

Global Fascism Revolutionary Humanism and the Ethics of Food Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT *Social movements struggles against neo-liberalism are always both global and local. Resources to fight this 'global fascism' on the ground can be found in a mix of the anti-colonial humanist writing of Frantz Fanon, and in the ethical thinking of Alain Badiou. Rajeev Patel argues that both thinkers ask activist to undertake a critical self-reflective engagement as part of the broader political struggle struggle. He looks at how a framework for this kind of global and local reconstruction has been applied in the fight for Food Sovereignty declared by the international peasant organization Via Campesina.*

KEYWORDS *social movements; Frantz Fanon; Alain Badiou; Karl Polanyi; democracy; Via Campesina*

Global Fascism

We start on a controversial note – that the battles that many social movements around the world are fighting can be characterized as struggles against 'global fascism'.¹ The term 'global fascism' is not intended to peel away the specific horrors of the Shoa or of the European experience of fascism in the 20th century. Instead, the aim is to suggest that the ways our bodies are policed and shaped by capital has important parallels with the rise of fascism. This part of the argument has been developed elsewhere (Polanyi, 1936; Gilroy, 2000; Patel and McMichael, 2004). Readers may find the terminology objectionable, but the adjective is becoming increasingly popular in commentaries about the United States' government's behaviour in these last months (Leupp, 2005). In 2002, it was definitely inappropriate to accuse any administration, least of all that of the United States still in mourning over the horrors of September 2001, of fascist tendencies. By the end of 2004, on the eve of a second Bush incumbency, it had become entirely plausible to see the precursors of National Socialism in the machinations of the US government. The harnessing of xenophobia and homophobia, the manipulation of the media, the suppression of dissent, the increasing and unchecked powers of state surveillance and detention, and the promotion of a millenarian destiny for the nation have all been used in evidence in mounting the case for incipient fascism in the United States.

The idea behind 'global fascism', is to suggest that these tendencies extend beyond the US – that they are part and parcel of national capitalism, and that they occur also in

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the Global South. From within the thick of European fascism in the 1930s, Karl Polanyi's words have a continuing relevance for struggles in the North and South today:

The mutual incompatibility of Democracy and Capitalism is almost generally accepted to-day as the background of the social crisis of our time....Hitler's Düsseldorf speech... proclaims the utter incompatibility of the principle of democratic equality in politics and of the principle of the private property of the means of production in economic life to be the main cause of the present crisis; for 'Democracy in politics and Communism in economics are based on analogous principles.' ... Basically there are two solutions: the extension of the democratic principle from politics to economics, or the abolition of the Democratic 'political sphere' altogether. ... After abolition of the democratic political sphere only economic life remains; Capitalism as organized in the different branches of industry becomes the whole of society. This is the Fascist solution. (Polanyi, 1936).²

The struggles by social movements against neo-liberal economic policies and their ersatz democratic technologies of 'consultation' and 'participation' are nothing if not the struggle of the promise of genuine democracy against capital.

Social movements global and local responses

The message that is important for social movements to consider is – if it is true that there is a global process of capitalist economic and social transformation, then should the resistance to be correspondingly global? The answer is both yes and no. The modes in which these national capitalisms play out, and in which they achieve hegemony, are not uniform. The World Trade Organization and the World Bank attempt to impose blueprints across the world, but they cannot ever be entirely successful in rendering places the same. Structural adjustment, for example, may have similar outcomes in different countries in terms of poverty and unemployment, but the processes and configurations of power that emerge through adjustment are always context specific, building up a distinct layer of history over existing struggles. The end result of structural adjustment

favours different historic blocs of capitalists in every country in which it is implemented, and these post-adjustment blocs are built with the ashes of the old domestic order. Globalization is, almost trivially, local.

If this is true, then there is an important corollary. The battlefields of globalization do not only include international trade negotiating forums, or imperial banks, or government policies, or markets, or territories, though these remain important sites of struggle. If globalization is local, then it also lays claims to our bodies and minds. Class struggle there remains today, to be sure – our bodies work, and they usually work for someone else. Yet our understanding of the struggle of our minds within movements becomes more nuanced and powerful when we link the emancipation from wage slavery with struggles for other kinds of liberation struggle. For this, philosophers from the Global South cannot be matched.

Revolutionary humanism

Few thinkers have read the Rorschach stains of colonial capital on our consciousness, and offered so powerful an emancipatory reading to rid ourselves of them, than Frantz Fanon. From his observation in *Black Skin, White Masks* that 'To speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization' (Fanon, 1968), he argues that consciousness itself is 'a process of transcendence...haunted by the problems of love and understanding'. Fanon analyses unflinchingly the betrayal of this transformation in liberation struggles by national bourgeoisies in post-independence colonies. This process is inevitable, given the class interests of the leaders of the liberation:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.... [For the national bourgeoisie], nationalization [of the economy] does not mean governing the state with regard to the new social relations whose growth it has been decided to encourage. To them,

nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period (Fanon, 1965).

Here again, we butt against national capitalism, but we see it now not only as a battle of forces in society, but as a battle in, and betrayal of, certain kinds of consciousness.

This inevitable betrayal, of course, is also the basis for the incipient global fascism which we are able to witness within the Global South. These are the betrayals of the promise of liberation by the compromises of new bourgeois capital. But just as Fanon offers a diagnosis for the incomplete transformation of consciousness, he suggests means for its completion, through a project of revolutionary humanism.

Humanism has come under well-deserved attack for its proscriptive claims. ‘Thick’ versions of humanism, visions that contain definitive claims about who or what qualifies as human for all time and what can be excluded from the ‘human’ category, invariably contain the taint of the times. Nineteenth century French positivists, for example, saw the highest stage of humanity, the stage to which all others would need to be brought through ‘development’, as not too different from themselves. Fanon’s humanism is markedly different – it is a constant project of critique, of struggle between self and world.³ In a profoundly beautiful essay, Richard Pithouse constructs a vision for Fanon’s humanism which avoids the tyranny of a book of morals, and thus of a ‘conservatism with a good conscience’ (Badiou, 2001). Instead, this humanism is context specific, and requires active struggle. It rejects the moral stupor of humanism-by-commandment, or by party diktat, or by NGO communiqué, or by identity, and enjoins instead a permanent and unflinching criticism of these doctrines, and of our complicity in their sentiments.

The work of French theorist Alain Badiou is useful here. In his *Ethics*, he advances this thesis: ‘It is from our positive capability for Good, and thus from our boundary-breaking treatment of possibilities and our refusal of conservatism, including the conservation of being, that we are to identify Evil, not vice versa.’ Part of Badiou’s project is to dismantle the ethical codes with which

we have been raised, because they are inherently conservative. Think of the moment in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, where Brian tries to disband his followers by insisting

You’ve got to think for yourself! You’re all individuals!

The crowd (chorus): Yes! We’re all individuals!

Brian (exasperated): You’re all different!

Crowd (chorus): Yes! We’re all different!

Lone Voice: I’m not.

Badiou’s analysis points out that there is a contradiction at the heart of ethics that demand individual ethical action, yet smother the very individual who is meant to act ethically. There is no space in conventional codes for the Lone Voice. Even the moral language of resistance is clouded with communifying languages: ‘Every invocation of blood and soil, or race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths’ (Badiou, 2001). The struggle for an ethics of truths is one that cannot tolerate the conservatism of ‘community’. Yet social movements are precisely about generating radical community against neo-liberalism, generating a community of democrats against capital. Fanon and Badiou point us toward what Gandhi called ‘experiments with truth’ within a framework of resistance to capital.

Food sovereignty

To see a vision of what this might look like in practice, let us take the international peasant federation, *Via Campesina* (helpfully covered by Desmarais, 2002; Borras, 2004). The movement’s declaration of food sovereignty offers a sophisticated attempt at developing a grounded, localized and yet international humanism around the food system. The call is available online⁴ and perhaps the most interesting thing about it is its ambiguity around precisely who gets to be sovereign: ‘food sovereignty is the right of all peoples, their nations or unions of States to define their agricultural and food policies, without dumping involving third-party countries’ says the declaration. This is a little confusing, since rights are usually only ascribed to citizens. Even those sympathetic to an overhaul of world agricultural policy have misunderstood the call, suggesting that ‘The concept of

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food sovereignty is clearly a big umbrella that could cover policy stances with widely diverse impacts and no doubt would be challenged from a number of quarters' (Ray, 2003). But 'challenge' is precisely the aim here. The call is an active attempt to incite context-specific transformation within a context of universal (and defensibly humanist) principles of dignity, individual and community sovereignty, and self-determination. It is an anchor for local interpretations of food sovereignty (and local they must be of necessity) within a frame that holds space both for love and understanding. Of course, a declaration is worth little without action. The importance of this declaration is precisely that it remains incomprehensible without individual action.

This is not individual action in a vacuum. The space in which action happens matters. This is the tension at the heart of the global call for Food Sovereignty. The call is for a widespread political control of the food system, the contours of which are necessarily defined in place. The struggle for Food Sovereignty in South Africa, faced as it is with the rebranded but barely reconstructed historical conditions of apartheid, needs to look different than the food fight in France. The Californian *Peoples' Grocery* in Oakland is unlikely to look the same in another US city, let alone in another country. The governmental agencies, the corporations, the local barons, the armed forces against which people in organizations struggle will yield different (mixed) results. The results will be transformative.

The role of the movement is to communicate not the recipes of victory against neo-liberalism, but to provide democratic spaces for communicat-

ing the truths behind them. This is why gender becomes a critical issue – if the logic of food sovereignty is taken to its logical conclusion, it is a manifesto for the reconsideration of sovereignty at the household level, and for personal-and-political transformation within it. There is much at stake for men and women activists in making this transformation real, and this is why Via Campesina has instituted both women's and gender forums. The call for radical transformation demanded by serious feminism is not limited to the increased representation of women in the struggle, but of transformation of that struggle itself. By creating the space for this without dictating the outcome from these spaces, Via Campesina is doing as an international movement ought – providing spaces for new ways of reclaiming our bodies from capital, and new ways of criticizing both it, and ourselves. To use the language of ethics, movements can offer, but can never guarantee, new ways to find and share truths.

Which brings us back to a vision of revolutionary humanism. As Pithouse notes, 'Humanism is just a way of saying that everybody's right to self-creation matters. It isn't even a map. It's just a signpost. It only matters when we are lost' (Pithouse, 2003). The promise of this is that no matter how lost we may feel under global fascism, the emancipatory force of humanism is one which we all can, and must, tap. Without it, we surrender ourselves to the corrosions of capital. With it, within the movements that can sustain it, we transform our selves, hold our selves to account, struggle permanently, and communicate. And why would we want to do that in the face of capital? Because this is what democracy looks like.

Notes

- 1 This article develops themes first advanced in Patel and McMichael (2004) and modulated through a reading of Burawoy (2003). The thinking in this article has benefited immensely from conversations with Sharad Chari, Nicola Bullard and Richard Pithouse.
- 2 For all his analytical skill, Polanyi was not invulnerable to wishful thinking. He follows up his historic choice between Socialism and Fascism with this thought 'Neither the one nor the other has yet been realized. Russian Socialism is still in the dictatorial phase, although the tendency towards Democracy has become clearly discernible.'
- 3 A struggle thoughtfully deepened by Jean-Luc Nancy (2000).
- 4 <http://www.viacampesina.org/art.english.php?id.article=34>.

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