Antoine Pinay. In Italy, fascism became silent, but was still present in the ranks of Christian Democracy and the Catholic Church. In Spain, the "reconciliation" compromise imposed in 1980 by the European Community (which later became the European Union) purely and simply prohibited any reminder of Francoist crimes.

The support of the socialist and social-democratic parties of Western and Central Europe for the anti-communist campaigns undertaken by the conservative right shares responsibility for the later return of fascism. These parties of the “moderate” left had, however, been authentically and resolutely anti-fascist. Yet all of that was forgotten. With the conversion of these parties to social liberalism, their unconditional support for European construction—systematically devised as a guarantee for the reactionary capitalist order—and their no less unconditional submission to U.S. hegemony (through NATO, among other means), a reactionary bloc combining the classic right and the social liberals has been consolidated; one that could, if necessary, accommodate the new extreme right.

Subsequently, the rehabilitation of East European fascism was quickly undertaken beginning in 1990. All of the fascist movements of the countries concerned had been faithful allies or collaborators to varying degrees with Hitlerism. With the approaching defeat, a large number of their active leaders had been redeployed to the West and could, consequently, “surrender” to the U.S. armed forces. None of them were returned to Soviet, Yugoslav, or other governments in the new people’s democracies to be tried for their crimes (in violation of Allied agreements). They all found refuge in the United States and Canada. And they were all pampered by the authorities for their fierce anti-communism!

In *Les Ukrainiens face à leur passé*, Ostriitchouk provides everything necessary to establish irrefutably the collusion between the objectives of U.S. policy (and behind it of Europe) and those of the local fascists of Eastern Europe (specifically, Ukraine). For example, “Professor” Dmytro Dontsov, up to his death (in 1975), published all his works in Canada, which are not only violently anti-communist (the term “Judeo-Bolshevism” is customary with him), but also even fundamentally anti-democratic. The governments of the so-called democratic states of the West supported, and even financed and organized, the “Orange Revolution” (i.e., the fascist counter-revolution) in Ukraine. And all that is continuing. Earlier, in Yugoslavia, Canada had also paved the way for the Croatian Ustashis.

The clever way in which the “moderate” media (which cannot openly acknowledge that they support avowed fascists) hide their support for these fascists is simple: they substitute the term “nationalist” for fascist. Professor Dontsov is no longer a fascist, he is a Ukrainian “nationalist,” just like Marine Le Pen is no longer a fascist, but a nationalist (as *Le Monde*, for example, has written)!

Are these authentic fascists really “nationalists,” simply because they say so? That is doubtful. Nationalists today deserve this label only if they call into question the power of the actually dominant forces in the contemporary world, i.e., that of the monopolies of the United States and Europe. These so-called “nationalists” are friends of Washington, Brussels, and NATO. Their “nationalism” amounts to chauvinistic hatred of largely innocent neighboring people who were never responsible for their misfortunes: for Ukrainians, it is Russians (and not the Tsar); for Croatians, it is the Serbs; for the new extreme right in France, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, and elsewhere, it is “immigrants.”

The danger represented by the collusion between major political forces in the United States (Republicans and Democrats) and Europe (the parliamentary right and the social liberals), on one side, and the fascists of the East, on the other, should not be underestimated. Hillary Clinton has set herself up as leading spokeswoman of this collusion and pushes war hysteria to the limit. Even more than George W. Bush, if that is possible, she calls for preventive war with a vengeance (and not only for repetition of the Cold War) against Russia—with even more open intervention in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, among other places—against China, and against people in revolt in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Unfortunately, this headlong flight of the United States in response to its decline could find sufficient support to allow Hillary Clinton to become “the first woman president of the United States!” Let’s not forget what hides behind this false feminist.

Undoubtedly, the fascist danger might still appear today to be no threat to the “democratic” order in the United States and Europe west of the old “Curtain.” The collusion between the classic parliamentary right and the social liberals makes it unnecessary for dominant capital to resort to the services of an extreme right that follows in the wake of the historical fascist movements. But then what should we conclude about the electoral successes of the extreme right over the last decade? Europeans are clearly also victims of the spread of generalized monopoly capitalism.² We can see why, then, when confronted with collusion between the right and the so-called socialist left, they take refuge in electoral abstention or in voting for the extreme right. The responsibility of the potentially radical left is, in this context, huge: if this left had the audacity to propose real advances beyond current capitalism, it would gain the credibility that it lacks. An audacious radical left is necessary to provide the coherence that the current piecemeal protest movements and defensive struggles still lack. The “movement” could, then, reverse the social balance of power in favor of the working classes and make progressive advances possible. The successes won by the popular movements in South America are proof of that.

In the current state of things, the electoral successes of the extreme right stem from contemporary capitalism itself. These successes allow the media to throw together, with the same opprobrium, the “populists of the extreme right and those of the extreme left,” obscuring the fact that the former are pro-capitalist (as the term extreme *right* demonstrates) and thus possible allies for capital, while the latter are the only potentially dangerous opponents of capital’s system of power.

We observe, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar conjuncture in the United States, although its extreme right is never called fascist. The McCarthyism of yesterday, just like the Tea Party fanatics and warmongers (e.g., Hillary Clinton) of today, openly defend “liberties”—understood as exclusively belonging to the owners and managers of monopoly capital—against “the government,” suspected of acceding to the demands of the system’s victims.

One last observation about fascist movements: they seem unable to know when and how to stop making their demands. The cult of the leader and blind obedience, the acritical and supreme valorization of pseudo-ethnic or pseudo-religious mythological constructions that convey fanaticism, and the recruitment of militias for violent actions make fascism into a force that is difficult to control. Mistakes, even beyond irrational deviations from the viewpoint of the social

interests served by the fascists, are inevitable. Hitler was a truly mentally ill person, yet he could force the big capitalists who had put him in power to follow him to the end of his madness and even gained the support of a very large portion of the population. Although that is only an extreme case, and Mussolini, Franco, Salazar, and Pétain were not mentally ill, a large number of their associates and henchmen did not hesitate to perpetrate criminal acts.

Fascism in the Contemporary South

The integration of Latin America into globalized capitalism in the nineteenth century was based on the exploitation of peasants reduced to the status of “peons” and their subjection to the savage practices of large landowners. The system of Porfiro Diaz in Mexico is a good example. The furtherance of this integration in the twentieth century produced the “modernization of poverty.” The rapid rural exodus, more pronounced and earlier in Latin America than in Asia and Africa, led to new forms of poverty in the contemporary urban favelas, which came to replace older forms of rural poverty. Concurrently, forms of political control of the masses were “modernized” by establishing dictatorships, abolishing electoral democracy, prohibiting parties and trade unions, and conferring on “modern” secret services all rights to arrest and torture through their intelligence techniques. Clearly, these forms of political management are visibly similar to those of fascism found in the countries of dependent capitalism in Eastern Europe. The dictatorships of twentieth-century Latin America served the local reactionary bloc (large landowners, comprador bourgeoisies, and sometimes middle classes that benefited from this type of lumpen development), but above all, they served dominant foreign capital, specifically that of the United States, which, for this reason, supported these dictatorships up to their reversal by the recent explosion of popular movements. The power of these movements and the social and democratic advances that they have imposed exclude—at least in the short term—the return of para-fascist dictatorships. But the future is uncertain: the conflict between the movement of the working classes and local and world capitalism has only begun. As with all types of fascism, the dictatorships of Latin America did not avoid mistakes, some of which were fatal to them. I am thinking, for example, of Jorge Rafael Videla, who went to war over the Malvinas Islands to capitalize on Argentine national sentiment for his benefit.

Beginning in the 1980s, the lumpen development characteristic of the spread of generalized monopoly capitalism took over from the national populist systems of the Bandung era (1955–1980) in Asia and Africa.³ This lumpen development also produced forms akin both to the modernization of poverty and modernization of repressive violence. The excesses of the post-Nasserist and post-Baathist systems in the Arab world provide good examples of this. We should not lump together the national populist regimes of the Bandung era and those of their successors, which jumped on the bandwagon of globalized neoliberalism, because they were both “non-democratic.” The Bandung regimes, despite their autocratic political practices, benefitted from some popular legitimacy both because of their actual achievements, which benefited the majority of workers, and their anti-imperialist positions. The dictatorships that followed lost this legitimacy as soon as they accepted subjection to the globalized neoliberal model and accompanying lumpen development. Popular and national authority, although not democratic, gave way to police violence as such, in service of the neoliberal, anti-popular, and anti-national project.

The recent popular uprisings, beginning in 2011, have called into question the dictatorships. But the dictatorships have only been called into question. An alternative will only find the means to achieve stability if it succeeds in combining the three objectives around which the revolts have been mobilized: continuation of the democratization of society and politics, progressive social advances, and the affirmation of national sovereignty.

We are still far from that. That is why there are multiple alternatives possible in the visible short term. Can there be a possible return to the national popular model of the Bandung era, maybe with a hint of democracy? Or a more pronounced crystallization of a democratic, popular, and national front? Or a plunge into a backward-looking illusion that, in this context, takes on the form of an “Islamization” of politics and society?

In the conflict over—in much confusion—these three possible responses to the challenge, the Western powers (the United States and its subaltern European allies) have made their choice: they have given preferential support to the Muslim Brotherhood and/or other “Salafist” organizations of political Islam. The reason for that is simple and obvious: these reactionary political forces accept exercising their power within globalized neoliberalism (and thus abandoning any prospect for social justice and national independence). That is the sole objective pursued by the imperialist powers.

Consequently, political Islam’s program belongs to the type of fascism found in dependent societies. In fact, it shares with all forms of fascism two fundamental characteristics: (1) the absence of a challenge to the essential aspects of the capitalist order (and in this context this amounts to not challenging the model of lumpen development connected to the spread of globalized neoliberal capitalism); and (2) the choice of anti-democratic, police-state forms of political management (such as the prohibition of parties and organizations, and forced Islamization of morals).

The anti-democratic option of the imperialist powers (which gives the lie to the pro-democratic rhetoric found in the flood of propaganda to which we are subjected), then, accepts the possible “excesses” of the Islamic regimes in question. Like other types of fascism and for the same reasons, these excesses are inscribed in the “genes” of their modes of thought: unquestioned submission to leaders, fanatic valorization of adherence to the state religion, and the formation of shock forces used to impose submission. In fact, and this can be seen already, the “Islamist” program makes progress only in the context of a civil war (between, among others, Sunnis and Shias) and results in nothing other than permanent chaos. This type of Islamist power is, then, the guarantee that the societies in question will remain absolutely incapable of asserting themselves on the world scene. It is clear that a declining United States has given up on getting something better—a stable and submissive local government—in favor of this “second best.”

Similar developments and choices are found outside of the Arab-Muslim world, such as Hindu India, for example. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which just won the elections in India, is a reactionary Hindu religious party that accepts the inclusion of its government into globalized neoliberalism. It is the guarantor that India, under its government, will retreat from its project to be an emerging power. Describing it as fascist, then, is not really straining credibility too much.

In conclusion, fascism has returned to the West, East, and South; and this return is naturally connected with the spread of the systemic crisis of generalized, financialized, and globalized monopoly capitalism. Actual or even potential recourse to the services of the fascist movement by the dominant centers of this hard-pressed system calls for the greatest vigilance on our part. This crisis is destined to grow worse and, consequently, the threat of resorting to fascist solutions will become a real danger. Hillary Clinton's support for Washington's warmongering does not bode well for the immediate future.

Notes

1. ↔ Olha Ostriitchouk, *Les Ukrainiens face à leur passé* [Ukrainians Faced with Their Past] (Brussels: P.I.E. Lang, 2013).
2. ↔ For a further elaboration, see Samir Amin, *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).
3. ↔ For the spread of generalized monopoly capitalism, see *ibid.*