

How ‘Antifa’ Mirrors the ‘Alt-Right’. “The Violence-as-Beauty Rhetoric Is At the Core of These Movements”

By [Chris Hedges](#)

Global Research, October 25, 2017
[Truthdig](#) 27 August 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#),
[Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

First published in August, this article sheds light on the contradictions of “Leftists” and “Progressives” in the US who endorse Antifa.

Behind the rhetoric of the “[alt-right](#)” about white nativism and protecting American traditions, history and Christian values is the lust for violence. Behind the rhetoric of [antifa](#), the [Black Bloc](#) and the so-called “[alt-left](#)” about capitalism, racism, state repression and corporate power is the same lust for violence.

The two opposing groups, largely made up of people who have been cast aside by the cruelty of corporate capitalism, have embraced holy war. Their lives, battered by economic misery and social marginalization, have suddenly been filled with meaning. They hold themselves up as the vanguard of the oppressed. They arrogate to themselves the right to use force to silence those they define as the enemy. They sanctify anger. They are infected with the dark, adrenaline-driven urge for confrontation that arises among the disenfranchised when a democracy ceases to function. They are separated, as **Sigmund Freud** wrote of those who engage in fratricide, by the “[narcissism of minor differences.](#)” They mirror each other, not only ideologically but also physically—armed and dressed in black, the color of fascism and the color of death.

It was inevitable that we would reach this point. The corporate state has seized and corrupted all democratic institutions, including the two main political parties, to serve the interests of corporate power and maximize global corporate profits. There is no justice in the courts. There is no possibility for reform in the legislative bodies. The executive branch is a dysfunctional mess headed by a narcissistic kleptocrat, con artist and pathological liar. Money has replaced the vote. The consent of the governed is a joke. Our most basic constitutional rights, including the rights to privacy and due process, have been taken from us by judicial fiat. The economically marginalized, now a majority of the country, have been rendered invisible by a corporate media dominated by highly paid courtiers spewing out meaningless political and celebrity gossip and trivia as if it were news. The corporate state, unimpeded, is pillaging and looting the carcass of the country and government, along with the natural world, for the personal gain of the 1 percent. It daily locks away in cages the poor, especially poor people of color, discarding the vulnerable as human refuse.

A government that is paralyzed and unable and unwilling to address the rudimentary needs of its citizens, as I saw in the former Yugoslavia and as history has shown with the [Weimar](#)

[Republic](#) and czarist Russia, eventually empowers violent extremists. Economic and social marginalization is the lifeblood of extremist groups. Without it they wither and die. Extremism, as the social critic **Christopher Lasch** wrote, is “a refuge from the terrors of inner life.”

Germany’s [Nazi stormtroopers](#) had their counterparts in that nation’s communist [Alliance of Red Front Fighters](#). The far-right anti-communist death squad Alliance of Argentina had its counterpart in the guerrilla group the People’s Revolutionary Army during the “Dirty War.” The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels during the war I covered in El Salvador had their counterparts in the right-wing death squads, whose eventual demise seriously impeded the FMLN’s ability to recruit. The Serbian nationalists, or Chetniks, in Yugoslavia had their counterparts in the Croatian nationalists, or Ustaše. The killing by one side justifies the killing by the other. And the killing is always sanctified in the name of each side’s martyrs.

The violence by antifa—short for anti-fascist or anti-fascist action—in [Charlottesville, Va.](#), saw a surge in interest and support for the movement, especially after the [murder of Heather Heyer](#). The Black Bloc was applauded by some of the counterprotesters in Boston during [an alt-right rally there](#) Aug. 19. In Charlottesville, antifa activists filled the vacuum left by a passive police force, holding off neo-Nazi thugs who [threatened Cornel West](#) and clergy who were protesting against the white nationalist event. This was a propaganda coup for antifa, which seeks to portray its use of violence as legitimate self-defense. Protecting West and the clergy members from physical assault was admirable. But this single act no more legitimizes antifa violence than the turkeys, Christmas gifts and Fourth of July fireworks that **John Gotti** gave to his neighbors legitimized the violence of the Gambino crime family. Antifa, like the alt-right, is the product of a diseased society.

The white racists and neo-Nazis may be unsavory, but they too are victims. They too lost jobs and often live in poverty in [deindustrialized](#) wastelands. They too often are plagued by debt, foreclosures, bank repossessions and inability to repay student loans. They too often suffer from evictions, opioid addictions, domestic violence and despair. They too sometimes face bankruptcy because of medical bills. They too have seen social services gutted, public education degraded and privatized and the infrastructure around them decay. They too often suffer from police abuse and mass incarceration. They too are often in despair and suffer from hopelessness. And they too have the right to free speech, however repugnant their views.

Street clashes do not distress the ruling elites. These clashes divide the underclass. They divert activists from threatening the actual structures of power. They give the corporate state the ammunition to impose harsher forms of control and expand the powers of internal security. When antifa assumes the right to curtail free speech it becomes a weapon in the hands of its enemies to take that freedom away from everyone, especially the anti-capitalists.

The focus on street violence diverts activists from the far less glamorous building of relationships and alternative institutions and community organizing that alone will make effective resistance possible. We will defeat the corporate state only when we take back and empower our communities, as is happening with [Cooperation Jackson](#), a grass-roots cooperative movement in Jackson, Miss. As long as acts of resistance are forms of personal catharsis, the corporate state is secure. Indeed, the corporate state welcomes this violence

because violence is a language it can speak with a proficiency and ruthlessness that none of these groups can match.

“Politics isn’t made of individuals,” **Sophia Burns** writes in “[Catharsis Is Counter-Revolutionary](#).” “It’s made of classes. Political change doesn’t come from feeling individually validated. It comes from collective action and organization within the working class. That means creating new institutions that meet our needs and defend against oppression.”

The protests by the radical left now sweeping America, as **Aviva Chomsky** points out, are too often little more than self-advertisements for moral purity. They are products of a social media culture in which each of us is the star of his or her own life movie. They are infected with the American belief in regeneration through violence and the cult of the gun. They represent a clash between the bankruptcy of identity politics, which produced, as Dr. West has said, a president who was “a black mascot for Wall Street,” and the bankruptcy of a white, Christianized fascism that produced **Donald Trump, Steve Bannon** and **Jefferson Beauregard Sessions**.

“Rather than organizing for change, individuals seek to enact a statement about their own righteousness,” Chomsky writes in “[How \(Not\) to Challenge Racist Violence](#).” “They may boycott certain products, refuse to eat certain foods, or they may show up to marches or rallies whose only purpose is to demonstrate the moral superiority of the participants. White people may loudly claim that they recognize their privilege or declare themselves allies of people of color or other marginalized groups. People may declare their communities ‘no place for hate.’ Or they may show up at counter-marches to ‘stand up’ to white nationalists or neo-Nazis. All of these types of ‘activism’ emphasize self-improvement or self-expression rather than seeking concrete change in society or policy. They are deeply, and deliberately, apolitical in the sense that they do not seek to address issues of power, resources, decision making, or how to bring about change.”

The corporate state seeks to discredit and shut down the anti-capitalist left. Its natural allies are the neo-Nazis and the Christian fascists. The alt-right is bankrolled, after all, by the most retrograde forces in American capitalism. It has huge media platforms. It has placed its ideologues and sympathizers in positions of power, including in law enforcement and the military. And it has carried out acts of domestic terrorism that dwarf anything carried out by the left. White supremacists were responsible for 49 homicides in 26 attacks in the United States from 2006 to 2016, far more than those committed by members of any other extremist group, according to a report issued in May by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. There is no moral equivalency between antifa and the alt-right. But by brawling in the streets antifa allows the corporate state, which is terrified of a popular anti-capitalist uprising, to use the false argument of moral equivalency to criminalize the work of all anti-capitalists.

As the Southern Poverty Law Center states categorically in its pamphlet “[Ten Ways to Fight Hate](#),” “Do not attend a hate rally.”

“Find another outlet for anger and frustration and for people’s desire to do something,” it recommends. “Hold a unity rally or parade to draw media attention away from hate. Hate has a First Amendment right. Courts have

routinely upheld the constitutional right of the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups to hold rallies and say whatever they want. Communities can restrict group movements to avoid conflicts with other citizens, but hate rallies will continue. Your efforts should focus on channeling people away from hate rallies.”

The Nazis were as unsavory to the German political and economic elites as Donald Trump is to most Americans who hold power or influence. But the German elites chose to work with the fascists, whom they naively thought they could control, rather than risk a destruction of capitalism. Street brawls, actively sought out by the Nazis, *always* furthered the interests of the fascists, who promised to restore law and order and protect traditional values. The violence contributed to their mystique and the yearning among the public for a strongman who would impose stability.

Historian [Laurie Marhoefer](#) writes:

Violent confrontations with antifascists gave the Nazis a chance to paint themselves as the victims of a pugnacious, lawless left. They seized it.

It worked. We know now that many Germans supported the fascists because they were terrified of leftist violence in the streets. Germans opened their morning newspapers and saw reports of clashes like the one in Wedding [a Berlin neighborhood]. It looked like a bloody tide of civil war was rising in their cities. Voters and opposition politicians alike came to believe the government needed special police powers to stop violent leftists. Dictatorship grew attractive. The fact that the Nazis themselves were fomenting the violence didn't seem to matter.

One of Hitler's biggest steps to dictatorial power was to gain emergency police powers, which he claimed he needed to suppress leftist violence.

What took place in Charlottesville, like what took place in February when antifa and Black Bloc protesters [thwarted UC Berkeley's attempt](#) to host the crypto-fascist **Milo Yiannopoulos**, was political theater. It was about giving self-styled radicals a stage. It was about elevating their self-image. It was about appearing heroic. It was about replacing personal alienation with comradeship and solidarity. Most important, it was about the ability to project fear. This newfound power is exciting and intoxicating. It is also very dangerous. Many of those in Charlottesville on the left and the right were carrying weapons. A neo-Nazi [fired a round](#) from a pistol in the direction of a counterprotester. The neo-Nazis often carried AR-15 rifles and wore quasi-military uniforms and helmets that made them blend in with police and state security. There could easily have been a bloodbath. A march held in Sacramento, Calif., in June 2016 by the neo-Nazi Traditionalist Worker Party to protest attacks at Trump rallies ended with a number of people stabbed. Police accused counterprotesters of initiating the violence. It is a short series of steps from bats and ax handles to knives to guns.



The conflict will not end until the followers of the alt-right and the anti-capitalist left are given a living wage and a voice in how we are governed. Take away a person's dignity, agency and self-esteem and this is what you get. As political power devolves into a more naked form of corporate totalitarianism, as unemployment and underemployment expand, so will extremist groups. They will attract more sympathy and support as the wider population realizes, correctly, that Americans have been stripped of all ability to influence the decisions that affect their lives, lives that are getting steadily worse.

The ecocide by the fossil fuel and animal agriculture industries alone makes revolt a moral imperative. The question is how to make it succeed. Taking to the street to fight fascists ensures our defeat. **Antifa violence, as [Noam Chomsky has pointed out](#), is a “major gift to the right, including the militant right.”** It fuels the right wing's paranoid rants about the white race being persecuted and under attack. And it strips anti-capitalists of their moral capital.

Many in the feckless and bankrupt liberal class, deeply complicit in the corporate assault on the country and embracing the dead end of identity politics, will seek to regain credibility by defending the violence by groups such as antifa. [Natasha Lennard](#), for example, in *The Nation* calls the “video of neo-Nazi Richard Spencer getting punched in the face” an act of “kinetic beauty.” She writes

“if we recognize fascism in Trump's ascendance, our response must be anti-fascist in nature. The history of anti-fascist action is not one of polite protest, nor failed appeals to reasoned debate with racists, but direct, aggressive confrontation.”

This violence-as-beauty rhetoric is at the core of these movements. It saturates the vocabulary of the right-wing corporate oligarchs, including Donald Trump. Talk like this poisons national discourse. It dehumanizes whole segments of the population. It shuts out those who speak with nuance and compassion, especially when they attempt to explain the motives and conditions of opponents. It thrusts the society into a binary and demented universe of them and us. It elevates violence to the highest aesthetic. It eschews self-criticism and self-reflection. It is the prelude to widespread suffering and death. And that, I fear, is where we are headed.

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, New York Times best selling author, professor at Princeton University, activist and ordained Presbyterian minister.

Featured image is from Mr. Fish / Truthdig.

The original source of this article is [Truthdig](#)
Copyright © [Chris Hedges](#), [Truthdig](#), 2017

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Chris Hedges](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.
For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca