

Fascism: The Politics of Fear (11/20/03)

Introduction to ACLU panel discussion on Civil Liberties & Authoritarian Regimes

Americans have experienced a renewed assault on our civil liberties since Bill Clinton signed the 1996 anti-terrorism bill, since George W. Bush came to power, & in particular since September 11, 2001. The ACLU has mounted effective legal & political challenges to this trend; & we are especially proud of our success in raising consciousness about the dangers present in the Patriot Act of October, 2001. Three states & over 200 cities & counties have passed resolutions against the Act (a quarter of these in Northern California); & there are now so many signs of a recoiling from it by both Democrats & Republicans in Congress that John Ashcroft & now Senator Diane Feinstein have felt obliged to go on the road to speak out & defend it.

But the assault runs broader & deeper than the Patriot Act; it predates President Bush; it has enjoyed majority support in Congress since Newt Gingrich's Contract on America; & it is sometimes aided & abetted by the Federal Courts. The growing threat to civil liberties is evident in our treatment of immigrants, in the construction of the Homeland Security apparatus, in the war on drugs, in the vast prison industrial complex, in the undermining of reproductive rights, in the resurgence of homophobia, in the breakdown of the separation of church from state, in sacrifice of jobs to the globalization of the economy, in the privatization of education & health care, in the consolidation of media ownership, in our policy towards the UN & the international movement for human rights, & in the increasing militarization of society & economy.

It's watching these things happen, & despairing of our being able to do anything to prevent them, that is behind the often-heard remark by some progressive-minded Americans that "this country is headed towards fascism."

Now Fascism was the dominant ideology in Europe during most of the period between World War I & World War II. It was very influential in other parts of the world as well

-- at that time & ever since. Nevertheless it's hard for us to see that phenomenon clearly nowadays, because of the caricatures that remain with us from having fought a war against the Fascists, & having learned later about the horrors of the Holocaust. Fascism is also not easy to define. It was something different in every country in which it either came to power, or functioned as a movement of opposition. Many things about it were peculiar to the historical circumstances of inter-war Europe, & could not be reproduced in any other time or place. But it's worth digging back & trying to bring that movement & its ideology into focus for people living in the United States today, because the story of the rise of Fascism does contain lessons that we ought not to ignore.

(For those who would like to read a little about Fascism, or view films that can help us to understand it, we've put on the back table a reading & film list, an article from a recent San Jose Mercury about the shifting uses of the term fascism in American political discourse, & an article that compares five fascist regimes to draw up a list to scare Americans with, of fourteen characteristics that they had in common).

So what was Fascism, & how did it come about? The context for its emergence in the 1920s was a world transformed by four centuries of colonialism & slavery, the rise of mercantile & industrial capitalism, the consolidation of high-tech militarism, & the establishment of imperialist control over most of the world. In the immediate past Europe had suffered through the First World War, a conflict of such unprecedented violence & devastation that it had slaughtered some nine million people & brought several powerful nations to their knees.

Before the First World War, the followers of 19th-c. Liberalism -- the ideology of capitalism -- had abolished the divine-right monarchy in Europe, separated the Church from the State, & established crudely democratic regimes in much of the North Atlantic world. Secular & scientific humanism had replaced the religious world-view among many people in Europe & elsewhere. The miseries suffered by working people under early capitalism had given rise to an international working-class movement with its

compelling ideal of socialism or even anarchism, to be achieved through a struggle between the classes.

The Catholic Church, along with many Eastern Orthodox clergy, had responded to these challenges by denouncing secularism, calling for a defense of the old beliefs & social order, & in particular by rejecting the ideals of democracy & class struggle – both of which they saw as pernicious notions aimed at destroying a harmonious social order. The rich & the property-owning middle classes tended for obvious reasons to agree with that analysis; but they were torn in their heart of hearts between religion & secularism. These debates were particularly influential in the Mediterranean & Eastern Europe, where the advantages of democracy & industrial capitalism were less evident than in the North Atlantic world.

At the end of the First World War, the US emerged as the number one world power to replace the British – as the military juggernaut that could determine the World War's outcome by simply intervening. Then the US withdrew into isolation, refusing to support the League of Nations that had been proposed by its own President Wilson. While that was going on, the Bolsheviks surprised everybody by taking power in the ruins of Tsarist Russia, declared war on both religion & the bourgeoisie, & set about constructing the dictatorship of the proletariat. That unprecedented development soon had the religious hierarchies & the ruling classes everywhere shaking in their boots.

Fascism was a response, or better a series of responses, to all of these challenges -- forged not once but again & again in the particular circumstances of Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania & other countries. Some but not all of the Fascist movements were pulled together loosely & only fleetingly during World War II, under the leadership of Nazi Germany. But for the most part they operated independently. The Fascist movements of those days had some peculiar characteristics that seem ridiculous or almost quaint today, & are hard to imagine in a 21st-century context. They are the ones captured so brilliantly by Charlie Chaplin in the *Great Dictator*: a hysterically demagogic leadership style, an obsession specifically with racial superiority (& in some but not all

cases with the removal of social groups viewed as undesirable: Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, disabled people, people of color or Communists). They might mobilize masses of supporters with shirts of the same color. But those movements also shared other characteristics that would prove more enduring.

Fascism was a set of ultranationalist beliefs & practices that sought to mobilize the nation, & to place loyalty to the nation – defined in exclusive biological, cultural or historical terms – above all other loyalties. It was therefore not designed for export, & it had (as it still has) to be re-imagined on the ground wherever people sought to imitate it. In Europe, it was generally rather more pagan than Christian, though in some places it would hold up the cross when it seemed expedient to do so. In other countries, following the example of Spain & Portugal, it has often wrapped itself in the banner of religion & enjoyed the wholehearted support of clergy.

Fascism was always implacably hostile to socialism (& in particular to Soviet communism) as well as to feminism, both seen as prioritizing class or gender over the nation. It was also generally homophobic. It was therefore often warmly supported by capitalists & priests, as well as by militarists, male supremacists & heterosexualists. It was anti-democratic, seeing democracy as an effete time-wasting system incapable of defending the nation against its many enemies. Fascism held that the defeat of socialism, feminism & all the other insidious enemies of national unity required the rise to power of a new elite, one that was usually embodied in a militarized mass party, with a charismatic leader to act in the name of the people.

Fascists were conservative in their nationalism & their hatred of socialism, feminism & what they viewed as sexual deviance, but they were quick to override the traditional conservative concerns with family, property or religion whenever the interests of party & nation appeared to require it. They were therefore sometimes resisted at least for a while by defenders of traditional authority.

Fascists generally sought to defuse dissent by accepting some of the demands of the labor & women's movements, & by mobilizing workers & women alongside young people into special sections of the party, understood as essential components of a corporate or a harmoniously unified system of power. That served to win them the loyalty of large numbers of youth, of women & of members of the working class.

These innovative characteristics combined with a reputation for efficiency to cause the light of Fascism to shine around the world in the 1920's & 30's: Mussolini made the trains run on time; & he conquered an empire in Africa, long after that continent had been carved up & divided among themselves by the greedy capitalists of Northwestern Europe. Hitler led the Germans back to being a first-class industrial, scientific & military power after the vengeful humiliations of the Versailles treaty, & the abject sufferings of the Weimar Republic. Then he went on to annex much of Europe with little opposition.

The appeal of Fascism was particularly strong in Catholic & in colonized countries – especially in Latin America & Asia. The idea of an invincible nationalism and a militarized state – one in which the divisive forces of socialism & democracy could be kept at bay while production was enhanced, the standard of living rose, masculine ideals were achieved & a poor country could see to it that it would be pushed around no more – that idea was enormously popular in the world outside advanced capitalism. By the early 1930s (before anybody could yet imagine the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust or the Nazi conquest of Europe), there were full-fledged movements attempting to nationalize a Fascist-style politics not only in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Britain & Ireland, but also in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Quebec, Cuba, South Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Thailand, China & Japan. The styles varied; & outside Europe it was often the Europeans themselves (or the Americans) who were represented alongside the Bolsheviks as relentless enemies of the nation against whom it was the responsibility of patriotic citizens to organize.

There's no time here to look at the details of any one of these movements, except to say that the advantage of studying them comparatively is that it frees us from being hung up

on our image of Hitler or Mussolini, to see more clearly what it is about Fascism that has continued to appeal to a great variety of people in very different historical circumstances from those that prevailed Europe between the World Wars, from that time to the present.

One way to make my main point here is to point out the enormous influence of Fascism on, say, the Revisionist Zionism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky in Palestine during the early 1930s, & on the organization of the Irgun terrorists who played so important a role during the war for Israeli independence. Before & during the Holocaust even a community of Jews could be susceptible to the fascination of Fascism. Another is to remind everyone here of the deep sympathy for Fascism that was sustained, during the 1930s & right down to World War II in this country, by people as different as Henry Ford in Detroit, Huey P. Long in Louisiana, or the influential Catholic radio commentator Father Charles E. Coughlin & the influential Protestant radio commentator Gerald L.K. Smith, or by the high-ranking US military officers of whom Gore Vidal writes that he heard them discussing around his father's table the possibility of a military coup against that "Jew-loving" Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Yet another is to point to the fact that all around the world since the Second World War, the authoritarian military regimes inspired by Fascism – be they in China, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Iran, Egypt, Greece, Spain, Zaire, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala or El Salvador, are precisely the friends & allies on which US foreign policy has most frequently lavished our support.

Fascism is not a far-away thing in time & space; it is a powerful present reality, & one with which every American retains a close association whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. So it is important that we be clear in our minds about what we think of fascism, & what we are willing to do to prevent it.

There's probably not much to be accomplished in conversations with our fellow Americans, by insisting shrilly on the proposition that under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld & John Ashcroft our country is headed for fascism. Wherever we're headed, it is an American destination; & we Americans will get there in our own very American

way. But there is lots to be learned by Americans from a close examination of actually existing fascism anywhere in the world. And like the Italians of the early 1920s, or the Germans of the early 1930s, it seems to me that we still have the opportunity -- & the obligation -- to keep our eyes on the signs that are to be found all around us of an increasing disregard for the most basic principles of democracy, of human rights & civil liberties, & to see to it -- working together right here in Santa Cruz, California -- that those principles are constantly reaffirmed, exercised & protected.