

# Seven Theses on the Three-Way Fight

By Devin Zane Shaw

*The seven theses I propose here were first published as part of a preface to T. Derbent's German Communist Resistance 1933–1945, published by Foreign Languages Press (2020). I have reworked parts of that preface here as a standalone essay that aims to summarize the praxis of the three-way fight and forecast problems and prospects going forward.*



In leftist—that is, socialist, anarchist, and communist—circles, it is still common to hear discussions of fascism couched in terms similar to Dimitrov's formulation of the Comintern's popular-front line as established in 1935. He asserts that "fascism in power is the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital." [1] The prolonged afterlife of this definition is likely due in part to the fact that it was later adopted, with slight modification, by the Black Panther Party in its call for a united front against fascism in 1969: "Fascism is the open terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic (racist) and the most

imperialist elements of finance capital." [2] Though I readily accept that fascism must be understood as a movement that is enabled by and a reaction to capitalist crises, and I maintain that fascism cannot take power without some factions of capital collaborating with far-right movements, there are numerous problems with identifying its overriding class character with the most extreme factions of capital. If we re-examine Dimitrov's two major essays from 1935—*The Fascist Offensive and Unity of the Working Class*—we find that his analysis hints at a more complicated picture of the class character of fascism, but that it is largely explained away as a product of demagoguery. [3] In any case, from this overarching perspective, the non-bourgeois elements of fascist movements are treated as mere instruments or lackeys of the fascist bourgeoisie.

Some critics reject the orthodox Marxist line represented by Dimitrov, but nonetheless preserve part of its form: where Dimitrov focuses on the specific *class character* of fascism, that is, locating its leadership within the most reactionary and extreme factions within the bourgeoisie, this non-orthodox interpretation treats fascism as an extreme version of some aspects of capitalist *social relations*. In other words, while Dimitrov focuses on fascism as a particularly extreme and terroristic form of one particular faction of bourgeois class rule, these critics treat fascism as a new particular application of the state's repressive apparatuses. These critics also overstate how

contemporary fascism breaks from patterns of classical fascism: Enzo Traverso's "postfascism," Samir Gandesha's "posthuman fascism," or Alberto Toscano's "racial fascism" (which evokes a parallel to the concept of racial capitalism, but adding "racial" to fascism is redundant) or "late fascism." [4] Fascism, though, is not merely a new phase of capitalism or state repression.

These variations on the thesis that fascism represents an extreme faction or policy of capitalism fall short for the same reason: they do not reflect the reality on the ground, in the concrete struggle between militant antifascism and far-right and fascist movements. It's clearly not the bourgeoisie who were holding the tiki torches in Charlottesville. And while there are connections and ideological similarities between the far right and certain apparatuses of state power (such as the police), their organizational interests do not necessarily align. In sum, the received concept of fascism as an extreme faction or policy of capitalism does not explain the presence of system-oppositional currents in the far right that fight against bourgeois political and cultural power. (Which is different than saying bourgeois class rule; as I argue in theses two and five, far-right movements seek to reorganize capital accumulation on advantageous terms, not to overthrow capitalism.) Indeed, these Dimitrov variations, as it were, could each lend themselves to a supposed leftist argument against using direct action: if fascism is the product of the most reactionary elements of the class rule of capital or an extreme implementation of repressive state power, the argument goes, then using direct action against the far-right malcontents in the streets siphons resources from broader anticapitalist organizing. In other words, from this perspective, militant antifascism combats symptoms rather than causes.

Hence there is a need, from a militant perspective for a different approach. Unsurprisingly, there has been a growing interest in the history and practice of nonorthodox approaches to antifascist organizing: for example, the 43 Group, the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, Anti-Racist Action (ARA), and, as evidenced by the re-edition of the anthology *Confronting Fascism* in 2017, the three-way fight. [5] These groups sometimes had similar approaches but we must also highlight their differences. The three-way fight differs from the other groups because, despite the organizational, extra-legal and militant aspects of these groupings and movements, they did not develop the necessary revolutionary outlook to orient their activity. Even with ARA, the revolutionary concepts which formed the basis for three-way fight were a minority tendency. What is needed now are the revolutionary, liberatory visions and living forms of praxis of the three-way fight. I will tentatively define the three-way fight, which I will outline in more detail below, as an approach to antifascist struggle that situates militant action against both system-oppositional far-right groups and bourgeois democracy (as it is embodied, in North America, in both bourgeois democratic institutions and what I call settler-state hegemony, liberalism as ideology, and the repressive state apparatus). Reality on the ground is more complicated and rife with contradictions than a one-sentence definition can encapsulate, so while this tentative definition cannot replace the seven theses I propose below, it does serve as an starting point for the discussion.

## **The Present Conjuncture**

Before presenting the seven theses on the three-way fight, I want to underline that, compared to the last five years, the coordinates of antifascist struggle have changed. While militant antifascism is best-known for its embrace of the diversity of tactics, over the past several years many militants have worked to create a broader social atmosphere of everyday antifascism, which brought those who I would call "liberal antifascists" into the broader struggle against far-right groups. Fostering everyday antifascism makes it possible to organize a broader movement in opposition to far-right groups when they mobilize in our cities. Everyday antifascism could, under the right conditions,

bring larger crowds to counter-protests; it also provides political education on how the seemingly small things, like seating far-right groups at restaurants or providing lodging, enables the far-right threat to communities. With Trump in office, there was no chance that antifascism could be funnelled back toward state-sponsored American civic participation, although as election day approached, intellectuals such as Cornel West described their support for Biden as an “antifascist vote.” A united front of militant antifascists—largely drawn from socialist, communist, and anarchist backgrounds—was formed within a broader milieu that included sympathetic liberal antifascists who, if they were not drawn toward militant action, at least provided room to manoeuvre.

With Trump deposed from power, the situation has changed. The differences between liberal antifascists and militants are more starkly illuminated as the immediate threat—or, frankly, what is perceived by some to be the immediate threat—of fascism has abated. Thus we should reiterate the differences between these two currents of antifascism:

- *Militant antifascism* upholds the diversity of tactics to combat far-right and fascist organizing; it organizes as a form of community self-defense which (at least ideally) builds reciprocal relationships with marginalized and oppressed communities. In addition, it ought to recognize and uphold the “revolutionary horizon” of antifascist struggle: fascism cannot be permanently defeated until the conditions which give rise to fascism are overthrown.
- *Liberal antifascism*, in Mark Bray’s concise definition, entails “a faith in the inherent power of the public sphere to filter out fascist ideas, and in the institutions of government to forestall the advancement of fascist politics.”[6] Liberal antifascists appeal to the democratic norms of these institutions, but they also assume that law enforcement will apply force to repress fascism when it constitutes a legitimate threat; furthermore, they also tend to accept the converse of the foregoing proposition: if law enforcement doesn’t intervene, then no legitimate threat is present.

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In the wake of the far-right *putsch* on Capitol Hill on January 6th, 2021, when I was working on the first version of this essay, I suggested that the Biden administration was poised to marshal the popular outrage toward that event to siphon parts of the broader atmosphere of everyday antifascism—which previously made it possible to organize militant antifascist actions relatively openly—to fortify Democratic blocs. Biden had, for example, in August 2017, only a few weeks after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, published an editorial in *The Atlantic* denouncing Trump’s equivocations about the far right; he had also referenced Charlottesville several times during his campaign. However, as it turns out, mainstream liberal antifascists were content to encapsulate and isolate fascism around so-called “Trumpism,” which was defeated with the victory and inauguration of the Biden administration, though, they sternly warned, a more effective demagogue could wreak more havoc than Trump in the future.

We must, by contrast, disentangle an array of far-right phenomena: Trump’s particular propaganda campaign against the legitimacy of his electoral defeat; the drift, or push, of the Republican Party toward far-right ideology; Trump’s attempt to suppress the anti-police uprising; and the temporary

alignment of ideologically system-oppositional groups as system-loyal vigilantism against antifascist and anti-racist organizing. What differentiates our perspective from the critique of “Trumpism,” which we must emphasize, is that we cannot lose sight of the far right as a relatively autonomous social movement. Trump’s ascendancy was based in part on the emergence and growth of far-right organizing, and he certainly didn’t conjure them out of the blue. Likewise, his electoral defeat does not signal their defeat and dissolution.

In order to examine the present conjuncture, we must admit that coalitions which have formed over the last five years between militant and liberal antifascists were, from the beginning, fraught. The two groups adhere to incompatible ideological commitments and organizational strategies. As I have already noted, militant antifascists struggle against both the far right *and* bourgeois democracy. This dual struggle necessitates criticism of liberal antifascism as well. First, militant antifascists, as I argue in thesis six, must maintain a revolutionary horizon, in which their practices are directed toward not only fighting the far right, but forging organizational capacity and skill for broader social—though in its various manifestations, also class—struggle against capitalist rule. This struggle brings antifascist action into direct conflict with both the far right and the repressive state apparatus, and hence militants must carry out investigations into the relationship between law enforcement and far-right organizing. Liberal perspectives and militant perspectives will never align on law enforcement.

But as militant and liberal antifascist coalitions fragment, we must also pay close attention to the vicissitudes of liberal antifascism. In the interregnum between January 6th, 2021 and the Inauguration, some liberal antifascists framed American civic participation and protection of democratic institutions as antifascist, and on this basis, I had previously examined the potential for Biden to appropriate this discourse. As it turns out, Biden’s administration pivoted—not unlike numerous liberal antifascist intellectuals—from formulating an opposition of antifascism and fascism to an opposition between liberal norms and extremism. We must interpret this pivot.

Given that liberal antifascists rely on democratic norms and rational persuasion to criticize fascist positions, under normal circumstances they carry out criticism within the parameters of liberal institutions, especially through the medium of intellectual exchange and debate. And under normal conditions, liberal ideology writ large—and liberal antifascists as a whole are typically no exception—condemns insurgent organizing, whether it is the militant left or the far right, as political “extremism” (patterned on the discourse of so-called totalitarianism, which equivocates between communism and fascism). Hence liberal horseshoe theory, which empties fascism and militant antifascism of their explicit (and incompatible) political content in order to present them as two iterations of purportedly irrational violence, although, of course, the only thing the two share is the rejection of the state’s asserted monopoly on violence.

But when the far right mounts a significant challenge to bourgeois political and cultural power, threatening liberal institutions, and (unsurprisingly) intellectual exchange and debate prove ineffective, some liberal antifascists enter into coalitions with or within militant groups. We saw numerous instances of this over the last few years. Though there are pronounced theoretical and practical differences between them, these two currents of antifascism converge around a shared sense of egalitarianism, which opens for militants a broader horizon for organizing around the practices of everyday antifascism. As a consequence of this practical readjustment, as we have seen, liberal antifascists set aside the framework of “extremism” in order to enter the struggle between militant antifascism and the far right.

However, when the threat of fascism seems to have passed—that is, at least from the liberal

perspective, when it appears that the far right has been unable to seize political, cultural, or institutional control—we should expect, and must prepare for, liberal antifascism to revert to its normal institutional habits. Thus as liberalism shores up political hegemony, liberal antifascism returns to the paradigm of “extremism” for categorizing militant and revolutionary leftist movements and the far right as two sides of the same extremist coin. I believe we are witnessing these shifts at the present moment, and hence it is all the more important that antifascist intellectuals both critique and refuse to collaborate with those think tanks and university institutions that push the “extremist studies” approach to fascism and antifascism. An academic pedigree for parts of the state security apparatus does not remove their ultimately repressive function.

When liberal antifascists categorize militant antifascism as extremist, they not only work to delegitimize militant currents; they also provide the ideological justification for the political use of force for repressive state apparatuses. If liberal antifascism succeeds in pulling everyday antifascism back toward bourgeois forms of institutional and cultural power, it will effectively empty everyday antifascism of any concrete political and organizational content, while setting the stage for state repression of militant antifascists.[7] The extension of law enforcement powers that follow in the wake of far-right actions related to the Capitol riot will redound against left-wing militants, because the repressive state apparatus specifically frames its work in this domain as a fight against extremism.

In my view, the political success of liberal antifascism will always be a pyrrhic victory. Militant antifascism draws its strength from its organizational capacity—that is, its ability to undermine far-right organizing. When words no longer match deeds, when theory no longer matches practical results, then militant antifascism enters into crisis. The principal contradiction of militant antifascism is that these forms of organizing often only last as long as the threat of far-right groups effectively persists.

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But repressive state violence, under the auspices of fighting political extremism, can apply force to accelerate the decomposition of militant organizing capacity. Liberal antifascists do not recognize, or do not adequately challenge, how their typical political framework legitimizes state power. They do not recognize how dismantling militant antifascist organizing capacity undermines community self-defense, and hence how it enables conditions for far-right forces to regroup. The danger remains that conditions arise in the future that are even more conducive to far-right movements than they have been over the last five years.

## **Seven Theses on Militant Antifascism**

The foregoing scenario is far from a *fait accompli*. It can be forestalled by renewed efforts at militant political education and organizing around a united front policy. The electoral defeat of the Trump administration has untethered far-right organizing from its momentary system-loyal pretensions, though without necessarily undermining alliances that were forged by the mutual opposition of some far-right groups and police departments to the anti-police uprising of 2020. I

will conclude by proposing a series of theses concerning a united front policy for militant antifascists in North America, though I believe some points also hold in other situations. I defend them in more detail elsewhere.[8] We will begin with defining two terms: fascism and the far right.

*1. Fascism is a social movement involving a relatively autonomous and insurgent (potentially) mass base, driven by an authoritarian vision of collective rebirth, that challenges bourgeois institutional and cultural power, while re-entrenching economic and social hierarchies.*

This definition of fascism—adapted from the work of Matthew N. Lyons and drawing from the discussion between Don Hamerquist and J. Sakai in *Confronting Fascism* (2002)—is a marked departure from the most common Marxist definition, which holds that fascism is “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”[9] Whereas Dimitrov’s formulation, as it is typically applied, treats fascists in the streets as instruments of the most reactionary faction of capital, the definition I offer asserts that fascist social movements are relatively autonomous formations that challenge bourgeois institutional and cultural power. This autonomy does not preclude hegemonic formations between fascists and the bourgeoisie. As Hamerquist argues, the Nazis’ seizure of power united factions of the ruling-class interested in imposing fascism “from above” with non-socialist factions (and I’m using the term “socialist” as loosely as possible here) of the fascist movement and “nazi political structure had a clear and substantial autonomy from the capitalist class and the strength to impose certain positions on that class.”[10]

As to the class composition of fascism, T. Derbent comments that “workers were the only social group whose percentage of Nazi party members was lower than its percentage in the total population.”[11] Closer to the present, an examination of 49 of 107 persons arrested for participation in the Capitol riot indicates the generally petty bourgeois character of participants.[12] Both observations affirm that the class composition of the far right and fascism is more complex than the most reactionary faction(s) of the bourgeoisie. In North America, the far right draws from elements of the white petty bourgeoisie who are seeking to protect their social status—purchased, as W.E.B. Du Bois argues, through the wages of whiteness—and/or their class position. Fascism is, in my view, relatively autonomous because it is anti-bourgeois, but anti-capitalist only to the degree that it seeks to reorganize capital accumulation on terms conducive to its base. To illustrate: Hamerquist has adduced examples where fascist policies have interrupted the normal functioning of capitalism, but as Lyons notes, “no fascist movement has substantively attacked core capitalist structures such as private property and the market economy.”[13]

*2. Fascist ideology and organizing develops within a broader far-right ecological niche.*

Lyons defines the far-right as inclusive of “political forces that (a) regard human inequality as natural, inevitable, or desirable and (b) reject the legitimacy of the established political system.”[14] Lyons’s definition focuses our attention on two key features of the far-right milieu, within which fascists organize. First, far-right groups seek to re-entrench social and economic inequalities, but the social hierarchies they advocate aren’t necessarily drawn along racial lines. Lyons gives the example of the Christian far right, which advocates for a theocratic state that centers heterosexual male dominance. In general, this movement has embraced Islamophobia and “promotes policies that implicitly bolster racial oppression,” but some groups have conducted outreach to conservative Christians of color while others have formed alliances with white supremacist groups.[15] Fascist movements emerge within a broader milieu of rightwing social movements and these various groups sometimes establish alliances and sometimes conflict. In fact, one purpose of antifascist counter-protesting when these groups rally is to put pressure on their organizing; when these rallies

are disrupted or dispersed through antifascist action, far-right alliances often rapidly splinter as prominent figures and groups within the far right trade accusations and recriminations.

Second, far-right groups reject the legitimacy of, as I would phrase it, bourgeois-democratic institutions of political and cultural power. Though mainstream conservatism has been pulled toward the far-right in ideological terms, organizational differences between “oppositional and system-loyal rightists is more significant than ideological differences about race, religion, economics, or other factors.”[16]

*3. Militant antifascism is involved in a three-way fight against insurgent far-right movements and bourgeois democracy (or, in ideological terms, liberalism).*

More precisely, each “corner” of the three-way fight struggles against the other two at the same time this struggle offers lines of adjacency against a common enemy. The first and most fundamental lesson of the three-way fight is that while both revolutionary movements and far-right movements are insurgent forms of opposition against bourgeois democracy, “my enemy’s enemy is not my friend.” Given that far-right groups also aim to recruit or ally with some leftist groups, it is all the more important to root out all forms of chauvinism within our practices and organizations. Second, we must recognize the line of adjacency between militant antifascism and the egalitarian aspirations of bourgeois democracy. It is the shared appeal to egalitarianism which makes fostering a broader sense of everyday antifascism possible. But it also means, as I will argue in thesis six, that militants must uphold a revolutionary horizon to keep the limitations of liberal antifascism in focus.

We will deal with the line of adjacency between the far right and bourgeois democracy (or liberalism) in the next two theses. But before moving on, we must examine the relationship between far-right groups and law enforcement. The slogan that “cops and klan go hand-in-hand” expresses two fundamental aspects of this relationship. First, it acknowledges the systemic role of law enforcement: that is, law enforcement protects the systemic white supremacy of North American settler-colonial states. Second, it also emphasizes not only common membership between the two groups (when police, for example, are also members of the KKK), but also the ideological bases, through which police and system-loyal vigilante groups find common cause in opposition to leftist movements.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that there are no antagonisms between law enforcement and far-right groups. In my view, it is more accurate to differentiate between what I would call system-loyal vigilantism and system-oppositional armed organization. On the terms established by Lyons, all far-right groups are ideologically system-oppositional, *but not all of them are organized in system-oppositional forms*. Over the last few years, many framed their actions as system-loyal vigilantism, which I would define as the use of violent tactics to harass, intimidate, or physically harm individuals or groups participating in transformative egalitarian movements. While some levels of law enforcement tend to be permissive or deferential toward system-loyal rightwing vigilantism, there are recent examples of law enforcement at the federal level moving to repress system-oppositional groups organized around armed insurgency. In 2020, law enforcement moved to incapacitate numerous far-right armed accelerationist groups, including members or groups affiliated with The Base, Atomwaffen, and the more loosely-affiliated boogaloo movement. Nevertheless, we must not mistake law enforcement repression to signal an unequivocal antagonism between police and the far right or any degree of common cause between these targeted far-right groups and militant and revolutionary leftist movements.

*4. The particularity of the three-way fight is dependent on concrete social relations. Far-right and*

*fascist groups draw on and respond differently to different social contexts. For example, during the interwar period, fascist movements drew from the imperialist aspirations of European nationalisms. In North America, far-right movements emerge in relation to broader ideological and material forms of settler-colonialism (which includes—meaning that capital accumulation is imbricated in—elements of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and Indigenous dispossession). [17]*

In North America, the historical development of liberal political and cultural institutions is inseparable from the development of settler colonialism. Nonetheless it would be undialectical to treat them uncritically as the same thing. Instead, in my view, it is more precise to contend that settler-state hegemony is formed by the mediation of bourgeois liberalism and white supremacist settlerism. I would define white supremacist settlerism as an ideological framework which privileges both white entitlement to land (possession or dominion) over the colonized's right to sovereignty and autonomy, and entitlements encapsulated in what Du Bois called the "public and psychological wage of whiteness." Examining the end of the Reconstruction period in the southern United States after the Civil War, Du Bois argues that the potential for the formation of abolition democracy, built on the solidarity between the black and white proletariat, was defeated by the hegemonic reorganization of settler-state hegemony which ensured forms of deference and the institutionalization of racial control, as well as opening institutional access to education and social mobility to poor whites, drawing them, even if only aspirationally, into the petty bourgeoisie and labor aristocracy.[18]

Du Bois' analysis remains the prototype—though it must be theoretically corrected by incorporating the role that the settlement of the western frontier played in this dynamic—for conceptualizing settler-state hegemony and the role that whiteness plays within it. The presidential campaigns of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and then the widespread antipolice uprising, offered two competing visions of reorganizing American settler-state hegemony—one which attempted to pull some system-oppositional far-right movements toward system-loyal organizing (embodied in the fall of 2020 as vigilantism) and the other which took on a form of superficial antifascism—but it also demonstrated that a common interest in defending settler-state hegemony against challenges from the revolutionary left and the liberation struggles of oppressed peoples forms the basis of the line of adjacency between bourgeois liberalism and white supremacist settlerism.

*5. Far-right movements are system-loyal when they perceive that the entitlements of white supremacy can be advanced within bourgeois or democratic institutions and they become insurgent when they perceive that these entitlements cannot.*

In the first thesis, I stated that fascist groups appeal to an authoritarian vision of collective rebirth. In North American settler-colonial societies, far-right and fascist groups demand the re-entrenchment of the social and economic hierarchies which enabled white social and economic mobility; they perceive that their social standing is in jeopardy and demand that settler-state hegemony be tilted "back" toward their advantage. In sum, far-right movements assert supposed "rights" of white settlerism which supersede the formal guarantees and protections granted through the liberal institutions of settler-state hegemony.

This thesis seemingly contradicts Lyons's definition of the contemporary far right offered in thesis two. Though contemporary far right movements are system-oppositional now, that has not unequivocally been the case historically. Ken Lawrence, in "The Ku Klux Klan and Fascism" (1982), outlines how the KKK shifted between system-loyal and system-oppositional forms: in its earliest form, the KKK was a "restorationist movement of the Confederacy;" in the 1920s it was a



mainstream bourgeois nativist movement; in the 1960s it was a reactionary movement fighting to preserve segregation; then finally, around the time Lawrence was writing, it shifted toward its present system-oppositional, insurgent position.[19]

I would suggest—as a provisional hypothesis which remains to be developed in more detail elsewhere—that liberalism and white settlerism were historically able to coexist in North America because the latter’s interests did not substantially interfere with the former’s. Fascism failed to emerge as a profound challenge to American political hegemony in the 1930s and 1940s because, as Sakai notes, “white settler colonialism and fascism occupy the same ecological niche. Having one, capitalist society didn’t yet need the other.”[20] From the 1950s to the 1970s, a variety of civil rights and liberation movements levelled a profound challenge to settler-state hegemony. Liberalism accommodated challenges from social-justice movements by extending formal legal protections to marginalized groups and by introducing new patterns of economic redistribution (social welfare). This did not overturn the expectations and entitlements of the wages of whiteness. As Cheryl Harris contends, “after legalized segregation was overturned, whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law’s ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline.”[21] In other words, white entitlements could be codified into law as long as they could be framed in supposedly color blind terms—but these color-blind terms would also contribute to the (incorrect) perception that systemic white supremacy has been pushed to the margins of American society.

As recent events reveal, settler-state hegemony is not immune to crisis. As Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto*, the social position of the petty bourgeoisie is always tenuous because “their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on.” While the white petty bourgeoisie has repeatedly been “bought off” by social mobility or access to land (available due to Indigenous dispossession), even during the period of neoliberal policy, that does not mean that settler-state hegemony will continue to reorganize future hegemonic blocs successfully. The threat remains that an insurgent fascist movement, organized around the rebirth of the settler-colonial project, will fill that hegemonic vacuum.

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*6. A revolutionary horizon is a necessary component to antifascist organizing; that is, there is no meaningful way in which fascism can be permanently defeated without overthrowing the conditions which give rise to it: capitalism and white supremacy, and in North America, settler-colonialism.*

Militant antifascism is organized in order to meet the imminent threat of fascist organizing; it is an instantiation of community self-defense. A united front is necessary in situations where the revolutionary left is present but lacks a mass base, but it is always caught in a contradiction: the major leftist ideological currents—socialism, anarchism, and communism—converge in a united front but diverge around the particulars of the revolutionary horizon. While combatting fascism is the immediate task of militant antifascism, antifascists must maintain a revolutionary horizon, even if only in broad outline, in order to avoid being absorbed within the ideological parameters of

liberal antifascism. At the same time, militants must also recognize that antifascist work cannot merely be absorbed into revolutionary work; antifascism is community self-defense.

### *7. Militant antifascism must uphold the diversity of tactics.*

From a practical perspective, militant antifascism is distinguished from liberal antifascism by a willingness to use the diversity of tactics, up to and including physical confrontation, to disrupt far-right organizing. Effective militant organizing, though, must not transform the diversity of tactics into *merely* physical confrontation.[22] Antifascism seeks to raise the cost of fascist organizing and that is the most obvious reason that the diversity of tactics plays an important role in organizing. As Robert F. Williams observed in 1962, racists “are most vicious and violent when they can practice violence with impunity.”[23] Physical confrontation raises the stakes of fascist attempts to harass and intimidate communities as they organize. But it is important to emphasize that physical confrontation still tends to come late in practice: antifascists conduct research and publicize the fascist threat and dox fascists, we put pressure on supposedly community-accountable institutions to de-platform or no-platform far-right groups, when fascists rally we meet them in the streets to disrupt their actions. Militants uphold the importance of the diversity of tactics but that doesn’t mean, against popular conceptions, that violence is necessary. The critical question is always: which tactic can cause the greatest disruption to far-right movements at each stage of organizing?

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Events of the last year especially have revealed the weaknesses of liberal mechanisms to stem far-right organizing. For years, liberal antifascists interpreted the lack of law enforcement pressure against the far right as a lack of urgent threat, and when the potential scope of far-right violence erupted into popular consciousness on January 6th, 2021, it was years too late. The failure of far-right and fascist groups to undermine the transition of government power was due not to police repression (in fact, there was a distinct absence of police repression on that particular day), but primarily to internal organizational weaknesses, which I would attribute in part to pressure brought to bear on these groups over the last five years of antifascist organizing.

When confronted with emerging far-right movements, and unlike liberal antifascists, militant antifascists act sooner so that we don’t have to take greater risks later. Antifascists must maintain a revolutionary horizon, but at the same time remain focused on the immediate threat of fascist organizing. A world where fascists can openly organize is worse than one where they cannot. Though German fascism and Italian fascism were historically defeated in 1945, it will take a greater effort to defeat fascism once and for all. Part of that work must be done now by a united front of militant antifascists.

## **Photo credit**

Photo by Mark Dixon, Schenley Plaza, Pittsburgh, 14 August 2017 ([CC BY 2.0](#)), via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Image has been cropped

## **Notes**

1. George Dimitrov, [The Fascist Offensive and Unity of the Working Class](#) (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 4. Don Hamerquist discusses in passing how anarchist definitions of fascism during this time were similar to Dimitrov’s line. See Don Hamerquist, “[Fascism and Anti-Fascism](#),” in Hamerquist et al., [Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant](#)

[\*Movement\*](#), 2nd edition (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2017), 30.

2. The Black Panther Party, “Call for a United Front against Fascism,” in Bill V. Mullen and Christopher Vials, eds., [\*The U.S. Antifascism Reader\*](#) (London: Verso, 2020), 269.

3. See Dimitrov, [\*The Fascist Offensive\*](#), 6: “Fascism is able to attract the masses because it demagogically appeals to their most urgent needs and demands.”

4. See Enzo Traverso, [\*The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right\*](#) (London: Verso, 2019); Samir Gandesha, “[Posthuman Fascism](#),” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 22, 2020; Alberto Toscano’s “[The Long Shadow of Racial Fascism](#),” *Boston Review*, October 28, 2020. I have criticized Toscano in more detail in Devin Zane Shaw, “[On Toscano’s Critique of ‘Racial Fascism’](#),” *Three Way Fight*, December 30, 2020.

5. See, for example, Mark Bray, [\*Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook\*](#) (New York: Melville House, 2017), Daniel Sonabend, [\*We Fight Fascists: The 43 Group and Their Forgotten Battle for Post-war Britain\*](#) (London: Verso, 2019); Hilary Moore and James Tracy, [\*No Fascist USA! The John Brown Anti-Klan Committee and Lessons for Today’s Movements\*](#) (San Francisco: City Lights, 2020). Note that this list does not include antifascist approaches developed by groups that framed their struggle in terms of national liberation, though they are certainly worthy of study as well.

6. Bray, [\*Antifa\*](#), 172.

7. As Matthew N. Lyons, notes, “repression...can even come in the name of antifascism, as when the Roosevelt administration used the war against the Axis powers to justify strikebreaking and the mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans.” See [\*Insurgent Supremacists: The U.S. Far Right’s Challenge to State and Empire\*](#) (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2018), ix.

8. See [\*Philosophy of Antifascism: Punching Nazis and Fighting White Supremacy\*](#) (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020); “[Between System-Loyal Vigilantism and System-Oppositional Violence](#),” *Three Way Fight*, October 25, 2020.

9. Dimitrov, [\*The Fascist Offensive\*](#), 4.

10. Don Hamerquist, “[Fascism and Anti-Fascism](#),” in [\*Confronting Fascism\*](#), 41.

11. T. Derbent, [\*The German Communist Resistance 1933–1945\*](#) (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 99. Despite the repeated assertions by paternalistic liberals that fascism is a working-class movement, even liberal historians acknowledge that workers “were always proportionally fewer than their share in the population.” See Robert O. Paxton, [\*The Anatomy of Fascism\*](#) (New York: Vintage, 2004), 50.

12. Lambert Strether, “[The Class Composition of the Capitol Rioters \(First Cut\)](#),” *Naked Capitalism*, January 18, 2021.

13. Hamerquist argues, for example, that Fascist labor policy under the Nazis extended beyond “the genocidal aspect of continuing primitive accumulation that is part of ‘normal’ capitalist development...The German policy was the genocidal obliteration of already developed sections of the European working classes and the deliberate disruption of the social reproduction of labor in those sectors—all in the interests of a racialist demand for ‘living space’” (“[Fascism and Anti-Fascism](#),” in [\*Confronting Fascism\*](#), 43); Lyons, [\*Insurgent Supremacists\*](#), 255.

14. Lyons, [\*Insurgent Supremacists\*](#), ii.

15. Lyons, [\*Insurgent Supremacists\*](#), 28.

16. Lyons, [\*Insurgent Supremacists\*](#), ii.

17. In [\*Confronting Fascism\*](#), Hamerquist and Sakai both criticized the assumption that fascism (even in North America) will continue to be necessarily white supremacist. Within the discussions of the three-way fight, the meaning of non-white participation in far-right movements remains an open debate. In my view, we must both assess the degree of non-white participation while also providing an explanation as to why this participation remains at the present moment marginal (for most individuals within ostensibly white supremacist movements or as autonomous organizations) within the broader far-right milieu. That account is provided in these theses.

18. W.E.B. Du Bois, [\*Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880\*](#), edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 573–574.
19. Ken Lawrence, “[The Ku Klux Klan and Fascism](#),” *Urgent Tasks* 14 (Fall/Winter 1982), 12. Reprinted in Bill V. Mullen and Christopher Vials, eds., [\*The U.S. Anti-fascism Reader\*](#) (London: Verso, 2020).
20. Sakai, “[The Shock of Recognition](#),” in *Confronting Fascism*, 130.
21. Cheryl Harris, “[Whiteness as Property](#),” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993), 1714.
22. Indeed, Petronella Lee contends, in a point that applies both to the creation of a broader antifascist culture and to the use of the diversity of tactics, that “we cannot focus almost exclusively on physical activities and/or traditionally male-dominated spaces. It’s important to have spaces, roles, and activities that account for the variety of diversity of social life—for example considering things like ability and age.” Nor should we perpetuate gender stereotypes in organizing community self-defense. See [\*Anti-Fascism against Machismo\*](#) (Hamilton: The Tower InPrint, 2019), 36.
23. Robert F. Williams, [\*Negroes with Guns\*](#) (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 4.