Article

Neither fascism nor democracy

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Contre-Attaque redux

By Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

> "We observe that nationalist reaction in other countries has been able to profit from the political weapons created by the workers' movement: we intend in our turn to make use of the weapons created by fascism, which has been allowed to use the fundamental aspirations of people for affective exaltation and fanaticism" (Counter-Attack 2001, p. 116).

So wrote the Contre-Attaque group in a declaration issued in October 1935. This small group was led by the Surrealist André Breton and the writer and librarian Georges Bataille; in 1929 and 1930 Bataille had been engaged in a fierce battle with Breton who had dismissed him as an anti-dialectical materialist (Breton 1969, pp. 182-183). Bataille in turn ridiculed Breton for being an impotent bourgeois poet (Bataille 1985, pp. 27-28). In 1935, the two Surrealists put their differences aside and joined forces in an attempt to create a radical political position capable of meeting the challenge of fascism head-on. The idea was to draw on the energy of the fascist movement to mount a revolutionary offensive that could cast aside not only fascism but also Stalinism and liberal democracy. Anti-fascism had to be a radical affirmation of the energies of capitalist mass society, not merely a defensive safeguarding of European culture and parliamentary democracy. It was an affirmation of the passion that the fascist movement was capable of unleashing, but in the hands of the proletariat, with a view to ending the rule of capital.

If Breton and Bataille's proposal to use the weapons of fascism was shocking to many contemporary intellectuals and militants in the mid-1930s, the proposal probably sounds even more troubling today, when we are again confronted with the emergence of fascist parties and tendencies. Repurposing the energies of fascism against fascism? As we know from the historical record, the idea of using the affective energies of fascism did not gain ground, and Breton and Bataille soon ditched it. The proposal is undoubtedly not without its problems, but it is precisely as a problematic – and therefore potentially productive – concept that I wish to re-examine it here. I will argue that it has the potential to undo some of the automatic reactions that fascism produces in non-fascists, not least a knee-jerk rush to save "democracy" from the threat of fascism and oppose reason and affect.

The present context

History, we know, does not repeat itself. However, confronted with the scenes on the steps of the US Congress on 6 January 2021, many historians and commentators had to pinch themselves. In summer 2020, the US president had called for "law and order" while deploying the Border Patrol to kidnap and contain protesters while armed far-right militias fought anti-racists in the streets. The feeling of déjà vu reached its zenith on 6 January when a mixed bag of Trump supporters, including Viking-clad, spear-carrying QAnon believers, heavily armed Proud Boys and female real-estate brokers who flew from Florida in a private jet, spurred on by the president, stormed the Capitol in a bizarre attempt to stop the certification of Biden's election victory.

CONTRE-ATTAQUE

SOUS LE FEU DES CANONS FRANÇAIS...

1\. **HITLER GEGEN DIE WELT - DIE WELT GEGEN HITLER**
HITLER CONTRE LE MONDE - LE MONDE CONTRE HITLER

Cette pseudo-dialectique qui s'étale sur la couverture d'une brochure stalinienne ornée de quatre haches sanglantes disposées en forme de croix gammée, suffit à prouver que la politique communiste a rompu définitivement avec la révolution. Faire appel au monde tel qu'il est contre Hitler, c'est en effet **qualifier** ce monde en face du national-socialisme, alors que l'attitude révolutionnaire implique nécessairement une **disqualification** (disqualification dont rendaient compte il y a peu des expressions méprisantes comme *monde bourgeois* ou *monde capitaliste*).

2\. L'adhésion au groupe des vainqueurs de 1918 de l'U. R. S. S. et des communistes, a entraîné par là-même leur adhésion au traité de Versailles et à toute une série d'élucubrations sinistres qui l'ont suivi. Il est normal que de la qualification du monde découle, sur la route du reniement, la qualification des instruments diplomatiques qui servent à donner à ce monde un semblant de cohésion.

3\. **Nous sommes, nous, pour un monde totalement uni** - sans rien de commun avec la présente coalition policière contre un ennemi public n° 1. Nous sommes contre les chiffons de papier, contre la prose d'esclave des chancelleries. Nous pensons que les textes rédigés autour du tapis vert ne lient les hommes qu'à leur corps défendant. Nous leur préférons, **en tout état de cause,** la brutalité antidiplomatique de Hitler, plus pacifique, en fait, que l'excitation baveuse des diplomates et des politiciens.

Paul ACKER, Pierre AIMERY, Georges AMBROSINO, Georges BATAILLE, André BRETON, Claude CAHUN, Jacques CHAVY, Jean DAUTRY, Jean DELMAS, Henry DUBIEF, Reya GARBARG, Arthur HARFAUX, Maurice HENRY, Georges HUGNET, Marcel JEAN, Léo MALET, Suzanne MALHERBE, Henry PASTOUREAU, Benjamin PÉRET, Jean ROLLIN.

LES IMPRESSIONS DIVERSES, 6, Av. de la Porte-Brunet, Paris-19e

Treatise from March 1936, where Contre-Attaque criticizes
both Hitler and the new anti-fascist front.

The storming of the Capitol was the final piece of the puzzle. It was impossible not to compare the scenes on the steps and inside the building with the 1920s and 1930s (Paxton 2021). The question of fascism has returned. What until recently seemed highly unlikely – the return of fascist parties and politicians and the mainstreaming of violent identitarian nationalism – seems to be happening all over the world, from the United States to France, Italy, Hungary, Brazil and India. The ghosts of the 1930s have suddenly reawakened. Fascism has gone from a merely historical phenomenon to a question of the utmost contemporary importance. In many countries, far-right parties have made electoral gains and have even managed to enter governments, and a growing number of states have taken an authoritarian turn. This development peaked between 2016 and 2018 with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the elections of Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Add to that the 2017 showdown between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen in France, the emergence of a number of racist movements and the electoral success of far-right parties in most European countries following the so-called "Migrant Crisis" of 2015, in which millions of refugees from the war-torn Middle East and Africa began penetrating the Schengen border regime. The combination of austerity policies implemented after the financial crisis of 2008 and anti-Muslim scapegoating of immigrants opened the door for racist parties in countries previously characterized by anti-fascist consensus, such as Germany and Spain, where *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Vox* stormed onto the scene. Even in well-off Northern European countries like Denmark, which receive very few asylum- seekers and refugees, Islamophobia became part of the political mainstream. The competition for racist votes was given free rein throughout the '00s, and the Danish Social Democrats ended up adopting the policies of the far-right Danish People's Party (Bolt 2011).

Fascism is no longer merely a question of historical scholarship. As the Italian historian and fascism scholar Enzo Traverso puts it: "The world has not experienced a similar growth of the radical right since the 1930s, a development which inevitably awakens the memory of fascism" (Traverso 2019, pp. 3-4).

It is important to understand the new fascism and its specificity. First, however, I will present Contre-Attaque and its anti-fascism, including how the group understood the challenge of fascism and what had to be done. Then, I will return to the present and draw on Contre-Attaque's particular vocabulary to make a stab at a brief analysis of 21st-century fascism.

A vanishing revolution

The Contre-Attaque group was set up in late 1935 under the name *Contre-Attaque, union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires* (The Union of Revolutionary Intellectuals). In an invitation to one of the initial meetings of what was to become the short-lived group, Bataille, the anarchist historian Jean Dautry and the communist intellectual Pierre Kaan posed the following question: "What to do? Faced with fascism, given the insufficiency of communism?" (Bataille 1999, p. 124). It was urgently needed to rethink the task of a revolutionary response to accelerating political events. The available Marxist analyses were inadequate and had to be ditched. The French Communist Party was rallying behind an ever-more suspicious and nationalist Soviet Union, which was abandoning the old Communist motto according to which imperialist war should be transformed into civil war. The newly formed Popular Front, which had united Socialists, Communists and Liberals against fascism, seemed unable to halt the rising fascist tide. And the parliamentary democratic system was ill-equipped to channel the affective energy of the disgruntled masses who were still enduring the effects of the economic crisis that had swept the world in the wake of the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

The historical context was highly charged. The previous year in France had been marked by dramatic events in which organized fascist groups attempted a *coup d'état* and rioted in central Paris, forcing the resignation of the newly appointed centre-left president, Édouard Daladier. Internationally, the consolidation of Hitler's NSDAP was confirmed in June with the purging of the left-wing faction. In early August 1934, following the death of the 87-year-old German president Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was officially elevated to the position of Führer, absolute leader, of the German nation. In December the same year, Italian forces stationed in Italian Somaliland attacked an Ethiopian garrison in neighbouring Abyssinia, sparking a conflict that would culminate in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War – which broke out in October 1935, coinciding with the exact moment that Contre-Attaque convened for the first time.

In themselves, these events were overwhelming, but the group's members, many of them Marxists or affiliated to other revolutionary positions, also experienced a theoretical paralysis due to developments in the Soviet Union. As Denis Hollier put it, in the mid-1930s, this generation of Marxists – all of whom were dedicated to the emancipatory potential of a proletarian revolution in which the working class would transform itself into the proletariat and put an end to class rule – experienced a form of "political aphasia" (Hollier, p. 19). Events in the Soviet Union made it more and more difficult to understand what was going on. The beacon of revolutionary hope was fast becoming invisible, or at least more and more difficult to see and orient toward. The Soviet Union was not what it was supposed to have been. The Russian proletariat had tried to seize the means of production, but the Bolsheviks had quickly turned into a new exploiting class.

As Bini Adamczak writes in her beautiful *Yesterday's Tomorrow,* for communist militants, the revolution was always already ending (Adamczak 2021). In the mid-1930s, signs of the end of the revolutionary process were commonplace, from the spread of fascism and the necessity of a broad anti-fascist front to the bizarre spectacle of the show trials in Moscow at which former revolutionary icons were forced to confess to having been in the service of counter-revolutionary forces. As a disillusioned Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter to a comrade, communist intellectuals were forced into silence. The Marxist intellectuals, who were supposed to be in tune with the direction of history, said nothing: "the silence of those who think, who, precisely because they think, have a hard time considering themselves as people who know" (Benjamin in Hollier 1996, p. 19). One defeat led to another, each one seemingly more final than the last: the March 1935 Laval-Litvinov Treaty, a French Soviet treaty of mutual assistance, was preceded by Stalin's "socialism-in-one-country" doctrine; Hitler's ascendance to power in 1933 was foreshadowed by the crushing of the German Revolution in 1919 by the German Social Democrats; show trials followed the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921, and so on. The counter-revolutionary dynamic was constantly derailing the revolutionary process.

Contre-Attaque emerged in the middle of these tumultuous events. From a Marxist perspective, the entire interwar period was one long, systemic crisis in which the tensions that had previously facilitated the development of capitalist society threatened its very foundations. Class conflicts were tearing society apart. Capitalism would undergo two world wars and a deep economic crisis before stabilizing after 1945 (Mandel 1986). We can only properly understand the world wars and the first four decades of the 20th century if we understand this period as an ultraviolent, protracted confrontation between a restless, militant working class and a bourgeoisie vacillating between repression and integration (Traverso 2016). In the interwar period, parliamentary democracy lacked the means to function as a mediator in the class struggle – it was unable to integrate the labouring classes, which, rightly or wrongly, were perceived as an existential threat to the

bourgeoisie. For revolutionary intellectuals such as Bataille, Breton and Benjamin, the dream of communist world revolution was evaporating with paradoxical swiftness. Nonetheless, it remained a haunting nightmare, which forced dominant parts of the ruling classes in Italy and Germany to opt for a reactionary solution, culminating in the slaughter of the European working classes and the Holocaust (Bordiga 1950, Mayer 1971).

By the end of the 19th century, it was becoming more and more difficult to manage the productive capacity of industrial capital, and national capitals were competing with each other. Add to that the growing strength of the working class and the scene was set for a conflict that raged back and forth before reaching a preliminary solution in the postwar Keynesian wage-productivity compromise (Negri and Hardt 1994), according to which workers gained access to jobs and cheap commodities, and acquired political rights, but abandoned the revolutionary dream of the abolition of the money economy.

Flyer for the second public meeting organized by Contre-Attaque on the 21st of January 1936 on the occasion of the execution of Louis XVI. The subject of the three advertised lectures were the 200 families who controlled the financial sector of France.

Using fascism against fascism

The stakes were high and something had to be done, felt the intellectuals who put together the Contre-Attaque group. Fascism was mobilizing the masses; communism was no longer what it was supposed to be, and parliamentary democracy appeared doomed and unable to prevent the fascist push. There was an urgent need to take a stand. As was clearly stated in the call to the first meeting, something had to be done – but what, exactly, was less clear. Fascism was on the rise everywhere. Hitler was consolidating his rule in Germany. In Austria, Nazis had shot Chancellor Dollfuss in an attempted coup. And in France, fascist militias were rioting in the streets of Paris. It was necessary to both understand and challenge the fascist offensive. However, this could not be a mere defence of the status quo. The Surrealists had been engaged in a fierce critique of the status quo since the mid-1920s, and Bataille, too, was highly reluctant to accept any kind of compromise. It was a question of advancing the revolution while preventing fascism. The mission was to hijack the passions mobilized by fascism in order to launch a revolutionary offensive.

Contre-Attaque would unite a mixed band of Surrealists led by Breton, disillusioned Leninists, anarchists and people who had contributed to various projects by the anti-Stalinist communist Boris Souvarine, including the Democratic Communist Circle and the journal *La critique sociale.* Bataille had published a number of texts in the latter, not least “The Psychological Structure of Fascism”, which constituted a theoretical reference point for the new group’s attempt to analyse the challenge of fascism. The Surrealists had recently made their final break with the French Communist Party after eight years of often tortuous attempts to tie the Surrealist search for the marvellous to a Communist notion of socio-material transformation (Bolt 2022). The Surrealist group refused to abandon the equation between artistic nonconformism and political revolution even when confronted with fascism and dictated by the Communist Party. And after failing in its attempt to take over the leadership of a new cultural anti-fascist association AEAR (*Association des écrivains et des artistes révolutionnaires*) financed by the French Communist Party, the Surrealist group dramatized a public break with the Communist Party in June 1935. This was the “local” context for Contre-Attaque. The group published its first tract in early October in two versions – the first with 13 signatories, the second with 39. Among them, we find the actor Roger Blin, the Hungarian Marxist Pierre Aimery (alias Imre Keleman), writers like Pierre Klossowski, and a number of Surrealists, including the poets Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret and the painter Yves Tanguy.

The short tract consisted of 14 points split into two parts: “Resolutions” and “Positions of the Union on Essential Points”. It was a withering attack on any notion of national identity and patriotic beliefs of any kind, from fascism’s ethno-nationalist community to the Stalinist “socialism-in-one-country” doctrine to the anti-fascist Popular Front defence of France. “Virulently hostile to any tendency, whatever form it takes, harnessing the Revolution to the advantage of ideas of nation or country” (Counter-Attack 2001, p. 114). The nation was a trap that had to be avoided at any cost, even when confronted with the emergence of fascism. As Bataille and Kaan put it in November, in a proposed but never written tract:

> A great many people love their country, sacrificing themselves and dying for it. A Nazi can love the Reich to the point of delirium. We are also able to love to the point of fanaticism, but what we love, even though we come from France, is not at all the French community, but the human community; not at all France, but the world (Pierre 1980, p. 288).

Marxism was in serious trouble, but the anti-nationalist stance that had been a central ingredient in the working-class movement until 1914 remained important. Marxism was a completely different way of conceiving politics – instead of nations and national communities, politics was a question of class struggle (Buck-Morss 2000). Its goal was to emancipate everyone from the shackles of the capitalist economy. This remained the programme.

The problem, however, was that the revolution needed to be updated. The revolutionary movements' traditional tactics had been developed in a different context when the task had been to topple autocracies. Now, the revolutionaries were confronted by democracies. The existing revolutionary movement had not been capable of rethinking the revolution but remained stuck in a situation that was long gone. The failed revolutions in Germany and Hungary in 1918–1919, along with subsequent events in Austria and Germany, testified to that fact. The strength of fascism was precisely due to its capacity to subvert democracy. It was not only a genuinely popular movement that managed to mobilize the masses and let them express themselves, but it was also the only "revolution" that had managed to get rid of democracy. This made it necessary to mimic the fascist movement when it came to unleashing the affective energies of the masses as a means of confronting bourgeois democracy. Politics was a question not only of reason but of affect; not only discussion but action. This was a radical and controversial analysis at a moment when most leftists were rallying behind the Popular Front in a defence of democracy and culture. However, Contre-Attaque rejected what they perceived to be fascist/anti-fascist blackmail, which made it impossible to uphold a revolutionary perspective that rejected both fascism's racist community and capitalist authority in the form of parliamentary democracy.

It was no longer possible to take a step back and appeal to reasoned debate and ideas of a common good. These ideas were part and parcel of the bourgeois institutions that would always manage class conflict in favour of the bourgeoisie. It was this world – the world of meaningless slaughter in the trenches of World War One, the economic crisis and the silly spectacle of parliamentary debate – that was doomed. Fascism was a sign of its degeneration, an expression of its bankruptcy. This was the "truth" of fascism, and unless people sought to meet the fascist challenge on these terms, they would remain mired in the past. Fascism was an attempt to save the world from capitalist authority but in the most paradoxical way. It made no sense, therefore, to oppose fascism and the world of bourgeois institutions and bourgeois parliamentarism, but this was exactly what the newly formed Popular Front was doing. This was the problem with the Popular Front's programme: it was "destined to fail" (Counter-Attack 2001, p. 115). Contre-Attaque's proposal was to form what we might call an aggressive Popular Front, one not afraid to use violence and mobilize affect in a Sorelian fashion in order to supersede both fascism and the capitalist money economy.

The fundamental principle behind Contre-Attaque was that parliamentary democracy was beyond redemption. This rendered the Popular Front meaningless. It facilitated a false dichotomy that reduced politics to a choice between fascist mobilization or bourgeois democracy. Contre-Attaque rejected both and sought desperately to uphold a revolutionary perspective that fused anti-fascism with anti-capitalism. Parliamentarianism had to be ditched to combat fascism, but also because it was already a meaningless spectacle that prevented the working class from carrying out its historical mission – namely, the emancipation of all and the end of class society. Whenever the working class entered parliamentary politics, it lost its revolutionary vision. Both Breton and Bataille subscribed to Lenin's virulent dismissal of political democracy (Lenin 1919).

A completely different kind of "counter-attack" was needed – one that the Popular Front would be incapable of mounting, as it was way too timid and unable to cope with the affective powers

unleashed by the fascists. Contre-Attaque imagined anti-fascism as a form of revolutionary action that included a takeover of political power. It was nothing short of a popular coup, even if this implied violent action. “The constitution of a government of the people, of a directorship of public salvation, requires an uncompromising dictatorship of the armed people” (Counter-Attack 2001, p. 115). Dictatorship was better than the political democracy of the bourgeois state. It was thus not a question of rejecting discipline and authority but of putting them in the service of a proletarian revolution that affirmed the affective energies of the people. The fascist movement hailed “father, fatherland, boss”, while Contre-Attaque called for the emancipation of all. The servile discipline of fascism was to be rejected. There could be no single master or Führer. Everybody should “behave as masters” (Counter-Attack 2001, p. 116). The group’s rallying cry was “Death to all the slaves of capitalism!” (ibid., p. 115)

The second part of the tract, “Positions of the Union on Essential Points”, began with the group proclaiming its fidelity to the core principles of Marxism – the contradictory character of capitalism, class struggle as the motor of history – and then stressed the need to update the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production due to the growing significance of the superstructure. The economic crisis had resulted in a (counter-) revolutionary push precisely because of the emergence of new political forms capable of defusing the revolutionary energies generated by economic hardship. Modern parliamentary democracy and, most importantly, fascism, were two political forms that required a revision of Marxism or at least a new focus on the superstructure. Any revolutionary action had to take these developments into account and develop “a science of the forms of [present] authority” (ibid.).

On that basis, the goal was still a classless society free from immiseration, in which everybody had access to society’s riches. “The revolutionary intervention must have done with economic impotence” and hand over “total power” to the workers and peasants, without which they would remain “condemned to disorganized production, to war and poverty” (ibid., p. 116).

The tract ended with a call to armed mass action in the streets, appropriating the means of fascism. Clearly, this carried a certain risk of blurring the lines between Contre-Attaque’s revolutionary programme and fascism. However, the weak Popular Front posed no threat to the virulent power of fascism. Following George Sorel, Contre-Attaque argued that it was necessary to create myths that could compete with fascism rather than return to an already broken political system that was set up to uphold private property and the capitalist economy. In the tract’s Nietzschean wording (no doubt included by Bataille), the task was to let everybody become masters. The revolution had universal meaning and was therefore addressed to “people across the whole world” (ibid., p. 117).

As we can see in the correspondence, invitations and meeting summaries collected by Marina Galletti in *L’Apprenti Sorcier,* the group was characterized by a feverish need to react to ongoing events. The tone of the tract dated 7 October reveals the urgency of the undertaking. Bataille, Breton and the others – according to Henri Dubief, the group numbered between 50 and 70 members (Dubief 1970, p. 53) – were in a hurry. The political horizon was quickly closing, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to uphold a revolutionary anti-capitalist stance that sought to combine criticism of fascism, Stalinism and parliamentary democracy. The hectic activities included a series of meetings, but the planned publication of a series of pamphlets never took place. Only one was published, on the question of the family, in May 1936. Sixteen issues were planned and assigned. Breton and Bataille were to co-write one on authority, crowds and leaders, and another tentatively titled “Death to slaves”. Other issues were to deal with the party form, revolutions in

Central Europe and the master-slave dialectic in Hegel and Marx. Issues dedicated to Nietzsche, Sade and Fourier were also scheduled. However, events overtook the plans and the group fell apart in spring 1936, following the publication in May of a tract written by Bataille, Jean Bernier and Lucie Colliard titled "Workers you have been betrayed!" Breton and the Surrealists had not approved the tract before it was printed. After its publication, they not only declared their disapproval but decided to leave the group, voicing their criticism of a problematic tendency to conflate anti-fascism with fascism: "The Surrealist members of the group Contre-Attaque report with satisfaction the dissolution of the so-called group, within which had emerged some tendencies called 'superfascist' whose purely fascist character has become more and more evident" (Pierre 1980, p. 301). The Surrealists seem to have been annoyed by the introduction of the term "superfascism" (*sur-fascisme* in French), which obviously somehow mirrored the term surrealism. However, by most accounts, Breton agreed with Bataille on the need to develop an anti-fascist position that differed from the one propagated by the Popular Front. It was a question of accepting the challenge of fascism's ability to let the masses express themselves but then directing this unleashed energy for a different purpose, in which the wage-slaves would end capitalism.[1]

Revolutionary anti-fascism in the 1930s

In retrospect, it is evident that the group had set itself an extremely difficult task and the political dynamic was definitely not in its favour. Politics was becoming increasingly narrowly defined as a question of fascism or democracy – and anti-fascism was in favour of democracy. Following the treaty between France and the Soviet Union, there was no room for more radical perspectives. Artists, writers and intellectuals who considered themselves to be on the Left rallied behind this position. The avant-garde position gradually disappeared as it was no longer possible to expand anti-fascism. Class struggle was suddenly rewritten and adapted to another line of conflict.

In reality, the avant-garde position had been under threat ever since the emergence of the avant-garde in the build-up to World War One and during the revolutionary proletarian offensive in the final phase of the war. The communist revolution was not only under threat but was, in fact, always already dying, and the avant-garde almost always arrived late on the scene (Bolt Rasmussen 2018, pp. 27-52) – the French Surrealists only joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1927. At that time, the PCF was already turning into a loyal proselyte of the Soviet Union, a centralized, ideologically homogenous party led from abroad. Nevertheless, the Surrealists wanted to show their commitment to the revolution and wanted a bigger platform for their project of moral revolution. By the mid-1930s, the situation was even worse. Not only had the revolutionary credentials of the Soviet Union deteriorated, and the Soviet government's brief espousal of modern art been replaced with agitational realism, fascism was also in the ascendance all over the map, and parliamentary democracy was unable to deal with the repercussions of the economic crisis. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Contre-Attaque felt something different was required to avoid war and destruction. Bataille had an almost intuitive understanding of the destructive capacity of fascism, but it was hard to devise an adequate response that could be mobilized beyond the intellectual milieu in Paris. The project collapsed even before it got off the ground.

1) The specific circumstances of the split remain somewhat unclear. In his letter to Galletti, the Surrealist Henri Pastoureau explains that it was in fact the Surrealists who came up with the term "superfascism" and not Bataille or any of the former Souvariniens. And the term had two meanings: one positive, one negative (Bataille 1997, p. 297, note 3).

After Contre-Attaque, Bataille abandoned politics altogether and set up a secret group called Acéphale, which attracted several members of Contre-Attaque. Believing neither art nor politics would do, Bataille turned to mythology in a desperate attempt to make a gesture toward a different kind of community than the one the fascist movements were busy establishing (Surya 2002, p. 235). According to his reading of Nietzsche, Bataille wanted to create a genuine community characterized by a radical affirmation of sacrifice, in which the destructive energies of human life were not turned outward, against others – Jews, homosexuals, Communists – but inward, against oneself.

If Bataille gave up on politics, in the form of movements in the street and direct critiques of party politics, Breton and the Surrealists sought to uphold Surrealism as a revolutionary communist stance by allying with Leon Trotsky, the exiled revolutionary and former leader of the Red Army. In 1938, Breton went to Mexico to visit Trotsky. Together, they penned a manifesto that emphasized the revolutionary dimension of modern art and rejected the idea of submitting art to any kind of political diktat as was the case in the Soviet Union where the doctrine of Socialist Realism had been introduced in the mid 1930s (Schwarz 1977).

To the quickly assembled group of Marxists and Surrealists, fascism was an expression of a displaced revolutionary impulse. Fascism channelled the heterogenous elements that bourgeois society had tried to purge from human life. The homogeneous nature of bourgeois society allowed fascism to present itself as a revolution. It mobilized the masses, luring them into participating in their own submission. This was the power of fascism: it seduced the masses, gave them a voice, a form, channelling their anger and energy into subjugation under the authority of the leader. As such, fascism was obviously a negation of precisely the destabilizing democratic impulse that Contre-Attaque sought to affirm. Fascism was a fake revolution against the fake democracy of parliamentary democracy. Contre-Attaque's impossible project was to affirm a radical democracy in which the wage-slaves of capital would become masters. Contre-Attaque was, therefore, a negation of bourgeois democracy but in favor of a Communist society that was open to all, not just the members of the Aryan or Mediterranean races.

Many historians and philosophers have found this attempt to combine anti-fascism with a critique of existing parliamentary democracy problematic. Contre-Attaque's description of fascism's capacity to mobilize the masses has also caused concern, even accusations of sympathy or support (Lindenberg 1990, Wolin 1996).[2] While these critiques are not irrelevant, they seek to immunize parliamentary democracy against any kind of critique and overlook the fact that in the interwar period, the ruling class had to be forced into compromising with the working-class movement. The integration of labour into capital took different forms, including the racist, nationalist community of fascism. Contre-Attaque sought to prevent the integration of labour into capital in favour of a communist solution in which capitalism was to be replaced by socialism (as the lower stage of communism) and then finally communism. Richard Wolin and the other critics of Contre-Attaque dismiss this attempt to formulate a more radical anti-fascism – what Susan Rubin Suleiman describes as "a Popular Front with balls" (Suleiman 1994, p. 72) – in favour of a liberal consensus

2) It is interesting that the surge in interest in Surrealism within art history in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States and Britain largely refrained from analysing Contre-Attaque. "Formalist" critics and historians, including Clement Greenberg, had little or no interest in Surrealism. Inspired by the reading of the French *Tel Quel* journal of Bataille (and Artaud), Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster made important contributions to a new understanding of Surrealism from the early 1980s onwards, often highlighting the role of Bataille. However, the question of anti-fascism (and anti-capitalism) has been notably absent from these analyses.

that hides its own investment in capitalist property relations. Contre-Attaque's project was aimed precisely at a critique of fascism's false mediation of heterogeneity *and* a critique of capitalism and its mute force. As Robyn Marasco writes in a recent presentation of Bataille, Contre-Attaque did not flirt with fascism but sought to understand its ability to mobilize affects (Marasco 2022, p. 7). Mass politics was a question of an affective surplus. Only by engaging in a politics of passion would the anti-fascists be capable of combatting the fascist threat.

The new fascism

As I have argued elsewhere, the new fascism that has been emerging during the last decade or so needs to be understood within the context of a longer political economic development, in which global capitalism has stalled, resulting in declining profitability in manufacturing and industry. A stagnating economy has once again called forth the violence of fascism (Bolt 2021a).

What we usually call neoliberalism was an attempt to fix a situation of overcapacity in the industrial sector by moving production and reducing circulation costs. However, the fix did not work, and the last 50 years has been one long, slow crash landing in which a small segment of the population grabbed an increasingly large share of a diminishing total wealth. The result has been staggering inequality, both globally and locally.

The political form of post-Fordist deindustrialization was a merger of party politics and finance capital. Colin Crouch terms this development post-democracy (Crouch 2004) – a situation in which politics is transformed into the management of business interests, and voters are only supposed to be active when they cast their votes. The link between street and parliament is severed, and politics is left to the professionals. This results in a technocratization of politics, which effectively hollows out democracy (Mair 2013). The emergence of political figures such as Trump, but also Le Pen, Farage and Salvini, is a reaction to this hollowing out. Trump was the bizarre expression of a rejection of social disintegration, the expression of four decades of political, economic and social decline that saw the United States slowly fall apart as both a wealth machine and a global superpower. Trump was the paradoxical embodiment of the rejection of a broken political and economic system characterized by huge inequalities and the fusion of politics and finance. His promise was to restore order by closing the borders, imposing tariffs and being tough on socially constructed others, including migrants, Muslims, Black people, Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars and "Cultural Marxists". It was an explicitly racist project that promised a racially privileged segment of the population's access to the jobs still available in the US.

In other words, there is a political economic background to the new fascism, but Contre-Attaque illustrates the explicitly superstructural or cultural dimension of contemporary fascism – how it attempts to solve an economic crisis by recourse to "cultural" gestures in which socially constructed others are identified with the abstract laws of capitalist accumulation (Postone 1980). By associating the abstract dominance of late capitalism with specific cultural forms, the foreigner is positioned as the cause of the *déroute*.

Trump, Salvini, Le Pen and all the other fascists come off as even more shallow than the fascists of the interwar period – as if they do not really believe their own gestures. The project is still a national community reserved for the chosen few, but it is rarely presented with the same kind of historical grandiosity expressed by Mussolini or Hitler. Today's fascism is thin (Bolt 2021a). We find no large-scale projects akin to *città nuove,* the new cities built by Mussolini. There are no monumental plans for a Thousand Year Reich, as sketched by Hitler's architects. Today, the dream

is a return to the White welfare state of Northern Europe and North America as it existed before May '68, before the African-American revolts in the US, before mass migration to the West.

Contre-Attaque did really well at showing up the fake revolutionary nature of fascism, the way it channelled resentment and let the masses express themselves – albeit, obviously, without changing the relation to production, as Bataille and Breton's friend Benjamin wrote in his analysis of fascism (Benjamin 2008, p. 41). The group stressed the importance of affects in politics, that politics has to do with passions, often in the form of anger and anguish. This is important and should warn us against attempting to combat fascism through a recourse to reason. As Contre-Attaque made clear, reason is never enough. Passion and energy are the material of politics. When confronted with the spread of fascist sentiments, it makes no sense to appeal to good arguments or *sensus communis* when this is precisely what is missing (Bolt 2021b).

The hollowing out of democracy has paved the way for a hyper-political wave in which politics takes on the form of brief, emotional utterances but rarely leads to long-lasting engagement in organizations and projects (Jäger 2022). This is the perfect breeding ground for fascism, as it functions as a polarity machine that unites opposites in an unstable mix (Kaplan 1986, p. 25). It is an incoherent and aggressive ideology that functions best in a situation of heightened conflict and opacity. Fascism is perhaps best understood as an experience that draws people in and promises to give them an identity, however fleeting, through violent aggression.

The new fascism is a quick identity fix in an era characterized by a lack of lasting engagements and the withering away of former political vocabularies. The sociologist Asef Bayat has argued, referring to the Arab Spring, that there can be "revolutionaries without revolution" (Bayat 2017). In much the same way, we can now say that we have fascists without fascism. Fascism has become so threadbare that we instantly recognize that there is something lacking. Even the fascists themselves seem unsure that they are really fascists. But they are. It is the same programme of exclusion and violence we know from history, the myth of a threatened national community that needs protecting. The notion of "the great replacement" is the perfect contemporary expression of this idea. Politicians from Denmark to France repeatedly invoke this idea to conjure an image of danger and the need for drastic measures.

Similarly, anti-fascism has to arouse the passions of the masses. This was the tricky lesson of Contre-Attaque. In order to meet the challenge of fascism, anti-fascism has to enter the terrain of violent affects and destructive passions. This is affect theory *avant la lettre*, what Gavin Grindon has called "affective materialism" (Grindon 2010, p. 312). It is a more vicious version of affect theory than most contemporary forms, which rarely engage with the seductions of fascism. However, if we want to stop fascism from gaining ground, we must engage with affects, even the more dangerous ones. It is precisely fascism's capacity to unleash passions that attracts people and gives it a semblance of protest. But fascism is a protest against protests, a counter-revolutionary force that blocks any real challenge to the relations of production of capitalist society. Fascism directs the heterogenous energies of the masses into submission to the leader and violence against minorities. Contre-Attaque's anti-fascism sought to prevent this heterogenous energy from mutating into a form of violent homogeneity. It preferred to hold on to the messiness of human life and to embrace contamination, slipperiness and surreal accidents. It sought to do away with leaders, to end the attempt to transcend the labyrinth of human existence and affirm the interdependence of human and non-human life on Earth. This could perhaps still be the programme of an anti-capitalist anti-fascism.

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