

The Fascistisation of the Greek State

New Left Project, 20/09/2013

The recent murder of the Greek anti-fascist Pavlos Fyssas by neo-nazis exposes an insidious transformation undergone by the Greek state in the epoch of austerity. Imagine a class where a ten-year-old racially abuses a fellow student. If the teacher takes no steps to stop the abuse, but allows the first student to continue unhindered – perhaps he's too bored to interfere, or half-agrees with the abuse – then he is a fascist by omission. Suppose that the first student persists in his racist tirades, and initiates a set of intimidation tactics against the other student. The teacher's inaction gets worse, to the point of beginning to look like positive fascist agency. At this stage a third student intervenes and attempts to curb the racist attacks of the first student. Now the teacher punishes the third student and threatens him with expulsion from school. The teacher is no longer a fascist by omission. He's a fascist *period*.

Over the past few months the Greek state has engaged in behaviour far more troubling than that of the teacher. The first stage began to unravel from mid-2012, when Greek society first confronted the ascending party apparatus of Golden Dawn – Europe's most successful neo-nazi organisation. Although Golden Dawn unambiguously qualifies as a gang by the lights of the Greek criminal code, its institutional manifestations and its leading members have never been legally challenged by state prosecutors. One striking upshot of this systemic omission by the Greek justice system received broad coverage in October 2012, when the police failed to protect the play *Corpus Christi* from a

mob of fascists and fundamentalist Christians preventing its performance. The second stage of fascism by omission took hold with the rejection by the Greek government of a proposed anti-racist bill in June 2013, in part due to the flirtation of leading members of cabinet with voters of Golden Dawn. The next stage, that of fascism *period*, is now with us through the concerted efforts of Greek justice officials to criminalise anti-fascist activism. These efforts have been consecrated in recent state prosecutions against writer Savvas Michael for 'incitement to violence' and 'breach of the peace', and against hospital workers in the island of Samos, allegedly for preventing a 'Greeks-only' blood donation organised by Golden Dawn in hospital premises. In both cases the teacher clearly penalises the good student, and encourages the fascist. This makes the *teacher* a fascist. Indeed, the second prosecution is in a way more reprehensible, for it literally legitimises the use of public property for racist purposes.

Liberal souls might try to resist my conclusion. They will say that the state must protect hateful or racist speech, and that, when it does, citizens are more likely to discover important truths about themselves and the good life. The Greek state is therefore only guilty of overzealous persecution of anti-fascist militants. Neither racist speech, nor its anti-racist counterpart, should be criminalised. And yet even such high-flying souls must allow, on pain of absurdity, for situations where speech-related restrictions become permissible, indeed obligatory, because of the nature or severity of probable speech-induced harm to others. Do I *really* think the US state is fascist by omission, or otherwise, because its judges protect the racist speech of the KKK? I do not. But my claim would begin to sound eminently plausible if the KKK were allowed to obtain 6 percent of Congress seats (the percentage currently occupied by Golden Dawn in the Greek Parliament), nothing

was done to forestall the growing dissemination of its hateful practices, *and* its most vocal opponents were systematically undermined in their word and deed.

In his *Fascism and Dictatorship*, the sociologist Nicos Poulantzas provides what is, in my mind, a useful periodisation of the rise of fascism. He distinguishes between four periods: (1) the period from the rise of fascism to what he calls the 'point of no return', (2) the period from the point of no return to the point when fascism takes political power through the state, (3) the first period of fascism in power, (4) the period of the stabilisation of fascism. During the first period, fascism turns from its 'embryonic form' of armed bands to a mass party, and secures the support of big capital, while taking the offensive against workers and working-class organisations. In the second period, fascism manages to temporarily align the interests of the so-called 'petty-bourgeoisie' (roughly: those who can afford not to work as waged employees, but who cannot afford to hire others) with the interests of big capital, and takes over state power. In the third period it consolidates that power by reconstructing the state in the image of the petty-bourgeoisie, and in the fourth it fully embraces big capital.

I want to dwell a little on Poulantzas' first period, because that is arguably where we are now, at least in Greece (and perhaps in Hungary). A necessary condition for reaching the 'point of no return', i.e. the point beyond which a fascist rise to power is inevitable, is that fascists manage to secure the backing, or at least the partial support, of big capital. Such support is in no way preordained. A litmus test for obtaining it consists in the possession and exercise of an ability to resist, indeed repress, working class resistance to wage cuts, depressions, austerity, and the like. A thug needs to be tested before he

gets hired. This is, moreover, why fascists experience the infiltration of the state's coercive machinery as an existential necessity, well before they even have inklings of an ability to take power. In interwar Germany the Nazis gradually infiltrated the army and police, which permitted them both to 'neutralise divisions' within the coercive state apparatus itself, as Poulantzas put it, *and* furnished an extra instrument for suppressing working-class resistance in the midst of the Depression. The choreography of oppression towards the point of no return is quite elaborate.

Greece's recent experience with Golden Dawn therefore seems to vindicate the view that the historic mission of fascism consists in the forceful restoration of capitalist normality. The recent attacks against members of the Greek Communist Party attempting to put up strike posters further supports this view. If all this is sound, then fascism in Greece is at a more advanced stage than most pundits claim. Over 50 percent of Greek policemen are said to vote Golden Dawn, and there is considerable evidence of strong organisational ties between the latter and the police. Golden Dawn maintains links with the army, the most overtly oppressive state apparatus, and with the Church, which still wields considerable ideological influence in Greece. Those who think the fascist form of state has been safely relegated to the dustbin of history should think again.