

A Short Introduction to the MLM Conception of Fascism¹

Introduction

For everyone in the world today, since at least World War II, our various conceptions of what the word ‘fascism’ means are strongly colored and partially determined by the historical experience of previous regimes that have been called fascist. The first of these was Mussolini’s Italy (1922-1945), but even more central to today’s conceptions of fascism was the Nazi regime led by Adolf Hitler in Germany (1933-1945). The term ‘fascism’ itself was first brought to public attention by Mussolini in 1919 when in the period after World War I he created a new authoritarian nationalist movement under that name to combat revolutionary socialism.

But while the *connotations* of what fascism means derive from the murderous and genocidal regimes of Hitler and Mussolini, the actual intellectual conceptions and definitions of the term still vary rather widely.

In particular, for us revolutionary Marxists (or Marxist-Leninist-Maoists) there is a rather *different conception* of what the word ‘fascism’ means than the standard (if still quite vague and amorphous) conception of the bourgeois ideologists.² Of course, their standard bourgeois conception forms the basis for the popular understanding of the term ‘fascism’ among the people as well. (This is simply a particular instance of the well-established principle of Marxist historical materialism that the dominant ideas of any age are normally those of the ruling class.)

Someone’s conception of the term ‘fascism’ depends on where they start from. If they start on the basis of bourgeois biases and prejudices then they will end up with the bourgeois conception of fascism. Two of these major assumptions and biases of bourgeois ideology in this regard are:

1. That society is *not* to be understood in terms of social classes, but rather simply in terms of “elites” and those ruled.
2. That the “be-all and end-all” of democracy is the holding of regular elections. Thus even if these elections are completely rigged by the virtually total ownership and control by the capitalists of the media, and even if the dominant parties all have more or less the same bourgeois ideas and programs, such elections are still considered to be the “essence” of democracy.

We don’t start from these false assumptions and biases. Our very different presumptions in this regard are:

1. That society is composed of social classes (based primarily on the differing relationships of groups of people to the means of production³), and that society can only be properly understood and analyzed in terms of classes.

2. That the fundamental struggle and force of development in class society is the struggle between social classes.
3. That states (“governments”) are dominated and controlled by one or another social class, and—indeed—controlled to such an overwhelming extent that it is correct to view every state in class society as the *dictatorship* of one or another class. (I.e., the [dictatorship](#) of that class over all the other classes.) Of course, under capitalism, that means the dictatorship of the capitalists or bourgeoisie.
4. That real democracy means, in the words of Mao Zedong, *people having control over their own lives*.⁴ This control will be exercised not only on an individual basis (as the bourgeoisie primarily looks at it) but even more importantly, *collectively*. Elections are one of numerous means for the people to express and implement that control, but only if the elections are *not rigged* by an enemy class (as they always are under bourgeois rule, often completely so, occasionally only to a major degree). And organized mass action is generally a much more effective means than elections for expressing and implementing the collective control by the people over their own lives.
5. Of course in order for people to truly have control over their own lives, they must also have genuine collective control over the state itself (while states continue to exist), over the dominant political party, and over all aspects of their society. This can only be *completely* accomplished over time as human beings revolutionize their society, but a substantial leap must be made in this direction before a society can be properly called democratic at all.

The Definition of ‘Fascism’

The standard brief definition of the word ‘fascism’ within the world communist movement is that stated at the 13th meeting of the Enlarged Executive of the Communist International in Moscow in late 1933: “Fascism is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, most imperialist elements of finance capital.”

This is still a fairly good capsule definition, but there are important aspects of fascism that are not brought out in this definition, and also aspects of the definition as given here that may not fully apply to fascism as it has developed in some countries other than Italy and Germany. For example, if fascism is the dictatorship of the “most imperialist elements of finance capital”, does that mean that fascism can only exist in imperialist countries? Does it mean that there can be no fascism in a country without a developed financial bourgeoisie?

No, it doesn’t really mean those things. Those two specific things are characteristics only of fascism in an advanced capitalist (imperialist) country. In 1933 there were two primary fascist countries to focus on: Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. There were other fascist or fascist-like regimes in Eastern Europe, Japan and elsewhere, but it was German and Italian fascism that primarily served to represent the entire phenomenon. So as might be expected, there tended to be a bit too much generalization from the cases of Germany and Italy in defining what fascism is.

Instead of just trying to refine and expand the Comintern definition of ‘fascism’, I propose simply to discuss in turn some of the key things about fascism, key aspects of the concept that are sometimes forgotten even within the world communist movement.

**The First Principle in the MLM Conception of Fascism:
Fascism is one of the two major forms of bourgeois class rule.**

Based on our own initial presumptions, for us the first major principle concerning fascism is that *it is one of the two major forms of bourgeois class rule*, the other being *bourgeois democracy*. Thus, we view *both* fascism and bourgeois democracy as forms of the *dictatorship of the bourgeoisie* over other classes, and especially over the working class (proletariat). The “democratic” elements in so-called bourgeois democracy are mostly just for the bourgeoisie itself.

Still, we do recognize *secondary differences* between fascism and bourgeois democracy. And the primary secondary difference we recognize is that *for the proletariat*, under bourgeois democracy, there is qualitatively more freedom to express their opinions, to protest, to organize themselves, and for their organizations and political parties to operate openly without being suppressed, to publish and distribute newspapers and other literature, etc.

We view these things as far more important than whether or not the working class is allowed to vote or run candidates in elections, or even on whether there *actually are* any elections! We do certainly support having elections in bourgeois society; we just don’t normally view them as being all that important as compared with rights of free speech, free assembly, and the rights to organize and demand changes in society. And we don’t view elections as normally being of great importance because it is obvious to us that they are always rigged and controlled via the dominant ruling-class mass media and “education” (i.e., indoctrination).

This is exactly opposite to the bourgeois conception here. Their ideologists view the main issue as being whether or not regular “free” elections occur. “Free elections”, on their conception, mean ones where the parties they support are allowed to run candidates, where everyone is allowed to vote (at least in theory), where the votes are correctly counted, and there is no ballot-box stuffing and the like. They only object to the domination of the mass media by one rich clique (say the existing government) when they themselves are in another clique and are unable to buy up a major part of the media in order to dominate public opinion with their *own* specific views!

We must note here that the bourgeois-democratic form of capitalist rule is never absolute or permanent. Whenever the ruling bourgeoisie perceives a serious growing danger to itself from the rising protests and organization of the proletariat and masses it will inevitably seek to control or suppress that “dangerous development” by removing (temporarily or permanently) those rights to free speech, a “free press”, to assemble, to protest, to form organizations, and so forth. This is a major part of why even bourgeois democracy is still a form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. These democratic rights are only granted (and only to the degree) that they are not perceived by the ruling capitalist class as a serious danger to itself. Indeed, such rights are most often granted as a means of promoting the false idea that

they rule with the consent and approval of the people. Granting the masses “rights”, but only when it seems to the rulers that they make no real difference, is highly useful to them as part of fooling the masses about just who is running society.

On the other hand, the partial freedoms of speech, press, assembly and organization, etc., under bourgeois democracy are still important to us in the revolutionary movement. We know (or should know!) that these “rights” will one day be stripped away from us under new fascist laws or policies, but *in the meanwhile* we can make good use of them to *begin* to build up the revolutionary movement of the workers and masses. It would be foolish not to demand and fight for rights (even if quite limited) that help us build struggle and organization that will take our class at least a part of the way along the path toward revolution.

The Second Principle: Whether or not a regime is fascist is primarily a question of *how* it goes about exercising its dictatorship over *other* classes—and especially over the proletariat and the masses.

For bourgeois political theorists, the primary question in determining whether a regime is fascist or not is simply whether it holds so-called “free elections”. For us revolutionary Marxists, the deciding factor is instead *just how* the bourgeoisie exercises its dictatorship, and most essentially, whether or not the working class is (for the time being) allowed some considerable freedoms to openly and legally speak out, protest, and create organizations and parties which champion its own collective interests, including its fundamental interest in making social revolution.

For bourgeois political theorists, fascism mostly means the prohibition of *other* bourgeois parties, ending “pluralism”, and removing the right of other bourgeois individuals to express and promote ideas contrary to the ruling party. Thus the bourgeois conception of “fascism” is mostly an “intra-class” issue, and is quite narrow and limited compared to ours.

This is a major point of difference for us from bourgeois conceptions of fascism. We concentrate on the democratic rights and freedoms of the working class; they focus almost entirely on the rights of other sections of the bourgeoisie who wish to promote alternative ideas and programs for the management of the society *their* class controls.

The Third Principle: How the regime treats *revolutionaries* and *revolutionary parties* (along with the militant mass movements they organize and lead) is especially key in determining whether a regime is a fascist one or not.

The Second Principle, just above, says that whether or not a regime is fascist is primarily a question of how it goes about exercising its dictatorship over the working class and its allies. But the working class itself has different components, some more active and advanced, and others less active or advanced. Thus the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie will inevitably come down much harder on the active and advanced

segments of the working class than it will on the rest of the class. And that is true under both forms of bourgeois dictatorship, under *both* fascism and bourgeois democracy.

So when we say that the deciding factor (between fascism and bourgeois democracy) is “*just how* the bourgeoisie exercises its dictatorship, and most essentially, whether or not the working class is (for the time being) allowed some considerable freedoms to openly and legally speak out, protest, and create organizations and parties which champion its own collective interests”, we have to especially look at *just how* the bourgeois ruling class acts in relation to those *who are* more active and advanced, and who therefore *are* speaking out, protesting, forming revolutionary groups, and so forth. After all, even the most vicious fascist capitalist ruling class will normally not do much, if anything, to those workers who themselves do nothing, do not protest or strike, do not complain and try to organize themselves, and who have no militant or revolutionary ideas! In that case the rulers don’t *need* to do anything to these totally compliant and beaten down workers, since they are already behaving the way the rulers want them to behave.

The real test of a bourgeois society (as to whether it is fascist or bourgeois democratic) is in how it acts in relation to those who are actually stirring up the masses, educating them in their own interests, organizing them, and leading them in struggle against those rulers and oppressors. And that means that how the state acts against *revolutionaries* and *revolutionary parties*, and the militant mass movements they organize and lead, is a key indicator of whether it is a fascist state or not.

We could even say that for us revolutionary Marxists the most important thing which distinguishes fascism from bourgeois democracy is *how the bourgeois state treats revolutionaries and revolutionary mass movements*, in particular. Why revolutionaries, specifically, rather than just the working class in general? Is this looking at things too narrowly? Not really.

Revolutionaries, and revolutionary parties, *concentrate* and *focus* the interests and actions of the working class and masses. That is the job of revolutionaries and their parties; that is what they are there for. The Marxist conception of the revolutionary party is that of an organized nucleus arising primarily from within the working class itself, which seeks to lead the whole class and the broad masses forward in struggle.

There is a tendency, frequently even among revolutionaries themselves, to see revolutionaries and revolutionary parties as separate from and outside the working class. Of course sometimes we talk that way when we are focusing on how revolutionaries should relate to *the rest of the class and the masses*. But no class party is really any good unless it is deeply a part of the class it represents, i.e., unless it is its intellectual and leadership *core*. (New parties are necessarily small and limited in their influence within their class, but they must still have this solid determination to represent and lead their class if they are ever to amount to anything in the future.)

If revolutionaries are mostly allowed to openly express their ideas without being arrested, if they are allowed to have meetings and demonstrations, form legal organizations, print and distribute leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers and books, and are allowed to openly talk to the rest of the masses and build mass struggles, then this is a qualitative difference in the regime as compared to the situation where these actual

freedoms are suppressed or severely limited. If all these things are allowed (or at least pretty much allowed) then we call the form of capitalist rule a bourgeois democracy.

True, even in this case the democratic aspects of society are severely curtailed; elections are still basically a manipulated fraud; the bourgeoisie still massively dominates the press and educational system; there is no democracy at all at the capitalist workplaces; and so forth. But under bourgeois “democracy” we revolutionaries are allowed (for a time, and to a limited degree) to openly organize and bring revolutionary ideas to the masses, and that is very important to us. We revolutionaries are able to operate in a qualitatively different way.

The Fourth Principle: The role of terrorism.

As mentioned above, the traditional Marxist definition of fascism is that it is the “open terrorist dictatorship” of the bourgeoisie. But this “terrorist” aspect, while certainly true of fascism, needs further discussion.

First of all, terrorism is an integral and inherent part of *all* class rule; one of the main goals of the ruling class is to enforce its dictatorship in part through instilling considerable fear or terror in the subjected classes about what will happen to them should they dare to attempt to overthrow that existing class dictatorship.

And specifically, terrorism is an inherent part of both of the two fundamental types of bourgeois class dictatorship, that is, of *both* fascism *and* bourgeois democracy. Even if the workers and masses are allowed some considerable level of freedom of speech, organization, and the like, under bourgeois democracy, there will still be plenty of things that it is illegal for them to do. It might be illegal for them to assemble except in a few isolated and out-of-the-way places for example, or to arm themselves, and it will certainly still be illegal for them to try to defend their interests and welfare through any type of force or violence. Should they be driven to do so, which will inevitably happen from time to time, then the full terroristic violence of the state will come down on their heads. Not only will the bourgeois state strive mightily to stop those directly involved in these rebellions, it will attempt to make them an “object lesson” for anyone else who might be tempted to rebel. In short, the goal is always to terrorize all those whose actual class interests might lead them toward rebellion or revolution.

So we must be very clear that it is *not* just the fascist form of bourgeois rule that is terroristic, but bourgeois democracy as well.

On the other hand, fascism is typically *much more* terroristic than bourgeois democracy. One of the reasons for this is simply that more things are illegal under fascism, and the people have fewer “rights”. So when they do even such things as peacefully assemble, peacefully protest, publish leaflets, newspapers or other literature, or form organizations to represent their interests, these things will be viciously and violently attacked by the state in the same way that any form of violent protest or action would be. The *scope* and “*necessity*” (from the viewpoint of the capitalist rulers) for state terrorism is much broader.

Since fascist regimes regularly rely on terroristic violence to a much greater degree than bourgeois democratic regimes, the police and other enforcers of the bourgeois dictatorship in that form also become even more vicious and inhuman than they already usually are even under bourgeois democracy. Torture, for example, typically becomes much more common and much more extreme. The massacre of “innocents” (i.e., those who are not even protesting against exploitation and injustice) becomes more frequent and widespread.

Nevertheless, these things also do occur from time to time under even the most “generous” forms of bourgeois democracy. All forms of bourgeois dictatorship involve violence directed against the people “as is needed” to keep them under control, and also terrorism, torture, and so forth. In this regard, between fascism and bourgeois democracy, there is a definite difference in degree, but not really a difference in kind.

The Fifth Principle: Fascism and bourgeois democracy are theoretical extremes or archetypes; all actual regimes have elements of both types of bourgeois rule.

In reality no actual regime is an example of “pure fascism” or “pure bourgeois democracy”. All real regimes lie in between these two theoretical archetypes.

However, the Nazi regime did come pretty close to the “pure fascism” end of the spectrum, and Hitler and his minions tried as hard as they could to achieve that “perfection”. According to the “*Führerprinzip*”⁵ (“leader principle”), for example, every single person in Germany was under the absolute obligation to be uncritically loyal to *Der Führer*. However, there still were many private disagreements, and even small circles of organized disagreements with Hitler, sometimes even within the German army. Still, Nazi Germany did come grotesquely close to fascism “uncorrupted” by bourgeois liberalism.

It is much harder to find examples of regimes which even begin to approach the pure ideals of bourgeois democracy. Some of the modern Scandinavian countries perhaps come the closest, but they are still far from “pure”. All have many laws to control and limit strikes and every other form of mass activity. I think we can lay it down as a law of bourgeois society that there never has been, and never will be, anything really closely approaching a pure form of bourgeois democracy. (Moreover, as I mentioned above, if such a thing ever could arise it would only be very temporary, until events “required” the rulers to crack down on the working class in order to preserve capitalist rule.)

So all actual bourgeois regimes (with the possible exception of Nazi Germany) are made up of a blend of bourgeois democratic and fascist elements.

The Sixth Principle: Regimes can be categorized as either *fascist* or *bourgeois democratic* based on whether they more closely approximate the fascist theoretical archetype or the bourgeois democratic theoretical archetype.

Just because there is a blend of elements characteristic of both forms of bourgeois rule in every actual bourgeois society, it does not follow that there is no way to characterize a particular regime as being overall close to one or the other of the two basic types. Even if Mussolini's Italy was *slightly* more liberal than Nazi Germany, it was still a clear case of a vicious fascist regime.

There are also some regimes, such as present-day capitalist China, which must be considered to be a relative "soft" form of fascism as compared with Germany and Italy in the 1930s. There are of course very tight laws restricting the democratic rights of the masses, including the working class, as well as constant attempts to imbue them with the ruling class's ideology. But for the most part the workers and masses are left pretty much alone to think as they wish until they actually protest publicly or try to change society in their own interests. Nevertheless contemporary China is a *clear* example of fascism, as far as the basic Marxist conception is concerned. Revolutionaries are arrested and imprisoned, and sometimes tortured or executed, and no revolutionary organizations or publications are allowed. Moreover, it would *still* be fascism there even if the bourgeois rulers were to allow contested elections (as they sometimes already do on the local level), as long as the democratic rights of free speech, a free press, assembly, protest, and organization among the workers and peasants to advance their own interests were still prohibited.

It is true that there are bound to be some regimes, at one time or another, whose fascist and bourgeois democratic elements are roughly on a par. In those cases we might be hard pressed to say whether the regime should be called a fascist country or not, and even well informed opinions might differ. However, there are intermediate cases between men who are bald or not bald too, but that does not keep us from reasonably categorizing most men as one or the other.

One good thing to do in the intermediate cases is to focus on which direction the new changes are being made. If a country is roughly half-way between fascism and bourgeois democracy, but all the recent changes are in the direction of more fascism, then it seems quite reasonable to describe that country as at least undergoing "developing fascism". In general in politics, the *direction* of development is often more important than where things actually stand at the given moment.

The Seventh Principle: Individual laws or actions by the bourgeois state can be categorized as *fascist* if they correspond to the sorts of laws or actions typical of the fascist theoretical archetype, and whether or not they occur in a regime which we overall categorize as *fascist*.

Strangely enough, there is a very common tendency to resist calling laws which are characteristic of fascist countries "fascist laws", when applied to laws in a country which is overall correctly called a bourgeois democracy. The idea seems to be that there can *only* be fascist laws in a totally fascist regime! This is complete nonsense.

There are in fact many laws and government policies *characteristic of fascism* in even the most democratic bourgeois state, and it is by no means wrong to label them as such. In fact it is *very important* to label them as such, as part of the continuing struggle against fascism.

As we said earlier, every actual bourgeois regime has a mixture of fascist and bourgeois democratic elements. That means that *of necessity* there are always fascist laws, restrictions, policies, actions and the like on the part of the state. And these fascist elements should be labeled for what they are, and firmly opposed.

Are *all* repressive laws properly viewed as *fascist laws* even under a bourgeois democracy? This might depend to some degree on what is meant by a “repressive law” in the first place. But if the term refers to a law that actually restricts or prohibits what would otherwise be properly considered some democratic rights of the working class and masses, then *yes*, it can and should just as well be called a fascist law too. I see no reason to support the notion that there are “two categories” of the suppression of democratic rights: “ordinary repression”, and “fascist repression”. That would echo back to the old notion that something should only be called “fascist” if it brings *all* the horrors of Nazi Germany to mind. If there are two distinct categories, “repressive laws” and “fascist laws”, on just what grounds do we decide that a particular law is one or the other? There would need to be some principle which leads us to make the appropriate choice.

Moreover, if we arbitrarily decide to call a law or policy a fascist one *only if it occurs in a fully fascist country*, this would then force us to say that identical laws, with identical results, are fascist in one country and merely “repressive” in another country! Wouldn’t that amount to using a euphemism for the law in the bourgeois democratic country? Wouldn’t it be sort of a cover-up or implicit apology for the bourgeois democratic country? It seems much better to simply say that if a law or policy is a *fascist* one in a fascist country, then it is a fascist one anywhere else too.

The Eighth Principle: Since fascism vs. bourgeois democracy is a matter of *how* the bourgeoisie rules, it is *possible* for it to rule in different ways in different areas (as well as at different times), and therefore to be a fascist regime in one area and a bourgeois democratic regime in another area.

Some people think in simplistic black and white terms, and say that a country must either be *entirely* and *completely* fascist, or else that it must be *entirely* and *completely* a bourgeois democracy. But why “*must*” it be? The world is far more complex than simple conceptual schemes like that allow for.

Suppose, for example, that a state declares martial law in a region and “suspends” all democratic rights, including the right to assemble, free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of organization, perhaps to vote, and so forth. That is our definition of fascism. Martial law is one common form that fascism takes.

In particular it is relatively common for imperialist states to administer their internal colonies and territories in a more fascist manner than they do the rest of their domain.

The Ninth Principle: Bourgeois democracy is unstable and periods of fascism are virtually inevitable—especially as the bourgeoisie faces a major crisis or nears its overthrow.

This is a simple corollary of the basic fact that even bourgeois democracy is a form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. “The scientific term ‘dictatorship’”, says Lenin, “means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatsoever, and based directly on force.”⁶ The ruling class will certainly *have* many laws in place, and will generally operate in accordance with those laws most of the time. *But when it needs to ignore them it will almost always do so!* No matter what the law books say, no matter what the constitution says, the capitalist ruling class will always try to protect its continued rule by whatever means it takes.

The United States, for example, has a constitution that “guarantees” the rights of free assembly, free speech and freedom of the press. But during World War I, and even more so during the “Red Scare” after that war, the U.S. government arrested thousands of people peacefully protesting the war or working for socialism (most of them naively via the ballot box!), banned Socialist Party meetings and gatherings, and even closed down the extensive Socialist press of the day. The fact that the “law of the land” prohibited such actions in no way stopped the ruling class from carrying them out when they felt the necessity of doing so.

The entire reformist German Social-Democratic movement was caught off guard by the advent of fascism in Germany in 1933. The socialists had assumed that their hard won rights to belong to labor unions, form a political party to work for reforms, to publicly gather and protest, to have a socialist press, and so forth, were all permanently secure. They were fatally wrong. All such “rights” were suddenly stripped away.

Those who do not understand that bourgeois democracy is unstable in historical terms, and is extremely prone to being replaced with fascism during times of serious crisis, can only mislead the people and leave them totally unprepared to deal with full-scale fascism when it arrives.

The Tenth Principle: Struggling against fascist laws and policies of the government in a bourgeois democracy is a struggle for reforms.

Yes it is! Even if you win the particular struggle you are still stuck with basically the same system, the capitalist-imperialist system and the class dictatorship of the ruling bourgeoisie. We should never forget this fact, or start to confine our work *mostly* (let alone *only*) to the struggle for a purer form of bourgeois democracy. That would turn us from communists into bourgeois democrats.

On the other hand, there are some infantile “Leftists” who are totally against all struggles for reforms, and who even think that by engaging in any struggle at all against fascist laws or in favor of democratic rights under this system, we thereby automatically become “reformists” or bourgeois democrats. That is just not the case. These “Lefts” do not know how to reason, as Lenin remarked. (Participation in the struggles for reforms is not necessarily *reformism* in the Marxist sense, unless that *is all* that you are doing, or the major part of what you are doing!)

First, we must struggle along with the masses for aims which they see as important. Most people do see democratic rights as important, and are willing to struggle for them. By being in the midst of mass struggles, even those around reforms, we thereby win the ears of the masses so that we can explain that while reforms are well and good, what we really need most of all is socialist revolution and getting rid of capitalism entirely. Second, the struggle for reforms around democratic rights (as opposed to say wages and job conditions), puts people more directly up against the state, and can be in itself a very useful education. And third, struggles against fascist laws and policies, if won (for a time), can help give us a freer hand to further explain the necessity of revolution to the masses. These are all quite valuable things.

Comintern and Revisionist Errors with Respect to Fascism in the 1930s and Later

This essay is meant to be focused on explicating the *concept* of fascism from the MLM point of view, and we cannot delve into the historical development of that conception, let alone the various erroneous views about fascism and politics which have developed in Marxist circles over the decades. However, any modern Marxist work on fascism (even if fairly short) must condemn and divorce itself from the theories and actions in this regard of the Comintern and many revisionist parties during the 1930s and afterwards.

What happened, briefly, is that the Communist Party of Germany, under the direction of Stalin and the Comintern, did not seek to build a tactical united front to prevent the Nazis from coming to power in Germany. They were right to see the Social Democrats (SPD) as also a bourgeois party, to struggle against it generally, and so forth. But they were wrong not to see the importance of a temporary, broad, tactical alliance in 1933 (including the SPD) as a means of keeping the Nazis from power. That was already a major error, involving mechanical (undialectical) reasoning on their part. But then, after the Nazis did come to power, Stalin and the Comintern and (at their direction) the CP of Germany and most of the other CPs, overreacted to their initial error and made an even greater, much more widespread and more prolonged error in the opposite direction.

The “United Front Against Fascism” which they promoted for years on end called on the masses and the CPs in all countries to closely ally themselves with social democrats and reformists (pretty much regardless of local conditions, negligible local fascist threats, etc.), and—in effect—to become mere social democrats and reformists themselves. In most areas independent communist revolutionary work was almost eliminated or totally submerged into electoral “popular fronts” and the like. The entire thrust of this new direction was to cut the revolutionary heart out of much of the world communist movement and shift it strongly into reformism. Later as World War II loomed and then began, the Comintern and CPs went even further, and called for the people of the world to unite with and support the “democratic” countries—such as the U.S. and Britain—which were actually, of course, imperialist countries and *also* the enemies of the people of the world. This line pretty much limited the world struggle to simply defeating fascism and *restoring* bourgeois democracy in the fascist countries.

This un-Marxist glorification of bourgeois democracy corrupted the international communist movement from within, and especially in Europe and the U.S. it led to the complete revisionist degeneration of the various existing “Communist Parties”, which they never recovered from. In the immediate post-WWII world the possibilities of socialist revolution in countries such as France, Italy and

Greece were tossed away. (The excessive fear by Stalin and the CPSU of a new war with the West was also a major factor here.)

It was only in Asia, and especially in the case of the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong, that a proper Marxist course of turning an anti-imperialist/anti-fascist war into an outright revolutionary war was seriously attempted and successfully carried out. That put to shame the pathetic performance by the so-called “Communist Parties” in Western Europe and the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s.

Revisionism in Power is “Social-Fascism” (i.e., Plain Old Fascism)

After the overthrow of socialism in the USSR by Khrushchev and his fellow revisionists, Mao labeled that country as “social-imperialist” and “social-fascist”. He explained that these terms meant that while the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was still “socialist” in *name*, in reality it had become an imperialist and fascist country.

For many decades, however, many Marxists (including many dedicated followers of Mao) have been curiously shy about outright calling the revisionist Soviet Union as an imperialist or fascist country. They have sometimes used Mao’s terms (“social-imperialist” and “social-fascist”) as if they meant something less severe than “imperialism” and “fascism”. The fact is that the revisionist Soviet Union *was* a fascist and imperialist country, and we should not only admit this, we should *insist* on it. On our MLM conception of fascism, for example, there is just no doubt whatsoever about it.⁷

Some Additional Comments about Fascism and How the Term has been Used

It is sometimes argued that Leftists are too free and easy with the word ‘fascist’, to the point where it has become little more than a term of abuse for any person or government action or law that they don’t like. Supposedly communists in particular are guilty of terrible sins such as calling people “fascists” even if they are not actually members of any recognized fascist party (such as the Nazis).

Personally I think these complaints are mostly off base. It is true that ‘left’-liberals, especially, have often used the term ‘fascist’ in exaggerated ways in *light of the common bourgeois conception of what fascism is*. But there is also this revolutionary Marxist conception of the term which I have been trying to explicate here. And on that conception, I really don’t see that most of the uses of the term which people complain about are really that far off the mark.

To start with, doesn’t it seem rather reasonable to call someone a “fascist” if they systematically or frequently promote fascist laws and actions, even if they are not actually a member of an organization that might be correctly called “fascist”? What reason is there for restricting the term only to members of certain organizations?

However, if someone’s promotion of some particular fascist law or action is instead deemed an aberration, then it would seem to be at least “impolitic” to label that person as an outright fascist, though

it would certainly still be correct to label the law or action itself for what it is, a fascist one, and to strongly argue with or condemn the person for supporting it. “Do you really want to be promoting laws of the sort that Hitler and Mussolini implemented against the working class?”

We do have to remember that a country which has some fascist laws is not necessarily correctly called a fascist country (overall), and in the same way a person who favors a particular law or action which is appropriately termed fascist, may not systemically approve of fascist laws in general. In that case it would be wrong to call the person a fascist. But such a person must still be strenuously struggled with, and/or condemned!

If we don't view fascism as something which must necessarily parallel Nazi Germany in every respect, but rather just as a regime where the basic democratic rights of the working class are grossly restricted or almost entirely absent, then the scope for the very proper and appropriate labeling of such a regime as *fascist* greatly increases.

Thus to argue that the term ‘fascism’ is being grossly overused on the left often is strongly suggestive that the person claiming this has a *bourgeois* conception of what fascism is, and not a proletarian revolutionary conception. They might well still be a Marxist or revolutionary in general! After all, even we individual Marxists virtually always have *some* bourgeois ideas too, mixed in with our more genuinely Marxist ideas. Nobody's worldview is absolutely pure and perfect. So when I suggest that those who think that the term ‘fascism’ is being grossly overused likely have a bourgeois conception of fascism, that by no means implies that I view them as bourgeois ideologists, let alone the enemy! It is merely a way of strongly criticizing that one element of their conceptions.

Short Case Study #1: The United States and Fascism

The United States is not a fascist country, though there have been periods when it has moved in that direction and at least one brief period when it came quite close. (I'm referring to the “Red Scare” period after World War I, when the government suppressed the Socialist and Communist parties and their press.) The fact that bourgeois elections continued during that period is not the main thing for us; the real point is that the freedoms to speak, assemble, publish and organize were severely restricted for the working class and the revolutionary movement during that period. However, even during the “Red Scare” most unions were not suppressed, not all workers' political organizations were suppressed, not all speech was suppressed, and so forth. Moreover, the period was rather short, and what might be considered a close brush with fascism was not consolidated and made permanent. A somewhat less serious flirtation with fascism occurred during the McCarthy Era in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

But the U.S. today does have many fascist laws, and they have been tightened up in recent years. For example, while the “freedom to assemble” is officially still on the books, it is often so restricted as to become close to meaningless. You may still gather to protest “at” a Republican or Democratic national convention, for example, but you probably won't be allowed to do so within actual sight or sound of it, no matter how peaceful you are. Existing rights and freedoms are generally being more and more circumscribed, though there has not yet been any wholesale extinction of them.

In addition to this, there have been some major new fascist laws and policies instituted in the U.S., most notably the “Patriot Act” in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Some of the aspects of that law have so far been directed at ethnic Arabs and Muslims mostly, but they could be extended to anybody the government doesn’t like and gets concerned about. We revolutionary Marxists, for example, might at some point be labeled as “terrorists” and be rounded up, even though we strenuously oppose terrorist tactics and actions, and condemn them as counter-productive.

It is fair to say that while the U.S. is still a bourgeois democracy overall, it nevertheless has numerous fascist laws and policies, and the trend certainly seems to be gradually in the direction of having more such fascist laws and policies. If there is another major 9/11 type event, the capitalist state may well take the opportunity to take another significant step in the direction of fascism.

A brief word about the fears of many that we are on the verge of some sort of spontaneous “Christian fascism” in the U.S.: This is a notion that has also been strongly promoted by the [Bob Avakian](#) Cultists (the RCP), who seemed to be predicting that it would come down while George W. Bush was still in office. Avakian now talks about the Republican Party in the U.S. as having a “fascist social base”, which I guess must on that theory make the Republican Party a fascist party or about to become one.⁸ While the country has in fact become much more polarized over the past decade, and a rabid ultra-rightwing trend has become more prominent, outright Christian fascism is only one fairly small part of that. If and when outright fascism is instituted someday in this country, it will no doubt have a significant Christian-fascist coloration. But I don’t see either the necessity or the panic on the part of the ruling class that would possibly make them take such a major and very risky overall leap at this time. It would be politically foolish on their part to do so, and I think the vast majority of those in control understand this.

It is much more likely that the ruling class will someday take it into its heads to round up a few of us revolutionary Marxists who are sticking our necks out (even though we are certainly no real imminent threat to them at this point), and/or close down our websites, and such, than that they will go for any full-blown fascism at this point—“Christian” or otherwise. But if revolutionaries are *systematically* arrested (even without having committed any overt illegal actions of any kind), if all real revolutionary literature is banned, and if all revolutionary organizations are proscribed, that would from our perspective surely count as fascism. This is almost inevitable *someday*, but I see no reason to expect it soon in this country.

Short Case Study #2: Growing Fascism in Contemporary India

What about a country like India, which is still part of what is loosely termed the “Third World”? India is often called (especially by the ruling class in India itself) “the world’s largest democracy”—for the usual superficial reason that there are many political parties, most of which are allowed to participate in periodic elections, elections which—there as elsewhere—are manipulated and largely controlled by the bourgeois media and the general indoctrination of the people.

But in India, as in any other country, for us the key question is how the state treats revolutionaries and militant mass movements working in the people’s interests. And when you look at the situation in India

today it is easy to see that many revolutionaries are being hounded and arrested, and even frequently murdered in cold blood in what are known as “fake encounters”. (These are cases where the police arrest some revolutionaries, torture and murder them while in custody, and then claim that those people were killed in shoot-outs or “encounters” with the police.) The foremost revolutionary party in India, the Communist Party of India (Maoist), has been proscribed, its publications are illegal, and people have even been arrested for simply possessing magazines sympathetic to the CPI(Maoist) or to mass struggles such as those of the [adivasis](#) (“tribals”) in which the CPI(Maoist) has been playing a leading and organizing role. For the CPI (Maoist) itself, there is no question but that they are operating in a completely fascist environment.

It is true, of course, that the Maoists have themselves been killing police officers who have been sent to arrest or kill them. But the illegal actions they have been taking would not have been necessary and would not have happened if there were any effective legal and peaceful means for them to continue to organize and support the masses in their struggles for their own interests. It is the reactionary bourgeois/feudal authorities who are fully responsible for the revolutionary war that has broken out, and for the necessity for such a war.

There are many other at least nominally revolutionary parties and organizations in India, most of which have not been proscribed. As long as they do not actually join with the masses to interfere in any major way with the continued exploitation and oppression of the Indian people which are promoted and protected by the laws and the police, these organizations are still allowed to exist, distribute literature and so forth. So these groups are mostly operating in what could be called a bourgeois democratic environment. The question here, however, is whether most of these groups are really genuine revolutionary organizations in the first place! They do generally work in the interests of the masses, but mostly around low-level reformist issues, labor strikes, and so forth, most of which are legal only because they are largely ineffective in advancing the major interests of the masses.

There have been a whole series of special fascist laws enacted in India which are directed against those the government calls “terrorists”, and especially the Maoists, as well as against the mass movements led by the Maoists. At present, the most draconian of these laws is the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 2008 (UAPA). Under this law anyone arrested can be kept in jail for 180 days without any trial and can undergo as much police interrogation as the authorities wish. It is virtually impossible to be released on bail if you are arrested under the provisions of this act. Instead of being presumed innocent until proven guilty, those arrested are assumed to be guilty and must instead prove their own innocence! If those arrested under the UAPA are unwilling to become police informers, they are considered guilty of a further crime; there is no right to remain silent. Under this act every person is a “terrorist” suspect, and the police are routinely and almost automatically granted the right to search anyone’s home at any time of the day or night. Any article, essay, report, documentary film, or public speech may be judged by the police as “intending to aid terrorism”, and the writers, speakers, artists or even media persons who write or present them may be arrested for this reason alone. In other words, free speech in support of anything the government labels as “terrorism” (and that can be anything at all!) no longer exists. Those arrested can be tried in secret courts, with the names of the accusers and witnesses not being made public (presumably even to the accused!).⁹ Some people are even being arrested—not for publishing literature supporting adivasi struggles and/or the CPI (Maoist), but even for *possessing* literature which supports these

struggles. Even protesting the arrest of *others* under this law makes those who protest subject to arrest! If the UAPA is not a fascist law, I don't know what is!

That's the *legal* part of the UAPA. In addition there is the widespread torture and murder that police and paramilitary forces routinely inflict under the de facto protection of this law. As draconian as the UAPA itself is, the extremely limited legal restrictions on the police that this and other laws provide are ignored pretty much whenever the police and the government wish to ignore them. Torture and extra-judicial killings (murders) are now common by the police in India.

The UAPA is now also the formal cover for full-scale wars being waged against the Indian masses by the government. The latest of these is what is known as "Operation Green Hunt", directed against the adivasi people in the hilly forested areas of central India so that giant mining corporations and others can steal their land, and especially against the Maoists who are leading the adivasis in the resistance struggle against this theft and oppression.¹⁰

The ruling class in India has also set up numerous private armies in the rural areas to suppress the masses. One of the most notorious of these is the [Salwa Judum](#) in Chhattisgarh state, which functions as a right-wing death squad. The state and national governments participated in building the Salwa Judum, and train and elevate many of its members to the status of "Special Police Officers".¹¹ There are similar paramilitary death squad groups in other areas, such as the [Ranvir Sena](#) in Bihar state, which enforces the dictates of the landlord Bhumihar caste.

As if all this were not bad enough, there are regions of India which are under martial law, most notably the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir, but also parts of the minority nationality areas in the northeast corner of the country (Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, etc.). Operation Green Hunt is turning much of the adivasi areas in central India into regions of martial law as well. As we mentioned above, martial law is one form of openly fascist rule, and can't count as bourgeois democracy on anybody's definition.

So, how then should we sum up the overall situation in India? Certainly there are many large regions under outright, full-scale fascist rule today. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) is operating under what can only be described as fascist conditions throughout the entire country. However, in the cities, there still remains some considerable degree of freedoms of association, protest, freedoms of speech and of the press, and so forth, for the proletariat—as long as they submit to all the bourgeois laws and regulations. So in these areas the situation is closer to bourgeois democracy for now, except of course for the CPI(Maoist) or for anybody else who has the audacity to support mass uprisings such as those of the adivasis in the [Jangalmahal](#).

Consequently, as a rough estimate, we might say that India today is still mostly a bourgeois democracy in the urban areas, but mostly a fascist country in large parts (and ever growing parts) of the rural areas and in some entire regions (such as Kashmir and the Jangalmahal). The country as a whole should perhaps be considered a *semi-fascist* country at the present time, but with the trend toward more and more fascism over more and more areas. If it is overall "only" a semi-fascist country now, it is nevertheless rapidly developing in the *direction* of more complete fascism.¹²

Conclusion

Large areas of the world are already appropriately called *fascist* from the proletarian revolutionary point of view. Even in countries and areas where bourgeois democracy still exists, there are often new fascist laws and policies being implemented, and frequently there is at least a slow trend in the direction of fascism. As the world capitalist economic crisis continues to intensify over the next decade and beyond there will almost certainly be a further impetus toward fascism in a growing number of countries. This is something we need to recognize, prepare for, and resist with all our might.

If something really is fascist on our own definition, then we should not shrink from calling it fascist. That's my opinion.

—Scott H.

(Dec. 1, 2009; with revisions on 12/11/09, 12/12/09 and 12/13/09.)

¹ “MLM” in the title means, of course, “Marxist-Leninist-Maoist”. I would like to thank some friends and correspondents for commenting on and criticizing earlier drafts of this essay. (More such criticisms are always welcome!) And thanks are especially due to my friend “Ted” for suggestions and criticisms, many of which—but not all!—I have taken to heart, at least to a degree, and have used to improve this essay. (See also the next footnote.)

² What constitutes what could be properly characterized as a distinctive “Marxist-Leninist-Maoist” conception of fascism? My friend “Ted” said that the CP of China didn’t devote much attention to the question of fascism and that therefore “a distinctive Maoist analysis of fascism hasn’t emerged as of yet”. I don’t quite see it that way. I think the conception of fascism put forth in this essay incorporates not only the views of Marx and Lenin but also those of Mao, such as his conception of what democracy is (i.e., control by the masses over their own lives). Thus it utterly rejects the notion that having elections is the “be all and end all” of bourgeois democracy, especially when those elections are manipulated and controlled by the ruling class. Ted went on to say:

I would argue that the key elements in such an analysis are that it contains a deep analysis of the nature of bourgeois democracy and fascism as forms of state power; how these two prototypical forms of capitalist rule interpenetrate with each other, and how the struggle against fascism and [to] protect democratic rights must be closely linked to and serve the revolutionary struggle. In brief, the struggle against fascism requires a struggle against bourgeois democratic illusions among the masses and against revisionism among leftists.

I would certainly agree with that excellent statement! But it seems to me that for the most part this simply means a return to Lenin’s conception of the state, a conception that got ignored during the 1930s when the Comintern and many revisionist-leaning Communist Parties promoted various forms of class collaboration (such as “the Popular Front”) under the name of combating fascism.

³ For Lenin's fuller definition of 'class', see the entry for 'CLASS' at <http://www.massline.org/Dictionary/C.htm#class> or LCW 29:421.

⁴ Citation to be added. In another place Mao says: "Democracy means allowing the masses to manage their own affairs." ["Notes on the Report of the Investigation of the Peking Teachers' Training College" (July 3, 1965), in Jerome Ch'en, *Mao Papers*, (Bombay: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 102.]

⁵ For a bit more on the *Führerprinzip* and other aspects of bourgeois "leadership", see "Leadership of the Masses: Bourgeois and Proletarian", Chapter 12 in my book *The Mass Line and the American Revolutionary Movement*, on the Internet at: <http://www.massline.info/mlms/mlch12.htm>

⁶ Lenin, "The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers' Party" (1906), LCW 10:246.

⁷ What about countries such as post-Mao China, and contemporary Vietnam, North Korea or Cuba? In my own view (though I'm sure not all my comrades will agree on this) *all* of these countries are also fascist countries, to one degree or another. They are not socialist countries, so they are capitalist countries. They are not bourgeois democracies, so they are fascist countries. Straightforward logic.

In each of these countries the working class and masses have no or very limited rights of speech, press, assembly, protest, independent organization, and all the other things that serve to distinguish bourgeois democracy from fascism. No revolutionaries are permitted to speak or to organize the masses to change society.

Of course these countries differ tremendously in how the masses are treated. The worst by far is North Korea which cannot sensibly be described as a socialist country by any stretch of the imagination. It is not even "barracks socialism", the sort of nightmare that Marx mentioned in passing. It is state capitalism of perhaps the most extreme type in history, with an exceedingly tiny privileged elite and a country of totally impoverished, virtually enslaved masses. It gives me the shivers when I hear fellow revolutionaries refer to it as a socialist country. It is definitely not what Marx meant by socialism, or what I mean.

Contemporary China and Vietnam have largely shifted away from state capitalism to Western-style monopoly capitalism. The material life of tens of millions of people has much improved in these two countries, though it has worsened for probably many hundreds of millions more. It is a very soft form of fascism, but it is still fascism. Democratic rights hardly exist at all for the masses.

Cuba is the most interesting case, because it is a strongly paternalistic country run by the national bourgeoisie still *mostly* for the benefit of the masses (though quite ineptly). There is the somewhat privileged ruling class, but as long as Fidel Castro is alive they are constrained in their growing desires to enrich themselves. Once Castro is gone, the regime will either fall apart completely or else the national bourgeoisie will transform it gradually from a mostly state capitalist economy into yet another Western-style capitalist country, once again firmly under the U.S. imperialist thumb. People are misled by the impressive health and educational facilities for the masses. The real issues are *who is running the country?*, and *is the country being transformed from state capitalism into socialism and then communism?* (It *isn't* being thus transformed.) So Cuba too is a soft form of fascism. Perhaps the most gentle form there has ever been. But it's not socialism, and the masses do not even have the limited democratic rights that exist under U.S. bourgeois democracy.

⁸ In his recent talk, "Unresolved Contradictions, Driving Forces for Revolution", Fall 2009, online at <http://www.rwor.org/avakian/driving/index.html#toc08>, Avakian says (emphasis added):

These right-wing politicians (generally grouped within the Republican Party) can, will, and do actively mobilize **this essentially fascist social base** (and, even while they keep it on something

of a leash, it's a long leash) yet, on the other side, the sections of the ruling class that are more generally represented by the Democratic Party are very reluctant to, and in fact resistant to, mobilizing their social base...

So you have on the one side (the "left" side, to use that term) a significant amount of paralysis, whereby the objective of the ruling class politicians is in fact to pacify and demobilize the people whom they appeal to to vote for them (their "social base" in that sense), whereas on the other side there is a very active orientation toward unleashing, revving up and mobilizing, in a very passionate and active way, **the fascist social base that the Republican, right-wing part of the ruling class sees as its social base, or sees as a force it relies on among the population.**

⁹ See: Prof. Amit Bhattacharyya, "Democracy and Ban Cannot Go Together", November 2009. Online at: <http://www.bannedthought.net/India/Fascism/General/DemocracyAndBan-091100.pdf>

¹⁰ For much more about "Operation Green Hunt" see the articles and news reports listed on <http://www.bannedthought.net/India/MilitaryCampaigns/index.htm>

¹¹ For an extensive exposure of the Salwa Judum written the Chhattisgarh State Committee of the CPI(Maoist), see: <http://www.bannedthought.net/India/CPI-Maoist-Docs/Misc/SalwaJudum-pamphlet.pdf>

¹² My friend "Ted" prefers to put it this way: "I would hesitate to call India 'semi-fascist.' I think it's better to describe it as an unstable mix of bourgeois democracy and military rule/fascism which is moving in the direction of more openly fascist/military rule." However, I'm not clear on what the real difference is here between that and what I call "semi-fascism"!