

Defining and Debating Fascism

An exchange

Michael Staudenmaier
Pedrito Peligro

2003

FE note: Although we generally dislike back and forths in our letters column, we thought the issues raised by our two comrades below are worthy of continuing the discussion raised about combating fascism begun in our Summer 2003 edition (see “Strange Bedfellows?”) and then commented upon in the letters section of the subsequent issue. We welcome readers’ thoughts as well.

Dear Comrades:

Pedrito Peligro takes issue with my article on anti-fascism in the Summer 2003 FE, going so far as to claim that I “completely misunderstand fascism.”

Without knowing Peligro any better than he knows me (which is to say, not at all), I suppose I could make the counterclaim with the same level of assurance (which is to say, none). Respectfully, however, I don’t think the issue here is one of misunderstanding on either of our parts, but rather one of disagreement.

Peligro’s letter holds to one of the classic socialist lines on fascism—that it represents the last resort of capital in the face of left insurgency, while my article adheres to a competing line—that fascism constitutes an independent and potentially revolutionary threat to capital as well as to the revolutionary left. The complicated historical record and the lack of a common definition of fascism make this a dispute unlikely to be resolved any time soon. The best I can do here is to clarify my own position as it relates to actual social struggles currently going on in North America.

I did not intend to “uncritically” approach anti-fascism as it stands currently in North America. Indeed, one major purpose of the article was to draw anti-fascist militants away from an exclusively physical struggle and toward an understanding of revolution that includes military, cultural, and ideological elements. This entails the explicit rejection of parliamentary, bourgeois, and reformist options for anti-fascism. Some of the people who respond positively to this message will undoubtedly identify more with Maoism (or Trotskyism, or revolutionary nationalism, or indigenism, or...) than they will with anarchism. The question then is whether or not they embrace the liberatory culture at the center of revolutionary anti-fascism. If so, they are, at least temporarily, comrades in the simultaneous struggle against capitalism and fascism.

On the other hand, the question of fascism’s appeal is no longer (if ever it was) as simple as Peligro’s optimistic assertion that “communities under assault, often aided by those committed to social justice and revolutionary transformation, will fight fascists whenever and however necessary.” Another central aim of the article was to point to the need for a new understanding of fascism, one that recognizes its increasing ability to appeal precisely to communities under assault, whether in Palestine, Venezuela, or Detroit. Fascists are more and more interested in appearing to be anti-imperialist, opposed to ecological devastation, revolutionary, and even anti-capitalist. Not all these appearances are deceiving. Consider the Klan rally in Georgia in September where a klansman was applauded heartily by hundred or more black congregants who had made common cause with the Klan over local church-state

issues. Here again, the promise of a libratory culture is one of the most important weapons anarchists and our comrades have in the struggle to win communities away from both capitalism and fascism.

Beyond arcane historical and philosophical considerations, questions of fascism and anti-fascism in our era will be decided in struggle. While we may disagree on many things, I sincerely hope that Peligro and I end up on the same side of the barricades.

Michael Staudenmaier
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Pedrito Peligro responds: Michael Staudenmaier's letter above seems only to confirm my contention that he lacks a solid definition of fascism and what steps should be taken to combat it.

I charged that Staudenmaier advocated a 1930s-style Stalinist Popular Front and he replies by saying that some of the people who will "respond positively to this message [of anti-fascism] will undoubtedly identify more with Maoism (or Trotskyism, or revolutionary nationalism...)" as if to prove rather than dispute the charge. And worse, this leftist flotsam will be "temporarily, comrades."

And, just what exactly is "revolutionary nationalism," or for that matter, "revolutionary anti-fascism?" These are sterile leftist phrases masking authoritarian concepts by utilizing a positive adjective to disguise the authentic nature of the noun. Take away the modifier and Staudenmaier is left as uncritical of nationalism (if it's a militant or Third World variety) and anti-fascism even if the movements are larded with the worst authoritarian leftists.

He says he wants to take the anti-fascist movement away from "physical struggle," but ends by talking about "barricades." It's exactly this macho posturing that is part of what anti-fascist ideologues refuse to confront. Left wing tough guys confronting right wing tough guys. Further, he makes no mention of his uncritical citing in his original article of Maoist anti-fascist theoreticians, J. Sakai and Don Hamerquist; are they the "revolutionary anti-fascists" he speaks about?

I may have put forth "the classic socialist lines on fascism," but does Staudenmaier deny the practical function of fascism was exactly what was said by people like Daniel Guerin in his 1936 *Fascism and Big Business* or by Soviet bureaucrat-in-exile, Leon Trotsky in his 1931 pamphlet, "Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It?" Both described fascism as a mass mobilization of the middle-class, and sections of the working class and poor, to defend capitalist property forms. If that's not what they intended, it's odd that's what they accomplished.

Staudenmaier's point about "the need for a new understanding of fascism," misses a lot of what has come before him when considering right wing political phenomena. Rather than being new, fascism has always presented itself on the mass political front in exactly the terms he has apparently just discovered.

Perhaps a good starting point for him would be his brother Peter's book, *Fascist Ideology: The Green Wing of the Nazi Party and Its Historical Antecedents*, where he details fascist criticism of technology, big business, their support for ecology and expression of a longing for a return to a more nature-centered life. Many Nazis advocated this in the 1920s and early '30s, while sympathetic philosophers like Heidegger and Junger similarly expressed a revulsion toward modern life in terms that most anti-technology anarchists today would feel completely comfortable with.

Also, employing anti-capitalist rhetoric to mask its actual intent is nothing new for fascism—remember the National Socialist Party? In fact, the origins of fascist philosophy, with the image of the fascine, a bundle of sticks bound together, recognized the rapacious nature of capitalism. It proposed that class strife be mitigated under the aegis of a powerful, centralized state to stop the ruthless

exploitation of the workers by capitalists while at the same time protecting owners from being expropriated by revolutionary workers who demanded an end to capitalist property forms. Classes were to be vertically incorporated into the state's grandeur, led by a supreme ruler, and marked by an expansionist militarism.

However, its philosophy aside, in practice, while submerging corporations and banks to the needs of the state, fascism functioned to defend capital against an energized working class and peasantry.

But the latter aspect couldn't be retailed to a desperate citizenry, so most of fascism's direct appeal has been to the psychopathology of its recruits. Even the dreadful Trotsky spoke of the "crazed hordes of the petit bourgeoisie." Marx predicted that the middle-class, ruined by capitalist crisis and a falling rate of profit, would collapse into the proletariat and become its ally as the antithesis to capital in the final battle to establish socialism.

Knowing little about the human psyche, the grouchy old German failed to recognize the deep hold personality traits, rooted in class, caste and patriarchy, held over the ruined class of shopkeepers. Instead, they became cannon fodder for insane regimes established in Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and elsewhere to protect the lords of land and capital from worker revolts.

This psychopathology of the right and its ability to manipulate symbols deeply imbedded in repressive capitalist culture is well chronicled in Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, and perhaps, most frighteningly, in Klaus Theweleit's two volume, *Male Fantasies*, where the authors delve into the character structure of those twisted personalities which inhabit fascist movements.

Actually, it is Staudenmaier who comes closest to what he calls "classic socialist lines on fascism." It was the authoritarian, counter-revolutionary Bolshevik, Trotsky, who called for armed contingents to physically confront the street militias fielded by the fascists in many European cities during the 1920s and 30s. This may have made sense during that period, but we are not at a point where physical confrontation seems to be very viable and although Staudenmaier says he wants to move away from confrontations "exclusively," he mentions nothing else.

He never says why he thinks the threat of fascism rises to the level of the need for a specific movement, particularly one where anarchists have to have alliances with authoritarian leftists who have always betrayed or even murdered our comrades. To Staudenmaier, an ideology of anti-fascism and a corresponding movement is simply a given, neither of which necessitates a critical look.

Staudenmaier's confusion continues to the end of his response, still counterposing capitalism (the system) to fascism (one of its forms of rule). Violent fascists and racists exist, we know that, but they have little chance, particularly in the short run, of overcoming the neo-liberal ideology that opposes their disruptive beliefs and tactics. Besides, in many ways, we already have, in the current US government regime, the classic fascist state complete with trappings Reich would immediately recognize. These pathetic losers, the fascists! called "freebooters," don't have a chance to realize their aspirations. Our fight is still against the capitalist state.

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