

On 'Australian' fascism

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*Tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop
you think the accident rate would lower subsequently?*
June Jordan, 'Poem about Police Violence' (1978)

*I'm sick of it, sick of bein' traumatised
Scrollin' down my timeline, see we lost another life.*
Barkaa, 'Our Lives Matter' (2020)

Three episodes of colonial violence, centred around Mparntwe (Alice Springs)

On 9 November 2019 in the town of Yuendumu, nineteen-year-old Kumanjayi Walker is shot three times through the chest by the white cop Zachary Rolfe. While Walker, a Warlpiri man, lies dying, cops handcuff him and drag his body from the house. Later Rolfe, an ex-soldier who was mentored by a war criminal, and who has a history of racist violence, is found not guilty of all charges. Hundreds of members of the public write in to nominate him 'officer of the year'.

On 11 March 2022, the day of Rolfe's acquittal, the mostly Aboriginal inmates at a Mparntwe prison start a riot, setting fire to the cells and smashing windows and doors. The 'disturbance' is quelled by guards who douse the uprising with tear gas. A representative confirms that 'the ones who instigated have been removed', though it is not said to where. Those same guards go on to march under the banner of the United Workers Union, demanding higher pay.

In January 2023, mostly white colonisers at a town hall meeting cheer for the police to come and arrest Aboriginal children. Later, one tells the ABC that 'little black f***ckers are gonna start to get belted... they're gonna start getting flogged. And they won't come back... we'll take 'em out to the scrub and leave 'em there.' When the journalist suggests that this is lynching, the man responds: 'I don't really give a shit what it's called, it'll solve the f***king problem.'

These acts of violence are part of an ongoing project through which 'Australia' brutalises and criminalises Aboriginal people to steal land and resources. They are also fascist violence. Though fascism is often presented as marginal to life in this country, it is in fact central to how the colony operates, deployed directly by the state via its agents of repression (cops and prison guards), through state-affiliated institutions and through vigilante action deputised to a racist and white supremacist public.

How can we better understand 'Australian' fascism, moving towards a resistance grounded in anticolonial liberation for Aboriginal and all people?

The State is the biggest fascist

White and settler activists often see fascism as something exceptional, choosing to focus on neo-Nazis, the KKK and other actors considered 'extreme' by mainstream society. This allows

them to depict the struggle through a triumphal lens—fascism is something that could have happened here but didn't. In the essay 'How the Left Stopped Fascists From Organizing in Australia', Jacobin points at the electoral marginalisation of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party as an example of how 'time and again, coalitions of anti-fascists, union militants, and community organizations have stymied the far right's rise'.

While this might make sense to (especially) members of the dominant, coloniser and wealthy group, it does not speak to the reality of those who suffer everyday terror under carceral and colonial systems. Cops, guards, prisons and detention centres kill, surveil and control far more people than neo-Nazis. While Hanson has been sidelined at the ballot box, her weaponised contempt for migrants and Indigenous people remains has been incorporated into 'Australian' policy. Refugees are jailed and abused for years. Poor and Aboriginal people are criminalised and forced to work in prison for a pittance, with most of the value of their labour being stolen by the state and businesses.

Black radicals, anti-colonial writers and imprisoned intellectuals have long understood fascism as not external but central to Western 'civilisation'. The Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire writes that European fascism has its roots in colonialatrocity, with white nations in the imperial centre having long engaged in genocidal violence against the periphery:

'It is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices... because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples.'

Anarchists Lorenzo and JoNina Abron-Ervin locate USian fascism in the nexus between corporations and the state, with antecedents in slavery. They draw on words from George Jackson, the Black Panther Field Marshal who saw the US prison system as fundamental to the '*modern industrial fascist state*'. For Jackson, mass incarceration was one prong of a strategy used by state and capital to create 'the illusion of a mass society'. Ruling elites would allow some concessions to compliant sections of the working class—minimum wages, access to cheap goods. This '*mass consumer flea market*' would be underwritten by imperialist extraction of wealth from all over the globe. Meanwhile, carceral terror is used to discipline those who might otherwise rebel.

None of these theories is complete—and they cannot be, for fascism is always changing in its shape. From Jackson:

'We will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class.'

Nor do these narratives perfectly describe the situation in 'Australia'. But they provide a framework which can be repurposed for our own conditions.

Organised labour as an agent of state violence

In 'Australia', mainstreams unions and peak bodies—including the ACTU, UWW, CPSU, Union-sWA, UnionsNSW and Victoria Trades Hall—play a key role in upholding state-fascism. Unions for cops, prison and detention guards deploy their industrial and political power to secure more pay, less accountability and more jobs for those deploying state violence, thus stabilising systems of carceral violence as a whole.

Unions have been known to defend cops and screws who engage in behaviour so egregious the even the colonial legal system can recognise misconduct, including the murder of an unarmed, shackled, fleeing Aboriginal man. This mirrors overseas trends which see carceral brutality well embedded into organised labour, including in the US and Britain. There are no jails without jailers and no ‘good’ cops or screws—there is no non-racist or pro-worker way to uphold a structurally racist institution which suppresses working people.

An anti-fascist workers’ movement will remove cops, detention guards and screws from the established unions, or it will rebel by organising outside of them. George Jackson wrote:

‘Real union activity will eliminate the corporative ties between the regime-ruling class and labor... We’re hungry.’

An anti-fascism grounded in the land

The fascistic relationship between ‘Australia’ and Aboriginal people is mirrored in extractive relations between the colony and land. Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes: ‘The Indigenous body signifies our title to land and our death reintegrates our body with that of our mother the earth.’ Just as colonial society dehumanises Aboriginal people, it desecrates the land for profit and to perpetuate a way of life which is anti-life. ‘Australia’s use and export of fossil fuels also represents an act of imperialist aggression against those who suffer most from climate crisis, within and outside its borders.

These acts of violence against country have echoes in state the repression deployed against environmental activists, who are punished both directly through carceral systems and at arms’ length by encouraging the public to undertake vigilante reprisals. While carceral violence levelled at settler activists is by no means as severe as that experienced by Aboriginal people, when those activists are brought into conflict with the State, opportunities for solidarity emerge. Some environmentalists have sought to distinguish themselves as ‘respectable’ protestors who don’t deserve to be in jail, implicitly appealing to the State’s legitimacy. Others have come to understand that colonial prisons are inherently illegitimate and that ‘Australia’ itself must be overturned.

The State fears collaboration between anti-colonial and environmental movements and seeks to frighten and brutalise those who would make this happen. Resisting this is anti-fascism. In police custody, climate activists see the Aboriginal flag scratched into cell walls, realise their own freedom is bound up with Aboriginal freedom, and commit more powerfully to the liberation of this stolen land.

A fascist State can’t save us from fascism

At times, cops and other State institutions may offer some limited protection for individuals against extra-state fascists, such as far-right gangs or Nazi punks. This should not be confused for the State being an ally against fascism. The State wants order, not justice. An individual Nazi may be sent to jail, but the system of carceral repression itself will not be overturned. And of course, jailing a Nazi exposes those locked inside with him to his supremacist aggression—who are disproportionately likely to be Aboriginal, poor and/or of colour.

One especially grotesque example of how cops and national security organisations use the spectre of ‘extremism’ to bolster their own power, is how the police unit which murdered Kumanjayi Walker encouraged Zachary Rolfe to reference the Christchurch massacre while seeking 40,000 rounds of ammunition for his team—all the better to secure their paramilitary occupation of the Northern Territory.

Another disturbing parallel is how Channel 9—intertwined with natsec agencies to the extent of staging a theatrical ‘Nazis next door’ raid on a fascist house, then putting the boss of ASIO on TV to give commentary—later televised an equally theatrical, but ultimately more violent, raid on a camp of environmental activists, including Ngemba elder Aunty Caroline Kirk. The surveillance techniques and legislation advocated by ASIO on the ostensible basis of fighting Nazis are now being deployed against environmentalists, to stymie a burgeoning direct-action movement against fossil capital.

In the wake of recent collaborations between TERFs and neo-Nazis, the state response has been mixed—illustrating how state and extra-state fascists are mutually re-inforcing but not identical, and sometimes act in opposition to each other. Cops brutalised anti-fascists in front of Victorian parliament to defend a line of National Socialists; they also protected queer protestors in Sydney when they were swarmed by Christian Lives Matter. They flung Aboriginal Senator Lidia Thorpe to the ground when she showed brave trans solidarity. They shot yet another Aboriginal man dead, even as the courts convicted a neo-Nazi who had attacked the home of a socialist activist.

Clearly, the formulation that ‘some of those that work forces/ are the same that burn crosses’ is inadequate. Not every cop is a Klansman—it’s worse than that, every cop is a cop. Cops do, on occasion, protect people from extra-state fascist violence—not through any commitment to peace and freedom, but to maintain their own hegemonic control over who gets to live, die and access public space. While much has (rightly) been made of personal connections between police and neo-Nazis, this can give the mistaken impression that it is possible for police to purge these individuals and become ‘good’, thus reinforcing instead of undermining the carceral State.

Corporate media is an arm of the State

Journalists and corporate media organisations sometimes offer opportunities to ‘expose’ individual fascists. Some activists choose to cooperate with them on this basis. In the long term, this does not advance liberation—especially when those media organisations are themselves embedded with natsec agencies, and when those journalists use their profile to manufacture consent for greater powers for police.

On occasion, Ninefax media will break sensationalist stories about individual neo-Nazis and war criminals. This may momentarily disrupt the Nazis in question. Yet Ninefax also pushes an editorial agenda that is racist, anti-trans and pro militarist. Collaborating with the journalist and organisation which orchestrated the boss of ASIO’s television debut will not bring about revolutionary change. Ironically, the TERF-supporting neo-Nazis pictured on the steps of Parliament had previously been exposed in the Channel 9 ‘Nazis next door’ raid. Any interruption to their organising was temporary; the expansion and legitimisation of the State’s repressive powers has been longer lived. When activists participate in this news-outrage cycle, they are not playing n-dimensional chess, they are being played.

Individuals targeted by the far-right will understandably do whatever they can to protect themselves. But at a movement level, it is not anti-fascist to co-operate with the colonial, carceral state, either directly or at arms' length. What is secured by such collaborations is not defence against fascism but the State's own monopoly on white supremacist and gender-fascist violence.

Towards a mass anti-fascist movement

If fascism has deep roots in 'Australian' society, and is enacted through ordinary life rather than exceptional events, it can only be opposed through what Lorenzo Ervin calls as 'a mass anti-fascist movement'. 'Bring together these movements, these different forces. Bring together the movement against police terrorism with the movement against mass imprisonment... We need to defeat fascists in the streets and in the government and corporate suites.'

When we confront fascists on physical terrain that is controlled by cops (centralised and mostly static rallies), we inevitably lose. When we confront them on ideological terrain controlled by the State and by capital (corporate media), we lose again. What would it mean to take the fight to a terrain where we can win?

If anti-fascist work is, at times, necessarily difficult and traumatic, it can also be full of joy. From Barkaa:

*I got oppressors on my plate, and I got my feed on
I put my feet on 'em, I'll stomp on the PM
I give a fuck about a government, my people don't govern...*
Barkaa, 'Bow Down'

And from June Jordan:

*I'm saying war is not to understand or rerun
war is to be fought and won
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby*
June Jordan, 'Poem about Police Violence'

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<https://backlashblogs.wordpress.com/2024/03/29/on-australian-fascism/>
[Note: This article was written some time ago but feels relevant given recent events, including further state-fascism in Mparntwe and yet another Nazi-supported TERF rally in Naarm.]

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