

Europe's Black Comedy*

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At the end of his *Fascism and Dictatorship* the Marxist sociologist Nicos Poulantzas rehearses the famous Marxian dictum from the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (to the effect that 'all great world historic facts appear... twice... the first time as tragedy, the second as farce') by saying that there are such things as 'black comedies'. One of the things I want to try to do is gauge the conditions under which the world-historical play in which we are involved in Europe *today* can have a (not un-)happy ending.

To do this I will briefly go through four things. First, I will offer a rough-and-ready definition of fascism, which will help us get our bearings straight. I will then briefly discuss the causes and function of fascism, as it surfaces in the sociological and historical literature. I will then discuss the class and ideological constitution of historical fascist regimes. Finally, I will allude to the issue of the periodization of fascism and try to connect it with contemporary events. I will conclude with some remarks on the possibilities for a not-unhappy ending today.

The definition I shall offer is, as I said, rough, and is therefore bound to satisfy no one. It is even less likely to satisfy the historians among you, given the diverse historical and cultural backgrounds in which fascism has grown. (Note that the fact that a largely common social phenomenon has taken hold in backgrounds as diverse as interwar Germany, Italy, Japan, Greece and even pre-war Russia—the 'Black Hundreds' of 1905—shows that there is something non-specifically-western, or European, about fascism.) But it is necessary to try to define fascism, otherwise you won't know what I'm talking about. By 'fascism' I mean a form of social movement agitating for a racially pure national community of small-scale ownership through (para-)military means. Again, a lot can be said against this definition, but bear with me.

What about the causes of fascism? Imagine a country whose national income, over a period of three years has fallen by over 25 percent, its unemployment rate has reached 30 percent, it is running massive deficits in its balance of payments, and cannot make use of its fiscal policy because it is crippled by debt. Its workers are dubbed lazy and inefficient, and its industry ineffective and uncompetitive. Does this ring a bell? It is Germany in 1932. Let me note, however, that 1920s Germany experienced significant reforms in favour of its working classes: the Weimar Republic introduced collective

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bargaining, universal suffrage and unemployment insurance. This, in turn, meant that worker remuneration gradually rose, and the labour share in national income temporarily increased, whereas the capital share fell. (This is tantamount to a reduction in what Marxists call the rate of exploitation, but I'll try to avoid loaded terminology in this presentation.)

Similar things were true of Italy by the time the fascists came to power in 1922. The war had crippled the economy, which was massively in debt and struggling with hyperinflation. At the same time, the country's ruling classes were trying to consolidate an alliance between the landed property of the South and the rising bourgeoisie of the North. The working class in Italy-being more militant than its German counterpart-had, by 1921, got major concessions from capital: an 8-hour working day, universal suffrage, and collective bargaining, thereby also eating up capital's share in national income.

All this at a time of intensifying economic competition globally (which of course translated into political competition through colonialism and other forms of imperialism on the part of capitalist countries, but I won't dwell on this here). Intensifying global competition, under capitalism, means greater difficulty, and greater expediency, in securing profit. So clearly something had to give: you can't get both a normal sort of socioeconomic transition to intensifying global competition and an increasing, or even constant, labour share in national income. As long as capitalists own the bakery, you can't expect them to give up an ever increasing part of the cake: not doing so is a matter of *existential necessity* for them (and is experienced as such).

And something *did* give, namely democratic and workers' rights. This brings me to the historical mission of fascism, or, rather less pompously, its function. In this connection, I must admit that I know of no better treatment than that of Trotsky who, for all his other shortcomings, saw this function very clearly, very early on (the one other person who saw this is perhaps Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary):

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 lumpenproletarian; all the countless human beings whom finance capital has brought to desperation and frenzy. From fascism the bourgeoisie demands a thorough job... and the fascist agency, by utilizing the petty bourgeoisie as a battering ram... does a thorough job. (Trotsky 1971, p. 155)

This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it was written in 1932, but contains within it a lot that was to happen in the years to come in Nazi Germany. Second, it points out that the function of fascism proper is to get capitalism out of the quagmire it has thrown itself in, following war, or depression, or both. What follows from this is that in a period of severe crisis of profitability capital will not hesitate to

sacrifice every ounce of democratic legitimacy, and every brick of the liberal edifice in order to quench its unquenchable thirst for profit. This abrogation of liberal-democratic norms is precisely the historical mission of fascism.

Now, it does not follow from what Trotsky says that fascism is a *mere instrument* of big capital. This is the so-called 'instrumentalist' view embraced by the Comintern in the 1920s, and which does not seem to be borne out by what we know about fascism today. It is true that there is more than a whiff of instrumentalism in Trotsky's writings, but he perceptively noticed, along with Gramsci, that fascism is constituted not by big capital, but rather by petty-bourgeois elements. So his instrumentalism, if any, was much more nuanced than the Comintern's.

This brings me to the question of the class constitution of fascism. There is overwhelming evidence that fascist movements get their leaders, their main cadres, and most of their electoral support from the so-called petty-bourgeoisie. This is a category that comprises, roughly, those and only those people who do not strictly need to work as wage-labourers, i.e. do not need to sell their labour power to live (either because they are small-scale owners themselves, or because they have some skills that permit them to be, say, self-employed), and who cannot hire the labour-power of another. This category therefore comprises small-scale shop owners, medium peasants, mid-level managers and civil servants (not excluding teachers and university professors) and the like. When under threat of unemployment, or bankruptcy, this class becomes fascism's 'battering ram' against the workers, in the process gradually destroying itself.

The vast majority of high-ranking members of the NSDAP in Germany came from either white-collar, or from small-scale commercial, or from teacher and civil-administration-related backgrounds. (In Greece today, most recruits of Golden Dawn come from such (second-generation) backgrounds, often among the young and unemployed.)

Having said something about class constitution, let me also say something about the ideological constitution of fascism. On this a great deal has been written, with some authors stressing the psychopathology of fascist attitudes (I think a very prominent theory of fascism in the 1970s was the idea of fascism as a model of male fantasy, a sort of patriarchy gone mad), and others the links with 'feudal socialism', the sort of parochial and racist anti-capitalism that flourished among peasants in the 19th century. Although very often fascists do not present themselves as anti-capitalists tout court, but rather opposed to 'predatory' capital, or 'usury', they are not always hypocrites. And it is a great mistake for the Left to believe that it has an ideological monopoly on anti-capitalism, *even if fascist anti-capitalism necessarily leads to capitalism* (which could, conceivably, be true of left-anticapitalism as well). The reason why left-anticapitalism is different from right-anticapitalism is that the former is, unlike the latter, necessarily opposed to all forms of exploitation and domination. This is a moral commitment, and Leftists are sometimes not sufficiently forthright, if not dismissive, of their *actual* moral commitments.

The final thing I want to briefly mention might help us put some things into perspective, especially in light of what will come in the next session. In *Fascism and Dictatorship* Poulantzas provides what is, in my mind, a useful periodization of fascism's rise. He dis-

tinguishes 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 stabilization 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 organizations. In the second period, it manages to temporarily unite the interests of the petty-bourgeoisie with those of big capital, and takes 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, Hungary, and perhaps Austria and Italy. A necessary condition for reaching the 'point of no return', i.e. the point beyond which a fascist rise to power is unavoidable or inevitable, is that fascists manage to secure the backing, or at least support, of big capital. But a key first step for achieving *that* is the possession of an ability to resist, and indeed repress, working class uprising and resistance. A thug needs to be tested before he gets hired. This is why it is extremely important for fascists to infiltrate the coercive machinery of the state, well before they even have inklings of their capacity to take power.

In interwar Germany the Nazis gradually infiltrated the army and police, which permitted them both to 'neutralize divisions' within the coercive state apparatus itself, as Poulantzas put it, and gave them an extra instrument with which to suppress the workers. The choreography of oppression towards the point of no return is quite elaborate.

Now, *if* all this is correct, then fascism in Greece (and perhaps Hungary) is at a more advanced stage than most people think. Over 50 percent of Greek policemen are said to vote Golden Dawn, and there is a lot of evidence of strong organizational links between the fascists and the police. Golden Dawn has also established strong links with the army, the most overtly oppressive state apparatus, and with the Church, which still wields considerable ideological influence in Greece. I'm not saying we've reached the Poulantzite 'point of no return', but we're closer to it than many pundits seem to think.

Let me conclude. In the beginning of my talk I did not promise a happy ending to this black comedy, but only the conditions for achieving one. Joseph discussed the united front tactic, which I think is a strong weapon for building working class unity, and for effecting short-term offensive maneuvers. But it's no strategy for winning the war against the fascists. To do that, one must win over those 'human beings driven to desperation and frenzy' through capitalist crisis by reversing the (secular?) trend towards depression and barbarism. To do this, the workers and their allies must set their sights on full victory. The desperate crazies sitting in no-man's land will not side with you if they see signs of defeatism, or if you propose nothing but painting the grey in grey. In the absence of an immediate route out of the quagmire, those in no-man's land will side with the enemy.

That's why I think that recent calls for a 'left government' in Greece, by staunch

opponents of fascism on the Left, don't make much sense. What is necessary for a (not-un)happy ending to this black comedy is a workers' government that will put an end to privatizations, eviscerate the twin-fetters of the national debt and austerity, and reverse the annihilation of collective wage agreements and the like. A policy of worker control over banks and industry and a return to the idea of an economy for the satisfaction of peoples' needs would be good first steps. All this would, in all likelihood, deprive the fascists of their sources of support, simultaneously removing the economic conditions for their existence.

If the workers don't take power, there is great danger someone else will. And that is as black as comedies get.

References

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