

Interview

France's Mounting Authoritarianism Is Paving the Way for Fascism

Tuesday 29 June 2021, by [BERNARD Émilien](#), [PALHETA Ugo](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2021).

Soldiers' and police unions' calls for action to save France from chaos show how fascist ideas have spread within the state. For decades, neoliberal governments have increased these repressive bodies' powers — and today, they're preparing the ground for a Le Pen presidency.

It's been two months since a thousand active military personnel signed a letter grimly foreboding "chaos" in French public life — and threatening to intervene to do something about it. In a time in which Emmanuel Macron's administration is dissolving basic civil liberties, police unions and outspoken army officers are trampling on the standards of democratic civilian government.

Fascism hasn't come to France yet — and Marine Le Pen has sought to mainstream her Rassemblement National party's image. Yet this is based not just on a moderation of the old far right but also a broader radicalization of French politics around identity, Islamophobia, and security — thus preparing the way for large parts of the state apparatus to rally behind her project.

Ugo Palheta is author of *The Possibility of Fascism*, soon to be translated into English. He spoke to Émilien Bernard about the authoritarian turn in France, Le Pen's project, and how we can stop the downward spiral toward fascism.

Émilien Bernard (EB)

Your book came out in 2018, not long before the gilets jaunes movement got underway. What's your reading of the police and judicial repression against it? And, if in your book you talk of three decisive trends — the crisis of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and a boom in racist nationalism — has all this gotten worse since?

UP

Ugo Palheta: I'd written most of the book in 2017, and its subtitle spoke of the "disastrous trajectory" that we're on. Everyone can see that we haven't moved an inch away from this over the last few years — rather, we're ever more obviously trapped in it.

Yes, the situation is worse today than in 2018, and it couldn't have been otherwise, given the neoliberal project that Emmanuel Macron embodies and pursues. This project is a reworking of social relations, and even of subjectivities, in the attempt to increase profits through intensified exploitation. This requires the destruction of the popular classes' past social conquests, a challenge to fundamental democratic gains previously won (especially civil liberties), and a constant bidding war upping the tempo on racism.

The repression of the *gilets jaunes* movement was of a piece with the social violence intrinsic to this project, but also the loss of legitimacy suffered by political authorities and by the neoliberal project

pursued by all governments since the 1980s. When you're not prepared to make any serious concessions to the working class, when you systematically smash up the various components of the postwar "social compromise," and when you hold social movements (particularly trade-union organizations) in contempt, it's ever less possible to exercise political domination in a peaceful way. That's especially true faced with a movement that won't bend to the usual rules governing social conflict.

EB

Has the system's ever more marked dependence on its repressive forces — so blatantly obvious during the gilets jaunes protests — opened the way to an intensified securitarian turn? And what are we to think of the fact that soldiers recently entered the political arena with these "seditious" columns published in far-right magazine Valeurs actuelles? Is this resurgent fascism, or is this just media clownery?

UP

All governments over the last two decades have given a greater margin of autonomy to the police and to the public displays of strength that the police unions can make today. And what's also new here is that the police unions' positions are widely being broadcast by media outlets which are extremely indulgent of them.

The intensification of repression is a downward spiral that's very difficult to put a stop to. What Loïc Wacquant calls the gradual replacement of the welfare state by the penal state can only end up with an ever-increasing criminalization of poverty and inequalities in society. These are the perfect ingredients to keep feeding low-level criminality (though, in the long term, the most serious crimes have fallen). And in the media's and our rulers' eyes, this justifies intensified repression.

But we should also note that the repressive apparatuses are pushing home their advantage. That's particularly true of the most reactionary elements in their ranks, which either have been or are being won to the neofascist project. We need only read the columns by these officers to see that the whole language and worldview they are adopting is drawn from fascist circles. I don't at all believe we'll see a military coup. But this all points to a process driving the fascization of the state. This means that if the far right does arrive in power, it will find massive support within the ranks of the state apparatus in carrying through the core element of its project: namely, to establish a racial apartheid regime under the cover of "defending France" while crushing any space for the exploited and oppressed to act politically.

EB

Not least because of the COVID-19 crisis, we seem to have sunk ever deeper into a permanent state of exception — a state of emergency on security grounds, on health grounds, etc. Does this provide the catalyst for an already strong authoritarian state to slide toward fascism, fueled by the public-health crisis?

UP

The path toward fascism is neither the product of a slow involution (a gradual, progressive slide without disruptive shocks) nor a sudden show of strength by fascists, allowing them to win power once and for all and then implement their program. The turn the ruling class and its political personnel have taken provides a terrain in which fascism can prosper. But the working class has to suffer a whole series of decisive political and social defeats before the fascists can reach power and be able to deeply transform the state and social relations in a truly *fascist* sense.

So, there is nothing automatic in this: there have been profound setbacks (socially, politically, ideologically) and battles have been lost. But there are still other battles yet to come. We have to be

prepared for them and engage these battles by seeking out the (difficult) paths of both radicalism and unity. Without combining the two things, there's no way out of this situation.

EB

One thing you don't talk about much in the book is the online dimension of this propaganda, which helped Trump to the presidency and is now driving QAnon's growth. The Left seems to be losing out a lot from this in the current culture war. Do you think that fascism in its new guise will necessarily depend on new forms of communication and propaganda?

UP

That's already the case. Insofar as fascisms have no problem using lies, current developments in the media and political landscape are highly favorable to them. When the interior minister says he doesn't give a damn about crime statistics and prefers to listen to "the good sense of a small-town butcher," and when twenty-four-hour news station constantly platform industrial-scale false-news producers (of which far-right polemicist Éric Zemmour is just one example), when everything is arranged to maximize ratings, clicks, and retweets, the fascists have an easy time promoting their propaganda.

But, in my view, the more decisive fact is something rather less noted. It is, primarily, the weakness of the popular classes' own organization that allows part of them to become prey to the racist propaganda of the dominant ideologues (and ruling-class ideologues) or even to the mad theories promoted by conspiracy theories. The workers' movement long offered — on a mass scale — not only collective solidarity and a hope of social transformation but a rational framework for reading the world based on the fundamental social antagonisms, class and class struggle.

All that has unraveled, and that's what we need to rebuild. That has to be done in a way suited to our time, also integrating some relatively new themes like the environment and some older ones like racism and patriarchy. Because when you no longer believe in something, you're prone to believe anything and anyone.

EB

While it's trying to redeem its image, you say the Rassemblement National is the bearer of a fascism "in gestation." What can be done to stop it reaching its full conclusion?

UP

That's a big, difficult question. The response that immediately comes to mind is building anti-fascism — but while this is imperative, it is sadly also insufficient (especially if we focus anti-fascism on the fight against the Rassemblement National, which I think is a mistake). If the growth of fascism is a product of the crisis of capitalism in general, and in particular a crisis of French capitalism (including its imperialist dimension, which is important even if we haven't touched on it here) then we cannot beat fascism without imposing an emancipatory alternative to capitalism.

The winning solution is easy to formulate, but much harder to put into practice: to build anti-fascist organizations, coalitions, ideas, and practices; intensify and expand social mobilizations, especially through rebuilding at the base (in workplaces and communities); waging the battle of ideas, not settling for satisfying small niches but addressing the great mass of people; and building a mass anti-capitalist organization, with its center of gravity in social struggles but also able to develop on the electoral and institutional levels. The bar is very high. But even if such objectives seem beyond reach, that doesn't mean we don't have to pursue them.

EB

There's a debate on the term "fascism," which often risks being used as mere invective. François

Giroud spoke of how “Thus fascism begins. It never says its name, it crawls up on us, it looms . . . and then one day it is right up in our faces and we can’t get rid of it anymore.” Could it be defined any better? And when should this term be used?

UP

There’s at least three difficulties, beyond the problem of the more or less polemical use of concepts.

One concerns the debates among historians and the lack of consensus on the definition of fascism. On one end there’s the historians who reduce it to the Italian fascism of the 1920s and ’30s, and on the other those who outline a more generic concept of fascism, which then has to be distinguished between different variants (and I clearly embrace this latter vision).

Then there’s the fact that fascism can be captured in terms of its ideology (its project), or in light of the movements carrying forth this ideology, or in light of states and regimes. So in each case we should make clear which we are talking about. There is no fascist regime in today’s France, but there are various political movements propagating fascist ideologies.

Lastly, there’s the fact that fascism has always been diverse and opportunistic (especially regarding its economic doctrines) even if there is a common matrix: a project of national or civilizational regeneration by means of the ethno-racial and political purification of the social body. I follow Zeev Sternhell when he says that fascism wasn’t born in the trenches of 1914-18 and did not die in a bunker in Berlin in 1945. Fascism has changed, it has adapted to a new context, it has learned to make itself difficult to grasp, to melt into the dominant ideology (for instance, its call for the “defense of the republic,” which the French far right used to scorn). Almost everywhere it is racking up successes as capitalism sinks into crisis, the Left disappoints or betrays its base, and movements for emancipation prove unable to bring alternatives into view.

Interview by Émilien Bernard

P.S.

- Jacobin. 06.28.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/06/france-authoritarianism-facism-military-police-letter-macron-le-pen-gilet-jaunes-racism>

- Adapted from CQFD:
<https://cqfd-journal.org/Le-fascisme-a-mute?cimobile=web>

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