

Fascism Without Fascism

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Well, I shall follow the advice of Chantal Mouffe and I will be both agonistic and affectionate. And I will also offer a compromise today. We have been told that we should avoid the word 'fascism'. So, I am offering a compromise. Others will not use the word 'fascism' and I will not use the word 'populism' for a very simple reason: I do not think it exists. Now let's return to the fundamental problem here. After what happened in the 1930s and the 1940s, including the small episode that was World War II, a very fragile consensus was established in 1945. For the first time since the crisis of fascism and war in the international arena, there was an eruption of socialist ideas. This idea has been formalised in the UN charter, 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights', which drew on some of the lessons of National Socialism in particular in an imperfect, insincere and hypocritical manner. This consensus has now been broken. In fact, it has been broken since 1989. After all, what was the fundamental procedure of fascism against bourgeois democracy and especially against socialism? The idea of bourgeois

democracy, bourgeois liberalism and the nation state, based on nineteenth-century liberal nationalism, was as follows: the aim of the political development of all those things was to approximate the idea of human rights and civil rights. In other words, to achieve a state of affairs in which nobody was allowed to be excluded from the political community. To be a member of the political community was the goal of democratic and socialist progress. It was also an aspect of nineteenth-century democratic nationalism that was based on attack, something that is very important, especially for us central Europeans, when all hell broke loose in the 1920s and 1930s: namely, the fact that you would be allowed to be a member of the political community if you were prepared to pay the price of admission, which was cultural assimilation. So, nations have been constructed through unification, as in the case of Germany, Italy, and later, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia etc. And these supra-ethnic nationalisms were not based on race, on tribe, on this, that or the other. If you agreed to speak the national language—as opposed to what Saint-Just called *le patois contre-révolutionnaire*, the dialects, and the controversial dialects—if you were willing to abandon the ‘langue d’Oc’ and accept the ‘langue d’Oil’, then you would be accepted as a member of the national community with a teleology of equality in a political sense, which, of course, is the basis of classic republicans. This trend, albeit never complete and never sincerely meant, since all colonised people were excluded from it, was, however, still the aim. This planned development was broken by racism, which, of course, has always been the basis for imperialism. This imperialism is seen even in conservative works, such as Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where one of the foundations of fascist development is discovered in a colonial world view that was not just a political reality. If you’ve studied the history of ideas in England, then of course you will know how colonial ideas, Darwinism, social Darwinism, a strand of socialism and a strand of liberalism coincide with racist exclusion. John Stuart Mill was a racist and one of the colonialist founders of modern liberalism. And, in spite of all this, it was of course the [...] of this emancipation trend and the socialist revolution. That was one of the most important conclusions drawn by those who thought that capitalism, bourgeois democracy and bourgeois liberalism were not to be saved. That was the conclusion presented in the last sentence of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848: ‘Workers of the world unite!’ The consequence of this was only felt in 1917 when the people of this world

discovered that they had a common enemy: capitalism. Not the other proletarians of another country. It seems elementary, it seems commonplace, it seems banal, but even today it appears to be one of the most difficult things to realise, construct or build upon. It seems extremely difficult. Why does it seem so difficult? Because the essence of capitalism stands for crushing neo-liberals and social democrats and anyone similar; because capitalism stands for separation and division. How can a system—which is, after all, based on the domination of a minority—survive in the face of majority resistance? The answer: by becoming allies with part of the majority. And the main tools in this have of course always been religion, nation, race, this, that and the other. Nevertheless, some conceptual operations were needed. In a radical and historically important move, Adolf Hitler and his ideologues announced that there were some people in his country—legal inhabitants—who would be deprived of civil rights and would be excluded from the national community. He presented this idea to white people on the European continent—as that was itself a kind of colony—and made it possible for people who had already earned their place in a community to be excluded. This was a sort of liberation, elements of which you can see today in the latest developments and triumphs of the ‘extreme right’. This discovery made it appear as if there was a basis on which oppression, repression, discrimination and violence were morally justified. However, it wasn’t justified for the people who were members of the same moral community, but there were some individuals against whom violence and destructive passions were justified, permitted and even praiseworthy. This is a sort of liberation that sets something free.

Talking about political passions, and here I agree with Chantal Mouffe, is an abuse. You cannot really tell ‘passions’ and ‘reasons’ in politics apart. And our abstract passions, what kind of passions are they? But there was a liberation from the commands of morality, from the commands of generosity, from the commands of self-limitation. And that of course has replaced genuine emancipation. It was a radical change to existing society. And this was, of course, what a very unfashionable thinker today—Herbert Marcuse—called ‘repressive desublimation’. What happens, for example, with ‘political correctness’? Everyone, including professors, seems to be talking about political correctness. For example, in my own country [Hungary], none other than the prime minister said: ‘Now the tyranny of political correctness has finally ended and we are free.’ (In parentheses: What kind

of man needs his sincerity to be approved by superior authorities in New York?— Very strange!) But what is he liberated from? Hypocrisy. He is liberated from hypocrisy. And now he can honestly say that the Roma are of inferior quality; that the Hungarian people are working hard and we cannot receive any migrants and refugees because we also have to pay for the Roma who do not want to work. OK, that is very simple: he is liberated. But what is liberated there? The faith, the passion and oppression. That is what is liberated. Finally that has been rehabilitated. Not only can you oppress women, ethnic minorities and foreigners, but you can also talk about it. So it is elevated to the rank of what is spiritual. It is not considered 'inferior'; it is not a dirty secret of a repressive society; it is the openly announced, a glorious title for dominion. And that is indeed experienced as liberation to a certain extent. Yes, well, the air has been cleared. Now we know that they want to repress and they want to kill and they want to discriminate and they want to live a passionate life of contempt.

Good. So, now I will again follow Chantal Mouffe's advice and be agonistic about it and be agonistic about it in a very Athenian sense. You know about the Athenian rule, when there was real strife in Athens—civil war or other kinds—and those citizens who refused to take sides were exiled or imprisoned. The first duty of a democrat is to take sides. This is what I am proposing. I was very surprised to hear somebody say that neo-liberalism represented liberty. What? Liberty? The liberty of what? The liberty of whom? We are confronting two versions of the same system: one hypocritical version, pretending to represent equality and liberty, and another that does not. There is a small difference. What we experienced as a victory of the anti-establishment, such as the election of Mr. Trump, is the most traditional, the most old-fashioned, oligarchic government that you can imagine: billionaires and generals. What is so new about this? This is the absolutely traditional upper class, taking power without hypocrisy, without pretending. This is naked power, this is in your face: 'You're fired!' Yes, that is the slogan of the new system and it is everywhere. Now the power systems have the courage to say: 'We do not want you! Do not come here! Do not live here! Get out! Get lost! You will be punished!' And this is supposed to be progress. Well, to a certain extent it is, because of course it is sincere. It is very sincere. These are not the class warriors, these are—to use an old traditional [term], which is so dear to me as an old opponent of Stalinism and post-Stalinism—'enemies of the people'. The 'enemies of the people',

who are representing small sections of interest and mobilising people against their own interest by invoking what? By trying to present, partly in a justified manner, the moral criticism of liberals, partial allies of the most oppressive capitalism and of social democrats. Here I agree with what we heard before. This kind of terror that we have been suffering from, accepting an order of repression and uniformity and exploitation as a 'system of freedom', this is gone. That is progress, if you wish. We will not call this 'liberalism', we will not call this 'democracy'. What we call it depends on your temperament. One thing, though, will not happen in these totalitarian systems: we are not likely to see concentration field camps filled with white people. Rather, we already have concentration camps filled with people of colour called 'refugee camps'. The question of an international order has been presented by none other than Immanuel Kant as a question of hospitality. He considered this idea in a famous work. As you all will know, especially in this country I suppose, hospitality was a condition of cosmopolitan order, by which Kant understood international republican order. Republican order in Kant's sense was a federation or a system of states in which all people are fully fledged citizens with rights, entitlements and dignities, and that the dignity is valid everywhere. The condition is that everywhere should have a just system. It is unimaginable that a system of exclusions like the present system of nation states and partial federations that is the European Union, which is not a universalist organisation, despite what Habermas might think about it or might have thought about it (he does not any longer), is just an association for rich, western European nations. But you see, you cannot build up a just and free world out of elements of injustice, inequality and so on. Now, let's go even a little deeper, if you'll allow me. One of the most grievous harms inflicted on the emancipation struggles is our failure to differentiate between two kinds of 'socialism'. One I would call a 'resilient socialism' and the other a 'Marxist socialism'. What has been accepted as a socialist idea almost everywhere has, of course, been Rousseau's ideas and not Marx's. Marx's day is still to come. Rousseau and his followers—the Jacobins, the social democrats and Bolsheviks—believed that the understanding and the construction of an equal, dignified and just society comes about through equality, usually equality obtained through redistribution. But this is not Marx's idea. Marx's idea is not equality. Marx's idea is not redistribution. Marx's idea is an end to the commodity-producing system. An end to alienation. Emancipation from life forces

of humankind estranged into the power arena of others. That is a theory, a liberationist theory in the sense of autonomy and not in the sense of equality. Equality may of course be a consequence; obviously a just society cannot be unequal, but as a consequence and not as a basis. And when socialists, social democrats and Bolsheviks tried to create a dignified, egalitarian and just society on the basis of redistribution, and in the case of the Bolsheviks, also a reversed value system, it was, of course, the Soviet Bloc, which was, for the first time in world history, at the pinnacle of the moral hierarchy. But what was there? Manual labour. Physical work. After tens of thousands of years, when it was the spirit, it was God, priests, sages, philosophers etc., and then of course came the aristocracy with the fiery souls, and the people who had to work for their living, who had to earn their bread, and who even in Athens, were of course not permitted to vote. Because nobody who has to work for a living can be independent. Nobody who is labouring for others can be autonomous. No fully-fledged member of a political community can be at the service of someone or something else at the same time. A real free political community must consist of free people. What does it mean to be a free political community that consists of exploited people under the command of the most stringent and brutal set of rules called technology? A work discipline and a time, a use of time, subordinated to a production of commodities. You enter an office, you enter a shop, you enter a factory and your autonomy disappears. And this is where you are spending the majority of your waking hours. What kind of a political community of free citizens can this be? This is obviously an illusion. And it has been proved many times to be an illusion, and of course there is the discontent, the humiliation, that 'Bifo' has spoken about this morning so eloquently and so poetically. Humiliation of people of colour, humiliation of white people, humiliation of poor and even humiliation of not-so-poor people by being dependent — even my intellectual colleagues, writing their submissions for grants, everybody collecting their points, everybody trying to get good marks in exams — there is not one single moment of independence. This is a free society? That is ridiculous! Well, let us stop pretending and being hypocrites. When people of course say, 'our free community is threatened by this and that', of course people can say: 'This is a free community'. Should we defend your system? Why are people so neutral about the conquest of power by these really scheußlich [abominable] right-wing governments, such as my own? Because when the liberals tell them: 'Up in arms! Save liberal

democracy, save market capitalism, save inequality from the incursions of all sorts of unpleasant people!' the people will say: 'oh, yeah, right? Should we save a system that does not give us anything nice except cheap merchandise?' So, people will not. We all hate Trump voters, and people who hate Trump agree on one point: This world as it is now is not worth saving. This is why the right is winning. This is why the right is winning. What is the great difference? That they are sincere? More oppressive than the rest? They are not so well mannered? Who cares about manners? Well I do, but I am old-fashioned. But even I do not think that this is very essential and very important, very substantive.

I agree that contempt for Trump voters and for Brexiteers is not justified. We have come to a point where we do not resist any longer, because we do not think it is worthwhile. And hence come ideologies in the newspaper that say: 'there is no difference between left and right'. Is there not? I mean: hierarchy and equality are the same, yes? Gain for others and suffering for these? And even the foolish resistance against this says: 'This is really the same'. Let us be serious. Of course: it does not seem to be important. Because of the betrayals, because of the hypocrisy and because of what is the main fact of our age: the final defeat of the international workers' movement. This is what has changed. This is why there is no alternative. For a very long time we have lived in a world where there was an alternative not only to the philosophy books, but you could go into the streets of many towns and you would come across a building on which *Arbeiterheim* [workers' home] or Karl-Marx-Hof was written. You could tell in which *Kneipen* [pubs] your sort of people congregated. You could be sure that those people working in the big factories were against it all. And there was an idea that the working class was the first subaltern class in history to have not only a folklore of complaint, but also a high culture. Genuine literature, genuine philosophy, genuine social science. It was similar to the ruling classes of the past, in having conquered discourse through rational procedures, and it was immoderately proud of it, and, yes, committed the mistakes of positivism and scientism and other sins of this nature. That does not exist any longer. There is not a double system as there was during the Cold War, whatever the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China was worth, and I was always their enemy. It was certainly another world. It has preserved the presence of an alternative, at least symbolically for many. And we live in a world in which alternatives are not clear, are not visible

and are not represented. But do we reconstruct such alternative and agnostic worlds by decrying difference: political and philosophical and moral difference? Yes, it is very unpleasant, because if you conduct a moral debate, sooner or later you will say that someone is a bad man. Yes, it may happen. That is, of course, not the aim of a moral discussion or a moral debate, but of course judgement of this kind has weight. And it is inconceivable that a real difference in a political community can be free of condemnation, of judgement, which are the consequences of moral choices. When poor old Elfriede Jelinek said that you should not talk to the FPÖ [the Freedom Party of Austria, a right-wing populist political party in Austria] voters, well yes, that is very clumsy. But by this, she does not mean that FPÖ voters are not human beings, she has been writing all her life about people who are typical FPÖ voters, but because she seems to think that it is intolerable to pretend that we share the same moral world with those people, who are advocating discrimination and distinction and hierarchy and oppression. It is difficult. You can, of course, have a conversation. I do. So, I would talk to conservatives and to extreme right-wing people and so on and so forth. But there is a limit. It is always the same and I guess that you might have had similar conversations: I am always told, 'what you want — equal dignity for everybody, universal membership of a political community and to a nation — those are beautiful dreams. We are representing reality and reality is discrimination; reality is putting up boundaries, putting up frontiers and putting the people we do not like beyond those frontiers.' And this is not the enmity of people who are thinking differently within the political community. This is establishing a boundary between political community and an area where there is no politics because there are no true human beings. 'Politics is for us...' — whoever 'us' may be — '...and we can deliberate, we can decide, we can dominate or we cannot dominate, but those who are outside, those may be human beings, but they are certainly not our fellow citizens.' But what sense, since we are not members of the animal kingdom, what other sense is in the constitution of a human being that is devoid of political dimension? That we are biologically members of the same race? That is true. But what does it mean? What does it mean for thinking and feeling beings? Those people, who will be the members of the same humanity? If we are members of the same political community — and in order to be members of the same political community, to really have a say in our lives, in our fates etc., we will have to abandon all of our extant institutions.

In the last 500 years it's been proven that the final result is always a massacre. It has been always like this. Until now. Look at colonial conquest, look at great revolutions, look at the great wars, including wars of liberation. Massacre after massacre. Oppression, violence, rape, torture, everything. Enough. Enough. Enough. Why not emancipation? Why not liberation? Why should we pretend to imitate our enemies, imitate their cunning, imitate their energy, imitate their dynamism? I do not envy their dynamism because it comes from the energy of rising above others. This is the energy of distinction. All societies are based on distinction, as Bourdieu said. All societies are based on distinction. All competitiveness, including the most virtuous one: being better at something, being excellent, being the first, being the most intelligent, being the most beautiful, being the fastest. Those are based on distinction, meaning 'I am better than you'. And as long as the basis of that and as long as our concept of liberty is essentially competitive, it will be modelled on the bloody market. And not only the market: sports, contests, all our ideas of excellence are differential and hierarchical. In his famous book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre said that our mistake of modernity was of course the temptation of equality. Because according to Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas and others, they knew better than us that the only virtue could be differential virtue. 'Somebody is better than others'. This is the aim: to be better and better, which means comparison and contest. But comparison and contest for the losers is humiliation. Not everybody triumphs. It is a very nice idea to have a contest. We have this fuzzy fantasy that all of us are running in the same direction and somehow we'll all be winners. But nobody runs in a contest if nobody is going to lose. There are no winners without losers. So, all these moral and political ideas are wrong if you want to be emancipated and ['desalinated?'] (1:53:21). I have been talking about an essay that some of you may have read. It was published sixteen years ago in 2000 and it was called 'Post-Fascism'. It has more recently been republished by openDemocracy along with other pieces on this subject.

I originally wanted to talk about those matters but hearing what's been said here today, I decided to change my attack and to try to deliver a sermon to you. All right, I gave you a Heilige Lektion [religious oration] and because you can see my feelings, you can feel my feelings and my passions, I hope that I can maybe convince you, if not of anything else, than of my deep need to persuade you, that you should not go on tolerating all of this.

Thank you.

Colophon

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