Below the Radar Transcript

EPISODE 217: LATE-FASCISM – WITH ALBERTO TOSCANO

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SPEAKERS: KATHY FENG, AM JOHAL, ALBERTO TOSCANO

[*theme music*]

Kathy Feng 0:02
Hello listeners! I'm Kathy Feng with *Below the Radar*, a knowledge democracy podcast. *Below the Radar* is recorded on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

On this episode of *Below the Radar*, our host Am Johal is joined by Alberto Toscano, a critical theorist and Term Research Associate Professor with the Digital Democracy Institute in SFU's School of Communication. He is also the writer of the book, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*, which will be available in the Fall of 2023 from Verso Books. In this episode, Alberto traces the emergence of critical theory, explores manifestations of fascism through the work of racialized theorists, and discusses imagined white annihilation and victimization as a predicator for far-right movements in the US. We hope you enjoy the episode!

[*theme music fades*]

Toscano, welcome, Alberto.

Alberto Toscano 0:58
Thank you, Am.

Am Johal 1:00
I'm wondering if we can begin with you introducing yourself a little bit.

Alberto Toscano 1:04
So I teach at the School of Communication. I've been teaching for a couple of years, first on a visiting [scholar position] and now in a research term position. And before that, I was at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the Sociology Department and co-directing a Center for Philosophy and Critical Thought, which I still run. And, in general, my work sort of concerns, political and social theory and traditions of Marxist and critical philosophy with a focus on their relevance to contemporary social issues and conflicts.

Am Johal 1:45
And you've been a guest on our podcast before. But I've, of course, first ran into your work as a translator of Alain Badiou's work because I was doing some work on there related to my dissertation and read your book on fanaticism, and another book you did with a colleague of yours *Cartographies of the Absolute* and you've continued to do a lot of translation work as well. I'm wondering if you can speak to your current interests in fascism.

Alberto Toscano 2:13
So the interest in fascism, I suppose, is a long term interest, sort of inevitable if you're interested in or working in critical theory, and also concerned with mapping and possibly re-actualizing the legacies of radical and revolutionary movements of the 20th century, which often were either quashed or, in any case, had to confront various forms of authoritarian or fascist movements. And of course, those movements were often born by way of reaction or counter revolution, right.

when you're talking about the relevance of critical theory to neoliberal representative democracies, you may need a few steps to show why that would be of interest, to remember that when the very idea of critical theory was first forged in the late 1920s and 1930s, it was really in that context, right. The context first of the emergence of fascism, the emergence of National Socialism in Germany in particular, then the context of the defeat of the left and the defeat of socialist and communist forces.

And further to that, the whole question of the afterlives of fascism or the continuation of the potentials, or the elements of fascism, after its seeming defeat on the battlefields of Europe and elsewhere. And so that, I suppose, is one of the sources of wanting to study fascism and to really return to a whole set of theoretical debates on fascism, not just from the 20s and 30s, but from the 1960s and 70s. And more recently, to try to get some purchase, some orientation on contemporary political developments.

And I suppose the strongest motivation, in a sense, is a kind of critical, maybe at times even a polemical one, which is that even though fascism is now a topic of discussion in very mainstream media domains. People fulminate against fascism on CNN or MSNBC. Biden recently started talking about the GOP's semi-fascism, possibly not realizing it was a technical concept amongst American communists in the 1930s and 40s. But I think a lot of those debates are really hamstrung by a very stereotypical or very truncated conception of what historical or interwar or classical fascisms where, and also an inability to think about the relations between the phenomenon of fascism in its most obvious and catastrophic manifestations, and both its precursors and its prolongations, right, after World War Two.

And so that is one of my concerns in this work, is really not just to critically revisit the debates about interwar fascism and how we understand them. So the kinds of theories or critical theories that pertain to them, but also to try to think about the ways in which elements of fascism are seeded in, especially in colonial settings, all the way back to the into the 19th century, and the way that

wondering if you can speak a little bit to that article?

Alberto Toscano 6:13
So the prompt for the piece in Sidecar was a very unfortunate, unhappy anniversary, which is the centenary of the March on Rome, which led in October of 1922 to the ascension of Mussolini and the fascist party to power in Italy. Alas, a grim anniversary because it was a cause of some considerable celebration amongst the inheritors of fascism, not least the supporters of the current Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, who comes very much firmly from that tradition. But I thought it was also a good occasion—this awful 100th birthday—to reflect on what might be some of the limitations, or maybe some of the common places that we might want to revisit in our understanding of fascism. So, not just to question, making analogies with the 1920s and 30s, but to ask ourselves if we really understand this phenomena in their multiple dimensions, right.

And one of the things that I wanted to bring out in that piece was the extent to which the association that we make between fascism and a state that controls economic life, a, so to speak, totalitarian state, that more or less is associated with a planned economy, with corporatism, with the effort to, you know, quash class struggles by uniting bosses and workers, and so on and so forth. That image is an image that doesn't really work for the initial formations of fascism, and certainly, I guess that's one of the things that I do in the piece, if you look at the speeches by Mussolini from 1921-1922, on the eve or the immediate aftermath of the March on Rome, you see a very different conception of the state than the one that we would be prone to associate with fascism, and certainly with fascism as a full blown state regime in the later 1920s, which indeed, made massive inroads into the organization of economic life in Italy.

So in those speeches, one of the things that Mussolini does, is to place fascism on the side of what he himself calls economic liberalism. And therefore argues —or rather, arguing not being a particularly fascist activity—states, affirms that the purpose of the fascist movement is to take the state out of large swathes

would associate with forms of rather extreme neoliberalism are there at the beginning.

Now, it's very true that then that's not what happens to fascism as a state regime in the later 1920s and early 1930s, but I think it's very significant to reflect on the fact that statism, understood in terms of planning and control of the economy, is not, so to speak, in the DNA of fascism, necessarily, right. And it's something that develops for a whole host of reasons, not least the need to deal with a modern society and to [the] rest of working and middle classes that require welfare, and so on and so forth.

Yeah, so that that struck me as worth recalling, and worth recalling that there is, of course, at the origins of fascism, a phenomenon of social and political violence, a celebration, even an idealization of violence in all of its kind of virile, martial post World War One forms. But there is also the desire to place that violence, seemingly unruly violence, on the side of a certain idea of economic life, which at that time, 1921/22, is pretty classically liberal, or at least as economic liberalism was understood by politicians and economists in early 20th century.

Am Johal 11:12
In the piece you talk about Mussolini's reading of Sorel's work, *Reflections on Violence*, and wondering if you can speak a little bit to that work, and it's sort of entanglement or relation to what became a kind of fascist orientation.

Alberto Toscano 11:28
Yes, Sorel is a fascinating and perplexing figure whose role in that political moment, or at least, whose role even in the 1910s, not just in the 1920s, in Italy was very significant—more significant, arguably than in his home country of France. Sorel was first very significant in Italy as a participant in what were debates around so-called Marxist revisionism or the revision of Marxism, which involved Sorel with figures like the Italian-Marxist Antonio Labriola, or indeed his friend and for a while kind of intellectual supporter of Benedetto Croce,

He was a peculiar figure, who, in fact, only began to be a writer, intellectual theorist in his mid-40s after having worked as a civil engineer for the French state. And actually, the propensity of his ideas to attract people from very seemingly disparate sides of the political spectrum was very evident quite quickly. And he was also, you know, quite volatile or mercurial in his associations, right. So moving from anarcho-syndicalism, to associations with hyper-nationalist and even anti-semitic French-right in the 1910s, simultaneously welcoming the fascist movement and the Bolshevik Revolution, writing plans to both Lenin and Mussolini. And his death, for instance, was met with, you know, obituaries that, not necessarily celebrated, but, you know, praised his significance as an intellectual figure both in the communist journal L'Ordine Nuovo, run by Gramsci, Togliatti, and Tasca, and in Gerarchia, which is Hierarchy, the journal of the fascists. So, he's an extremely tricky figure without even going into then—influence on aspects of critical theory itself, right.

So Sorel plays a very prominent role in Walter Benjamin's essay on the *Critique of Violence*, for instance, and so he's a kind of crucial, if very slippery reference for all forms of political and theoretical radicalism, right in the 1910s and 20s. In part because of an emphasis on what could be seen as a kind of revolutionary volunteerism, so a kind of centrality of will and action, a fierce critique of liberalism, of parliamentary liberalism in particular, so elements that would have in different ways resonated with far-left and far-right figures, as well.

The aspect of Sorel's writing, which was most attractive to fascists, of course, remembering that Mussolini, of course, had encountered Sorel as a socialist, and in fact, as a left-wing or radical-socialist himself, right, in the early 1910s. But the aspect that that really resonated with the fascist Mussolini, or with fascists more broadly, was the reference to the centrality of myth in politics, right, to the centrality of myths as—I think the term that Sorel uses, which I think is taken from the philosopher, Henri Bergson, is as blocks of images that will somehow energize or catalyze a kind of creative revolutionary spontaneity,

The myth for Mussolini is a nation, right, that's the, you know, the virile, martial nation at war. And one of the aspects of that reference to myth, certainly in a figure like Mussolini, it's often explicitly, you could say even kind of cynical in the way that it's put forward, right. It's basically saying, well, a myth is needed. It's not some sort of surreptitious, subliminal, manipulative propaganda. It's almost a statement that you know, we are forging a myth because it's only through a myth that we will be able to mobilize mass political energies.

The argument is almost, well, there isn't a nation yet, right. We will make the nation with a myth and the myth will gain in substance with mass politics and indeed, you know, mass violence, right. And that's a, maybe as a kind of afterthought of sorts but that's the very interesting and subtle irony of Walter Benjamin's use of Sorel, is that Walter Benjamin centres the figure of the general strike in his Critique of Violence, but places a general strike against what he calls mythic violence, right. So actually, for Benjamin, the general strike is not a myth, right, it's a form of praxis, let's say, whose object in a sense is to undermine forms of myth in the political realm. So it's an extremely subversive, let's say, use of Sorel on his part.

Am Johal 17:35
Now, one of the things around the way people perceive fascism is centered around this role of the state or the one party state but in your article, you parse out, kind of, the way through Mussolini speeches, as you mentioned earlier, that this relation to the state is quite interesting. It's more complicated than the way it gets sometimes presented, and wondering if you can speak through this sort of, the notion of the role of the state or what you later, you're referencing, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who uses this term, the 'anti-state state.'

Alberto Toscano 18:12
Yes, so Gilmore uses that term, of course, in an analysis of the racial and spatial politics of neoliberalism. My suggestion, I suppose, was that there's elements, certainly of early Italian fascism, as evidenced by the speeches by Mussolini,

its control of social infrastructure, by claiming, advertising, its own retreat from the state. And that is very evident, right, that move is, I think, very evident in Mussolini's speeches.

Notwithstanding the fact that, you know, by the early 1930s, when he writes with the philosopher Giovanni Gentile this famous encyclopedia entry on the doctrine of fascism—or Gentile sort of ghostwrites it for him—the idea of the state, of course, looms large, the so-called ethical state, the statements that, you know, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state, everything within the state, you know, all of that then becomes synonymous with fascism. And so in that sense, it's not surprising that our common sensical or received notion of fascism is as this totalitarian hyper-statist form.

My suggestion, hypothesis, I suppose, is that, if we want to reflect on the relevance, both of the category of fascism, but also theories of fascism, to the moment that we find ourselves in, then it might be useful to turn our attention to those moments when fascism was not simply identified, right, with this monolithic figure of the state. And we can also find those, albeit in a very different vein, I think, that in those speeches by Mussolini, in aspects of National Socialism, and in theories of Nazism as well, right.

So one of the authors who I think is extremely interesting in terms of his analysis of the structure of power in the Third Reich, is the theorist and critical theorist and critical legal theorist, I suppose, Franz Neumann, who in his book, *Behemoth*, actually argues that what national socialism generated was what he calls a non-state state. So, that ultimately it was the Nazi movement and the Nazi party that treated the state, the state bureaucracy, state capacities, as an instrument for racial and power projects that were not contained by the state. And in fact, Neumann, already in 1942, uses this insight to argue for why his—I can't remember if Norman himself was taught by Carl Schmitt. I think Kirchheimer was, of the critical theorists—but in any case, Norman knew Schmidt quite well during the Weimar period, and he argues in Behemoth that you know, Schmidt falls out with the Nazi establishment or aspects thereof, in

understood, right, by Western political theory or by legal theory.

And it's in that context, that Neumann, of course, advances his idea that Nazism does not create a *Leviathan*, right, but creates a Behemoth, right, which a behemoth being the, the mythical figure for Hobbes, of civil war. And, in fact, for Neumann, then, the Nazi state is a state which is not only—can only exist through endless, brutal wars of conquest, but it's also a state that's in a permanent internal state of civil war, right. Because actually, it doesn't really have any principles of stability or cohesion, other than those of this kind of expansive racial terror and conquest. And so he depicts the Nazi state as one in which various groups—industrialists, the SS, the army, the party—are kind of constantly at war with each other, right. The state, in a sense, no longer mediates conflicts properly, but just becomes a kind of arena of these rackets, in a sense, right. And then Hitler has the role of sort of mediating between these bodies and giving this impression of seamless cohesion, but in fact, it's completely internally antagonistic formation, also in which political power directly translates into economic power, right, into plunder of resources, and so on and so forth.

So, I think, whether it's looking at early Italian fascism and its contiguities or affinities with a certain kind of anti-democratic, economic liberalism, or looking at the ways in which the Nazi state was not simply the apotheosis of the modern Western state, but perhaps also its implosion. All of those might allow us, maybe, to take some distance from those notions of fascism as inevitably associated with a kind of monolithic state, which I think ends up being a blockage or a hindrance to thinking about the present as well.

Am Johal 24:30
You use this term...that fascism, as well, like, there's a kind of takeover of the state apparatus, [which] is always presented in a particular way. But you're right, that it's not as an insurrection, but by invitation by sovereign authorities, or a kind of civil war for economic liberalism, or even it's, even the takeover of state is sometimes done in particular ways that is not an insurrection. In fact, it

because, indeed, it itself celebrates and identifies itself with political violence, we often think of fascism as synonymous, right, with a violent takeover of power. Of course, many people will, and do remind us, including in very mainstream fora, that fascism came to power, quote, unquote, democratically, right. So that's also a common reminder, right., because it's also a warning that there might not be jackboots or tanks in the street, and there might still be an infiltration of political power by fascist forces.

The reality, at least in Germany and Italy, falls somewhere in between, right. So, you have a combination of street—or, street violence is perhaps a euphemistic way of putting it right, but, you know, of mass organized militia-like violence—that serves to affirm what is almost a kind of dual power already, right, so the Fascists are already able in Italy in 1920 and 21, through the phenomenon of organized political violence, or sSquadrismo, the use of these kinds of squads that descend on workers' cooperatives, on socialist city administrations, and the like, to dismantle and destroy them, shows that it already has, that the monopoly of power of the state has already largely been undermined.

And of course, as with most cases of fascism, including the creeping forms of the present, large swathes of the so-called repressive state apparatus, police, army, et cetera, are already, you know, porous visa-vie these fascist movements, but the—and this is very evident in the March on Rome as a kind of classic case—that form of organized political violence does not directly take power, right. It instead exerts a kind of spectacular pressure that creates the conditions, or in a sense kind of the excuses or the opportunity, for reactionary conservative and nationalist, but non-fascist forces, amongst governing and business elites, to opt for this solution to ongoing crisis, right. And therefore, Mussolini is, in the Italian instance, invited by the king, to take the position of Prime Minister, even though, of course, in terms of political representation, in terms of votes, Italian Fascists have nothing close to a percentage of votes that would make them even the leading force in a kind of right-wing or nationalist formation. They'd participated in some coalition governments, etc.

[in 1933]. And so then what becomes crucial to think through is that social political coalition, that of, you know, centrist-liberals and nationalists and conservatives, that find it expeditious, to rely on this openly, violent, seemingly revolutionary and anti-statist movement, to shore up, right, a power that they feel is at risk.

And then, of course, the dynamics that follow are quite different, you know, in the case of Italy, for instance, the formation of a kind of one party state takes some time, right. Not fully in place until the later 20s. In the Nazi case, it's extremely accelerated, right, and just various reasons why, you know, that that can be explained. So, I think that yeah, that's an important phenomenon, right, because it suggests that we should be careful about this image of the fascist coup, right, as the way in which fascism comes to power, right. And that perhaps, political violence has other roles, right. And there's more of a, of a dialectic between the street violence and the institutional power. And if anything, one could say that, you know, Mussolini, partly from having been a journalist and propagandist and also socialist politician long before he was a fascist, was very tactically and strategically adept at playing these registers, right, of using the threat of violence to make possible a smooth entrance into power, right.

What the king does, in fact, in Italy, is to basically not sign a state of emergency that would allow the army, which was perfectly capable of doing—whether it would have done it as a different matter, given its sympathies. But it's that omission, right, that then makes it possible for Mussolini to come to power and then for the march itself to be seen as this, you know, triumphant, while in fact, it was actually a much less grandiose event, not least because famously, Mussolini was waiting in Milan quite close to a train station to be able to take a train straight to Switzerland or go into exile if the whole thing were going to fail, right. So, showing a certain opportunism there as well.

Am Johal 31:16
I wanted to go into your your piece in the in the *Boston Review*, which looks

historically been in place in the States. So, I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit to where that article started for you and some of the key thinkers and periods that can help us think that through.

Alberto Toscano 31:58
So I've been conscious for some time of a strain of anti-fascist theorizing emerging from both anti-colonial and black radical movements—had encountered it in Du Bois, in Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, in the writings of C. L. R. James. I'd never necessarily thought of it as a single seam or tradition, but I'd been, you know, aware that this was, of course, and unsurprisingly, so a concern of these theorists. In coming to work in a more concerted way on the problem of fascism in the present, it struck me that in wanting to resist this obsession with analogies with the 1920s and 30s and kind of checklists, right, checklists or, you know, steps towards fascism, right, which all took ...

Am Johal 33:10
There were a lot of those.

Alberto Toscano 33:11
A lot of those, yeah, still are, the 1920s and 30s as the model, right, you know. So has this happen, already, you know, you're in stage three, or in stage five, or, you know, etc, etc.

(*laughs*)

And I think the importance—I mean, there's an importance in its own right, because they're just brilliant theorists, but also the importance now—of figures like Césaire and Du Bois and later on, Angela Davis, George Jackson, and others, is to undo this normative model across a number of different axes. So, one is to suggest something that Du Bois does in *Black Reconstruction in America*, and which Amiri Baraka points to in writing on Du Bois, which is to see the formations of racial terror in the US South, especially—not really in the

element, right, to see that fascism has a longer history than when it takes the name of fascism explicitly, and that those racial and settler colonial formations of proto or pre or racial-fascism are both worthy of critical and theoretical attention to themselves, but are also indispensable if you really want to understand both classical fascisms and contemporary rebirths or mutations, right, of fascist politics.

A second perspective that I draw from this work, and I think it's also very nicely synthesized in some short essays on fascism by Cedric Robinson—and about the specificity of black radical theories of fascism—is to argue that the identification of fascism emerges from specific social experiences of exploitation and repression, which are in turn racialized, as well as gendered—which we could discuss, you know, together and separately, to this issue—and in that sense, the writings of Angela Davis and George Jackson in the early 1970s, or late 60s and early 1970s, around the specificity of the experience of black political prisoners and the reality of these, you know, law and order and incarceration campaigns that define the US state. These are experiences that point to the fact that the same society might be fascist for some and not for others, right. And Davis makes this very explicit, he says, well, she says, there's already fascist modalities of rule and repression and terror that are taking place in the United States in the late 1960s and early 70s—obviously, we could say, into the present—which swathes of the population were not affected by them, do not consider to be, right, did not see as fascist, but that nevertheless are also seeds or even kind of laboratories for politics that might and forms of repression and government that might affect the broader populations, and not solely along racialized lines further, further down the road, right.

And, I guess, third and last, we could also say—so not just that fascism has this kind of racial longue durée that is, like long before the European 1920s and 30s and it has to do with with colonialism, settler colonialism and empire—that there was a differential experience of fascism, but also that fascism, in certainly in its North American forms, is not just a counter revolutionary or preventive counter revolutionary force, but it's one which is explicitly

abstract, generic way in which capitalism deals with its abstract and generic contradictions and crises, right.

Am Johal 38:15
You reference Césaire's term, this sort of boomerang effect of European colonialism and its link back to kind of specificities of fascism or authoritarianism. Wondering if you can speak a little bit to that.

Alberto Toscano 38:31
I think Césaire has probably the most—I mean, not least, because he's such a splendid and incisive writer, but probably has in Discourse on Colonialism, some of the most effective formulations of the idea that, that the fascism that we often misperceive as an intra-European phenomenon, is constitutively linked to the histories of colony and empire. And that it is, in many ways a return, or a projection, of racial regimes and forms of political and military and genocidal violence that are firmly established and practiced, outside of a so-called metropole that under the condition of global capitalist crisis of the 20s and 30s, then, you know, return, so to speak to European soil.

And there's somewhat analogous if actually, in some ways not, comparable formulations of this also, in some writings by the Marxist, Karl Korsch and also by Hannah Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Her formulation is rather problematic for a number of reasons having to do with her own, so to speak, racial imaginary, which is a bit over-determined by *Heart of Darkness* and Joseph Conrad and so on and so forth.

Now, I think Césaire's insight is extremely significant and has been extremely significant for a lot of theorists of contemporary fascism. And for those listeners interested in this, I would just recommend they look, at least at first at Robin Kelley's introduction to the new edition of Discourse on Colonialism.

I think it's perhaps also worth qualifying the idea of 'the boomerang', right. It's worth qualifying, one, maybe through exploring the idea that Europe already

also the history of all forms of racial, you know, racially framed repression and violence in forms of internal colonialism and histories of anti-Semitic and anti-Roma repression and persecution. So in some sense, it's not just that there is this kind of homogeneous European history and then these awful things are done in the colonies and then they return, right. You kind of have to follow the whole circuit, right. Things are also done in colonial spaces that had already been, you know, practiced and perfected against internal ethno-racial minorities and against labouring classes and, you know, dispossessed and subaltern people within Europe itself, right. And I think we have to be careful also, right, of these kinds of homogeneous and anachronistic notions, right, of this kind of homogeneous white continent, or, whatever, right. You know, just as, you know, we can, you know, we can learn a lot from, you know, what the British practiced in Ireland first and then exported to other settler colonial contexts, right. So, it all kind of has to do with, yeah, how we configure this, this idea of Europe, in part.

So that's one, one issue, I think 'the boomerang' should not be taken as too linear, right, or too unilateral kind of a metaphor. And then I also think we could qualify Césaire's point, and this really has to do with histories of settler colonialism specifically, by emphasizing how much the settler colonial practices—juridical practices for instance—and imaginaries, played a critical role in the formations of European fascism, right. It's no secret that the east plan of the Nazis was basically their own version of a kind of Manifest Destiny, right. That they constantly fantasize their own genocidal and territorial practices with a kind of North American model in mind, right. And this was also true at the very technical juridical level. So, very early on in the emergence of the Nazi state, in the planning of racial laws, Nazi jurists were studying, quite assiduously, racially exclusive and hierarchizing legislation applied to African Americans and Native Americans in the States, right. And initially, in fact, they —which, of course, in retrospect is surprising—but initially they thought that Jim Crow Laws were too extreme to be able to implement, right, on the European continent.

laws were fascinating for these racist Nazi jurists, because they permitted the possibility of having nationals who weren't citizens, right. It was all about the stripping of citizenship and the creation, right, of all sorts of racialized and subordinate populations. So that's another sense, right, in which, yeah, it's not just the kind of—'boomerang' because it's not just about what European powers, France, Britain, Germany, Italy did in their colonial and imperial outposts and ventures, but also very much what settler colonies, what European settler colonies outside of Europe did as a model, right.

So while and, you know, there's a lot of very interesting historical discussion, right, about, for instance, how many key figures in Nazism or ideologues or military practitioners drew on the experiences, for instance, of the genocide carried out on the Herero people in the early part of the century by Germany, and so on and so forth. But I think there's almost an even stronger claim, or even maybe, perhaps even a more precise or specific claim than 'the boomerang', to say that, maybe not European fascism on the whole but certainly, National Socialism is, in a fairly uncontroversial way, the idea that you could be a settler colony, like inside so-called European space, right. And in many ways, it imagines itself in that mode, right, like the whole idea of Lebensraum or 'living space' is very much an artifact, right, of that, of that model and that imaginary, yeah.

Am Johal 46:28
In talking about or evoking these American sort of strains of fascism, authoritarian, whatever word we want to use, that there are these sort of echoes, and differences with European fascism, as you write in, and you talked about before, as kind of a form of preventive counter reform, or racial fascism as a response to abolition democracy and attempt to contain political movements from asserting rights or gaining rights in some kind of way.

Wondering in looking at, you know—I have friends who live, for example, in Florida or Ohio, and these governments are bringing in, you know, under DeSantis, critiques of, their Stop Woke Act to all of these things where you

Mussolini was kind of a joke for a bunch of people at the beginning, as was Hitler, and, in some cases, the absurdity of it all, as it rolls out, that there is a kind of tenor to these places when they actually, you know, for example, can appoint Supreme Court justices that can shift and change the laws very quickly. And wondering, what [are] these American specificities of how this rolls out, and how we can think [about] it?

Alberto Toscano 48:02
Just this morning, I saw the Virginia Department of Education revised their history high school curriculum to remove all mentions of fascism, this is an actual item. They did so in a particularly gormless way because they actually left the gaps in the text. The sentences became kind of nonsensical, it was like, you know, dictatorship and blank. Yeah, it was Japanese militarism and Italian fascism. So they removed the militarism and fascism from the curricula. So, there's that too. I think it's tricky. I found it challenging right to think through, even theorize both at the political strategic level, but also, I suppose, at the quasi-psychoanalytic one, what this sheer overkill, right, of ideological, cultural warfare signals, right.

I use the term, 'preventive counter reform,' in the piece I wrote, as a way of marking both the continuities and the differences from the moment that Marcuse and Angela Davis were responding to in the late 60s and 70s, right. They said, okay, if there is a US fascism, then it's not a fascism that takes place in the context of or the wake of revolutionary or insurrectionary situations, it takes place in anticipation of and to preemptively undermine the possibility of the emergence of a threat to orders of property and privilege, right. I said 'preventive counter reform' because it seemed to me that the situation that we find ourselves in, alas, is even less laden with imminent emancipatory revolutionary potentials, right, than the one of the 1970s.

And so in a way, when, you know, these, some of these completely grotesque and bizarre legislative drives are carried out, for instance, to try to remove the teaching of critical race theory from elementary schools where—I don't think

almost say is become this kind of quasi-racialized word in the States, right, like theory is what awful leftists who want to destroy western white civilization or something do, right, just by by definition. So that's why I think, yeah, I use the term, 'preventive counter reform.'

Now, I don't, in doing that, I don't want to, yeah, belittle the discursive struggles, right, very significant discursive struggles that in some way have played out across, especially across the United States, for all of their ambivalence, right. So, you find self-avowed, radical abolitionists writing op-eds for the New York Times, which is surprising, which is, of course, still, you know, massively establishment, liberal right-wing paper, right. So it's not...

And it's true that if you look at the whole debate around the advanced placement course, right, the most recent one in Florida. I was impressed by the curriculum. It was like, you know, it's like, we've done well.

(*laughs*)

It's like, yay, yay for Cultural Marxism, right, like, I thought, wow, you know, they have, you know, Robin Kelley and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on an AP exam, like that's some serious, some serious discursive struggle taking place, right. So you know, and in one sense, like, it's, there's both an element of like, grotesque, overreach, and like comical paranoia, but there's also the reality, right, there's a reality that people have engaged in and people should like, own up to, you know, should be proud of that, right. Like, it's an impressive achievement to get Floridian 18 year olds to read abolitionist theory in, you know, state schools like that. That's great that they got even to the point where they were forced to then, now—I think it was yesterday or something I saw that they've then proposed the kind of redacted or revised course, right.

And in a way, I think like, and I think a lot of people do, especially the abolitionist and radical thinkers just mentioned, you know, see this as a real discursive struggle, and therefore, there's nothing in a sense to be to be

that, you know, so in some sense, it's, you know, that, that there's both a diversionary and instrumental notion of, you know, culture war, but there are also evidently very massive discursive conflicts that are very kind of consequential, right, in the United States, and elsewhere. Yeah, I'm not sure if I have necessarily that much more to say about that issue in particular.

Am Johal 54:03
Yeah, and for those of you listening at home, Alberto is accepting speaking engagements in Florida.

(*laughs*)

Wanted to see if you had anything else to add on the notion of American fascism? Is that the right term, or should we be—are we talking about American authoritarianism? Are we talking about a kind of American fanaticism? Because I think sometimes people get caught up— object to the term itself as a kind of overreach or exaggeration to an American political kind of condition that's been amping up in a particular direction.

Alberto Toscano 54:40
Yeah, that, I confess, is one of the ambivalences I have in undertaking this whole project, right. I think it's crucial to think with theories and conceptions of fascism from different historical moments and coming from different intellectual and political traditions. Also, outside of Western or Atlantic contexts, I'm thinking of very, extremely interesting debates on fascism, for instance, that took place in Japan in the 1930s, and onward and so on. At the same time, I also worry about the pleasures of naming phenomena, right, as though in affixing the label, one had done anything in particular, right.

So, that's in part why I'm more interested in those positions, like those articulated by Angela Davis in the 70s, which are really to think about fascism as a process, right, as a dynamic and to think through that instead of necessarily saying, okay, well, "the Republican Party is", as Biden puts it, "a

the specificity of this phenomenon, which I think we need those theories of fascism for, but we don't necessarily require the label in the end, because it might be distracting or, you know, then you might just get stuck, is Trump a fascist or not a fascist, etc.

But if we want to move in that direction, I was really, really taken recently by a very good book, by a journalist called Brendan O'Connor, called, *Blood Red Lines*, on nativism in the far right in the US. And what I really liked about it—well, a couple of things. One was that unlike a lot of these studies, or analyses, it really—unlike my own work, I must confess—it really gives a lot of granular detail about where the money is coming from. So there's really incisive and kind of forensic work on all of these foundations of the far-right and especially of the population obsessed, anti-immigration, eugenicist far-right that has been there, right, from about, for a long time, but that that really cohered also in the in the 1970s, as well, right.

And, together with that emphasis on the kind of political economy, right, of far-right movements, which is very significant, showing, actually, how it is through these foundations that you can also draw connections between fractions of the Republican Party, Proud Boys, sundry different institutes of various stripes, and anti-immigration websites, and et cetera, et cetera, also shows how, despite the super fractious character of this nebula of far-right, or proto-fascist or neo-fascist organizations in the US, which often seem to have irreconcilable differences, right, Christian nationalists, Neo-Cons, Neo-Liberals, Proud Boys, Neo-Nazis, etc, etc, that in the end, they do cohere around this project, which he, I think, quite compellingly, just calls 'border fascism,' right.

And that basically, the defense of white homogeneity and privilege, albeit with some complicated caveats, because, of course, some of these supremacist groups are not actually entirely white, like the Proud Boys, but nevertheless, the obsession with the border and the obsession with the threat of the suicide, decline, degradation of this white western conception of, white western settler

radically.

And, to which I think one could also add, which I, we haven't touched on, but I think is, is really significant, the way in which, a kind of gender-panic, for want of a better word, is also extremely significant in bringing, again, seemingly disparate and incoherent groups in the far-right, both mainstream, i.e. Republican Party and all of the groups, and movements and institutes etc, on its fringes, together, right. And to bring those movements together with a whole, post-fascist international, right, which uses exactly the same discourse, especially when it comes to, whether it's transphobia, or the obsession with so-called gender ideology, etc, right.

I saw the other day somebody had uploaded with subtitles a speech by the Syrian ruler, Bashar al-Assad, and it was a speech about basically like, gender ideology, which could have been given by Putin or by Trump or Bolsonaro, but I mean, like, literally, like there was no, I mean, at that level, this is like an extremely effective, like, point around which all of these groups cohere and circulate, right. It's like a kind of common currency, almost.

So, I think that also has to be kept in mind, that—not just in the North American context, and of course, you know, you could also say most fascist or proto-fascist or post-fascist or neo-fascist worldwide are also invariably border fascists as well. But there is, I think, something you know, quite specific about that formation in the US, right.

And about, this is also, I guess, linked to the gender issue, the fantasy of erasure or annihilation, right, like the whole white genocide trope and how that is able to generate this kind of violently victimized subjectivity, right. Which reminds me of some of the insights in, well both in Adorno and specifically in Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman's book, *Prophets of Deceit*, this whole idea of malaises, right, that the racist with genocidal propensities always projects, right, those desires onto another that, it's like, "they want to get rid of us," right, like that mode, which is always a kind of avowal, right, a kind of

gender dimension as well, right, like the end of sexual difference, the end of masculinity, the end of women, et cetera, et cetera, also has that kind of structure, authoritarian personality structure.

Am Johal 1:02:47
Thank you so much, Alberto for joining us on *Below the Radar*.

Alberto Toscano 1:02:51
Oh, thank you, Am.

[*theme music*]

Kathy Feng 1:02:52
Below the Radar is a knowledge democracy podcast created by SFU's Vancity Office of Community Engagement. Thanks for listening to this episode with Alberto Toscano. Head to the show notes below to learn more about books by Alberto, such as *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*, and other mentioned resources. You can follow us on social media at sfu_voce to keep up to date on new podcast releases. Thanks again for listening, and we'll catch you next time on Below the Radar.

[*theme music fades*]

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RETURN TO EPISODE