Can It Happen Here?

Introduction

The signs are all around us. Abortion clinics are bombed. The far-right John Birch Society is embraced openly by members of the Padres pitching team and has become part of the mainstream of the governing Republican party. The military is pumped up and super-patriotism erupts everywhere, from the Olympics to racial riots. White youth chanted "USA! USA!" as they attacked Puerto Rican homes in Massachusetts. It's clear that the country has swung way to the right, but just how far is now an open question, especially for the left.

1984 then is a rather fitting year to discuss these rightward trends and whether that bogeyman of the twentieth century — fascism — has any future here in America. Circumstances and political development have forced upon the left and the progressive community in general the need to examine possible fascist trends in our society.

With this issue, "The Whole Damn Pie Shop" opens the discussion on these possible trends and the concurrent rise in militarism and repression. Under the shadow of a second Reagan administration, this discussion will raise more questions than it resolves, but we hope it will provoke every reader to think more about these trends. We hope a few will respond and all will act. The future is at stake.

The Question of Fascism

by Robin Greyson

It's more than just worried leftists these days who are talking about the similarity between 1984 American and 1933 Germany. Even traditional conservatives, frightened by the power of the New Right in the Republican party, have begun to talk in terms of Weimar Germany. The growth of economic instability, the ultra-right, nationalism, a sense of anger and resentment in political culture, and deification of the military and military might are frigheningly familiar. There is an echo of jack boots and beer halls that can't be ignored.

But if this threat is real, then more is demanded of analysis than the use of simplistic analogies to Hitler's Germany. It is not enough to merely invoke the memory of the Nazis, we must attempt to apply the understanding of fascism to American society to see what fits and what does not. Obviously, even the possibility of a fascist putsch is an issue to be taken seriously; but no less important, and considerably less obvious, is the danger of encouraging political hysteria through the use of historical analogies that do not apply.

What is our current understanding of fascism? There are two major leftist approaches to this issue. The first has focused on the specific set of conditions that gave rise to the Nazis in Germany in the 1930's; and the second has concentrated on a wider analysis of authoritarianism.

CRISIS FASCISM — THE RISE OF THE NAZIS

Marxist discussions of the rise of fascism in Germany begin by focusing on the relation of this event to class struggle and the economic crisis of the early 1930's. Traditionally, class struggle takes place in the institutions of capitalist democracy — on the shop floor, in labor struggles, and in the clash between political parties. But with the onset of economic collapse and with the survival of the capitalist class itself threatened, the bourgeoisie becomes willing to suspend the rules of the game. Bourgeois democracy, the basis of so much capitalist ideology, is quickly abandoned. Fascism in this view is capitalism with its gloves off. It is the naked face of a system that is based on domination and exploitation, but in the past has attempted to hide this fact behind a veil of democracy. Fascism, far from being a historical aboration or accident, is seen as the logical extension of a dying system fighting for its life.

This initial position was attacked in the 1950's by a group of American sociologists. After examining the voting records of Germany up to the election of Hitler in 1933, they found that support for the fascists was strongest not among the upper classes as the Marxist model would imply, but rather was most signifcant among the lower middle classes. It was from state bureaucrats, small businessmen, and middle peasantry that Hitler received his widest and most enthusiastic support. Fascism was not so much a movement to save capitalism, as it was an expression of yearning of the marginalized middle classes to create an order that was neither capitalist nor socialist. The middle class envied and resented the bourgeoisie for its wealth and power, but feared the left because of the strength of its trade unions. Anti-capitalist, but even more paranoid of Marxist socialism (after all, where would the private shop keeper be in the socialist state?), the middle class was attracted to the vision of a classless society based on hyper nationalism. Nazism was characterized not by its support of either of the major classes of capitalism, but rather by its attempt to create a mythical society in which all classes were submerged into the national identity of the German Volk(people).

The Marxist response to this criticism admitted that the mass base of fascism in its *early* stages was the lower middle class, but it insisted that this movement was used by capitalist interests. What these sociologists missed, it was argued, was the fact that fascism developed over a period of time and that the early phase of its origins was very different from the later stage of its consolidation. In the early years of its march to power, fascism *was* a predominantly middle class phenomena, though even here it was financed and supported to a significant degree by the bourgeoisie. The people who poured into the Nazi party and who voted for it were members of the middle class, but this was during the insurgent phase of its development. Once the economic crisis struck, and once Hitler assumed the reins of power, a compromise was quickly reached with the bourgeoisie. At this point the cap-

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Are There Fascist Trends in America?

by Frank Gormlie

It is time to ask the question: are there trends in our country today that represent a form of American fascism? Have developments in the political-social-economic spheres of our society so accelerated their rush to the right that in fact they threaten the constitutional framework of American capitalism and want to replace it with a new repressive authoritarianism? Or are we now just perceiving the beginnings of a new era of reaction symbolized by Ronald Reagan?

It is a timely and significant question, and a weighty and complex one, even so that volumes have been written on 'the question of fascism.' Despite the depth and complexity, we have to face up to what's happening around us, and begin to critique and analyze the forces of reaction that may one day surround and engulf us.

We've already seen the dramatic increase of militant rightwingers picketing abortion clinics and gay churches, and the counter-demonstrators at progressive events. We can turn on the tube and watch the zealotry of the fundamentalists and the sophistication of the Klan on their own programs. We can feel the forces of the right biting at the bit, yearning to force the country into a god-fearing Christian and super-patriotic frenzy. The government, especially after four years of Reagan and fifteen years of the Burger Supreme Court, seems bent on dismantling the civil rights of its citizens. And there's evidence too of the accompanying construction of a repressive governmental machine, being built piece by piece. All the while we daily experience the effects of the corporate monopolies doing their best to dominate every sphere of modern life and in effect creating a new corporatist serfdom.

Perhaps San Diego is not the best place to judge trends and gauge the political climate of the whole country, for we have our own particular blend of reactionary and conservative forces. We have the John Birchers, a host of fundamentalist churches, Moonies, Lyndon LaRouch followers, our very own Klan outfit now on public access TV, the vigilante Posse Comitatis, the terroristic Alpha 66 Cubans, anti-communist Vietnamese and Hungarian organizations, and a history of Minuteman and other armed rightwing terrorists. Our sun-swept Pacific paradise, economically dominated by the military and war-related industries, is home for generations of military retirees, where registered Republicans outnumber Democrats, and where Klanspeople and other extreme rightwing populists burrow into a weak Democratic Party.

San Diego is also a very racially segregated town, where up until two short decades ago Black people were allowed to live in only two neighborhoods, and where currently the INS terrorizes the Mexican community. It's an anti-labor and anti-union town and has long been Reagan country. But the entire country elected Reagan and not just San Diego, so we have the distinction of living in the vanguard of the republic.

Whatever San Diego's role, the question discussed here is whether the trends witnessed across the country have anything in common with what we've come to know as fascism, either of the classical variety or of a new type.

Definitions and Confusion

Webster calls it "a system of government characterized by dictatorship, belligerent nationalism and racism, militarism, etc." But "fascism" is treated more completely by better dictionaries who add: "an alliance between big business and government." Both of these have elements of truth but curiously overlook the independent and mass character of the fascist movement that took power in Germany and Italy.

This dictionary inadequacy confirms that there are widespread differences and confusion over just what or who is a fascist. Demonstrators at the San Francisco Democratic Convention called brutal cops "fascists." Some leftists label the dictatorships in Chile and the Philippines "fascist," as were labeled the former regimes in Argentina and Iran. Conservatives and liberals alike call the Soviet Union "fascist," and as the rhetoric swings around, certain left groups following China's line, were claiming the present Vietnamese government was "fascist." Many call Ronald Reagan a "fascist" and at least one left group currently believes we're living "under fascism" already. There's also a more generalized tendency to term anyone or any act that's sadistic, brutal, coercive or ruthless as "fascist." The confusion stems from the understandable tendency to cry 'wolf!' in the face of brutality, but which then endangers the moment when the wolf actually appears.

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Weimar Germany 1933

A common comparison these days is to measure the America of 1984 with the Weimar Germany of the Thirties as it teetered on the brink of the Nazi seizure of power. Some do this to look for similarities and to learn of the mistakes that the German left made in order not to repeat them.

So just what happened back then?

Germany by 1929, like most of the capitalist world, was suffering from the great depression. The National Socialist German Workers' Party, once a small fringe group of ex-veterans, was busy organizing among jobless youth, and its leader and best orator, Adolf Hitler, was busy attacking Jews, Communists and the Versailles Treaty. Over the next year the Nazis made a spectacular jump in popularity. At the 1930 elections, in a surprising electoral breakthrough, they became the second largest political party, in the country.

Through the next couple of years, with unemployment going up and Hitler promising full employment and prosperity, the old-line conservatives frantically but vainly worked to resolve the economic crisis. Finally in early 1933, after pledging to major industrialists that he would uphold private enterprise, Hitler was invited to serve as chancellor of a conservative coalition cabinet.

We ask the question, where was the German left during all of this turmoil and rise of the Nazis? Were they building a popular anti-fascist front

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