

Strange Bedfellows?

An anti-fascist talk for Bakunin's birthday

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Think back to the Great Depression and World War II and envision the odd alliances that developed around the world in the face of capitalist crisis and rising fascism: the Hitler-Stalin pact, for instance, or syndicalist support for Mussolini. Or, imagine militant anti-fascists in the underground resistance (often dominated by Stalinists) building ties with US and British military forces. Radicals in North America split between those who encouraged enrollment in the fight against fascism and those who did time in prison for refusing the draft. Think of the strange permutations of Peronism in Argentina, the “green” and “left” wings of the Nazi Party, the failure of the European left in the face of Italian occupation in Ethiopia, or the twists and turns of East Asian resistance to Japanese occupation.

Some of these alliances are now scoffed at by anarchists and revolutionary anti-fascists. But others are not so easily dismissed. Would you have enlisted in the Army against the Nazis? Would you have participated in the French or Dutch or Italian resistance, knowing that most support was coming from either the Soviet Union or the United States? Would you have encouraged draft resistance in the US or Canada during World War II? I don't have clear answers to these questions; in fact, I think anyone who answers too quickly probably hasn't thought them through.

As hard as it is to answer such questions though, we'd better start trying because chances are we'll soon be facing similar decisions ourselves, in a new and different context. The world is changing more dramatically right now than it has at any time in the past half-century, and it seems the old contrast between “Socialism or Barbarism” is as plausible now as it has ever been before. A careful assessment of global transformations—from Seattle, Quebec, and Genoa to September 11, Iraq, Syria, Philippines, and Colombia—is essential to efforts to create a liberatory movement, a revolutionary moment, and a free society. Much of the discussion that follows is indebted to the book *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement*, by Don Hamerquist, J. Sakai, et al. which came out of a series of discussions among anarchists and revolutionary anti-fascists around North America over the past several years.

Fascism is built on a dialectic of backwards and forwards, of nostalgia and progress. These two are always in tension, but the tension is productive in a way that makes fascism far more dangerous than most of us are willing to admit. To see only the regressive aspects can make us blind to the truly modern-appeal of fascism, while seeing only the progressive elements can make fascism seem indistinguishable from capitalism and the state as we know them today.

While white supremacy has historically been the hallmark of major fascist groupings, this has not always been the case. And in any event racial purity has almost always been a secondary element in fascist ideology, conditioned by and dependent upon hypertrophied patriarchy. Social and cultural totalitarianism, beginning with total male supremacy in the home and in society, is the essential component unifying the various competing strands of fascism around the world.

But over this ideological core, fascists have adopted a bewildering range of political positions, some of which are frighteningly close to popular left stances on many issues. We have already seen fascist infiltration in the anti-capitalist/globalization movement, as well as widespread (but by no means universal) support among fascists for the September 11 attacks. Because we as anti-fascists tend to treat all fascists as brainless thugs, these maneuvers can seem confusing or downright incomprehensible. Yet, for this very reason, it is imperative that we figure out what is going on here.

Perhaps the most easily understood example of this leftward tilting fascism is the support of groups like the National Alliance (NA) for Palestinian liberation. (See, for instance, the cover of *Confronting Fascism*, which features seig-heiling skinheads in Washington, DC last spring denouncing Israel and supporting Palestine). Certainly, much of this “support” is opportunistic posturing and the anti-semitic equivalent of popular front strategy, but just as certainly, there is at least a core of ideologues who sincerely support the sort of racial separatism advocated at the NA’s DC rallies last year.

More significantly, there is a good possibility that the NA’s position will resonate, not only with overt white supremacists, but also with white “liberals” who have been rightly appalled by Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and even by elements of the Palestinian movement (whether Islamist or otherwise) that have incorporated some notion of racial, ethnic, or religious purity into their analysis. In each case, the majority of these groupings have no analysis, much less any practice, that would lead them to challenge the patriarchal moorings of such an alliance.

But can we generalize from the experience of a few hundred anti-semites? It is possible that the NA rallies represent nothing more than the old-school of North American fascism, but even then people like J. Sakai, co-author of *Confronting Fascism* and a long-time revolutionary organizer and writer, will argue that the old school is more sophisticated than most anti-fascists give it credit for. Or, we might consider Billy Roper (organizer of the DC rallies, but subsequently forced out of the NA) and his cohorts to be the bridge between an old fascism and a new one, built on progress and nostalgia in the 21st century, not the 20th.

Don Hamerquist, co-author of *Confronting Fascism* and a seasoned anti-fascist militant, argues (especially on pages 43 to 45) that the true danger of a new fascism lies in its adaptability to the reality of capitalist crisis in the new millennium. Fascism, like the left, is a product of capitalism and its long history of development and crisis. In the coming years, the development of global capital may create a crisis for white supremacy, if it is seen as a hindrance to profit rather than as its prerequisite. For an early example, consider the overwhelming support of Fortune 500 companies for affirmative action policies at elite universities in the US (especially in the University of Michigan cases currently before the US Supreme Court). This transition is likely to happen even more quickly if the current economic downturn continues to expand globally. Fascism’s progressivist moment welcomes both the development and the crisis (while much of the left refuses even to acknowledge the possibility that white supremacy could be discarded by capitalism), but its nostalgic moment longs to preserve the privileges of white skin.

One increasingly likely outcome here is a defense of purity and separatism, rather than supremacy as such. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, and replace Hitler with Bin Laden or Che on your mastheads and websites. As these mutations mature, it will be worth reconsidering whether “fascism” is an appropriate categorization, but the term retains value at this point, if only for reasons of historical context and framing. Regardless, the kernel of truth in what liberals in the US have opportunistically called “left-right convergence” will likely confront us more and more frequently in the coming years.

Most anarchists and other leftists flatly refuse to consider this as a real possibility. But for those of us who decline to underestimate our enemy, a different question presents itself: If fascism can become revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, ecologically-minded, and so on (and does anyone deny any one of these possibilities, considered individually?), is it really so bad? For the Stalinists out there, perhaps not; think of the National Bolshevik Tendency and its “Red-Brown Alliance”. But for anarchism, revolutionary feminism, radical queers, and other liberatory elements inside anti-fascism, the answer remains, “hell yes!” and the reason, while not necessarily obvious, is relatively simple.

Our vision of a free society and of the movement that can help bring it into being involves social (including sexual) experimentation, clashes and mixtures of cultures and traditions, creative efforts and music and art of various origin, reproductive freedom, a diversity of backgrounds and interests, cooperation amongst strangers, freedom of movement, and what gets called globalization from below. In short, a revolutionary and liberatory culture is at

the heart of our best efforts. We aren't necessarily hedonists (though some of us are), but we are most certainly not puritans. For this basic reason, no permutation of fascism can possibly become our ally in the revolutionary moment we all hope and struggle for.

At the same time, it is equally important to recognize the corresponding issues that make capitalism (which remains, at this point, the most likely alternative to fascism) "really so bad." In this context, the current situation in the US in particular should not be misunderstood. There has been much debate over the true cause and basis of the Iraq war and the war on terror, none of it conclusive. But it is important to remember that the interests of capitalism, and the potentially independent interests of various capitalist states, are opposed not only to our interests but also to those of the fascists. In the States, domestic fascists have suffered far more severe state repression in recent years than any section of the non-Arab left.

In a parallel vein, the arena of nationalism and nations presents similar confusions, partly because nationalisms vary widely in their self-perception. Some are built around rigid biological notions of the nation as a heritable essence, which can be diluted or perverted if not defended properly. This is very similar to the hypertrophied patriarchy identified earlier as the essence of fascism, and Nazi Germany is obviously the pinnacle of such thinking, but examples abound across the world, including the third world. Other nationalisms are deliberately articulated around cultural elements, like music, food, or language, that can be learned or adopted by anyone, regardless of bloodline. These groupings may still contain within themselves a latent fascist potentiality (despite official pronouncements to the contrary), especially those that emphasize compulsory roles for women and children in defending the purity of the nation's cultural heritage. In many cases the most that can be hoped for is the recognition of this possibility, and the prioritization of struggle against it. But some number of nationalisms, perhaps few, far between, and depressingly small in size, will stand with revolutionary anti-fascism and incorporate it into their organizing.

And that's the key, in the end: to be successful anti-fascists means being revolutionary anti-fascists, and to be revolutionary anti-fascists means being steadfast advocates and practitioners of freedom, creativity, cooperation, resistance, and diversity. There is no guarantee of a free society, but there are many requirements for its creation. A radically liberatory culture is one such necessity.

In Chicago, to give a concrete example, Anti-Racist Action has developed a solid working relationship with a relatively small Palestine solidarity organization called Al-Awda Chicago, the local affiliate of the (US) national organization for the right of return for Palestinians. ARA helped coordinate security at a major right of return demonstration in Chicago last fall, sponsored by Al-Awda Chicago and attended by several thousand people. Members of Al-Awda Chicago have helped organize for several ARA efforts as well, including the protests against the NA rally in DC last August. Several members of Al-Awda Chicago identify as fervent anti-nationalists, and the organization is committed to the creation of a free, democratic, and pluralistic Palestine, a vision that puts its membership squarely at odds with even the most anti-imperialist fascists, be they members of the National Alliance or of Hamas.

ARA has also attempted (with mixed success) to build ties in the Mexican and Polish communities, especially in youth and subcultural scenes like punk and hip-hop (yes, there is Polish hip-hop). Most ARA leaflets are tri-lingual, including English, Polish, and Spanish versions. ARA has also attempted to maintain connections with various groupings of radical queers, activist artists, and politicized sports fans. Its reputation for getting in fights with nazis notwithstanding, the bulk of ARA's work in Chicago the past few years has been cultural. This is a good thing (though there's nothing wrong with bashing the fash either). Of course, the question remains, how successful can this anti-fascist cultural work be in fighting forms of fascism that thrive in very different classes and subcultures than those the anti-fascists live in?

One hundred eighty nine years ago today, Mikhail Bakunin was born. Late in his life he offered this metaphorical explanation of what we as anarchists oppose:

"The State, as I have said, is basically a vast cemetery, wherein every manifestation of individual and local life, every interest of those parties who together constitute society, is sacrificed, dies, and is buried" ("Open Letter to Swiss Comrades of the International" (1869) in *The Basic Bakunin*, ed. Robert M. Cutler.

The question of the best way to oppose and overthrow that cemetery, in either its capitalist or fascist versions, is one that should occupy the attentions of anarchists and revolutionary anti-fascists everywhere.

Related: see letter exchange, "Defining and Debating Fascism," FE #363, Winter 2003/2004.

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