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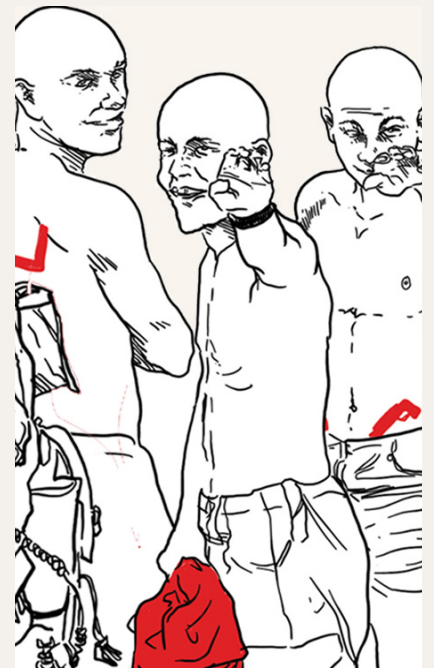
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ANTIFA



A.M. GITTLITZ

This text originally appeared on the site **communemag.com** in the fall of 2018. We think it deserves its own individual circulation because of its incredibly concise and uniquely nuanced view of the current state of antifascist struggle in so-called North America. Unlike much discourse amongst the broad “Left” and “Post Left” its refuses to remain stuck in the past, while also insisting the present be discussed as tethered to a history. Its tenor is also one of good faith, something we find unfortunately rare in the current moment.

About the author:

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“grey bloc” against the cops and Klan at Stone Mountain



a 200 person black bloc help shut down far right speaker Milo in Berkeley



a large black bloc and an even bigger crowd show up in Berkeley after the events in Charlottesville

*“We are not **anti**. That is to say, we are not against extreme forms of exploitation, oppression, war, or other horrors. Being **anti** means to **choose** a particularly unbearable point and attempt to constitute an alliance against this aspect of the capitalist Real.*

Not being anti does not mean to be a maximalist and proclaim, without rhyme or reason, that one is for total revolution and that, short of that, there is only reformism. Rather, it means that when one opposes capital in a given situation, one doesn't counterpose to it a good capital.”

Antifa's challenge now is to consider what they can do with the capacities they've developed. Part of this means shedding the encumbrance of being merely *anti*, and avoiding being seen, as an ARA-founder turned antifa activist told Mark Bray for his *Anti-Fascist Handbook*, merely as “one extremist gang taking on another extremist gang.” The work of generalizing working-class self-defense fits easily with a broader revolutionary framework so long as those revolutionary objectives take precedence.

Many antifascists have come to similar conclusions about the limits of the antifa identity. In April 2017, a group of Atlanta antifascists travelled to the University of Alabama to counter a speech by Richard Spencer. They joined hundreds of other students furious that Spencer was on their campus, but their black bloc attire set them apart. The fascists, however, were able to blend into the crowd, seizing the “possibility for agitation that [antifa] had abandoned.” In the end, it was the Auburn students who successfully ran Spencer and his entourage off campus, while antifa were isolated as a group of ineffective activists.

Reflecting on this experience, some Atlanta antifascists have called for abandoning the black bloc as a default tactic in favor of a “gray bloc” that allows militants to blend into the crowd, allowing for new forms of solidarity. This tactic was used in Charlottesville, skewing the usual opposition between right wingers and black-clad antifa. The resulting media coverage offered a vision of the form of struggle necessary to actually win: a group of violent racists against an entire town that had decided to fight back. In moving forward, antifa and pro-revolutionary groups more broadly should continue to change their wardrobe, ideas, and targets, in an effort to build a more effective movement against the state and capitalism. Or, for anarchy and communism, if that is indeed really what they want.

Anti- Anti- Antifa

Today's fascists aren't like yesterday's fascists.
Today's antifascists aren't like yesterday's antifascists.
What will tomorrow bring?

by A.M. Gittlitz
originally published in Commune Magazine, 2018



Antifascism in the Current Year

A revolutionary criticism of antifascism today ought to acknowledge that the dangers of contemporary fascism are real, offer a solid analysis of the phenomenon, and propose how it can be properly overcome.

Antifa's critics are correct to note that this is not the Weimar era, but they don't offer any alternative explanations or responses to today's developments. The street battles of 2017 had their origins in our own time. Trump's election was part of a sequence of victories for right-populist and "illiberal" authoritarians in Britain, Russia, India, Turkey, Hungary, Italy, Colombia, and the Philippines. Militarizing borders in the face of global trade and immigration, removing all obstacles to capital in the form of unions or regulation, and attacking minority groups and women, this political wave shares enough with historical fascism that some call it "late fascism" or "post-fascism." While there is no fully revolutionary wave to which this phenomenon responds, it has emerged in response to the Arab Spring, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and other social movements. The Trumpian emphasis on "law and order," in particular, refers to the riots of Ferguson and Baltimore. These movements and the rightwing "illiberal" reaction to them gesture, respectively, toward revolution or dictatorship—a polarization strengthened by capitalist stagnation and ecological breakdown.

Through this more global, structural analysis, antifa must reckon with its own weakness. Why are they doxing memesters and punching college Republicans while ICE stalks courthouses, police brutality is celebrated, social spending is slashed, and the bourgeoisie pushes us towards climate armageddon? This argument cuts both ways, inasmuch as antifa can always ask what, by comparison, the doubters have done. By accomplishing their short-term goal of creating a material force against street-level fascists, antifa have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to take on those tasks commensurate with their abilities. Can anything similar be claimed by the partisans of party building and radical syndicalism? Nonetheless, we still have to question how these short-term goals bring us closer to the revolution that might end fascism once and for all.

In a 2005 essay, "*We Are Not Anti*," French communist group *Théorie Communiste* proposes one way to reconceptualize antifascism. Taking up many of the left's famous negations—anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, anti-liberalism—the text identifies how each becomes a self-contained tendency with limited objectives. TC describes the revolutionary position, by contrast, as follows:

2. Antifa is not only practically insufficient, but lacks a thoroughly broad or deep theory of white supremacy, instead conceiving of white supremacy in moralistic and personalizing terms.

3. Finally, there is the critique of Bordiga and Dauvé which holds that antifa is counter-revolutionary, supporting the liberal democratic state in a moment of crisis.

Few antifa participants would argue that the movement in and of itself is a sufficient response to white supremacy. Contemporary antifascists share with *Lucha No Feik* and others a view of white supremacy as a structural feature of capitalism that only a thoroughgoing revolution could address. Any gap between practice and theory is certainly not unique to antifascism in an era when the revolutionary left is incapable of posing a real threat to the state. There is therefore no link between the errors of practice (in point 1) and the errors of theory (in point 2). Antifa tries nonetheless, participating in the recent ICE occupations and building solidarity for the national prison strike. Even if there are some who make antifascism their top priority, they do not argue this should be the case for everyone.

The Bordiga and Dauvé critique, however, applies to historical conditions that have not returned. Not only are the connections between antifa and the parliamentary or institutional left very weak, there is as yet no real revolutionary crisis of the state which would allow such a project to become actively counter-revolutionary. Despite his withering critiques, Dauvé is very much in favor of fighting neo-Nazis, as long as one comprehends the context and is realistic about who one is fighting. He writes:

“Those chauvinists, skinheads, white supremacists and self-proclaimed neo-Nazis that exist in Germany, in Italy, in Scandinavia, in Russia and in the US, and dream of themselves as the seeds of a future NSDAP, are to be fought. But fighting them implies treating them for what they are. There’s no reason to imitate them in ideology, nor to respect their self-image. Let’s situate them in their real time, our time, not in some imaginary 1932. Confronting a group that is called or calls itself neo-Nazi in 2007 is not combating the SAs of a reborn Hitlerism, but an activity comparable to the struggle against the Pinkertons in the US a hundred years ago, bourgeois reactionary sport clubs in Buenos Aires in 1919, the Shanghai Green Gang in the 1920s, Latin American pistoleros, strike-breaking hired thugs, or any of the many (sometimes paramilitary) squads that spring to life when the ruling classes are threatened, and act parallel to the official police.”

Anti-Anti-Antifa

Today’s fascists aren’t like yesterday’s fascists. Today’s antifascists aren’t like yesterday’s antifascists. What will tomorrow bring?

2017 was the year the “alt-right” entered the mainstream. Organizing rallies around the country, they held the streets through direct violence and police collaboration. “Unite the Right” in Charlottesville in August 2017 was intended as a show of strength, an opportunity to portray the united front they had built with normal conservatives. Instead, it marked the end of their momentum, and eventually, their movement. Today the alt-right’s united front has collapsed. For the most part, their public outings have returned to pre-2016 size, entirely dependent on the protection of the State. More than a year after Charlottesville, we can safely declare those antifascist mobilizations a victory—one of too few for the radical left in the Trump era.

But the victory of “antifa,” as antifascists are called today, brought intense criticism with it. Conservatives and law enforcement called them terrorists; liberals said they were no better than the Nazis. While such histrionics are to be expected, antifascism has also been strongly criticized on the left. These anti-antifascists argue that fighting small fascist groups does nothing to combat the structural racism of capitalist society. Antifascists, they say, are risking their lives to fight an acute symptom of liberal democracy rather than the terminal disease itself, sacrificing the revolutionary project many of them claim to be a part of and becoming little more than an aspiring paramilitary wing of the center-left in the process.

This argument is as old as antifascism itself. It originates from the first days of resistance to Mussolini, and was widely leveled against the antifascist popular fronts in Spain and Germany in the 1930s. Today it is applied anachronistically to the small groups of anarchists and autonomists who, despite similar imagery, have little in common with earlier antifascists. *The world has changed, and antifascism with it.* An understanding of this transformation reveals that the insufficiencies of antifa are little different than those of the revolutionary left in general. The fact that they are one of the only groups to have any success in the Trump era means they deserve better than ritual denunciation.



“Antifa sees trees where there is indeed a forest; in that they view the enemy as an individual (i.e. Trump) or groupings of Nazis or other racist white-nationalists instead of analyzing the structural nature of our racist society. This is an analysis that is but a few steps removed from the Liberal position that we should just all get along.”

Marianne Garneau takes those few steps in a recent essay for Ritual Magazine, “Antifa is Liberalism.” “Through both their criticisms and their tactics,” Garneau writes, antifa wants “to draw our attention away from systemic problems and towards individual behavior. It primarily addresses racism in terms of the virulent thoughts or attitudes in the mind of the racist...rather than systemic forms of race- and class-based domination and exploitation.” The result is that antifa turns away from revolutionary politics in favor of “individual displays of heroic resistance rather than attacking the problem at its root by building a mass movement.”

These criticisms, however much they may reflect particular experiences, ignore the distance antifa has travelled politically from its ARA predecessor. A response to these critiques from Philly/NYC Antifa highlights this:

“Today, an understanding of structural racism and how white supremacy is woven into the fabric of the U.S. is essentially a requirement to do this work. If a person with these simplistic views wanted to get involved in antifa circles, we would help them develop a deeper critique before we could closely work with them. Similarly, we can’t think of anyone currently in our circles who does not oppose capitalism... Anti-fascist work is done as a piece of, and not a replacement for, a larger radical vision. Anti-fascism is comparable to political prisoner work. No one claims that supporting our imprisoned comrades will bring down capitalism, the state, and hierarchy, but it is a necessary piece of background work that we feel must be done.”

Philly/NYC Antifa conclude by describing the Lucha No Feik criticism as “influenced by the theoretical approach of Gilles Dauvé... and his mentor Bordiga.” But here Philly/NYC Antifa walk into a trap by mixing historical debates about a bygone antifascism with contemporary denunciations of a completely different type. Instead of blending these critiques, they ought to be taken one at a time:

1. Both Lucha no Feik and Marianne Garneau claim that antifa is an ineffective and superficial response to white supremacy. A corollary point is that participants do not engage in other kinds of presumably more effective action.

row and their conception of white supremacy too focused on individuals, as opposed to the economic and political institutions of white supremacy: police, courts, banks, employers, and realtors. This corresponded to a pivot away from single-issue activism by the anarchist scene adjacent to ARA. The newfound influence of northern-European antifascism, with its more thoroughly revolutionary perspective, led to the creation first of Rose City Antifa in 2007, then NYC Antifa in 2010, and a proliferation of antifa groups thereafter. Instead of territorial disputes with skinheads, “anti-racist” activism focused on the societal and political bases of white supremacy, moving away from a view that saw racism as the bad ideas of bad men.

Antifa groups were among the first to sound the alarm that Trump’s campaign was an opening for explicitly white nationalist and anti-Semitic elements. They participated in the disruption of Trump campaign events in Chicago, Phoenix, and California. By the ugly dawn of the Trump era, their red-and-black flag was suddenly ubiquitous at every mobilization. On January 20, the counter-inaugural black bloc was called an “antifascist march,” and the antifa flag was photographed at the blockades of international airports that followed Trump’s “Muslim Ban” executive order.

While their goals weren’t always clear, this emerging antifascist movement never attempted to create a Popular Front. Antifascists did not campaign for Hillary, nor against Trump. Instead, to give an example of the politics animating contemporary antifascism, an editorial on *It’s Going Down*, the main North American antifa website, called for “an autonomous anti-capitalist force” that will “break out of the stranglehold of the symbolic, demand-based, and spectacular mode of activism.” This sort of reflectivity is common. Another antifa group cautioned against appearing in the “reactive role” in a “mere frontal clash between opposing forces” that allows the state to appear as a neutral enforcer of order. And in a recent essay for *Evergreen Review*, Natasha Lennard gives a maximalist view of the movement: “Antifa... is one aspect of a broader abolitionist project, which would see all racist policing, prisons, and oppressive hierarchies abolished.” Though some groups and writers have proposed strategic coordination with other left and community groups, electoralism and cooperation with the state has generally proved anathema to this stridently anti-political faction.

The fact that antifa had become the most visible group in US politics espousing anti-state slogans did not stop the leftwing anti-antifa school from characterizing it as liberal. The Los Angeles-based *Lucha no Feik* wrote at the close of 2016:

From the Arditi to the Popular Front

Historic fascism emerged from the revolutionary crisis following World War I. From 1917 to 1923, much of Europe was on the brink of revolution, as the example and inspiration of Russia loomed large. In Italy, hundreds of thousands of workers occupied their factories, bringing the economy to a grinding halt. Reacting to the political crisis, Benito Mussolini, a socialist turned national chauvinist, formed the first fascist paramilitary groups in 1921, organizing black-shirted ultra-nationalists to suppress the workers’ movement and defend industrial capital.

Leftists responded by forming their own paramilitary group, the Arditi del Popolo, to defend union halls and working-class neighborhoods from the fascists. Composed, like the blackshirts, largely of war veterans, the leftwing Arditi had about 55,000 members. Many today believe that they would have had the power to stop Mussolini, who was handed control of Italy by King Victor Emmanuel III in 1922, were it not for the disintegration of the Italian left. The Bolshevik-inspired Italian Communist Party established itself by seceding from the Italian Socialist Party in 1921. The socialists, attempting to govern their way through the crisis, signed a “peace pact” with the fascists and denounced the illegal tactics of the increasingly militant Arditi. For their part, the communists continued with the insurrectionary strategy of the immediate postwar period and tentatively supported the Arditi, but were internally split between the leadership of Antonio Gramsci, who viewed them as a potential military force for their party, and Amadeo Bordiga, who denounced them as merely reactive and not explicitly oriented toward the conquest of political power.

The positions of the socialists and Bordiga are the antecedents for today’s criticisms of antifa: the socialists denounced the Arditi as antisocial ultraleftists, and the communists aligned with Bordiga criticized them as defenders of liberal democracy.

This same dynamic reemerged during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, when anarchists and dissident Marxists joined Stalinists and liberals in a Popular Front government, defending the Spanish Republic against the fascist General Franco’s revolt. Bordiga, by then a very marginal figure, criticized the anarchists and communists for submitting themselves to the Republican alliance instead of pursuing their own revolutionary objectives in the space opened up by civil war. “The workers of Spain are fighting like lions, but they are being beaten because they are being led by traitors,” declared his journal *BILAN*.

The other communist current opposed to the Popular Front was led by Leon Trotsky, likewise a Bolshevik castaway claiming a Leninist lineage, but one with far more international influence. Although he was critical of the Spanish Republic, Trotsky argued for a reversion to Lenin's policy of a "united front" alliance between proletarian parties (communists and social democrats, along with the trade unions) but rejected interclass liberal organizations. With the rise of Hitler, Trotsky argued that the workers' movement would be completely crushed if communists and social democrats did not unite, even though he blamed social democrats for the rise of fascism. With a unique clarity about the horrors to come, Trotsky urged his followers to join antifascist groups, while still criticizing the liberal sentiments animating antifascism:

"The very concepts of 'anti-fascism' and 'anti-fascist' are fictions and lies. Marxism approaches all phenomena from a class standpoint... The slogan 'Against fascism, for democracy!' cannot attract millions and tens of millions of the populace if only because during wartime there was not and is not any democracy in the camp of the republicans... It suffices for liberal journalists but not for the oppressed workers and peasants. They have nothing to defend except slavery and poverty. They will direct all their forces to smashing fascism only if, at the same time, they are able to realize new and better conditions of existence. In consequence, the struggle of the proletariat and the poorest peasants against fascism cannot in the social sense be defensive, only offensive."

While Trotsky's Fourth International eventually committed to a defense of the Soviet Union and liberal democracy, the Bordigists remained "revolutionary defeatists." Fascism was merely bourgeois dictatorship, a reaction to the inability of liberal democracy to adequately defeat proletarian revolution. World war and dictatorship could only make such a revolution more likely, as it had in Russia in 1917.

In the aftermath of the fascist period, the extent of its horrors now known, such a position is more scandalous than ever. Some of its proponents famously attempted to make history conform to their intransigence by denying the extent of fascist terror, while others argued that, as bad as fascism was, it cannot recur in the absence of a revolutionary upsurge similar to the 1917-1921 period.

A new fascism has returned, however, and with it a militant opposition. The criticism of antifascism today often repeats the positions of Bordiga and Trotsky, despite the fact that the dynamics, composition, tactics, and goals of both fascists and antifascists are today totally different.

From Antifascism to Antifa

The most commonly-cited left critic of antifascism is Gilles Dauvé, a post-1968 French communist who attempted to fuse the left communism of Bordiga with German and Dutch council communism. Dauvé spells out his critique of antifascism in the introduction he wrote to a number of *BILAN* texts about the subject, translated into English under the name "*Fascism/Antifascism*" in 1982, and later reworked into the 1998 essay "*When Insurrections Die*." Dauvé describes antifascism, witheringly, as "the worst product of fascism," because it ends up defending the very things, capitalism and the capitalist state, that produce fascism.

These criticisms predated the militant antifascist groups of the 1980s, which emerged throughout Europe and the United States to counter the spread of Nazi skinheads. While Dauvé and others like him were skeptical of the efficacy of such milieus, their critiques were rather aimed at the continued Popular Frontism of the 1970s in places like Chile and Portugal. In most of Europe, however, fascist parties were banned or driven underground after 1945, only reemerging in the 1980s and 1990s as skinhead subcultural formations or clandestine terrorist organizations. Meanwhile, for most of the postwar period, the leftwing governing coalitions throughout Europe had ceded their socialist pretensions and embraced neoliberal restructuring. With no left coalition to attach itself to and few fascist opponents, antifascism largely disappeared as a street movement.

It returned as a significant force after German reunification, when neo-Nazi groups began to organize anti-immigrant pogroms. But unlike the German antifascist groups of the 1930s and 1940s, the antifa of the 1990s was influenced by the New Left autonomist movement and had little connection to the Social Democrats, German Communist Party, or parliamentary politics in general. In riots, they fought the police and attacked businesses in order to demonstrate the collusion between the state, fascists, and capital. They squatted buildings to create social housing and community centers and underscore their opposition to capitalism. To prevent identification from the state and fascists, they wore masks and an all-black uniform, developing the now ubiquitous tactic of "black bloc." Aside from iconography, they resembled the pre-war antifascists very little.

North American antifascism is an even more recent phenomenon, emerging within the last decade from the Anti-Racist Action networks that expelled Nazi skinheads from the punk and hardcore scenes in the 1980s. As time went on, many within the ARA network recognized that their practices were overly nar-