



# ***MARXISM & FASCISM***

*John Molyneux*

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This article does not attempt to be an exhaustive survey of the Marxist literature on fascism, which is vast. Rather it is an overview of how the Marxist analysis of fascism was developed with a focus on the writings of Leon Trotsky, who contributed more than any other individual to the Marxist understanding of this phenomenon, supplemented by some thoughts on more recent developments.

The Marxist theory of fascism was developed in response to the emergence of a mass fascist movement and the threat which it posed to the workers' movement and to socialism, i.e. it developed as a series of concrete analyses of current political phenomena, neither as a priori abstract theorising nor as historical reflection. Fascism first appeared as a significant force in Italy and Germany during the deep economic, social, and political crises that followed the First World War. Hitler founded the National Socialist German Workers Party in February 1920, and Mussolini founded the National Fascist Party in November 1921. Fascism was a new historical phenomenon, qualitatively different from previous authoritarian or autocratic regimes such as Tsarist Russia, the Kaiser's Germany, or the absolute monarchies of the 17th and 18th centuries. Consequently there is no theory of fascism, or even the concept, in Marx and Engels or in Kautsky, Luxemburg, or Lenin.

The closest approximation to a precedent in the writings of Marx and Engels is the concept of 'Bonapartism', derived from analysis of the French Second Empire, the regime of Louis Napoleon III, and set out by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and elsewhere. Louis Napoleon established his dictatorship by means of a coup d'état in December 1851, after a period as elected president following the 1848 Revolution which ended the reign of Louis-Philippe. Bonapartism was a regime characterised by a strong executive, absence of democratic rights, and repression of republicans and the left. It expressed, Marx argued, a situation where 'the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired the faculty of ruling the nation.'<sup>1</sup> The state achieved a certain relative autonomy balancing between the two basic classes and playing them off against each other, although ultimately acting in the interests of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie gave up its direct political power in order to preserve its social power intact. These concepts proved useful building blocks for the future analysis of fascism, but given the immense difference in scale, ferocity, and historical importance of the reaction imposed by Napoleon III and that of Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, they could not in any way substitute for such an analysis.

## **Fascism in Italy: the first response**

The fact that fascism first became a really threatening phenomenon in Italy meant that it fell to Italian Marxists to be the first to attempt a theoretical account of it. Unfortunately they did not acquit themselves well in this regard. The dominant Marxist in Italy at the time of the rise of Mussolini's movement (1920-21) and his assumption of power in October 1922 was the initial leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Amadeo Bordiga. Bordiga was a hardened ultraleft<sup>2</sup> with an abstract propagandist conception of the party. He saw fascism as simply another aspect of bourgeois repression and drew no real distinction between fascism and bourgeois democracy, and consequently did not see the need for any specific or concrete analysis of it. As a result, the main political report, authored by Bordiga, presented to the Rome Congress of the PCI in March 1922 barely mentioned fascism. Bordiga opposed any notion of a united-front strategy against

fascism and, indeed, the whole concept of the united front adopted by the Communist International in 1922, with the consequence that the PCI failed either to perceive the threat posed by Mussolini or to organise any specific resistance to his conquest of power. Gramsci was better than this in that he, probably alone among the Italian Communists, did see the possibility of the fascists taking power,<sup>3</sup> but he only produced a few journalistic articles on fascism, not a rounded theoretical analysis,<sup>4</sup> and he, like Bordiga and under his influence, opposed the idea of an anti-fascist united front until the mid -twenties.<sup>5</sup>

### Clara Zetkin

In fact it was the German Communist Clara Zetkin, close comrade of Rosa Luxemburg, who produced the first substantial Marxist analysis of fascism. This was in Zetkin's *Report to the Comintern Executive* in June 1923.<sup>6</sup> The first merit of Zetkin's analysis was that she grasped the deadly serious threat posed by fascism. Her report begins:

Fascism confronts the proletariat as an exceptionally dangerous and frightful enemy. Fascism is the strongest, most concentrated, and classic expression at this time of the world bourgeoisie's general offensive. It is urgently necessary that it be brought down. This is true not only with respect to the historic existence of the proletariat as a class, which will free humankind by surmounting capitalism. It is also a question of survival for every ordinary worker, a question of bread, working conditions, and quality of life for millions and millions of the exploited.<sup>7</sup>

She also identified fascism as a symptom of the profound crisis of capitalism—'We view fascism as an expression of the decay and disintegration of the capitalist economy'<sup>7</sup>—and a product of the fact that this decay was inflicting massive impoverishment not only on workers but also on intermediate layers such as intellectuals and the lower middle classes.<sup>8</sup> And she indentified a key difference between fascism and the kind of bloody counterrevolutionary terror witnessed in Hungary in 1921 under the Horthy regime as lying in the fact that whereas the Horthy

terror was the work of 'a small caste of feudal officers', fascism had a mass base among a 'broad social layer, broad masses'.<sup>9</sup> Zetkin saw fascism as a kind of historical punishment for the failure to carry through to victory the proletarian revolution, a failure for which the Social Democrats and even to some extent the communist parties were responsible. In a perceptive passage she noted:

Masses in their thousands streamed to fascism. It became an asylum for all the politically homeless, the socially uprooted, the destitute and disillusioned. And what they no longer hoped for from the revolutionary proletarian class and from socialism, they now hoped would be achieved by the most able, strong, determined, and bold elements of every social class. All these forces must come together in a community. And this community, for the fascists, is the nation. They wrongly imagine that the sincere will to create a new and better social reality is strong enough to overcome all class antagonisms. The instrument to achieve fascist ideals is, for them, the state. A strong and authoritarian state that will be their very own creation and their obedient tool. This state will tower high above all differences of party and class, and will remake society in accord with their ideology and program.<sup>10</sup>

Zetkin rejected the predominant social democratic approach to fascism, which was to reduce it purely to violence and criminality and thus to something to be dealt with just by police measures. She noted that fascism always combines violence with 'a sham revolutionary programme, which links up in extremely clever fashion with the moods, interests and demands of broad social masses'<sup>11</sup> and therefore must be combated politically and ideologically as well as by force. However, she insisted it was necessary to

Meet violence with violence. But not violence in the form of individual terror—that will surely fail. But rather violence as the power of the revolutionary organized proletarian class struggle.<sup>12</sup>

This in turn necessitated the formation of ‘a proletarian united front ... Workers must come together for struggle without distinctions of party or trade union affiliation’.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the mass united front needed to be capped by the call for a ‘workers’ and peasants’ government ... [This] slogan is virtually a requirement for the struggle to defeat fascism’.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the themes in Zetkin’s report were later taken up by Trotsky in his analysis of the rise of the Nazis, but, although her report was adopted by the Comintern Executive in 1923, it did not remain Comintern policy for long, being overturned in 1924. As John Riddell writes:

In his opening report to the Fifth Comintern Congress in 1924, its president, Gregory Zinoviev, abandoned Zetkin’s analysis ... by claiming that ... ‘The Social Democratic Party has become a wing of fascism ... The Fascists are the right hand and the Social Democrats are the left hand of the bourgeoisie’. This ultra left position excluded the possibility of united action involving Communist and Social Democratic workers—the very error that had crippled resistance to Italian Fascism during its rise to power in 1921-22.<sup>15</sup>

Stalin went even further with this theory of ‘social fascism’. In September 1924 he wrote:

Firstly, it is not true that fascism is only the fighting organisation of the bourgeoisie. Fascism is not only a military-technical category. Fascism is the bourgeoisie’s fighting organisation that relies on the active support of Social-Democracy. Social-Democracy is objectively the moderate wing of fascism. There is no ground for assuming that the fighting organisation of the bourgeoisie can achieve decisive successes in battles, or in governing the country, without the active support of Social-Democracy. These organisations do not negate, but supplement each other. They are not antipodes, they are twins.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to understand that Zinoviev and Stalin were not really moving leftwards here or taking genuinely ultra-left positions, like Bordiga for example. Rather, they were using ultra-left phrases as a cover for a rightward drift involving opportunistic alliances with forces such as Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist Kuomintang in China and the leaders of the British TUC. As we shall see, this pattern was to repeat itself with disastrous consequences in 1928-33.

### Trotsky’s analysis

This brings us to the most important Marxist analysis of fascism, that of Leon Trotsky. Two preliminary remarks about this: The first is that it was made in the most difficult circumstances and it was an extraordinary achievement that it was made at all. In 1927 Trotsky was expelled from the CPSU; in 1928 he was forcibly exiled to Alma Ata on the border with China; in 1929 he was deported to the Prinkipo Islands off the coast of Turkey, where amongst many other difficulties, news from Germany took a long time to arrive. Yet in these conditions in which most mortals would have been pretty exclusively concerned with their own fate, Trotsky managed, between 1928-34, to write a series of major articles on the events in Germany as they unfolded, which collected together form a book of almost 500 pages,<sup>17</sup> whilst in the same period writing a book-length study of the *Third International After Lenin*,<sup>18</sup> his three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*, his autobiography *My Life*, and a stream of articles on subjects ranging from unfolding events in Russia to China and Spain.

The second preliminary mark to be made is that Trotsky’s theory was not the product of a stand-alone special study or scholarly research (like, say, his *History of the Russian Revolution*); rather it was developed in, and out of, a polemic and political struggle against the line on fascism of the Moscow-dominated Comintern. In 1928 the Comintern, under Stalin’s direction, adopted an intensified version of the ‘social fascism’ position of Zinoviev and Stalin in 1924 which became known as ‘Third Period Stalinism’. History since World War One was divided into three periods: 1917-24, the ‘first period’ of revolutionary upsurge; 1925-8, the ‘second period’ of capitalist stabilisation; and 1928 onwards, the ‘third

period' of the final crisis of capitalism and renewed revolutionary upsurge. The communist parties were instructed to abandon united-front work, to form breakaway 'red' trade unions, and to treat social democratic parties as fascist and often as the main enemy. Trotsky considered this 'periodisation' to be completely arbitrary and remote from the actual course of the class struggle<sup>19</sup> and also extremely damaging to the struggle against fascism at precisely the moment this was becoming most acute. It was damaging because: a) by claiming that the Social Democrats and the Centre Party government of Brüning were fascist it suggested that fascism was already in power and there was nothing particular to fear from Hitler and the Nazis; and b) by labelling the Social Democrats as fascist it blocked the formation of the workers' united front needed to stop Hitler. The first aim of Trotsky's polemic was to warn the German workers and communists of the terrible danger they were facing, and to this end he deployed all his considerable rhetorical powers.

It is the duty of the Left Opposition to give the alarm: the leadership of the Comintern is driving the German proletariat toward an enormous catastrophe, the essence of which is panicky capitulation before fascism!... The coming to power of the National Socialists would mean first of all the extermination of the flower of the German proletariat, the destruction of its organizations, the eradication of its belief in itself and in its future. Considering the far greater maturity and acuteness of the social contradictions in Germany, the hellish work of Italian fascism would probably appear as a pale and almost humane experiment in comparison with the work of the German National Socialists...<sup>20</sup>

Germany is now passing through one of those great historic hours upon which the fate of the German people, the fate of Europe, and in significant measure the fate of all humanity, will depend for decades...<sup>21</sup>

Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for anyplace; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it

will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!<sup>22</sup>

But this was far from being just powerful rhetoric. Trotsky's predictions and his urgency were based on a developed and concrete analysis of the fundamental nature of fascism and Nazism. Its central idea was Trotsky's grasp of the class nature of fascism as a movement of the petty bourgeoisie, driven to despair by the acute crisis of capitalism and by the inability of the workers' movement to resolve that crisis.

At the moment that the 'normal' police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium—the turn of the fascist regime arrives. Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie, and bands of the declassed and demoralized lumpen proletariat; all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy. From fascism the bourgeoisie demands a thorough job; once it has resorted to methods of civil war, it insists on having peace for a period of years. And the fascist agency, by utilizing the petty bourgeoisie as a battering ram, by overwhelming all obstacles in its path, does a thorough job. After fascism is victorious, finance capital gathers into its hands, as in a vise of steel, directly and immediately, all the organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive, administrative, and educational powers of the state: the entire state apparatus together with the army, the municipalities, the universities, the schools, the press, the trade unions, and the cooperatives. When a state turns fascist, it doesn't only mean that the forms and methods of government are changed in accordance with the patterns set by Mussolini—the changes in this

sphere ultimately play a minor role—**but it means, primarily and above all, that the workers' organizations are annihilated...** Therein precisely is the gist of fascism.<sup>23</sup>

For Trotsky it was fascism's character as a mass movement based on the enraged petty bourgeoisie that distinguished it from other right-wing authoritarian rulers and regimes and made it such a deadly threat to the workers' movement and to socialists. It gave fascism, both in Italy and in Germany, the ability through its combat squads to take on and smash the organisations of the workers' movement at the base, in the communities, on the streets, and in the workplaces in a way that was not possible for an 'ordinary' military dictator.

The petty bourgeois social base of the fascist movement was also the key to understanding its ideology, including its virulent anti-Semitism. Standing above the proletariat but beneath the big bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie felt squeezed in conditions of extreme capitalist crisis between the two basic classes in society: on the one hand exploited and bankrupted by the power of finance capital and the banks; on the other pressured by the working class with its trade unions and its demands for decent wages and conditions. It therefore turned to a narrative which depicted the banks and the left as different wings of a conspiracy against 'the German nation', i.e. themselves, orchestrated, of course, by the Jews. The bankers, the Rothschilds, etc. were Jews; the communists (Marx, Luxemburg, Trotsky, etc.) were Jews, hence the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy.<sup>24</sup>

The big bourgeoisie, even those who supported Hitler with money, did not consider his party theirs. The national 'renaissance' leaned wholly upon the middle classes, the most backward part of the nation, the heavy ballast of history. Political art consisted in fusing the petty bourgeoisie into oneness through its common hostility to the proletariat. What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath. Impotent before big capital, the petty bourgeoisie hopes in the future to

regain its social dignity through the ruin of the workers.

As Social Democracy saved the bourgeoisie from the proletarian revolution, fascism came in its turn to liberate the bourgeoisie from the Social Democracy. Hitler's coup is only the final link in the chain of counterrevolutionary shifts.

The petty bourgeois is hostile to the idea of development, for development goes immutably against him; progress has brought him nothing except irredeemable debts. National Socialism rejects not only Marxism but Darwinism. The Nazis curse materialism because the victories of technology over nature have signified the triumph of large capital over small. The leaders of the movement are liquidating 'intellectualism' because they themselves possess second- and third-rate intellects, and above all because their historic role does not permit them to pursue a single thought to its conclusion. The petty bourgeois needs a higher authority, which stands above matter and above history, and which is safeguarded from competition, inflation, crisis, and the auction block. To evolution, materialist thought, and rationalism—of the twentieth, nineteenth, and eighteenth centuries—is counterposed in his mind national idealism as the source of heroic inspiration. Hitler's nation is the mythological shadow of the petty bourgeoisie itself, a pathetic delirium of a thousand-year Reich.

In order to raise it above history, the nation is given the support of the race. History is viewed as the emanation of the race. The qualities of the race are construed without relation to changing social conditions. Rejecting 'economic thought' as base, National Socialism descends a stage lower: from economic materialism it appeals to zoologic materialism...

Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics. Today, not only in

peasant homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms ... Everything that should have been eliminated from the national organism in the form of cultural excrement in the course of the normal development of society has now come gushing out from the throat; capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism. Such is the physiology of National Socialism.<sup>25</sup>

In order to argue for the strategy of a united front which Trotsky believed was essential for stopping the rise to power of Hitler in particular and fascism in general, he had to take on and refute in detail the theory that the Social Democrats were social fascists or that social democracy and fascism were twins. And here it must be remembered that among German communist workers at this time, memories were still fresh of the betrayal of the German Revolution of 1919–23 by the SPD and the complicity of its leaders in the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Trotsky made his case not by dropping or even softening his criticism of social democracy but on the basis of understanding how its political role and social base differed from that of fascism and arguing that the victory of fascism would mean the annihilation of social democracy along with the destruction of all forms of independent workers' organisation.

The task of fascism lies not only in destroying the Communist vanguard but in holding the entire class in a state of forced disunity. To this end the physical annihilation of the most revolutionary section of the workers does not suffice. It is also necessary to smash all independent and voluntary organizations, to demolish all the defensive bulwarks of the proletariat, and to uproot whatever has been achieved during three-quarters of a century by the Social Democracy and the trade unions. For, in the last analysis, the Communist Party also

bases itself on these achievements.

The Social Democracy has prepared all the conditions necessary for the triumph of fascism. But by this fact it has also prepared the stage for its own political liquidation. It is absolutely correct to place on the Social Democrats the responsibility for the emergency legislation of Brüning as well as for the impending danger of fascist savagery. It is absolute balderdash to identify Social Democracy with fascism.<sup>26</sup> The Social Democracy, which is today the chief representative of the parliamentary-bourgeois regime, derives its support from the workers. Fascism is supported by the petty bourgeoisie. The Social Democracy without the mass organizations of the workers can have no influence. Fascism cannot entrench itself in power without annihilating the workers' organizations. Parliament is the main arena of the Social Democracy. The system of fascism is based upon the destruction of parliamentarism. For the monopolistic bourgeoisie, the parliamentary and fascist regimes represent only different vehicles of dominion; it has recourse to one or the other, depending upon the historical conditions. But for both the Social Democracy and fascism, the choice of one or the other vehicle has an independent significance; more than that, for them it is a question of political life or death.<sup>27</sup>

Trotsky's advocacy of an anti-fascist united front between the KPD and the SPD was ignored by both parties with the disastrous consequence, which he entirely predicted, that Hitler came to power *without serious resistance* in January 1933. This negative confirmation of his analysis was not, however, the end of the matter. Stalin soon realised that the establishment of a Nazi regime in Berlin posed a direct military threat to the Soviet Union. Hitler and German imperialism wanted *lebensraum* for an expanded Germany in the East. Stalin responded to this threat by trying to form an alliance with Britain and France, i.e. with British and French imperialism (as in the First World War), and in line with this

he brought about a complete transformation in Comintern policy. In 1934, about a year after Hitler's victory, the Comintern began a 180-degree turn from the extreme ultra-leftism of the 'Third Period' to the class collaborationism of the Popular Front. The policy was pioneered by the French Communist Party, which formed an anti-fascist alliance with the Socialist Party and the Radical Party (a thoroughly bourgeois party headed by Eduard Daladier, prime minister of France on several occasions). It was then adopted as an international strategy at the Comintern's Seventh Congress in 1935. The essence of the Popular Front was the unity of all 'democratic' forces, including bourgeois ones, against fascism. Trotsky was just as critical of the Popular Front strategy as he was of the preceding ultra-leftism and he developed this criticism in relation to events in France, with the formation of a Popular Front Government in 1936 under Leon Bloom, and in Spain, with the election, also in 1936, of a Popular Front Government met by Franco's attempted fascist coup, the uprising of the Spanish working class (above all in Barcelona), and the three-year-long civil war. For Trotsky, the Popular Front represented a 'betrayal of the proletariat for the sake of an alliance with the bourgeoisie'.<sup>28</sup> It not only sabotaged the developing French and Spanish Revolutions but was also completely ineffective as a method of combating fascism. This was because the defeat of fascism required, as he had argued in relation to Germany, the united mobilisation of the working class, but this would be completely blocked and undermined by an alliance with outright bourgeois parties and forces, i.e. political formations inherently opposed to working-class action.

The theoreticians of the Popular Front do not essentially go beyond the first rule of arithmetic, that is, addition: 'Communists' plus Socialists plus Anarchists plus liberals add up to a total which is greater than their respective isolated numbers. Such is all their wisdom. However, arithmetic alone does not suffice here. One needs as well at least mechanics. The law of the parallelogram of forces applies to politics as well. In such a parallelogram, we know that the resultant is shorter, the more component

forces diverge from each other. When political allies tend to pull in opposite directions, the resultant prove equal to zero. A bloc of divergent political groups of the working class is sometimes completely indispensable for the solution of common practical problems. In certain historical circumstances, such a bloc is capable of attracting the oppressed petty-bourgeois masses whose interests are close to the interests of the proletariat. The joint force of such a bloc can prove far stronger than the sum of the forces of each of its component parts. On the contrary, the political alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, whose interests on basic questions in the present epoch diverge at an angle of 180 degrees, as a general rule is capable only of paralyzing the revolutionary force of the proletariat.

Civil war, in which the force of naked coercion is hardly effective, demands of its participants the spirit of supreme self-abnegation. The workers and peasants can assure victory only if they wage a struggle for their own emancipation. Under these conditions, to subordinate the proletariat to the leadership of the bourgeoisie means beforehand to assure defeat in the civil war.<sup>29</sup>

Once again the course of events, most tragically in Spain, was to confirm the accuracy of Trotsky's analysis and warnings. Since 1945 there has been, thankfully, no historical experience of fascism comparable to that between the wars and no theoretical contribution on the subject comparable in importance to Trotsky's. There has been a major debate on the nature and causation of the Holocaust to which many Marxists,<sup>30</sup> including a number from the International Socialist traditional, have contributed, but I am treating that as outside the scope of this article. There have also been a series of contributions which are essentially defences, applications, or developments of Trotsky's approach.<sup>31</sup> Again, I am not going to survey this literature here. However, there are two significant changes that have occurred since the struggle in the 1930s which have strategic



implications for the fight against fascism and which I want to flag up here.

### **The United Front today**

The first concerns the nature of the united front. The united front as advocated by Trotsky in the 1930s and previously by the Comintern in 1922 (including, very strongly, by Trotsky<sup>32</sup>) was essentially an agreement to form a common front between the two main political forces in the international working-class movement, the Social Democrats and the Communists. What Trotsky argued was that the leaderships of the communist parties should approach the leaderships of the social democratic parties with a view to reaching a concrete agreement for anti-fascist resistance. If such an alliance was established it would, he believed (and with good reason), mobilise millions of workers behind it. But neither in Ireland nor in most countries today is a replica of such a united workers' front an objective possibility. On the one hand the Social Democratic or Labour parties are nowhere near the social force they were in the 1920s or '30s, either in terms of roots in the organised working class or as physical organisations. (The SPD, for example, had significant combat groups for street fighting.) The communist parties, on the other hand, barely exist. It has been necessary, therefore, to find another route to establishing the required united front.

A useful model in this regard is provided by the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) formed in 1977 to combat the rise of the neo-Nazi National Front (NF) in the UK.<sup>33</sup> The ANL was launched by the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in alliance, not with the Labour Party as a whole, but with individual left Labour MPs (such as Neil Kinnock and Peter Hain), some trade union groups and officials (e.g. Ernie Roberts of the AEU), and various sporting figures and celebrities (Jack Charlton and Brian Clough). It worked closely with the musical movement Rock Against Racism, also launched by SWP members (David Widgery, Red Saunders, and Roger Huddle) and which was supported by many leading bands of the day such as The Clash, Steel Pulse, and the Tom Robinson Band. It operated, very successfully, through a combination of large street mobilisations against NF rallies and meetings, big music carnivals attracting

up to 100,000 people, and mass leafleting campaigns when the NF stood in elections. This three-pronged approach played a major part in the political defeat and marginalisation of the NF. The ANL was then revived in the eighties to counter the rising British National Party of Nick Griffin and again met with considerable success. The fact that forty years on, Britain has not seen the emergence of a large fascist organisation, comparable to that which exists in many countries, is due, in no small measure, to the campaigning of those years. This experience stands in stark contrast to France where the far-left failed to campaign actively against the Front National, which before long became too large to be dealt with in this way. Circumstances differ in different countries and at different times, but the united front as an alliance driven by revolutionaries in conjunction with some reformists and progressive figures from civil society accompanied by mass grassroots mobilisations still seems the way to go in most cases in order to counter rising far-right movements. The key is to find the organisational form that best facilitates the active mobilisation of the maximum possible numbers on the ground.

### **The Far Right today**

The second issue I want to raise is more complex and analytical in that it concerns the debate on the nature of the far-right parties, movements, and governments that we are currently facing. They are large in number and very varied in character, ranging from the very evidently neo-Nazi such as Golden Dawn in Greece or Jobbik in Hungary to the much milder UKIP in Britain, with many others somewhere in between such as Trump and his assorted followers, the Modi Government in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Victor Orban and Fidesz in Hungary, AfD in Germany, the Lega in Italy, the Swedish Democrats, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly Front National), and our Irish rag bag of Yellow Vests, Irish Freedom Party, and National Party. Some on the left deal with this problem by simply labelling all these varied right-wing forces fascist, especially if they in any way engage in racist messaging (which is effectively all of them), and some even include under the fascist label mainstream right wingers like Thatcher, Johnson, or Leo Varadkar. This is very unhelpful in that it deprives the category of fascist of any specificity and obliterates

the important distinction between those politicians and parties that operate within the framework of bourgeois democracy and those prepared to move beyond it. It has the same flaw, on a lesser scale, as the Stalinist theory of social fascism in that it breeds a baleful complacency. To put it in concrete Irish terms, if Leo Varadkar and Fine Gael are fascist, why worry about the much smaller National Party.

For those basing themselves on Trotsky's analysis, the key distinction was between, on the one hand, far-right, or racist populist or conservative nationalist parties which nevertheless remained within the limits of bourgeois parliamentary democracy in that they accepted election results and did not engage in street fighting and were therefore *not* fascist (UKIP in Britain being an obvious example), and on the other hand, parties that a) came from a clearly fascist or Nazi heritage; b) were run by an inner core that subscribed to some version of Nazi ideology, e.g. the Jewish conspiracy theory; and/or c) possessed a combat or proto-paramilitary wing which were therefore judged to be definitely fascist. What was crucial about this distinction was that it was presumed that if the latter came to power they would, like Hitler, move against parliamentary democracy and establish a dictatorship and, simultaneously, smash up labour movement organisations including the trade unions.

But this distinction, real and necessary as it is, does not exhaust the matter. What the last twenty years or so has thrown up is parties and forces that seem to vacillate or hover between these two categories and possess some characteristics of each of them. Donald Trump is a case in point. Trump came to power in 2016 from outside the traditional centre of US politics but nevertheless through the vehicle of the mainstream Republican Party and without an independent street fighting force. For this reason, those of us basing ourselves on Trotsky rejected the idea that Trump was fascist.<sup>34</sup> Others, notably Cornel West, Judith Butler, and John Bellamy Foster of *Monthly Review*, disagreed.<sup>35</sup> Foster cites Trump as an instance of a wider phenomenon which he calls 'neo-fascism' writing of:

movements in the 'fascist genus' (fascism/ neofascism/post-fascism), characterized

by virulently xenophobic, ultra-nationalist tendencies, rooted primarily in the lower-middle class and relatively privileged sections of the working class, in alliance with monopolistic capital. This can be seen in the National Front in France, the Northern League in Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the UK Independence Party, the Sweden Democrats, and similar parties and movements in other advanced capitalist countries.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Lowy also deploys the concept of neo-fascism in a similar way but makes clear the difference between neo-fascism and the fascism of the past.

One of the most disturbing phenomena of recent years is the spectacular rise, worldwide, of far right-wing, authoritarian and reactionary governments, in some cases with neo-fascist traits: Shinzo Abe (Japan), Modi (India), Trump (USA), Orban (Hungary) and Bolsonaro (Brazil) are the best known examples...

Neofascism is not a repetition of fascism in the 1930s: it is a new phenomenon, with characteristics of the 21st century. For example, it does not take the form of a police dictatorship, but respects some democratic forms: elections, party pluralism, freedom of the press, existence of a Parliament, etc. Naturally, it tries, as far as possible, to limit these democratic freedoms as much as it is able with authoritarian and repressive measures. Nor does it rely on armed shock troops, such as the German SS or the Italian Fascists.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein has been the use of the term 'creeping fascism' to describe virtually all the movements and governments of the racist right, including that of Donald Trump. This has been developed in book form, particularly in relation to Britain, by Neil Faulkner and others in *Creeping Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It*.<sup>38</sup>

This issue of which organisations and governments should be named as fascist and where the borderline exists, if at all, between far-right or right-wing populists, etc. and actual fascists requires major discussion, including a concrete analysis of parties such the Front National/National Rally and the Italian Lega and governments such as Bolsonaro's that is not possible here. However, I do not find the concept of neo-fascism, still less that of 'creeping fascism', convincing. What they both do is blur what seems to me the very important distinction, a matter of life and death, between regimes which annihilate and crush both parliamentary democracy and the organisations of the labour movement and regimes which do not. But in asserting that this distinction is vital we should not fall into the opposite trap of considering the character of parties and regimes to be fixed and immutable. The phrase 'The leopard does not change its spots' is not helpful here. Political leopards change their spots all the time, as the history of Social Democratic and Communist parties shows. Parties and leaders can move in different directions, moderating and/or radicalising. The Swedish Democrats had their origins in Swedish fascism; this in itself does not mean they still are fascist. Oswald Mosley began as a mainstream politician, including serving as a minister in the Labour government of 1929-31, and then became a full on fascist. Donald Trump did not run for president on a fascist basis, and his administration, for all its racist, sexist, and authoritarian awfulness, was not fascist in that it did not, for example, abolish congress, halt elections, or dismantle the trade union movement. Nevertheless, there was a moment in late 2020 after his electoral defeat when it looked as if he might try to move in an outright fascist direction. In the event, he did not, especially after the debacle of the 6 January incursion, and he remained with the framework of the Republican right. But, again, that could change in the future.

This is why there needs to be concrete analysis. At the same time, concrete analysis requires a theoretical foundation, and, I would argue, the theory developed by Trotsky in the 1930s remains the best starting point for such contemporary work.

## NOTES

- 1 Marx, K. 'The Civil War in France', Peking 1966, p 66, available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>
- 2 Bordiga was one of those against whom Lenin polemicised in *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.
- 3 Trotsky commented later: 'Italian comrades inform me that, with the sole exception of Gramsci, the Communist Party would not even allow for the possibility of the fascists' seizing power'. See: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1944/1944-fas.htm#p2>
- 4 See Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Political Writings*, 1921-26, London 1978, for example pp 44-6, 59-61, 63-6.
- 5 At the Lyons Congress of the PCI in 1926 Gramsci advanced a strong critique of Bordiga's line and that of the PCI, holding them responsible for facilitating Mussolini's victory. See above p 331.
- 6 Recently published as Zetkin, C., *Fighting Fascism: How to struggle and how to win*, M. Taber and J. Riddell (eds), Chicago, 2017.
- 7 As above, p 23.
- 8 As above, pp 27-8
- 9 As above, p 24.
- 10 As above, p 31.
- 11 As above, p 34.
- 12 As above, p 64.
- 13 As above, pp 64-5.
- 14 As above, p 65.
- 15 As above, p 90.
- 16 Stalin, J., 'Concerning the International Situation', available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/09/20.htm>
- 17 Trotsky, L., *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, Harmondsworth, 1971.
- 18 Trotsky, L., *The Third International After Lenin*, New York, 1970.
- 19 The major defeats suffered by the working class in the British General Strike of 1926 and the Chinese Revolution of 1925-7 precluded the

possibility of 1928 marking the start of a general working-class offensive.

20 Trotsky, L., *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, p 89.

21 As above, p 98.

22 As above, p 109.

23 As above, p 125.

24 The echo of this today in the way the Far Right obsesses about the influence of George Soros is clear.

25 As above, pp 408-13.

26 As above, p 114.

27 As above, pp 124-5.

28 Trotsky, L., *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, New York, 1973, p 209.

29 As above, pp 308-9.

30 Probably the best known Marxist contribution is Traverso, E., *Understanding the Nazi Genocide: Marxism after Auschwitz*, Pluto Press, 1999. For a useful survey of the field and a statement of his own views, see Callinicos, A., 'Plumbing the Depths: Marxism and the Holocaust', 2001, available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/callinicos/2001/xx/plumbing.htm>

31 These include: Mandel, E., 'The rise of fascism and the united front', 1987. <https://www.iire.org> ;

Mandel, E., 'Introduction to Leon Trotsky', in *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany*, as above; Sparks, C., *Never Again! The Hows and Whys of Stopping Fascism*, London, 1980; Gluckstein, D., *The Nazis, Capitalism and the Working Class*, Bookmarks, 1999 and Haymarket, 2012; Callinicos, A., 'Neo-liberalism implodes: global catastrophe and the far right today', *International Socialism*, 170, available online from: <http://isj.org.uk/implodes-catastrophe/>

32 See Trotsky, L., 'On the United Front', *The first Five years of the Communist International*, Vol 2, London 1974, available online from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/08.htm>

33 The National Front did not openly declare itself to be a Nazi party but compared to many more recent formations its Nazi character was very evident both in terms of its leaders (John Tyndal, Martin Webster), immediate history, and in terms of its mobilisations with marches of sieg heiling skinheads.

34 See for example, Molyneux, J., 'What is Fascism?', *Irish Socialist Worker*, June 2016, available online from: <http://johnmolyneux.blogspot.com/2016/06/>

35 See for example Foster, J.B., 'This is not Populism', available online from: <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/06/01/this-is-not-populism/>

36 As above.

37 Lowy, M., 'Gripenzinha-the little flu-neofascist Bolsonaro in the face of the pandemic', available online from: <http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/2020/05/21/gripenzinha-the-little-flu-neofascist-bolsonaro-in-the-face-of-the-pandemic/>. See also Lowy, M., 'Ten Theses on the Far Right in Europe', available online from: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1683-ten-theses-on-the-far-right-in-europe-by-michael-lowy>

38 Faulkner, N., Dathi, S., Hearse P., and Syeda, S., Public Reading Rooms, 2019.

