

# Is fascism a non-class ideology?

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Let us begin with a question that is deceptively simple and has proven to be pretty controversial: Are ideological elements attributable to specific classes? For instance, does fascism, being primarily an ideology, have a class content?

Trotsky had *inter alia* argued that the fascist movement could only rise over the base of the petty-bourgeoisie. Such a movement could not only establish a forcible hegemony notably over conscious workers but, more importantly, could also influence workers who did not have class consciousness ideologically. A similar argument has been put forth by Poulantzas as well.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, according to him, the main class that plays a role in fascism's seizure of power is the petty-bourgeoisie. The fundamental characteristic of this class is based on the fact that it merely reveals its unity as a class only when various economic activities of its various fractions produce the same effect at political and ideological levels. The petty-bourgeoisie is thus united as a class. There are some sub-unity factors that give way to the involvement of the petty-bourgeoisie's ideology into the dominant ideology, which are anti-capitalism within the limits of the status quo, the myth of hierarchy, and state fetishism. The historical role of fascism is to forge an alliance between big monopoly capital and the petty-bourgeoisie.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, Verso Edition, 1979.

The common aspect of these two analyses, leaving aside their differences, is nothing other than their identification of the petty-bourgeoisie as the main supporter/bearer of fascist ideology. Ernesto Laclau, however, objects to such an approach since, according to him, the process of unearthing the class belongings of concrete ideologies' key elements is undertaken completely arbitrarily. Moreover, Laclau argues that none of the elements, which Poulantzas had thought of being characteristic of a class, are such when handled on its own. Indeed, liberalism that is taken to be the bourgeois ideological element of the stage of competitive capitalism has been the characteristic ideology of feudal lords in Latin America. Or militarism cannot be necessarily regarded as an imperialist or feudal ideology. The version of militarism experienced in the Third World countries after the Second World War had anti-imperialist characteristics. Therefore, for Laclau, trying to comprehend any ideological element through class identity would be a pointless attempt. This implies that all ideological elements could be the main ideology of any class.

Laclau concludes the following based on these: (1) Evaluation of the ideological and political existence of classes through a process of reduction is not possible any more. The class character of an ideological discourse is revealed by the principle of articulation (i.e. the articulation of interpellations forming this ideology). Fascism does not involve any associations on its own; it is neither a bourgeois, nor a feudal, nor a petty-bourgeois, nor a proletarian ideology. The class statement here only appears through the articulation of fascism to other ideological elements. But where does the distinction lie? This distinction is based on the associative power of a specific signification nucleus to different fields of ideological articulation. Therefore, classes do not signify an ideological and political reduction process but exist within an articulation process. (2) Articulation, in this case, requires non-class contents that constitute the raw materials over which ideological class practices function, that is, interpellations and conflicts. A class establishes its hegemony to the degree that it succeeds in articulating different worldviews, not imposing a single worldview upon the remainder of the society and thus neutralizes the potential contradictions of different worldviews. For instance, if the working class tries to impose socialist ideology upon the remainder of the society, it will fail, but if it articulates its own ideology to other ideologies adopted by the "people" (nationalism, liberalism, social democracy, etc.) it can succeed. (3) If this is the case, classes and empirically observed groups do not have to overlap with one another. Individuals are the bearers and intersection points of an accumulation of conflicts with not all boiling down to class conflicts. Moreover, it cannot be argued that the class articulating this accumulation of conflicts has to be the one that the individual should belong to.

Laclau has persistently underlined that in order for a class to establish its own hegemony it should articulate popular democratic interpellations to its own

ideological discourse. Let us give this the benefit of doubt for a second. But Laclau has already stated in his critique of Poulantzas that his attribution of class belongings to concrete ideological elements was downright arbitrary. According to Laclau, ideological elements tackled on its own do not necessarily possess any class statements and one can only talk about a class statement on the condition that these are articulated in the form of a concrete ideological discourse. Yet, the problem is this: say, there needs to be an ideological discourse that can be attributed to the working class so that this class can articulate other ideological discourses with no class belongings to its own ideological discourse. In other words, there should at least be one ideological discourse belonging to a class and this class should be able to articulate non-class ideological discourses to its own. Laclau responds to this argument by underscoring the fact that class ideologies could exist at the abstract level of the mode of production. For example, if socialism is an ideology it is one abstractly expressed at the level of the mode of production and if the working class wants to become a hegemonic class with its ideology it should be able to articulate it to the ideologies at the concrete social level. However, the claim that the conflict emerging at the level of the mode of production is abstract refers in fact to an arbitrariness because people continuously go through this conflict within concrete social formations in their everyday lives. Then, class conflict not only takes place at the abstract level of the mode of production but it can also take place, or is experienced, and can be unfolded at the level of concrete social formation. Yet another problem appears at this point: a popular democratic interpellation that the working class has articulated to its own ideology does not necessarily have to render the ideology of the class revolutionary but, on the contrary, may very well bring about more reactionary consequences. Simply put, what if the process of establishing hegemony with the support of the “people” by articulating socialism to nationalism gives way not to people’s adoption of more progressive ideologies (like socialism) but more reactionary understandings within socialist ideology? That is, how can such negative effects brought about by the articulation of popular democratic ideologies on the ideology of the working class be eliminated or can they be eliminated considering the fact that all articulations to socialism will not engender progressive consequences? Laclau must have realized such problems in his further work (notably in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that he co-authored with Chantal Mouffe). His solution, however, has been to sever the tie between the objective class positions and hegemony entirely, that is, total dismissal of the idea that hegemony could only be established by classes. What follows is the total severance of the connection between the working class and its social position, that is, between economy (mode of production) and politics (ideology).

This has lately been a common problem for many authors. A more recent

example that suffers from the same defect is Michael Mann's book titled *Fascists*.<sup>2</sup> Mann argues that we have to comprehend the social basis and functions of fascism well but we should not identify the social with class. To him, theorists of class focus on "social basis" and "objective functions," thereby overtly ignoring fascists' own beliefs. Another problem emerges at this point as well. If there is no such basis, whether class or objective, the question "where do fascists' own beliefs spring from?" begs an answer. Mann's response to this question will be discussed below but now let us continue with his critique of the class-based theorization of fascism.

According to Mann, none of the theories of middle-class holds firm any more. Mann argues that most fascists are neither economically deprived nor particularly middle-class based on the examples of Italy, Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Austria. Since persons from all classes became fascists, this is exactly why it is unlikely that class consciousness or class conflict would directly explain much of fascism. Besides, fascism, according to Mann, is usually neither particularly bourgeois nor particularly petty-bourgeois, its class composition is complex and variable. Accordingly, Mann defines fascism as *the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism* rather than defining it in relation to a class category. He puts forth this definition in terms of five conditions that contain internal tensions. The first is *nationalism* signifying a deep and populist commitment to an "organic" or "integral" state. The second is *statism* involving both goal and organizational form; to Mann, fascists worship state power. The third is *transcendence* referring to fascists' rejection of conservative, liberal, social democratic, and socialist claims. According to Mann, they attacked both the capital and labor. Fascist nation-statism was expected to be able to transcend social conflict, first repressing those who fomented strife and then incorporating classes and other interest groups into the state's corporatist institutions. Yet all classes supported fascists for exactly these reasons. Nevertheless, Mann argues that transcendence was never actually accomplished as all fascist regimes leaned toward capitalism in practice. In this sense, Mann claims that fascists had an aim to actually transcend capitalism while he dismisses the fact that fascism was a product of the imperialist monopoly capitalism. The fourth condition is *cleansing* all its opponents that were seen as enemies. The last one is *paramilitarism* which is the basis of a fascist radicalism effecting people's class transcendence by "knocking heads together."

Mann states that the four components of fascism, which he refers to as the sources of social power, are necessary for his definition of fascism. These are ideological, economic, military, and political sources of power. According to Mann, class theorists tend to elevate economic power relations in their explanations,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Mann, *Fascists*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

while nationalist theorists emphasize ideology. To him, all four sources of social power are needed to explain the most important social and historical outcomes.

Within this framework, Mann associates the rise of authoritarianism and fascism with the crises seen in these above-mentioned four sources of power. Each of these components were effective in Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Spain, where fascist regimes emerged (and studied by Mann), but they had different specific weights in each country.

According to Mann, fascists were people who believed in a paramilitary, transcendent, and cleansing nation-statism and could not simply be a vehicle for class interests since neither their organizations nor their values allowed them to be simply a vehicle for class interests as they were distinctive. They rather sought to cleanse the nation of its enemies and so to transcend class and political conflict.

Mann quite appropriately argues that one must take fascist movements and the possibility of a future rise of fascism very seriously. In this sense, Mann's attempt at understanding fascism and fascists is invaluable because the history of the rise of fascism also coincides with the history of the incompetence of theories of fascism, as Mandel also stressed. A systematic analysis of fascism will also make the struggle against it more effective.

Yet, I believe that Mann's book has two important weaknesses. First, Mann takes class theories as ones that purely and simply reduce fascist movements to the middle-class or the interests of capitalist classes. However, explaining the world through class theories, i.e. through class struggles, refers to the analysis of a part of the whole together with other parts, for instance, analyzing the political field together with the other parts of the whole (economic, cultural, ideological, etc.), not merely reducing all issues to class. Indeed, Trotsky revealed the relationship between the petty-bourgeoisie and finance capital in his analysis of fascism. He investigated this relationship within the framework of the crisis of capitalism by demonstrating the ways in which the fascist movement was incorporated into the bourgeois state apparatus through a holistic analysis. Hence, class theory does not mean reducing everything to class.

Yet, Mann makes a second mistake and fails to notice the class characteristic of fascism, as he understands class theory in this way, and lists a wide range of various characteristics each of which may vary as per different countries. This, in turn, makes it harder for us to recognize fascism, thereby blurring the view about what and whom we should fight against. Mann mistakenly assumes that perceiving the world through class struggle is essentialism. What follows for Mann will merely taking one more step to sever the ties between economy and politics, just like Laclau.

Such a perception is in fact a major problem in social sciences. Indeed, analyzing social events from a class struggle perspective is often interpreted as an essentialist approach. This unavoidably leads either to the outright elimination

of class from analyses or to the eclectic articulation of utterly different variables to class, just like Mann does. Thus class becomes invisible in social analysis, it is disguised. Yet on the contrary such a perspective requires thinking about economic, political and ideological-cultural elements together since all these emerge, develop and transform within the framework of class struggles. Therefore, it will not be inaccurate to state that the literature on fascism needs further studies that are not eclectic or essentialist but are able to analyze fascism through a holistic comprehension of social events.