

Is the Ghost of Fascism Haunting Political Thought?

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The spectre of fascism has continued to haunt political thinking even though original fascism was decisively defeated within a decade. Given the very specific historical conditions in which fascism arose in Europe, whether the term “fascism” significantly applies to more recent forms of authoritarian rule is questionable. Facile reference to the handy historical precedence of European fascism inhibits a genuine understanding of the material conditions that cause authoritarian regimes in the neo-liberal era. More disturbingly, the impressionistic mention of fascism might divert attention from the real issues of resistance to neo-liberalism.

The notion of fascism is frequently used these days to describe the rise of a variety of authoritarian regimes in the current neo-liberal era. The use is not restricted to informal and agitated accounts on social media. Even noted political thinkers are now prone to use the term in the theoretical mode to characterise entire regimes. Notions such as “democratic fascism,” “ur-fascism,” and “Hindutva fascism” are increasingly used by scholars to explain attacks by violent sectarian groups who often perform under right-wing official patronage.¹

For instance, an editorial in *Economic & Political Weekly* propounds virtually a full theory of “semi-fascism.” Proposing an “Indian version of Nazism,” it argues for a politico-economic framework that relates the “pernicious ideology of Hindutva,” the “monstrous inequality in India,” and the effects of “colonialism” (*EPW* 2017). I share the deep anxiety concerning the disturbing phenomena of pernicious ideology, monstrous inequality, and catastrophic effects of virulent neo-liberal economic policies. However, the question arises whether theoretical uses of the concept of fascism are justified to understand the increasing loss of democratic space in the so-called free world. For the restricted purposes of this article, I will be primarily concerned with some of the prominent recent conceptions of fascism proposed by noted thinkers. It is a study of systematic confusions in the concept of fascism in the recent literature that attempts to understand regimes in the neo-liberal era. In that sense, my goals are critical and polemical.

An explanation of current authoritarian regimes is a very different project requiring a different form of analysis. My hope is that the present exercise will pave the way for a more rigorous study of neo-liberal authoritarianism. Some directions to that effect are indicated in the final section. In any case, my contention is that the relevant phenomena are poorly understood, which explains perhaps why scholars grope for handy classical notions to come to terms with the unfolding neo-liberal order.

Since historical distinctions between forms of undemocratic political power are the general underlying theme of this article, it is instructive to sketch the spread of authoritarianism in human history. Primatologists often trace human authoritarianism to the “Machiavellian” functioning of chimpanzee society, reminding us that the roots of politics are older than humanity (de Waal 2007, 2016: 218–22).

In recorded history, most human societies have been structured around exploitative and undemocratic authority, often headed by despotic figures. It is hard to find an exception to this rule. H G Wells characterised emperor Ashoka as a saintly

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“shining star” (Das 1991). We now know that Ashoka issued orders to kill 18,000 followers of the Ajivika sect even after his celebrated Buddhist turn; such narratives abound (Thapar 1961; Strong 1989; Popovski et al 2009; Sanyal 2016).

The general scene did not change significantly even after the gradual disappearance of monarchies and emergence of various forms of formal democracy, along with a wide array of dictatorships, oligarchies and military rule. The brief history of formal democracy in the West and the rise of communism across the world is replete with the imposition of extreme forms of autocracy, aggressive militarism, frequent mass slaughter of people, and brutal plunder of the planet. In fact, the most extensive mass slaughter happened during the period of Enlightenment when a “population of 80 million people went down to hundreds of thousands” in the western hemisphere (Chomsky 2017). Since the history of the East and the West converge on this count, Gandhi’s trenchant remark on the idea of civilisation applies everywhere, including his own (Singh 2017).

After a careful survey of every post-war United States (us) President, from Harry Truman to George Bush I, Noam Chomsky (1990) concludes that “if the Nuremberg laws were applied, then every post-war American president would have been hanged.”²² To recall, the Nuremberg trials were conducted to bring Nazi war-criminals to justice, and many were hanged. Notably, Chomsky’s focus here is on war-crimes, the subject of the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. He is not saying that us presidents have been fascists. I return to Chomsky’s more recent thoughts in the context of this significant caveat.

The preceding uncharitable exercise was needed to point out that, even with this rather gory record of human political systems, the events between the two world wars stand out as unique in human history. In particular, even though the notion of fascism was first applied to the dictatorial rule of Benito Mussolini in Italy, the concept of fascism as a sociopolitical order gets its primary salience from its original exemplar: the Nazi rule in Germany under the supreme command of Adolf Hitler.

Germany was a leading centre of European thought and culture during the 19th and the early 20th centuries, what Martin Heidegger characterised as the “most metaphysical of nations” (cited in Chomsky 2005). Its catastrophic defeat in World War I and the humiliating Treaty of Versailles compelled the German state to disarm and pay astronomical reparations. The value of the mark, the German currency, plummeted to several million marks per us dollar; much of the famed German industry became non-functional leading to widespread hunger and destitution of the people. In sum, capitalism in Germany was in deep, almost terminal, crisis. With the defeat of Russian monarchy and the emergence of the Soviet Union almost next door, there was a real possibility of either a disintegration or communist takeover of Germany, which no traditional bourgeois political forum was capable of preventing.

To emphasise, after Russia, it was Germany where the conditions and preparations for a proletarian revolution, under

the able leadership of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were in an advanced stage. The preparations were so deep that popular rebellion continued to develop for a significant period even after Liebknecht and Luxemburg were murdered (Watt 1968; Harman 1982; Broue 2006). I will emphasise this aspect of the history of fascism repeatedly in what follows.

It was of utmost importance for the remnants of German capital and aristocracy to find a popular alternative to the existing political order for the rehabilitation of Germany. The charismatic, working-class image of Hitler with his committed band of storm troopers fit the bill perfectly. While the communist and the working-class movements were rapidly smashed, the major mainstream political parties capitulated to Hitler. Eventually, after rousing electoral victories by Hitler’s party, the parliament was shut down, and a single-party Nazi rule under the supreme command of Hitler was installed.

The entire big business vigorously supported Hitler’s agenda of not paying the reparations, defying the Versailles treaty, and introducing large-scale forced labour to gear Germany towards a war economy. In addition, massive forced labour of Jews, followed by their mass extermination, helped sustain the most aggressive form of German nationalism preparing itself for global war. The resulting slaughter of millions of people across the world, and the scale of destruction that turned much of Europe and parts of Asia and Africa into ruins, were unprecedented even in the dismal political history of the world.

Such a catastrophic historical phenomenon carried a large number of distinguishing features which peaked individually and then coalesced into one organic form after the collapse of the Weimar Republic. Many of the critical features—failed economy with mass unemployment, collapse of the democratic order, and popularity of aggressive cultural nationalism—were present in Italy as well, explaining the fascist rule under Benito Mussolini. Thus, despite the difference in scale in these features, it is appropriate to use the generic notion of fascism to cover both the German and the Italian cases, albeit somewhat tentatively in the latter case as Umberto Eco (1995) also pointed out. These critical features are unlikely to cluster again in a grim repeat of history because the species might well become extinct before fascism-inducing conditions get a chance to mature (Mukherji 2016a).

Original Fascism

Georgi Dimitrov’s classic remarks on fascism throw interesting light on the issue of specificity. The extreme specificity of original fascism in Germany and Italy casts doubt on Dimitrov’s well-known observation that we need “to investigate, study and ascertain the national peculiarities, the specific national features of fascism” (Dimitrov 1935: 86–119). Dimitrov seems to assume that fascism may continue to take many country-specific forms; the assumption appears to be unfounded, especially now, because of the noted specificity of original fascism. However, Dimitrov’s assumption seemed eminently valid for the period under review by him in 1935 when original fascism had already manifested itself in parts of western Europe.

Although the core enabling conditions of fascism resulted in its most aggressive form in Germany and Italy, its presence was clearly visible in the adjacent territories during that dark phase in history. Thus, Dimitrov drew attention to the otherwise very different conditions in France where, according to him, the economic crisis “continues to become deeper and more acute, and that this greatly encourages the orgy of fascist demagoguery.” He conjectured that fascism may arise due to the French bourgeoisie’s keen fear of losing its political and military hegemony in Europe. In this connection, he also mentioned the rise of fascist features in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Finland.

Nevertheless, in agreement with Rajani Palme Dutt whom he mentioned in the lecture, Dimitrov warned against “erroneously classifying all reactionary measures of the bourgeoisie as fascism and going so far as calling the entire non-Communist camp fascist.” I emphasise that Dimitrov strongly opposed the tendency of “erroneous classification” even during the turbulent period in Europe when conditions were ripe for fascism to spread like wildfire; at the same time, he warned against restricting attention too narrowly only to the German form of fascism. With this very brief look at the vast phenomenon of original European fascism, we are in a position to evaluate some recent views on fascism.

Before I proceed to study other authors, I must acknowledge that my own earlier view on fascism appears to be faulty (Mukherji 2007). In that paper, I suggested that the emergence of fascism in a political order is characterised by the following features, among others: (i) growing concentration of wealth and the accompanying impoverishment of masses, (ii) growing attack on the democratic and economic rights of working people, (iii) aggressive promotion of a fundamentalist-supremacist view of history and culture, and (iv) constructing external enemies—the “other”—to unite people under the threat of war. These conditions are not unreasonable; as we will see, a range of prominent authors also appeal to (versions of) these conditions as indicators of fascism in India (Sarkar 1993; Thapar 2016; Patnaik 2017).

The four conditions were no doubt proposed as a filter. It was emphasised that all (four) conditions need to be simultaneously satisfied for a regime to be counted as fascist. In that sense, fascist regimes are to be distinguished from plain authoritarian regimes, including most dictatorial regimes, without denying that a fascist regime is also authoritarian and, eventually dictatorial. Under the proposal, non-fascist authoritarian regimes certainly satisfy the first two conditions, but unless they satisfy the other two conditions as well, they will not be counted as fascist regimes.

The problem with this proposal is that the filter fails in both directions. On the one hand, even after the filter is applied, a very large number of post-war regimes beyond the original examples satisfy the proposed constraint. This is because conditions (i)–(iv) are met in varying degrees in many regimes under the neo-liberal political economy. On the other, the two crucial conditions of original fascism—(i) near-collapse of capitalist order, and (ii) revolutionary upsurge of the working class—are missing from the list. In that sense, the conditions do not pick out the original examples. We return to these conditions in the context of so-called “Hindutva fascism.”

Democratic Fascism, Ur-Fascism

In a lecture, French philosopher Alain Badiou (2016) suggested that “this new political figure—Trump, but many others today—are near the fascists of the 30s. *There is something similar.*” Badiou admits that the current “near-fascists” are without “their strong enemies of the 30s, which were the communist parties.” As we will see, the us continues to be the biggest superpower with near-absolute military control over much of the planet; the military–industrial complex that dictates the terms of political arrangement in the us will not allow any significant changes in the character of power that has made the current world domination possible.

Nonetheless, Badiou invents a new political concept: “democratic fascism,” which he calls a “paradoxical determination.” How is democratic fascism both a fascism and different from the original one? Badiou’s response is that it “plays something different,” a “different music” perhaps. Having thus secured an artful category, Badiou begins to play on its tonal possibilities. After dispensing with critical economic and historical features of classical fascism, he now portrays the character of democratic fascism with dark features of individual psychology: racist, *machiste* (macho), and violent.

He also stresses the “fascist characteristic” of thought and speech that operate “without any consideration for logic or rationality.” He is able to stress it because he takes it for granted that “democratic fascism” is characterised by “dislocation of language,” such that “the language is not the language of explanation, but an affective language which creates a false but practical unity.” Badiou’s list of characteristics of democratic fascism includes several other telling features: vulgarity, a sort of pathological relationship to women, the possibility to say and to do publicly some things which are unacceptable for most humans.

By now, Badiou’s definition of democratic fascism is almost exclusively designed to cover Donald Trump. Having so secured the notion with a concrete and popular example, Badiou takes on other men “progressively,” as he says: Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Nicolas Sarkozy in France, and a range of shady characters in India, Philippines, Poland and Turkey. In general, once an elected male satisfies Badiou’s conditions of violent, *machiste*, vulgar, racist, illogical, etc, he becomes a “paradoxical determination,” a figure who is “inside the democratic constitution but who is in some sense also outside: inside *and* outside.”

The trouble with this artistic portrayal of fascism is that Mussolini does not fit: Mussolini was very much a suave gentleman who apparently impressed the humanist poet Rabindranath Tagore. Instead of being a raging psychopath with a dislocated language, he was actually something of a scholar and a novelist, and a moderate atheist. He translated excerpts from Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Immanuel Kant, wrote poetry and published a romantic novel, *Lamante del Cardinale* (The Cardinal’s Mistress). Although Mussolini did hold a supremacist view of history and culture, he was opposed to national socialism in Germany because it was “one hundred percent racism: against everything and

everyone; yesterday against Christian civilisation, today against Latin civilisation” (Mussolini nd: 185).

In the other direction, Badiou’s method of characterising fascism seems to apply to the revolutionary general of the People’s Army of Vietnam, Võ Nguyên Giáp. Giáp was described by an American general “as somehow combining the worst personality traits of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.”³ “Like Der Fuhrer,” the American general elaborated, Giáp “is impulsive and sometimes irrational,” and “like Mussolini, he is vain and self-indulgent.” My point is that Badiou has no means of denying the American propaganda that the great revolutionary general Giáp was a fascist.

It is possible that Badiou and other “continental” authors draw their inspiration from Umberto Eco’s (1995) celebrated piece, *Ur-Fascism*. In this problematic yet absorbing piece, Eco readily agrees that Nazism and the attendant form of fascism was a unique historical phenomenon. Even the historical context of Italian fascism—his topic—did not really qualify as (genuine) fascism by Nazi standards. Eco warns that the historically incorrect use of the concept of fascism might actually pave the way for ambiguous, even opportunistic, ascriptions. For example, Eco suggests, “It is worth asking why not only the Resistance but the Second World War was generally defined throughout the world as a struggle against fascism.” He illustrates the problem by citing from Franklin Roosevelt: “The victory of the American people and their allies will be a victory against fascism and the dead hand of despotism it represents.” The conjunction of “fascism” with the “dead hand of despotism” enabled the us and its allies to organise the impressive struggle for freedom and democracy across the world; apparently, the struggle included the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki against fascist Japan.

Chomsky (2016b) throws further light on Roosevelt’s concern over fascism. He reports that Roosevelt viewed Mussolini as that “admirable Italian gentleman.” Further, Chomsky observes that, in 1937 when Roosevelt was the President of the us, the State Department described Hitler as a kind of a moderate. It is important to recall that by 1937 the “moderate” Hitler had already smashed all democratic institutions of Germany, including Parliament and the political parties, turned German economy into a war economy, introduced forced labour, and initiated the murderous campaign against Jews. Roosevelt did not need the concept of fascism for this Germany in 1937; he needed it only after Pearl Harbour and the escalation of direct conflict with us global interests. Thus, Eco is fully justified in opposing the use of the notion of fascism beyond its original context.

Nonetheless, Eco’s otherwise salutary essay begins to lose salience with his suggestion that fascism, like any other ruling order, can be so experienced—as fascism, to emphasise. This is because, “behind a regime and its ideology there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a group of cultural habits, of obscure instincts and unfathomable drives.” These features of fascism enable Eco to ask whether there is “still another ghost stalking Europe (not to speak of other parts of the world)?” Thus, even if Eco warned us earlier about not venturing

beyond the original example of fascism, the memory of his experience of linguistic and cultural habits during the fascist period suggests to him, after over half a century, that the “ghost” may still be “stalking” the globe.

How are the generally reactionary actions of a right-wing regime related to specific forms of fascism, and how do we link the cultural habits of a ruler to the historical basis of the regime itself? Suppose that Mussolini the fascist was fond of humming Rossini; assume further that followers of Mussolini, including the black shirts, started humming Rossini too. Will the musical habit of humming the ever-popular Rossini, or even the cultural habit of imitating the leader, signal the onset of fascism? Did Wagner and Heidegger lose their popularity in the general German culture after the defeat of Nazism?

Fascism is essentially a form of rule in a very specific economic condition, accompanied by a certain form of class war, as we saw; it is facile to think that such material bases of a social order are causally reflected in the linguistic and cultural habits of the society. After all, Karl Marx and Hitler basically spoke the same German language. Cultural and linguistic habits of a community typically have a much larger historical—in fact, evolutionary—spread than the emergence and disappearance of specific political regimes. So, the relation, if at all, between the actual political ideologies of ruling regimes and its spokespersons, and the deep-rooted cultural practices of a community, can only be tenuous. In India, classical Oxford-style liberals, firebrand communists, Kellogg-bred executives, French-style postmodernists, and Hindu fundamentalists, all celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja.

Hindutva Fascism

Apart from cultural and linguistic habits, Eco also mentioned “obscure instincts and unfathomable drives” as sure manifestations of fascism. Such features usually belong to an individual and are thus studied in individual clinical psychology. In an influential essay, the psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy (2002) applied his disciplinary tools to portray an individual called Narendra Modi. Nandy pointed out that Modi appeared to be a “classic, clinical case of a fascist.” On the basis of a prolonged, “rambling” interview with Modi in the early 1990s, Nandy observed that Modi had “the mix of puritanical rigidity, narrowing of emotional life, massive use of the ego defense of projection, denial and fear of his own passions combined with fantasies of violence—all set within the matrix of clear paranoid and obsessive personality traits.” From this Nandy concluded that Modi was “a textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer, perhaps even a future mass murderer.”

It is important to note that Nandy made these highly technical remarks in 2002, more than a decade after the said interview took place, and after the world had already witnessed the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat under Modi-rule. The question arises as to why Nandy failed to bring up this grim case to public knowledge, including the law-enforcing authorities, given that he had identified a fascist and a prospective killer, possibly a mass murderer. Nandy’s silence for a decade raises doubts about how seriously he took his own “findings.”

It is unclear if the disciplinary methods championed by Nandy are able to relate such dark traits of fascism specifically to very selective individuals even if they are picked by a trained clinical eye. Indeed, even a casual inquiry in the labyrinths of urban dungeons—teeming with contract killers, drug mafia, prostitution rackets, gangsters, addicts, sodomised street children, and the like—could well reveal hundreds of thousands of ravaged individuals with such personality traits, as portrayals in Hindi cinema routinely illustrate. I wonder if Nandy, following the compulsions of his discipline, is willing to characterise these hapless rejects of modern society as fascists.

I must hasten to add that I am not trivialising the killings that took place under Modi's rule, and the danger to democracy posed by his advent to power; just the opposite, in fact (Mukherji 2005, 2007, 2014). The historical gravity and the political meaning of the 2002 genocide are in fact trivialised if we are asked to focus instead on the eye movement, tone of voice, and linguistic habits of an individual, no matter how intimidating his behaviour. Tracing the source of a calamitous historical phenomenon like the emergence of fascism to some "paranoid and obsessive personality traits" of an individual misses the tumultuous material events that give rise to fascism with its catastrophic consequence.

I mentioned earlier my own faulty analysis of fascism (Mukherji 2007) to illustrate why the notion of fascism, with the original European fascism as the exemplar, ought to be applied with much care. In hindsight, it is not difficult to discern why the (faulty) analysis was mooted in the first place. The grim sequence of events beginning with the demolition of Babri Masjid, and leading up to the pogrom in Gujarat, generated massive moral and political anxiety among liberal intellectuals to grasp the phenomenon in reassuring theoretical terms so that the emerging evil may be confronted (Sarkar 1993). It was natural, though naïve, to grope for familiar categories to place those events in a unifying perspective. Fascism offered that perspective. In other words, there was an underlying desire to so characterise fascism in rational terms such that the menace of Hindutva falls under it. When that happens, the struggle against Hindutva becomes aligned with the glorious historical anti-fascist resistance. My feeling is that many otherwise serious thinkers across the world fell for this narrative.

Forms of Fascism in India

Sumit Sarkar (1993) is a case in point. In what follows, I will be concerned only with Sarkar's characterisation of fascism in India. I will not go into his important discussion on democracy and secularism (Chatterjee 1994). Sarkar begins his well-known analysis of Hindutva fascism—he called it the "fascism of the Sangh Parivar"—with the familiar caveat that "fascism in contemporary India" is distinct from "the European historical context" because "in most part India 1992–93 remains very different from the Germany of 60 years back." Yet, without specifying, at that point in his argument, what is so distinct and different between Germany and India, Sarkar suggests

that "fascism" in the Indian context is a genuine characterisation, that it is no longer a "mere epithet" signifying assorted acts of "authoritarian repression or reactionary violence." Thus, Sarkar proposes to take "a closer look at the pattern of affinities and differences" between forms of fascism in India and Germany to form "a greater understanding of the dangers."

Given the immense complexity of any historical phenomenon, a well-known problem with the suggested comparative approach is that, in taking too close a look at the events, one can always locate enough items to convince oneself of substantive similarity, especially when one has not started the inquiry with a study of major differentia. Thus, Sarkar narrates the following details of Nazi Germany: street violence, deep infiltration into the police, bureaucracy and army, the connivance of "centrist" political leaders, crude violations of laws and constitutional norms, loud protestations of respect for legality, and the like. Sarkar then suggests that these features apparently set the stage for "the notorious Reichstag fire," thereby implying as if these very general features of almost any repressive regime are distinctive only of (emerging) fascism. No wonder, in the next paragraph, Sarkar is able to find almost point-by-point "parallels" with the Indian case.

A mosque is systematically reduced to rubble (*Reichstag fire*), in total violation of a direct Supreme Court order (*crude violations of laws*) and repeated assurances given by the leading opposition party and its allies (*loud respect for legality*), and the central government does not lift its little finger (*connivance of "centrist" leaders*). Countrywide riots follow (*street violence*), marked by blatant police partiality, with the guardians of the law often turning rioters themselves (*infiltration into the police, bureaucracy*).

It appears that, in the absence of a genuine theoretical understanding, Sarkar's narrative aim is to overwhelm the reader (and his own critical self) with so many "parallels" that a final appellation of fascism in the Indian case becomes irresistible. Setting a volume of other "cultural" and "linguistic" details aside, the point to note is that this form of piecemeal analysis prevails through most of Sarkar's paper. Nothing is proved with such parallels beyond the obvious lesson that repressive regimes have much in common.

Only after listing such parallels, Sarkar mentions almost in passing that "the Indian situation is significantly different above all because of the absence of any major threat to propertied interests from organised labour or apparently impending socialist revolution." Sarkar also notes vaguely that the economic scene between Germany and India is "not quite comparable." As we saw, the phenomenal growth of fascism in Germany was crucially linked to the near-collapse of German capital and the imminent threat of communist takeover, which the liberal political leadership was unable to halt. So, if the Indian situation is different in that capital is doing fine under the neo-liberal order, and the threat of any socialist challenge has virtually disappeared from the scene, which historical forces are driving India towards alleged fascist order? Or, is there a fundamental confusion in the attempt to detect fascism in the Indian scene?

After her familiar narrative on India's secular past and pluralist character, Romila Thapar (2016) declares that "what has been happening in recent times could well develop into fascism unless it is controlled and a new way of envisioning the Indian future is worked out." In support of this unnerving thesis, Thapar cites a range of evidence of the sort already familiar from Sarkar's list above. However, unlike Sarkar's painstaking scholarly narrative designed to establish a significant range of parallels, Thapar does not even bother to cite comparative data from fascist Germany and Italy. She is convinced that fascism is about to take over the Indian scene because the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological wing of the Sangh Parivar, always had historical links with the fascists. For example, "initial organisers of the RSS were most impressed with the Italian fascists." Also, "B S Moonje (a leader of the Hindu Mahasabha) spent time with (Benito) Mussolini and the Italian fascists." The problem with this "data" is that many leaders of Congress, such as Subhas Chandra Bose, were also "impressed" with the fascists, and Tagore spent time with Mussolini, as noted.

As for more direct recent evidence pointing towards imminent fascism, Thapar is worried to see "the police pick up a student and put him in jail, despite his stating that he did not utter the anti-national slogans he is accused of having shouted, and the recorded evidence confirms this." Setting aside the issue of whether the arrest would have been justified if the student had indeed shouted "anti-national" slogans, Thapar views such police action as sure evidence of a fascist's "obsession with victimisation" and a fitting example of "crude violations of law" mentioned also by Sarkar. The act of arresting some students illegally thus requires an entire structure of fascism, according to these eminent historians. Thapar then proceeds to cite other examples such as beating up teachers and "attacks" on universities. I cannot fail to note that protesting teachers have been regularly beaten up and large numbers of students have often been arrested—and even killed in encounters—in Congress- and left-ruled states across the country.

Prabhat Patnaik's (2017) portrayal of fascism in India essentially repeats my own faulty understanding in the past, as noted in the section on original fascism. Patnaik, to his credit and unlike Sarkar and Thapar, directly proposes a four-point characterisation of fascism to lend some theoretical flavour to his argument. First, fascism is supremacist in that it entertains a notion of the despicable "other," a point that was emphasised in my own four-point characterisation as well. The problem, as noted, is that almost every authoritarian and dictatorial rule requires some conception of other—typically, some minority—as enemy: for example, every fundamentalist regime projects a heretic, kafir, infidel, etc, every revolutionary movement is directed towards a declared enemy (Mukherji 2007).

Second, Patnaik believes, like Badiou, Eco and a range of postmodernist authors, that fascism is founded on "unreason." He illustrates the notion with things such as hostility to the intelligentsia, disregard for reason, a running down of

centres of learning, physical attacks against dissenters, and browbeating the media. It will be interesting to know if there had been any authoritarian or dictatorial regime in history—including, especially, the socialist and communist oligarchies—that was friendly to dissenting intellectuals, granted total freedom to the media, did not attempt to control centres of learning, etc.

Third, Patnaik points out the obvious feature that fascism emerges in the form of mass movements. The feature by itself is benign because every large social conflict is based on mass movement by definition: the non-cooperation movement, freedom movement, Telangana movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Khilafat movement, etc. So, Patnaik appears to have mentioned this feature with polemical intent. After mentioning two grim features of fascism ("supremacism" and "unreason"), Patnaik wishes to emphasise that these grim features assume an alarming character since they are guiding mass movements. However, the polemical mention does not enhance the characterisation of fascism since the concerned features lack specificity, as noted.

Finally, Patnaik suggests that fascism "makes a deal" with big corporate business. Except maybe for the erstwhile "socialist" regimes (and small, short-term "resistance" regimes in Nicaragua, Chile, Venezuela, etc), every state power in modern history needed the explicit sanction of the ruling classes, especially the big corporate business, in the last two centuries. The feature is as true of the current Modi regime in India, which Patnaik thinks is fascist, as of the Congress governments preceding it: the Tatas, Birlas, and Ambanis thrive in any case. What was distinguishing about original fascism, as noted, was that fascism was needed to prevent the collapse of a capitalist order and a possible take-over by communist forces. Just the fact of collaboration with (powerful) big business is as benign as the fact of a mass movement.

To strengthen his view of fascism, Patnaik does challenge the thesis that there are intimate links between fascism, the collapsing capitalist order and the threatening revolutionary takeover. In other words, his strategy is to delink fascism from these things. Thus, he asks: "why in the present era ... the current capitalist crisis is producing a world-wide fascist upsurge as opposed to a Left upsurge?" The question, however, assumes what needs to be explained. Patnaik first assumes that a "world-wide fascist upsurge" is taking place, including in India. He then questions the received link under that assumption. Since the four-point characterisation of fascism proposed by Patnaik has failed, the assumption has no historical merit, that is, he has not produced any argument for ascribing fascism to the perceived "upsurge" in the first place.

The Intelligentsia and New Fascism

The preceding review suggests that the growing urgency of the Hindutva issue—and the absence of real understanding of it—has led many otherwise prominent social thinkers to apply unsustainable conceptions of fascism on the Indian scene.⁴ The suggestion may well hold for other thinkers across the world attempting to understand related phenomena. However,

that may not be the full explanation of why the concept of fascism is so freely used.

Another ill-concealed aspect of the neo-liberal scenario is seldom discussed with frankness. While the neo-liberal order has driven vast masses of people into destitution across the planet, it has also given rise to a wealthy and powerful intelligentsia in the emerging “knowledge” order. Since a section of this intelligentsia—especially elite intellectuals of the left-liberal variety—is most vocal in complaining about the emergence of fascism, it is instructive to look at some of the characteristics of this group. I will restrict my attention to the Indian scene with the hope that the picture essentially generalises for the rest of the world.⁵

Patnaik (2015) has pointed out the relevant economic phenomenon. He suggests that the historical economic divide between, say, peasants and university professors has increased massively during the last 40 years, much of which, according to him, coincides with the so-called “post-reform” period, or the period of “neo-liberal” economic policies. Starting with an already atrocious inequality, in this period an average peasant’s income has grown 32 times, while a university teacher’s basic salary has increased over 70 times. By “peasant” Patnaik means a producer of foodgrains such as wheat; according to him, the basic picture obtains also for other petty producers like fishermen, artisans, and the like. The condition of landless peasants and other non-producing working masses must be vastly worse.

Also, the cited 70-times increase in the university teachers’ salaries excludes dearness allowances indexed to inflation twice a year, annual increments, house rent and other allowances. As Patnaik writes, the (starting) basic salary of an associate professor, before the pay revision, is about rupees ₹47,000, but the actual gross salary is closer to ₹1,50,000. On top of it, the central government has just announced a massive hike in pay with a fitment factor of 2.72. There are other benefits such as university housing, children’s education, medical aid, superannuation benefits, travel allowance, easy credit, and much else. Patnaik suggests that the picture holds not only for teachers but the entire “upper salariat.” Once these factors are included in income, one could visualise the astronomical divide between the upper salariat and the vast masses of poor. He concludes that “this middle class, at least a substantial chunk of it, has benefited from and supported the neo-liberal regime which has thereby remained politically afloat in spite of the squeeze on petty producers.”

The political meaning of these developments was examined by Ashok Rudra (1989) in an explosive article in which he characterised the emerging neo-liberal intelligentsia as a ruling class. Analysing the political role of the opulent intelligentsia, Rudra made two basic points: (i) in tune with big business and rich farmers, this class manipulates the system to serve its own interest, and (ii) these manipulations are hidden behind “persuasive hypeboles and rhetoric in the name of the downtrodden.”

In the two decades since Rudra’s ground-breaking article, the economic power of the upper salariat has increased manifold.

The class structure and the accompanied pile-up of privileges have generated historical vested interest for the intelligentsia to serve the established state power as long as it makes attractive arrangement for the intelligentsia to hold on to the privileges. It includes not only establishment intellectuals directly serving the neo-liberal order, but also a prominent section of elite left-liberal intellectuals who offer some critique of the order in the otherwise subservient media and academia. In this context, Rudra suggested that “radical thinking and radical action are the prerogatives of this class.” So, if the intelligentsia remains content with its lot, their radicalism “would not give rise to any challenge by the masses to the established order.”

Persuasive hyperboles and rhetoric in the name of the downtrodden, accompanied by grand postures of radicalism, are by now trademarks of this vocal section of the upper salariat; the “sixties” are long gone. Needless to say, there are a handful of noble exceptions in many countries, including in India. Many radical intellectuals were significantly involved in the vast social movements witnessed in Latin America in the last few decades even during the neo-liberal era. In most places, though, such wonderful individuals and isolated groups are located at the insignificant corners of elite habitats—old coffee shops and little magazines.⁶

For the vast majority of the elite intelligentsia, the picture is very different. There is a complex network of exclusive clubs: elite universities and institutes, specialised centres and councils, national and international forums and societies, a variety of academies and bhavanas—all generously funded by governments, global funding agencies, and corporations. In Delhi, there are lavish watering holes such as the India International Centre and India Habitat Centre—sponsored by the state and big business—where the elite left-liberal crowd assembles to reflect on poverty, ethnicity and human destiny, over subsidised liquor. The intelligentsia also enjoys deep connections with the mainstream media, and prestigious publishing houses, since these corporate forums are run by their own students, especially from University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Tata Institute of Social Sciences, etc. The leading “public” intellectuals also maintain deep international contacts, often via the elite non-resident Indian (NRI) system.

Spreading radical thought within this coveted network has become the new high-profile profession controlled by intellectual celebrities. The most prominent of them travel executive class, hold prestigious chairs and draw astronomical salaries, lecture fees and royalties while theorising—often from within formidably complex and competing “schools of thought” such as Marxism and postmodernism—on what is so wrong with the world. Their prescriptions often include radical reform, even armed revolutions.

Elite Left-liberal Intellectuals

The hegemonic character of this radical network in shaping liberal politics is seldom brought under scrutiny because, as Chomsky has often remarked, intellectuals write intellectual history. They enable the neo-liberal order to highlight its sanctioned (free) democratic space, as Patnaik (2015) pointed out.

Given their elite location, it is plausible to infer that, as a sub-class, left-liberal intellectuals are not only unaffected by the neo-liberal growth in inequality, they are in fact beneficiaries of the system. In this sense, their concerns about democracy and justice are far removed from the concerns of the basic masses.

When some students in a premier, showcase university were arrested by the Delhi police for organising a routine meeting on the strife-torn Kashmir, thousands of left-liberal intellectuals marched repeatedly in the national capital in protest. The events were constantly covered in national dailies and on prime-time television, parallel marches were organised in other cities, open lectures were conducted to analyse the growing phenomenon of “fascism,” international celebrities campaigned in solidarity to protect secularism, freedom of speech, and the autonomy of universities. However, the high-profile movement for freedom carefully distanced itself from the strife-torn Kashmir, which was the context of the arrests in the first place (Mukherji 2016b).

Needless to say, I am neither condoning the attacks on free speech and secularism nor advocating silence. I am suggesting that the protests are understandably restricted only to those issues that are far removed from the concerns of the basic masses. No march of the elites was ever organised for the hundreds of thousands of farmer-suicides in the country; the radical intellectuals never joined any mass-protest against the prolonged incarceration of hundreds of innocent automobile workers of the Suzuki factory, next door to the said premier university.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, from the other direction, there is hardly any mention of fascism, attack on freedom of speech, and the like in the massive worker and peasant’s movements currently developing in the country. These grass-roots protests are directed at the vicious neo-liberal policies of the right-wing regime: blatant exploitation of natural resources, naked display of corporate greed, crippling unemployment, mass suicide of farmers, large-scale attack on the working class, and rollback of safety and welfare measures accompanied by unprecedented price rise. The comfort zones of elite liberals are not disturbed by the vicious neo-liberal attack on the poor in terms of access to basic livelihood and justice; in fact, elite privileges are enhanced with a share of the general loot, as noted by Rudra and Patnaik.

Given the class divide between the intellectual upper salariat and the basic masses, elite left-liberal intellectuals are likely to emphasise fine distinctions within the ruling order to mark their apparently progressive sub-class preferences. Thus, in the us, distinctions are made between the philanthropic Microsoft and murderous Monsanto, or between friendly democrats Bill Clinton–Barack Obama and the “neo-fascist” Donald Trump. In India, liberals make a sharp distinction between the socially responsible Tata and the unashamed plunderer Ambani, or between the liberal-secular Indira Gandhi and the “fascist” Narendra Modi. Since both arms of the proclaimed distinctions agree on the basic neo-liberal material order, intellectual attention is naturally focused primarily on the “differentia” of regressive cultural aspects of the new regimes: “narcissism of minor differences,” to mention Sigmund Freud. Even elites

become affected when authoritarian rules begin to attack freedom of speech, attempt to impose archaic rituals, or promote hooliganism. Left-liberal intellectuals have two issues with such regressive developments.

First, given the moral ambiguity that arises with the vast gap between their rhetoric and class interests, elite left-liberals require some sense of a decent and thriving civil order to pursue their art. The presence of a perceptible civil order in their immediate urban polity lends a subliminal justification to their reluctance to step out of their comfort zones. As Chomsky once remarked, the number of progressive public intellectuals who are willing to come out in the streets will not fill a Volkswagen; he probably had the Beetle in mind. Hence, there is much emphasis on the sanctity of the Constitution, the vision of the forefathers, maintenance of rule of law, and protection of freedom of association and speech, etc, insofar as elite habitats and surrounding areas are concerned. All that the elite intelligentsia of the secular variety wants is the continuation of the “Nehruvian” era, in some form or other.

Their sense of comfort is significantly altered when authoritarian regimes unleash forms of vigilantism that defile parts of the pristine civil order: seminars are disturbed, libraries vandalised, cinema halls ransacked, minorities abused and killed, dissenters beaten up, religious and cultural dogmas aggressively promoted, and communal rhetoric is given prominent space. Since the phenomenon revives selective memories of street events in Germany and Italy under fascism, it is not surprising that elite liberals complain of fascism when their hair is so ruffled, as in Mukherjee (2018b). In contrast, for the vast masses assembled in the shadows and penumbra of metropolitan civil order, notions of Constitution, rule of law, freedom of speech, and the like, never carried much meaning anyway. As the late Maoist leader Cherukuri Rajkumar Azad (2010) pointed out, “your Constitution is a piece of paper that does not even have the value of a toilet paper for the vast majority of the Indian people.”

Perhaps, more importantly, the access to and control of state machinery that the elite left-liberals had enjoyed in the earlier “Nehruvian” regimes, are likely to diminish progressively in the new right-wing regime as it proceeds to install its own clients in acts of direct patronage, naturally. The uproar on the functioning of the Sahitya Akademi, appointment of vice chancellor of JNU, selection of chairperson of Film and Television Institute of India, etc, are cases in point. In this troubling sense, the indiscriminate use of the expression “fascism” might actually point to vested interest of a section of the elites. This is what Eco warned against in a different context.

Chomsky and the Weimar Republic

Interestingly, from a very different direction, Chomsky also appeared to suggest global emergence of fascism some years ago. He observed that the general politico-economic situation in the us “is very similar to late Weimar Germany; the parallels are striking” (cited in Hedges 2010). He gave two basic and related reasons: economic deprivation of large masses of people, and loss of faith in the parliamentary system.

As with many liberal observers, Chomsky reports that the “American dream” has progressively eroded for a vast number of people. This is specially the case with white blue-collar workers whose post-war prosperity was the driving force behind the earlier boom. To emphasise the point, Chomsky sometimes suggests that the post-war economic reconstruction in the us was largely “egalitarian” (Chomsky 2016c, 2017). With the collapse of much of the us-based classical industrial structure, wages and standards of living have fallen rapidly since the 1970s. The situation has aggravated with the astronomical rise in the wealth of the top 1% as American capital moved abroad to offshore domains of cheap labour. Naturally, as low turn-outs in national elections show, large sections of wage earners have lost faith in the political system that is viewed as serving only the rich. In this scenario, Chomsky thought that parallels with original fascism were developing. Chomsky predicted darkly (cited in Hedges 2010): “there it was the Jews. Here it will be the illegal immigrants and the blacks.”

However, beyond citing some familiar images, Chomsky did not push the Nazi analogy to reach any settled characterisation of current regimes. As Chomsky notes, the us not only continues to be the most powerful economy in the world, it has an absolute military control over the planet. Consequently, the ruling classes will not want any drastic changes in the reigning political order even if sections of the relatively impoverished people express increasing resentment. This is the basic difference with the late Weimar republic.

The other big difference is that there is not even a remote threat of communist takeover; in fact, there is not even the prospect of classical European social democracy in the us. According to Chomsky (2016a), the recently popular democrat Bernie Sanders can at best be viewed as a “new deal democrat,” yet the establishment preferred Hillary Clinton over Sanders. Following Obama, the messiah of liberal America, Clinton represents the continuity of the interests of big business.

How then do we understand the emergence of Trump (and Modi)? My own view is that it is misleading, both historically and politically, to cite classical fascism to understand the recent rise of despotic and demagogic political leaders, and their typically reactionary fundamentalist organisations. As noted, there are several crucial factors: (i) global dominance of neo-liberal capital after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods regime; (ii) continuation of significant prosperity of developed capitalist economies with the us in the lead; (iii) almost total absence of any form of socialist or communist resistance. In a strong sense, the structure of political economy, especially in the West, is directly opposite of the conditions in Weimar republic in the 1920s.

The New Neo-liberal Order

In an unrestricted capitalist world order, the astronomical increase in concentration of wealth has fostered unprecedented inequality. As a result, even though the capitalist ruling classes are secure in their historical role unlike German big business in 1920s, increasing sections of the impoverished masses are beginning to be restive without access to classical forms of resistance. The global scale of concentration of wealth and

the absence of structured mass resistance to it have created historically novel conditions of class war. As desperate sections of impoverished masses are trying to find new forms of resistance, conventional liberal-democratic forms—of both governance and resistance—are beginning to collapse. The electoral victories of Trump, Modi, and other “fascists” need to be understood in this specific historical context.

To sustain the immensely unequal neo-liberal order, new forms of authoritarian regimes have emerged to control the restive masses within the structure of formal democracy, wherever available. It stands to reason that deeply inegalitarian societies, devoid of progressive forms of mass resistance, will exhibit sharpened forms of existing regressive fissures and conflicts inherited from their cultural history (Mukherji 2007). It is no wonder that essentially unpopular authoritarian regimes will try to exploit these regressive conflicts—by promoting one side and intimidating others—to forestall united resistance. Two classic examples, among many, are the use of the Hindu–Muslim divide in India by the British, and the manipulation of Shia–Sunni divide in West Asia by the us and its allies.

The character of these cultural aspects naturally varies widely across national communities: Hindu vs Muslim vs Sikh in India, Immigrants vs Blacks vs Whites in the us, etc. It is natural that some of these regressive forces draw their inspiration from the cultural history generally and impressionistically associated with original fascism. They may also adopt some of the cultural practices—looks, attitudes, “ill-concealed feelings,” “dislocation of language,” and the like—allegedly associated with classical fascism in the folklore. We also need to study the massive role of propaganda through cinema and other horror narratives that help form such impressions in the popular mind.

Much of the dynamics of this new neo-liberal order—especially its inherently violent and uncivil character—is poorly understood. As the neo-liberal regime enforces progressive dismantling of civil and democratic order, discontent of the masses is increasingly getting expressed in what would be classically perceived as regressive actions. Conventional left-liberal political thinking is thus often stumped with “surprising” developments in the otherwise familiar post-Bretton Woods world order. These developments include electoral victory of reactionary political entities such as Trump and Modi, disturbing popularity of Brexit, massive popular support to murderous organisations such as rss and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), polarisation across religious sects especially in the Islamic countries, phenomenal rise in communal violence as in India, and the like. Since these phenomena are difficult to understand in classical liberal-democratic terms, especially in terms of class-war, sometimes entire populations are characterised as racist, fundamentalist, or even fascist, if political outcomes do not match elite liberal expectations.

In my view, the current authoritarian rule in India has major fault lines. This is because, on the one hand, the ruling cluster of big business will want the government to execute measures to accelerate economic growth and concentration of wealth even further; that is why the Modi regime was promoted to power in the first place, with naked and aggressive corporate support.

However, on the other hand, big business does not want the government to take measures that significantly disturb the “peace” of the existing neo-liberal market. That is why a huge uproar ensued—fully supported by the elite left-liberal intelligentsia, mainstream corporate media, Indian big business and leaders of the neo-liberal world order, in tandem—when cow vigilantism exceeded “tolerable” limits. While the Modi regime, with a thin popular mandate of 31%, struggles to find a balance between the conflicting demands of the ruling order, the progressive withdrawal of welfare measures will compel the resistance to gradually unite and grow (Patnaik 2015).

Still, the grim reality is that the present right-wing authoritarian regime has already damaged a range of democratic institutions, including welfare institutions for the poor. As long as this regime is allowed to operate without significant resist from the ground, it will cause further erosion to democracy and the justice system, while increasing the attack on the livelihood of the unorganised poor. The power of this force is inversely proportional to the influence of the forces of the left. Therefore, despite inadequate understanding of the new phenomenon, the form of resistance to it continues to be classical.

NOTES

- 1 I am setting aside “friendly fascism” proposed in Gross (1980) because the main features of Gross’ thesis are covered in the literature I discuss.
- 2 If asked about the headcount today, Chomsky will certainly include Bill Clinton, George Bush II, and Barack Obama; with the massive attack on Syria, Donald Trump has just qualified.
- 3 Davidson (1988/1998: 12), reviewed in Mirsky (1991).
- 4 The narratives of Hindutva fascism sketched above are shared by a range of contemporary political commentators. Thus, with the possible exception of Prakash Karat’s paper, author after author in Banaji (2013) basically state and develop the arguments first stated in Sarkar (1993) to the effect that “Hindutva’s similarity with fascism is clear” (Desai 2016: p 21). Similar remarks apply to Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s forthcoming book (Mukherjee 2018a), as evidenced from the excerpts from the book put together by the author himself (Mukherjee 2018b).
- 5 I am not ascribing vile personal motives to the members of this group, which happens to include the present author. I only wish to draw attention to their historically novel class character. Thanks to Justin Podur for raising the need for this caveat.
- 6 It is not difficult to see now that Rudra’s (1989) view offers at least a partial answer to Patnaik’s question mentioned earlier: why is there only a “fascist upsurge” without a “left upsurge”?

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