

Liberalism & Fascism: The Good Cop & Bad Cop of Capitalism

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Fascist modes of governance are a very real and present part of the so-called liberal world order.

“The model for Nazi Germany’s white-supremacist colonial expansion was the U.S.”

“There is currently one state [the United States] that has made at least the weak beginnings of a better order.” — Adolph Hitler in 1926

“Give Franco a hood and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan.”— Langston Hughes

The One-State-One-Government Paradigm

It is often presumed that each individual state has a particular form of government—be it liberal, fascist or authoritarian—which constitutes the primary mode of rule throughout the entire country. We thus often hear expressions like ‘the liberal democracies of the West’ or ‘the former dictatorships of Latin America.’ This geography of governments is linked to a political chronology, which tells us that a government can shift from one form to another, hence the prevalence of sayings like ‘the return of democracy’ or the ‘resurgence of fascism.’ The dominant paradigm for understanding the relationship between states and government can thus be summed up in terms of one overarching principle: each state, if it is not in an open civil war, only has one form of government at one point in time, which rules over its entire territory and population.

The one-state-one-government paradigm dissimulates the complex ways in which populations are governed. Its naïve either-or logic provides cover for less savory forms of governance if the state is declared, for instance, a liberal democracy. It also produces a geography and chronology of faraway fascism, by which liberal states seek to convince their citizenry that fascism is something that occurred in the past, that might emerge in

the future if liberal institutions aren't preserved, or that only infests distant lands recalcitrant to democracy. Whatever the case may be, we can rest assured that fascism is not an issue right here, right now.

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This paradigm serves as a powerful form of perception management insofar as it does not allow us to see how various sectors of the population and different geographic regions are actually governed and by what forces. Instead of commencing, then, with the one-state-one-government presumption, we should begin the other way around, by a bottom-up materialist analysis of the various modes of governance operative in each historical conjuncture. These modes are not limited to what is called the visible government, meaning the political theater that is daily staged for us by media conglomerates working for the ruling elite, but they also include the invisible government of the deep state, as well as all of the forms of governance that are discretely fostered by the state, but which are outsourced to vigilantes and organized crime (which is not to mention all of the tight economic controls that shackle peoples' lives). Rather than there being a single agent of governance, such as the elected government, the multiple-modes-of-governance paradigm insists on the multiplicity of agencies that are mobilized for governing different populations, as well as on the variable roles that they play across social strata and at different points in class struggle.

Amerikkka

Consider the interwar period in the United States, when Mussolini and Hitler were rising to power within the bourgeois democracies of Europe. According to the one-state-one-government paradigm, the U.S. was a liberal democracy at the time, and that is certainly how it presented itself. In fact, it had just won what Woodrow Wilson referred to as a war that made the world 'safe for democracy.' In a statement that is less often cited in American history books, Wilson clarified, however, what the hollow term of 'democracy' actually meant by specifying that the goal of the Great War

was “to keep the white race strong” and to preserve “white civilization and its domination of the planet.”

Indeed, the U.S. was a racist police state that empowered millions of white-supremacist vigilantes, and that served as a model for the fascist movements in Europe. “By refusing immigrants to enter [...] if they are in a bad state of health,” Hitler wrote admiringly of the U.S. in *Mein Kampf*, “and by excluding certain races from the right to become naturalized as citizens, they [the Americans] have begun to introduce principles similar to those on which we wish to ground the People’s State.” As James Whitman has argued in detail, America served as the prototype for the Nazis because it was widely understood to be at the cutting edge of racist and eugenicist statecraft when it came to immigration, second-class citizenship and miscegenation. The Prussian Memorandum of 1933, which outlined the Nazi’s legal program, specifically invoked Jim Crow, and the National Socialist Handbook of Law and Legislation concluded its chapter on the construction of a race state by acknowledging that America was the country that had fundamentally recognized the truths of racism and taken the first necessary steps toward a racial state that would be fulfilled by Nazi Germany. Moreover, scholars like Domenico Losurdo, Ward Churchill and Norman Rich have all argued that the model for Nazi Germany’s white-supremacist colonial expansion was the U.S. American Holocaust against the indigenous population. “The analogue of the ‘American West’ and the ‘Nazi East’ became,” according to Carroll P. Kakel, “an obsession for Hitler and other Nazi ‘true believers.’”

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When Italian fascism first strutted onto the world stage, many Americans at the time immediately recognized it as a European version of the Ku Klux Klan. “Comparisons between the homegrown Klan and Italian fascism,” writes Sarah Churchwell, “soon became ubiquitous in the American press.” With some 5 million members in the mid-1920s, the K.K.K. was a deadly vigilante network that enforced the American racial police state, but it was also only part of a larger repressive apparatus. This

included white supremacist groups like the Black Legion that were offshoots of the Klan, self-declared fascist organizations such as the Silver Legion of America, Nazi organizations like the Friends of New Germany and the German American Bund, brutal vigilante groups that policed agricultural workers with what Carey McWilliams aptly describes as “farm fascism,” and an expansive network of extremely violent anti-worker organizations that were backed by big business. These anti-labor para-state militants were generally allowed to act with impunity since their agenda seamlessly coalesced with that of the U.S. government. To take but one telling example, in 1919 and 1920, the General Intelligence Division (GID) of the U.S. Justice Department orchestrated raids in more than 30 U.S. cities, arresting between 5 and 10 thousand anti-capitalist activists, often without warrants, evidence or trials. If one was a member of a racialized group, an immigrant, a worker who sought to organize, or an anti-capitalist activist, it went without saying that you did not have the same rights as those purportedly living under a liberal democracy.

In *Facts and Fascism*, George Seldes detailed the striking similarities between global fascist movements and those in the United States by demonstrating how big capital in America directly invested in fascism at home and abroad, controlled a pro-capitalist and often fascist-friendly press, and financed repressive racist and anti-labor organizations. The American Legion, for instance, regularly invited Mussolini to its conventions, and one of its first commanders is on record as stating: “Do not forget that the Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion is to the United States.” Its anti-labor activities constitute one of the most violent chapters of American history, according to Seldes. “In 1934,” he reminds us, plans were made for a coup d’état in the U.S. when “leading members of the Legion conspired with Wall Street brokers and other big business men to upset the government of the United States and establish a fascist regime.”

Multiple Modes of Governance

The paradigm of multiple modes of governance allows us to bracket the image that a state projects of itself—its aesthetics of power—so that we can analyze how different populations are actually governed. This tends to

vary according to time, place and socioeconomic stratum. Emmett Till, to take a single example, might very well have lived in a state that declared itself to be a liberal democracy, but his brutal beating and murder, as well as the subsequent acquittal of his assassins in a court of law, demonstrate how he and other poor and racialized people were actually governed: by fascist vigilante violence openly condoned by the state. It is important to note that multiple modes of governance are often operative in a single space-time and sometimes target the same populations. The liberal charade of justice during Till's murder trial obviously sought to convince at least some people that their primary mode of governance was that of the rule of law.

What a materialist analysis demonstrates is that liberalism and fascism, contrary to what the dominant ideology maintains, are not opposites. They are partners in capitalist crime. For the sake of argument, it is worth clarifying that I am not here distinguishing between fascism and authoritarianism, although this distinction can sometimes prove helpful (as in Andre Gunder Frank's insightful analysis of Latin American military dictatorships). Whereas fascism is generally understood to be a movement that mobilizes sectors of civil society through propaganda campaigns, financial backing and state empowerment, authoritarianism is often defined as relying primarily on the police and military to control the population. These are somewhat porous categories, however, since fascism's vigilantes are sometimes simply off duty employees of the repressive state apparatus, and authoritarianism has often deputized vigilantes and integrated them into the state. Moreover, in the cases of Italy and Germany, it is arguable that fascism actually evolved into a form of authoritarianism. During their ascent to power within bourgeois democracies, fascists in both cases ran enormous propaganda campaigns to mobilize civil society and work through the electoral system, but once in power, they destroyed the more plebian elements in their fascist bands, and they integrated what was left of them into the state apparatus.

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Historically, liberalism and fascism, in this broad sense, have functioned as two modes of capitalist governance that operate in conjunction with one another, following the logic of the police interrogation tactic known as good cop / bad cop. Liberalism, as the good cop, promises freedom, the rule of law and the protection of a benefactor state in exchange for acquiescence to capitalist socioeconomic relations and pseudo-democracy. It tends to both serve and attract members of the middle and upper-middle classes, as well as those who aspire to be part of them. The bad cop of fascism has proven particularly useful for governing those populations that are poor, racialized, and discontent, as well as for intervening in various parts of the world to impose capitalist social relations by force. If people are not hoodwinked by the false promises of the good cop, or they are not motivated by other reasons to be acquiescent, then the liberals' partner in crime is on call to beat them into compliance. Those who rise up from any class in order to contest capitalism should be ready to have the liberals and their supposed regime of rights tap out, ceding the fight to their more vicious ally while looking the other way, and reminding any onlookers of the important differences between the lesser of two evils.

The hasty identification of fascism with government, and the complementary opposition between fascist and liberal governments, masks these multiple forms of governance, just as the definition of a state as 'democratic' independently of its foreign policy or internal class wars blinds us to its variegated forms of population control. Moreover, it imposes the liberal veil of ignorance, which maintains that fascism is only an important phenomenon if it completely takes over the government. The subtext, of course, is that it is absolutely fine if it continues, as it does in the U.S., as a form of population management for oppressed and exploited groups through concentration camps and ICE raids, police and vigilante murders, brutal assaults on water protectors, military interventions abroad, and other such activities. As long as a modicum of liberal decorum is maintained for even a small sector of the population, we can rest assured that what we need to do first and foremost is fight to protect the system of liberal rule from so-called fascism.

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This is not to deny in the least that there is, for significant portions of the population, a profound, world-altering difference between a self-declared fascist government and fascist modes of governance under liberal cover. When fascist parties attain state power and are no longer held back by their commedia dell'arte with liberals, they can and have unleashed brutal forms of repression on sectors of the population that are generally protected, while increasing their attacks on those that are not and launching barbarous colonial wars. Moreover, dealing with the casuistry and discursive contradictions of the good cop is usually far preferable to facing the iron fist of the bad cop when building power through political parties and organizations (for tactical reasons, it can also be extremely important to find ways of mobilizing and working with liberals, while coaxing them to the Left). However, none of this should blind us to the fact that fascist modes of governance are a very real and present part of the so-called liberal world order, which need to be identified as such in order to be directly contested.

Liberal Tolerance and the Policing of Capital

If liberals are tolerant of fascism and defend the rights of fascists, it is not because they are higher moral beings. It is because—whether they know it or not—their system of pro-capitalist governance necessitates keeping guard dogs on call for the dirty work. While it is true that they sometimes prefer the general population to be compliant and fall in line with the rigged elections of 60-second dollar democracy, they need to maintain the ability to smash anti-capitalism if there is ever any real threat to the system that supports them.

The good cop / bad cop routine only succeeds if it is able to drive a wedge between the two and create the illusion that there is a profound difference, and even opposition, between the amiable police officer who understands our plight and the brutal sidekick who is deaf to our pleas. If the violence of the bad cop is morally reprehensible to the good cop, however, it is because it serves as the latter's bogeyman, meaning the greater of two

evils that the good cop uses to subject populations to its unique form of evil (compliance with capitalist social relations). It is imperative, then, to recognize, that the good cop and the bad cop ultimately want the same thing: subjects who, by hook or by crook, accept the pervasive violence, ecological destruction and profound inequality inherent in capitalism. Using different tactics, whose very purpose is to obscure their shared strategy, they are both policing the capitalist system. As the American radical tradition has repeatedly pointed out, in language sure to sound barbarous—and hence beyond the pale of tolerance—to refined liberal ears: a pig is always just a pig.

Far from being exceptional or intermittent, fascism is thus an integral part of the systems of governance within which we live, or at least most people live. It is not something that might arrive in the future, although there can, of course, be moments of intensification or complete seizures of state power, which can wreak havoc. It is a mode of governance that is already operative here and now within the system of bourgeois democracy. The failure to recognize this and organize against it has been one of the factors that has contributed to its growth and potential for intensification.

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