

Antifa in Theory and in Practice

By [Diana Johnstone](#)

Global Research, October 25, 2017
[CounterPunch](#) 9 October 2017

Region: [USA](#)

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

First published by Global Research on October 11, 2017.

See [Diana Johnstone's followup article](#)

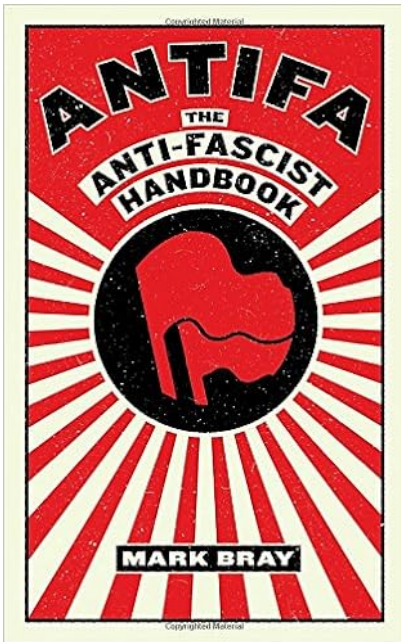
["Fascists are divided into two categories: the fascists and the anti-fascists."](#) – Ennio Flaiano, Italian writer and co-author of Federico Fellini's greatest film scripts.

In recent weeks, a totally disoriented left has been widely exhorted to unify around a masked vanguard calling itself Antifa, for anti-fascist. Hooded and dressed in black, Antifa is essentially a variation of the Black Bloc, familiar for introducing violence into peaceful demonstrations in many countries. Imported from Europe, the label Antifa sounds more political. It also serves the purpose of stigmatizing those it attacks as "fascists".

Despite its imported European name, Antifa is basically just another example of America's steady descent into violence.

Historical Pretensions

Antifa first came to prominence from its role in reversing Berkeley's proud "free speech" tradition by preventing right wing personalities from speaking there. But its moment of glory was its clash with rightwingers in Charlottesville on August 12, largely because Trump commented that there were "good people on both sides". With exuberant Schadenfreude, commentators grabbed the opportunity to condemn the despised President for his "moral equivalence", thereby bestowing a moral blessing on Antifa.



Charlottesville served as a successful book launching for [Antifa: the Antifascist Handbook](#), whose author, young academic Mark Bray, is an Antifa in both theory and practice. The book is “really taking off very fast”, rejoiced the publisher, Melville House. It instantly won acclaim from leading mainstream media such as the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and NBC, not hitherto known for rushing to review leftwing books, least of all those by revolutionary anarchists.

The Washington Post welcomed Bray as spokesman for “insurgent activist movements” and observed that:

“The book’s most enlightening contribution is on the history of anti-fascist efforts over the past century, but its most relevant for today is its justification for stifling speech and clobbering white supremacists.”

Bray’s “enlightening contribution” is to tell a flattering version of the Antifa story to a generation whose dualistic, Holocaust-centered view of history has largely deprived them of both the factual and the analytical tools to judge multidimensional events such as the growth of fascism. Bray presents today’s Antifa as though it were the glorious legitimate heir to every noble cause since abolitionism. But there were no anti-fascists before fascism, and the label “Antifa” by no means applies to all the many adversaries of fascism.

The implicit claim to carry on the tradition of the International Brigades who fought in Spain against Franco is nothing other than a form of innocence by association. Since we must revere the heroes of the Spanish Civil War, some of that esteem is supposed to rub off on their self-designated heirs. Unfortunately, there are no veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade still alive to point to the difference between a vast organized defense against invading fascist armies and skirmishes on the Berkeley campus. As for the Anarchists of Catalonia, the patent on anarchism ran out a long time ago, and anyone is free to market his own generic.

The original Antifascist movement was an effort by the Communist International to cease hostilities with Europe’s Socialist Parties in order to build a common front against the triumphant movements led by Mussolini and Hitler.

Since Fascism thrived, and Antifa was never a serious adversary, its apologists thrive on the “nipped in the bud” claim: “if only” Antifascists had beat up the fascist movements early enough, the latter would have been nipped in the bud. Since reason and debate failed to stop the rise of fascism, they argue, we must use street violence – which, by the way, failed even more decisively.

This is totally ahistorical. Fascism exalted violence, and violence was its preferred testing ground. Both Communists and Fascists were fighting in the streets and the atmosphere of violence helped fascism thrive as a bulwark against Bolshevism, gaining the crucial support of leading capitalists and militarists in their countries, which brought them to power.

Since historic fascism no longer exists, Bray’s Antifa have broadened their notion of “fascism” to include anything that violates the current Identity Politics canon: from “patriarchy” (a pre-fascist attitude to put it mildly) to “transphobia” (decidedly a post-fascist problem).

The masked militants of Antifa seem to be more inspired by Batman than by Marx or even by Bakunin.

Storm Troopers of the Neoliberal War Party

Since Mark Bray offers European credentials for current U.S. Antifa, it is appropriate to observe what Antifa amounts to in Europe today.

In Europe, the tendency takes two forms. Black Bloc activists regularly invade various leftist demonstrations in order to smash windows and fight the police. These testosterone exhibits are of minor political significance, other than provoking public calls to strengthen police forces. They are widely suspected of being influenced by police infiltration.

As an example, last September 23, several dozen black-clad masked ruffians, tearing down posters and throwing stones, attempted to storm the platform where the flamboyant Jean-Luc Mélenchon was to address the mass meeting of *La France Insoumise*, today the leading leftist party in France. Their unspoken message seemed to be that nobody is revolutionary enough for them. Occasionally, they do actually spot a random skinhead to beat up. This establishes their credentials as “anti-fascist”.

They use these credentials to arrogate to themselves the right to slander others in a sort of informal self-appointed inquisition.

As prime example, in late 2010, a young woman named Ornella Guyet appeared in Paris seeking work as a journalist in various leftist periodicals and blogs. She “tried to infiltrate everywhere”, according to the former director of *Le Monde diplomatique*, Maurice Lemoine, who “always intuitively distrusted her” when he hired her as an intern.

Viktor Dedaj, who manages one of the main leftist sites in France, *Le Grand Soir*, was among those who tried to help her, only to experience an unpleasant surprise a few months later. Ornella had become a self-appointed inquisitor dedicated to denouncing “conspirationism, confusionism, anti-Semitism and red-brown” on Internet. This took the form of personal attacks on individuals whom she judged to be guilty of those sins. What is significant is that all her targets were opposed to U.S. and NATO aggressive wars in the Middle East.

Indeed, the timing of her crusade coincided with the “regime change” wars that destroyed Libya and tore apart Syria. The attacks singled out leading critics of those wars.

Viktor Dedaj was on her hit list. So was Michel Collon, close to the Belgian Workers Party, author, activist and manager of the bilingual site Investig’action. So was François Ruffin, film-maker, editor of the leftist journal Fakir elected recently to the National Assembly on the list of Mélenchon’s party *La France Insoumise*. And so on. The list is long.

The targeted personalities are diverse, but all have one thing in common: opposition to aggressive wars. What’s more, so far as I can tell, just about everyone opposed to those wars is on her list.

The main technique is guilt by association. High on the list of mortal sins is criticism of the European Union, which is associated with “nationalism” which is associated with “fascism” which is associated with “anti-Semitism”, hinting at a penchant for genocide. This coincides perfectly with the official policy of the EU and EU governments, but Antifa uses much harsher language.

In mid-June 2011, the anti-EU party *Union Populaire Républicaine* led by François Asselineau was the object of slanderous insinuations on Antifa internet sites signed by “Marie-Anne Boutoleau” (a pseudonym for Ornella Guyet). Fearing violence, owners cancelled scheduled UPR meeting places in Lyon. UPR did a little investigation, discovering that Ornella Guyet was on the speakers list at a March 2009 Seminar on International Media organized in Paris by the Center for the Study of International Communications and the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. A surprising association for such a zealous crusader against “red-brown”.

In case anyone has doubts, “red-brown” is a term used to smear anyone with generally leftist views – that is, “red” – with the fascist color “brown”. This smear can be based on having the same opinion as someone on the right, speaking on the same platform with someone on the right, being published alongside someone on the right, being seen at an anti-war demonstration also attended by someone on the right, and so on. This is particularly useful for the War Party, since these days, many conservatives are more opposed to war than leftists who have bought into the “humanitarian war” mantra.

The government doesn’t need to repress anti-war gatherings. Antifa does the job.

The Franco-African comedien Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala, stigmatized for anti-Semitism since 2002 for his tv sketch lampooning an Israeli settler as part of George W. Bush’s “Axis of Good”, is not only a target, but serves as a guilty association for anyone who defends his right to free speech – such as Belgian professor Jean Bricmont, virtually blacklisted in France for trying to get in a word in favor of free speech during a TV talk show. Dieudonné has been banned from the media, sued and fined countless times, even sentenced to jail in Belgium, but continues to enjoy a full house of enthusiastic supporters at his one-man shows, where the main political message is opposition to war.

Still, accusations of being soft on Dieudonné can have serious effects on individuals in more precarious positions, since the mere hint of “anti-Semitism” can be a career killer in France. Invitations are cancelled, publications refused, messages go unanswered.

In April 2016, Ornella Guyet dropped out of sight, amid strong suspicions about her own

peculiar associations.

The moral of this story is simple. Self-appointed radical revolutionaries can be the most useful thought police for the neoliberal war party.

I am not suggesting that all, or most, Antifa are agents of the establishment. But they can be manipulated, infiltrated or impersonated precisely because they are self-anointed and usually more or less disguised.

Silencing Necessary Debate

One who is certainly sincere is Mark Bray, author of *The Intifa Handbook*. It is clear where Mark Bray is coming from when he writes (p.36-7):

“... Hitler’s ‘final solution’ murdered six million Jews in gas chambers, with firing squads, through hunger and lack of medical treatment in squalid camps and ghettos, with beatings, by working them to death, and through suicidal despair. Approximately two out of every three Jews on the continent were killed, including some of my relatives.”

This personal history explains why Mark Bray feels passionately about “fascism”. This is perfectly understandable in one who is haunted by fear that “it can happen again”.

However, even the most justifiable emotional concerns do not necessarily contribute to wise counsel. Violent reactions to fear may seem to be strong and effective when in reality they are morally weak and practically ineffectual.

We are in a period of great political confusion. Labeling every manifestation of “political incorrectness” as fascism impedes clarification of debate over issues that very much need to be defined and clarified.

The scarcity of fascists has been compensated by identifying criticism of immigration as fascism. This identification, in connection with rejection of national borders, derives much of its emotional force above all from the ancestral fear in the Jewish community of being excluded from the nations in which they find themselves.

The issue of immigration has different aspects in different places. It is not the same in European countries as in the United States. There is a basic distinction between immigrants and immigration. Immigrants are people who deserve consideration. Immigration is a policy that needs to be evaluated. It should be possible to discuss the policy without being accused of persecuting the people. After all, trade union leaders have traditionally opposed mass immigration, not out of racism, but because it can be a deliberate capitalist strategy to bring down wages.

In reality, immigration is a complex subject, with many aspects that can lead to reasonable compromise. But to polarize the issue misses the chances for compromise. By making mass immigration the litmus test of whether or not one is fascist, Antifa intimidation impedes reasonable discussion. Without discussion, without readiness to listen to all viewpoints, the issue will simply divide the population into two camps, for and against. And who will win such a confrontation?

A recent survey* shows that mass immigration is increasingly unpopular in all European countries. The complexity of the issue is shown by the fact that in the vast majority of European countries, most people believe they have a duty to welcome refugees, but disapprove of continued mass immigration. The official argument that immigration is a good thing is accepted by only 40%, compared to 60% of all Europeans who believe that “immigration is bad for our country”. A left whose principal cause is open borders will become increasingly unpopular.

Childish Violence

The idea that the way to shut someone up is to punch him in the jaw is as American as Hollywood movies. It is also typical of the gang war that prevails in certain parts of Los Angeles. Banding together with others “like us” to fight against gangs of “them” for control of turf is characteristic of young men in uncertain circumstances. The search for a cause can involve endowing such conduct with a political purpose: either fascist or antifascist. For disoriented youth, this is an alternative to joining the U.S. Marines.



Source: TheFreeThoughtProject.com

American Antifa looks very much like a middle class wedding between Identity Politics and gang warfare. Mark Bray (page 175) quotes his DC Antifa source as implying that the motive of would-be fascists is to side with “the most powerful kid in the block” and will retreat if scared. Our gang is tougher than your gang.

That is also the logic of U.S. imperialism, which habitually declares of its chosen enemies: “All they understand is force.” Although Antifa claim to be radical revolutionaries, their mindset is perfectly typical the atmosphere of violence which prevails in militarized America.

In another vein, Antifa follows the trend of current Identity Politics excesses that are squelching free speech in what should be its citadel, academia. Words are considered so dangerous that “safe spaces” must be established to protect people from them. This extreme vulnerability to injury from words is strangely linked to tolerance of real physical violence.

Wild Goose Chase

In the United States, the worst thing about Antifa is the effort to lead the disoriented American left into a wild goose chase, tracking down imaginary “fascists” instead of getting together openly to work out a coherent positive program. The United States has more than its share of weird individuals, of gratuitous aggression, of crazy ideas, and tracking down these marginal characters, whether alone or in groups, is a huge distraction. The truly dangerous people in the United States are safely ensconced in Wall Street, in Washington Think Tanks, in the executive suites of the sprawling military industry, not to mention the editorial offices of some of the mainstream media currently adopting a benevolent attitude toward “anti-fascists” simply because they are useful in focusing on the maverick Trump instead of themselves.

Antifa USA, by defining “resistance to fascism” as resistance to lost causes – the Confederacy, white supremacists and for that matter Donald Trump – is actually distracting from resistance to the ruling neoliberal establishment, which is also opposed to the Confederacy and white supremacists and has already largely managed to capture Trump by its implacable campaign of denigration. That ruling establishment, which in its insatiable foreign wars and introduction of police state methods, has successfully used popular “resistance to Trump” to make him even worse than he already was.

The facile use of the term “fascist” gets in the way of thoughtful identification and definition of the real enemy of humanity today. In the contemporary chaos, the greatest and most dangerous upheavals in the world all stem from the same source, which is hard to name, but which we might give the provisional simplified label of Globalized Imperialism. This amounts to a multifaceted project to reshape the world to satisfy the demands of financial capitalism, the military industrial complex, United States ideological vanity and the megalomania of leaders of lesser “Western” powers, notably Israel. It could be called simply “imperialism”, except that it is much vaster and more destructive than the historic imperialism of previous centuries. It is also much more disguised. And since it bears no clear label such as “fascism”, it is difficult to denounce in simple terms.

The fixation on preventing a form of tyranny that arose over 80 years ago, under very different circumstances, obstructs recognition of the monstrous tyranny of today. Fighting the previous war leads to defeat.

Donald Trump is an outsider who will not be let inside. The election of Donald Trump is above all a grave symptom of the decadence of the American political system, totally ruled by money, lobbies, the military-industrial complex and corporate media. Their lies are undermining the very basis of democracy. Antifa has gone on the offensive against the one weapon still in the hands of the people: the right to free speech and assembly.

Diana Johnstone is the author of [Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions](#). Her new book is [Queen of Chaos: the Misadventures of Hillary Clinton](#). She can be reached at diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr

Note

* “Où va la démocratie?”, une enquête de la Fondation pour l’innovation politique sous la direction de Dominique Reynié, (Plon, Paris, 2017).

Featured image is from jcrakow | [CC BY 2.0](#).

The original source of this article is [CounterPunch](#)
Copyright © [Diana Johnstone](#), [CounterPunch](#), 2017

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

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Diana Johnstone](#)

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