

# The Harmful Effects of Antifa. Crisis of America's Left

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*A historic opportunity is being missed. The disastrous 2016 presidential election could and should have been a wakeup call. A corrupt political system that gave voters a choice between two terrible candidates is not democracy.*

This should have been the signal to face reality. The U.S. political system is totally rotten, contemptuous of the people, serving the corporations and lobbies that pay to keep them in office. The time had come to organize a genuine alternative, an independent movement to liberate the electoral system from the grip of billionaires, to demand a transition from a war economy to an economy dedicated to improving the lives of the people who live here. What is needed is a movement for the pacification of America, at home and abroad.

That is a big order. Yet this approach could meet with wide support, especially if vigorous young people organized to stimulate popular debate, between real live people, from door to door if necessary, creating a mass movement for genuine democracy, equality and peace. This is as revolutionary a program as possible in the present circumstances. A moribund left should be coming back to life to take the lead in building such a movement.

Quite the opposite is happening.

Provoking a new Civil War?

The first step toward preventing such a constructive movement was a false interpretation of the meaning of the Trump victory, massively promoted by mainstream media. This was essentially the Clintonite excuse for Hillary's loss. Trump's victory, according to this line, was the product of a convergence between Russian interference and the votes of "misogynists, racists, homophobes, xenophobes, and white supremacists". The influence of all those bad people indicated the rise of "fascism" in America, with Trump in the role of "fascist" leader.

In this way, criticism of the system that produced Trump vanished in favor of demonization of Trump the individual, making it that much easier for the Clintonites to solidify their control of the Democratic Party, by manipulating their own leftist opposition.

The events of Charlottesville resembled a multiple provocation, with pro- and anti-statue sides provoking each other, providing a stage for Antifa to gain national prominence as saviors. Significantly, Charlottesville riots provoked Trump into making comments which were seized upon by all his enemies to brand him definitively as "racist" and "fascist". This gave the disoriented "left" a clear cause: fight "fascist Trump" and domestic "fascists". This is more immediate than organizing to demand that the United States end its threats against

Iran and North Korea, its open and covert project to reshape the Middle East to ensure Israel's regional dominance, or its nuclear buildup targeting Russia. Not to mention its support for genuine Nazis in Ukraine. Yet that trillion dollar policy of global militarization contributes more to violence and injustice even in the United States than the remnants of thoroughly discredited lost causes.

## The Left and Antifa

All those who are sincerely on the left, who are in favor of greater social and economic equality for all, who oppose the endless aggressive foreign wars and the resulting militarization of the American police and the American mentality, must realize that, since the Clintonian takeover of the Democratic Party, the ruling oligarchic establishment disguises itself as "the left", uses "left" arguments to justify itself, and largely succeeds in manipulating genuine leftists for its own purposes. This has caused such confusion that it is quite unclear what "left" means any more.

The Clintonian left substituted Identity Politics for the progressive goal of economic and social equality, by ostentatiously coopting women, blacks and Latinos into the visible elite, the better to ignore the needs of the majority. The Clintonian left introduced the concept of "humanitarian war" to describe its relentless destruction of recalcitrant nations, seducing much of the left into supporting U.S. imperialism as a fight for democracy against "dictators".

Antifa contributes to this confusion by giving precedence to the suppression of "bad" ideas rather than to the development of good ones through uninhibited debate. Antifa attacks on dissidents tend to enforce the dominant neoliberal doctrine that also raises the specter of fascism as pretext for aggression against countries targeted for regime change.

## Antifa's excuses

Antifa has several favorite arguments to justify itself those who criticize its use of force and intimidation to silence its adversaries.

1. Its violence is justified by the implicit violence of its enemies who if left alone plan to exterminate whole groups of people.

This is demonstrably untrue, as Antifa is notoriously generous in distributing the fascist label. Most of the people Antifa targets are not fascists and there is no evidence that even "racists" are planning to carry out genocide.

2. Antifa is engaged in other political activity.

That is completely beside the point. Nobody is criticizing that "other political activity". It is the violence and the censorship which are the hallmarks of the Antifa brand, and the target of criticism. Let them drop the violence and the censorship and get on with their other activities. Then nobody will object.

3. Antifa defends threatened communities.

But that is certainly not all they are doing. Nor is that what its critics are objecting to. Actual defense of a truly threatened community is best done openly by respected members of the

community itself, rather than by self-styled Zorros who arrive in disguise. The problem is the definition of the terms. For Antifa, the victim community can be a whole category of people, such as LGBTQI, and the threat may be a controversial speaker at a university who could say something to hurt their feelings. And what community was being defended by Linwood Kaine, younger son of the Democratic Party Vice Presidential candidate, Senator Tim Kaine, when he was arrested in St Paul, Minnesota, last March 4 on suspicion of felony second-degree riot for attempting to break up a pro-Trump rally at the State Capitol? Although Kaine, dressed in black from head to toe, resisted arrest, the matter ended there. What downtrodden community was the young Kaine defending other than the Clintonite Democrats? His own privilege as a family member of the Washington political elite?

4. Antifa claims that it is in favor of free speech in general, but racists and fascists are an exception, because you can't reason with them, and hate speech is not speech but action.

This amounts to an astounding intellectual surrender to the enemy. It is an admission of being unable to win a free argument. The fact is that speech is indeed speech, and should be countered by speech. You should welcome the chance to debate in public in order to expose the weaknesses of their position. If indeed "you can't reason with them", then they will shut down the discussion and you don't have to. If they resort to physical attack against you, then you have the moral victory. Otherwise, you're giving it to them.

5. Antifa insists that the Constitutional right to free speech applies only to the State. That is, only the government is banned from depriving citizens of the right to free speech and assembly. Among citizens, anything goes.

This is a remarkable bit of sophistry. Bullying and intimidation are okay if done by an unofficial group. In keeping with neoliberalism, Antifa is out to privatize censorship, by taking over the job itself.

### Verbal Violence

The verbal violence of Antifa is worse than their physical violence insofar as it is more effective. The physical violence is usually of minor consequence, at most temporarily preventing something that will happen later. It is the verbal violence that succeeds most in preventing free discussion of controversial issues.

Alarmed by the proliferation of pro-Antifa articles on CounterPunch, I ventured to write a critique, *Antifa in Theory and Practice*. My criticism was not personal; I did not mention the authors of those pro-Antifa CounterPunch articles and my mention of author Mark Bray was respectful. The result was a torrent of vituperation on CounterPunch's FaceBook page, as well as in a hostile email exchange with star Antifa champion Yoav Litvin. This culminated with a hit piece by Amitai Ben-Abba published on CounterPunch itself. Note that both Litvin and Ben-Abba are Israelis, but pro-Palestinian, which provides the two with impeccable left credentials.

These reactions provided a perfect illustration of Antifa discussion techniques. It is a sort of food fight, where you just throw everything you can pick up at the adversary, regardless of logic or relevance. On the FaceBook page, Litvin, on the basis of my past carefully objective articles on French politics, accused me of "shilling for Marine Le Pen". Irrelevant and inaccurate.

In his hit piece Ben-Abba dragged in this totally off-topic assertion:

“Much in the same way that her early ‘00s [pseudo-historical denial of the massacre in Srebrenica](#) worked to embolden Serbian nationalists, her present analysis can embolden white supremacists.”

Need I point out that I never denied the “massacre” but refuse to label it “genocide”, nor did Serbian nationalists ever need my humble opinion in order to be “emboldened” – especially since the war was over by then.

I happily grant that there are issues raised in my initial article that deserve debate, such as immigration or whether or not the “fascism” of the early twentieth century still exists today. Indeed my whole point was that such issues deserve debate. That’s not what I got. Ben-Abba came up with this imaginary allusion to the immigration issue:

“‘antifa’ is a broader umbrella term that allows formerly unaffiliated folks (like the sans-papiers migrant baker who makes Johnstone’s croissants) to participate in defense of their communities against neo-fascist intimidation.”

Very funny: I am exploiting some poor undocumented baker and preventing him from being defended. Aside from the fact that I very rarely to eat a croissant, the bakers in my neighborhood are all fully documented, and moreover this largely immigrant neighborhood is the scene of frequent peaceful street demonstrations by African *sans-papiers* clearly not intimidated by neo-fascists. They obviously do not need Antifa to protect them. This fantasy of omnipresent neo-fascism is as necessary to Antifa as the fantasy of omnipresent anti-Semitism is to Israel.

Antifa rhetoric specializes in non sequitur. If you agree with some conservative or libertarian that it was wrong to destroy Libya, then you are not only guilty of association with a pre-fascist, you are a supporter of dictators and thus probably a fascist yourself. This has been happening in France for years and it’s just getting started in the United States.

The Antifa specialty is labeling anti-war activists and writers as “red-brown”, red for left and brown for fascist. You may pretend to be on the left, but if we can find the slightest association between you and someone on the right, then you are a “red-brown” and deserve to be quarantined.

By claiming to defend helpless minorities from a rising fascist peril, Antifa arrogates to itself the right to decide who is, or might be, “fascist”.

Whatever they think they are doing, whatever they claim to be doing, the one thing they really are doing is to tie the left into such sectarian intolerance that any broad inclusive single-issue anti-war movement becomes impossible. Indeed, it is precisely the imminent danger of nuclear World War III that leads some of us to call for a non-exclusive single issue anti-war movement – thus setting ourselves up as “red-brown”.

That is why Antifa – unwittingly let us say – is running interference for the war party.

It is most unfortunate to see CounterPunch become a platform for Antifa. It didn’t have to. The site is quite able to reject articles, as it has systematically rejected contentions about

9/11 or as it rejected David Cobb's and Caitlin Johnstone's (no relative) right to respond. It could have taken a principled stand against calls for violence and censorship. It did not do so. It is one thing to encourage debate and quite another to sponsor mud wrestling.

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