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Is Fascism Back?



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IN 2015, "fascism" once again became the highest-octane political epithet in general use. Of course, the temptation to apply the fascism label is almost overwhelming when we confront language and behaviour that superficially resembles that of Hitler and Mussolini. At the moment, it is being widely applied to cases as disparate as Donald Trump, the Tea Party, the National Front in France, and radical Islamist assassins. But, though the temptation to call such actors "fascist" is understandable, it should be resisted.

At its creation in the 1920s (first in Italy and then in Germany), fascism was a violent reaction against a perceived excess of individualism. Italy was scorned and Germany was defeated in World War I, Mussolini and Hitler claimed, because democracy and individualism had sapped them of national unity and will.

So the two leaders put their followers into uniforms and tried to regiment their thoughts and actions. Once in power, they tried to extend dictatorship to every corner of life. Even sports, under Mussolini, were to be organised and supervised by the state agency called *il Dopolavoro*.

The fascists set themselves up (and acquired elite support) as the only effective barrier to the other political movement that surged following World War I: Communism. To international socialism the fascists opposed a national socialism, and while they crushed socialist parties and abolished independent labour unions, they never for a moment questioned the state's obligation to maintain social welfare (except for internal enemies such as Jews, of course).

The movement that calls itself the Islamic State may seem to fit this template rather well. Its followers' wills and personal identities are subordinated to the movement, all the way to the ultimate self-abnegation: suicide. But there are fundamental differences as well.

The Islamic State is less a state than a would-be caliphate, devoted to the supremacy of a religion in a way that cuts across and even threatens existing nation-states. Central authority remains inconspicuous, and policy and operational initiative is dispersed to local cells, without the need for a geographic core.

The fascists were nationalists, rooted in nation-states and devoted to the strengthening and aggrandisement of those states. The fascist leaders and regimes did their best to subordinate

religion to state purposes. At most, we might identify in the Islamic State a sub-species of religious totalitarianism; but it is fundamentally distinct from classical fascism's centralised secular dictatorships and glamorised leaders.

The Tea Party is at the farthest remove from fascism's state-enhancing nature. With its opposition to all forms of public authority and its furious rejection of any obligation to others, it is better called right-wing anarchism. It is individualism run amok, a denial of any community obligations, the very opposite of a fascist appeal to the supremacy of communal



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obligations over individual autonomy.

The National Front, of course, had its roots in Vichy France, and its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, long expressed contempt for the French republican tradition. But its emerging success nowadays under Le Pen's daughter, Marine, is at least partly due to the party's effort to distance itself from its street-fighting, Holocaust-denying past.

Donald Trump is a special case altogether. Superficially, he seems to have borrowed a number of fascist themes for his presidential campaign: xenophobia, racial prejudice, fear of national weakness and decline, aggressiveness in foreign policy, a readiness to suspend the rule of law to deal with supposed emergencies. His hectoring tone, mastery of crowds, and the skill with which he uses the latest communications technologies also are reminiscent of Mussolini and Hitler.

And yet these qualities are at most derivative of fascist themes and styles; the underlying ideological substance is very different, with the entitlements of wealth playing a greater role than fascist regimes generally tolerated. Trump's embrace of these themes and styles is

most likely a matter of tactical expediency – a decision taken with little or no thought about their ugly history. Trump is evidently altogether insensitive to the echoes his words and oratorical style evoke, which should not be surprising, given his apparent insensitivity to the impact of every other insult that he hurls.

It is too bad that we have so far been unable to furnish another label with the toxic power of fascism for these abhorrent people and movements. We will have to make do with more ordinary words: religious fanaticism for the Islamic State, reactionary

anarchism for the Tea Party, and self-indulgent demagoguery on behalf of oligarchy for Donald Trump. There are fringe movements today, such as Aryan Nations in the United States and Golden Dawn in Greece, that draw openly upon Nazi symbolism and employ physical violence. The term "fascist" is better left to them.

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