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How can anyone be a fascist if everyone is?

The regularity with which accusations of fascism are being voiced is concerning. It is high time we bid the fixation on fascism labels farewell

Let's take a deep breath and slowly repeat to ourselves: 'a dissenting opinion isn't always a fascist one'. This is worth bearing in mind. After all, the way accusations of fascism are now casually bandied about with regularity is not only counterproductive but also ignores historical facts.

One example of such an overstatement, a particularly common phenomenon among sections of the progressive milieu, occurred only recently on these very pages in an article by Robert Misik, in which he urges us to finally call a spade a spade. Opponents of right-wing extremism tend to avoid 'the f-word', the author complains. This is, he says, potentially disastrous given the threat posed by the far right. It's these right-wingers after all 'that often set the agenda'.

Fascism is not everywhere ...

The far right is, without a doubt, a threat to democracy. But where in our Western democracies are the educational institutions, companies, theatres or museums, bestsellers, streaming services or hit films that propagate even a trace of far-right ideology, let alone are dominated by far-right voices? Which mass media outlets can be said to broadcast far-right discourse? The ARD, the BBC?

Nor can anyone seriously maintain that the left has avoided accusing right-wingers of fascism. On the contrary: such accusations are legion. They form the soundtrack to political debate, the discursive equivalent of elevator music. Fascism is, thankfully, not everywhere. And yet, we are forewarned of it wherever we look.

… but the label seems to be.

Bookshops are full of publications heralding the fascist threat. The latest work by Madeleine Albright, the former US Secretary of State, bears the one-word title *Fascism*. British journalist Paul Mason recently published an influential handbook entitled *How to Stop Fascism* and Timothy Snyder has written a resistance guide to 20th-century tyranny that every second bookstore in the US, at least, is featuring prominently alongside its scented candles.

In film and television, the picture is no different: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Man in the High Castle* and *The Plot against America* all urgently caution against fascist rule, while, in social media, even Elon Musk's Twitter delivers a daily tidal wave of fascism accusations – directed, at the time of writing, against Putin, the Indian prime minister, the British Foreign Office, 'Nazi pope' Benedict and pretty much anyone else on planet Earth, including 'protofascist' Musk himself.

The accusation has also been wielded indiscriminately by large swathes of the established media. In early September, the *American Prospect* published an appraisal of Florida's Republican governor Ron DeSantis, touted as a potential presidential candidate, in which he was portrayed as a 'semi-fascist'. A week or so later, the *New Yorker* emphasised the importance of 'diagnostically' identifying Trumpism as fascist. In mid-November, *The Atlantic* called on readers to 'fight fascism before it's too late'. And, in recent years, *TheNew York Times* has even managed to apprehensively ask 'Is Donald Trump a fascist?' twice over in identical headlines.

Politicians too have long since succumbed to the idea of omnipresent fascism.

And yet, this is not just a US phenomenon. In the German press, Giorgia Meloni's election victory provoked a slew of articles warning that fascism was returning to Italy, or, in *ZEIT's* case, that fascism had never gone away. And you might recall *Stern's* cover showing Donald Trump performing a Hitler salute next to the headline 'Sein Kampf' ('His war').

Politicians too have long since succumbed to the idea of omnipresent fascism. Joe Biden recently claimed that around 50 per cent of Americans could fall for what he called the Republicans' 'semi-fascism'. Austria's Green vice-chancellor has accused opponents of mandatory Covid vaccinations of taking their cue from 'neofascists'. And German leaders too have, at times, spoken of the 'fascist' tendencies of Covid critics. Certain extreme cases aside, such comparisons can only be considered

valid if the obvious differences between fascism as a contemporary polemical insult and the historic realities of fascism are largely levelled out.

Pinning down fascism

According to devotees of the contemporary fascism accusations, it's the very absence of genuinely fascist policies that is the primary proof of their argument.

'Today's fascism', says Misik, 'invokes democratic values and claims to be the voice of the great mass oppressed by a powerful minority "elite". Its protagonists even know how to use the values of liberalism and hedonistic consumerism [...] values such as "autonomy", "self-det ermination" and "self-realisation" can be integrated surprisingly well into authoritarian movements.' Indeed, in *Gekränkte Freiheit,* Oliver Nachtwey and Carolin Amlinger published an entire book about this purportedly 'libertarian authoritarianism'.

Granted, fascism as an ideology is difficult to pin down. That was true in 1944 when George Orwell asked 'What is Fascism?' and remains so today. And it's also true that certain far-right movements usurp democratic ideals. On the other hand, the idea that people who invoke 'autonomy, self-determination and self-realisation' might have at least in part moved away from the key tenets of fascism seems not to occur to advocates of this interpretation.

For the latter, the accused's maliciousness apparently relates not to their behaviour but to their being. To put it simply: today's fascists may not always behave in a fascist way, which includes favouring very different values such as liberal beliefs. But, like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, this merely makes them more dangerous, the argument goes. After all: 'even the historical fascists didn't only become fascists once they'd fully established fascist rule. They were fascists long before.' That is, of course, true but, at the same time, this seems to be the point at which essentialism takes over and historical fact gives way to fascism fixation.

Ultimately, the hyperinflationary spiral of fascism accusations is hard to square with the current state of opinion polling – as revealed for instance in the World Values Survey, which for decades has recorded a widespread increase in liberal attitudes among broad swathes of society and not just in the West. This would suggest that the fascism diagnosis says more about the diagnosticians themselves than about any supposedly broad-based social trends.

Long-term effects

Moreover, wielding the sledgehammer of fascism accusations doesn't even make tactical sense. Granted, it might have a mobilising effect in the short term, but there will be serious long-term impacts too. Talking to fascists, after all, is a no-no. But such maximalist positions make it harder to participate in a conversation from which progressive parties in particular might occasionally benefit.

Not least given that the track record of such demonisation has been less than impressive – even when it was genuinely justified. In 2014, for instance, a French court ruled that it was permissible to describe the right-wing populist leader Marine Le Pen as a fascist, provoking much celebration. At last, the demagogue had been unmasked! And yet, only recently the same Marine Le Pen came an alarmingly close second in the French presidential election, an election in which the moderate left was utterly crushed. If that's what happens when progressives warn of fascism, then perhaps a little more circumspection wouldn't go amiss. In the US, the Trump presidency could be said to tell a similar story.

The inflationary use of the term fascism has a devaluing effect on all those to whom it is applied. And that could have serious consequences.

The ubiquitous fascism label eschews analysis in favour of moralism, turning a historical comparison into a hysterical one. It serves to demonise others and deepen social divides instead of bridging them. Besides, one of the drivers of this historically ignorant comparison is surely that it allows the accusers to entertain the idea of themselves as the resistance. After all, any opposition to this allegedly omnipresent fascism can bask in the reflected glory of the truly heroic struggles of the past.

This everyday anti-fascism, however, trivialises not only the fearlessness shown particularly by historical resistance movements on the left but also the monstrosity of 20th-century fascism with its millions of victims – the Jews, Communists, Christians, unionists, homosexuals and intellectuals murdered for being 'inferior' beings. The inflationary use of the term fascism has a devaluing effect on all those to whom it is applied. And that could have serious consequences: after all, how can anyone be a fascist if everyone is?

Perhaps that's why the right itself has now borrowed the playbook of fascism accusations. Putin, for instance, claims his disastrous war of aggression is about the 'denazification' of Ukraine. George W. Bush saw his 'war on terror' as a crusade against 'Islamo-fascism'. And even Donald

Trump railed against the 'left-wing fascism' of his opponents.

It's a worrying trend given that key liberal democratic values are genuinely facing exceptional threats. Evidence of exaggerated warnings of fascism is not proof that fascism itself is not still present, which is why it is, of course, right that democracies should remain vigilant.

Does it never occur to proponents of such rhetoric that there could be a connection between the careless bandying about of fascism accusations and the rejection of progressive forces by broad swathes of the population?

Misinformation, Robert Misik writes, allied to an exaggeration of aspects of reality and a radical simplification of its complexity is fuelling an 'us-*versus*-them polarisation' that seeks to foment a 'synthetic war for the public mind'. Quite so. And this is indeed a huge problem for democracy. But it's a phenomenon seen not only on the far right but also in a good many of those recurrent fascism accusations. After all, 'exaggeration' and 'radical simplification' can fuel polarisation from both sides.

Does it never occur to proponents of such rhetoric that there could be a connection between the careless bandying about of fascism accusations and the rejection of progressive forces by broad swathes of the population? It's hard to avoid the impression that outrage over purported fascists is sometimes nothing less than a particular way of expressing disdain for the kind of population groups that once formed left-wing parties' electorate.

In a world of uncertain energy supplies, recessionary economies and shortages of essential medication, left-wing groups would be well advised to provide convincing responses to voters' legitimate security concerns. Robert Misik is quite right to point out that 'hope has a hard time when change can only be imagined as deterioration', but indiscriminate accusations of fascism are not going to help. They trivialise genuine evil and all too often demonise legitimate fears, they also deepen the division they claim to want to heal. It is high time we bid the fixation on fascism accusations farewell.



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