Against moral anti-fascism. Reflection on the popular front model and its limits.

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Like any activist, I am merely the mouthpiece for ideas that are developed collectively—and a very large part of what I will share with you today has been shaped in the wake of two decades of autonomous antifascist activism in Paris, particularly by Action Antifasciste Paris-Banlieue, probably the most emblematic organisation of its kind in France.

Fascism is back in Europe—this is undeniable—and it raises crucial questions for our camp, at a time when such questions are piling up and defeats are mounting globally. Today, I will speak about the situation in France, trying to explore the reflexes at play within antifascist movements and the long-term viability of the New Popular Front strategy that emerged last year following the dissolution of the National Assembly.

That dissolution occurred in a broader context where the far right has been steadily approaching power, amid the crumbling of traditional governing parties, both of the right and of the centre left. This collapse—driven by an increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal dynamic—has reshaped French politics around three main blocs: a bourgeois bloc, embodied first by Macron and his recruits from the upper classes and former establishment parties; a hard right, fascist-leaning bloc led by the National Rally (RN), though with competition on both its right and left; and a leftist, breakaway bloc represented electorally by La France Insoumise, and socially by a decade of powerful social and antiracist struggles—making France something of an exception in Europe.

This tripartite division became especially visible in 2022, resulting in the unprecedented situation under the Fifth Republic where the president no longer held an absolute majority in the National Assembly. Following the RN's victory in the European elections facing a divided left, Macron chose to dissolve the Assembly. It was a rather foolish decision from the perspective of his own camp—but, I suppose, we get the Bonaparte we deserve.

Calling elections just one month later was practically a gift to the fascists. It led to the formation of a united front between the major forces of the electoral left, including the

Socialist Party—a party of traitors—with support from key labour unions, which is rare. This coalition came in first in the election, with a relatively ambitious programme inspired by social movements, featuring significant progress on Islamophobia, police violence, and ecology. In effect, the Popular Front worked—it succeeded in defeating the far right, which hasn't been part of a French government since 1944.

But the lack of an absolute majority allowed Macron to delay forming a new government for two months—a two-month coup, again, the Bonaparte we deserve—and then to appoint a government led by the traditional right, despite it finishing last in the election and now under the control of the far right, which still appears to many as an alternative since it governs without formally participating. Meanwhile, the New Popular Front has collapsed—largely because significant factions within the Socialist Party refuse to align with La France Insoumise's pro-Palestinian and anti-Islamophobic stance.

With a real possibility that the Assembly could be dissolved again, and the 2027 presidential elections on the horizon, the question of antifascist strategy resurfaces, along with its familiar dilemmas: Can we label certain organisations or policies as fascist? Should we speak of fascism or authoritarian neoliberalism? Should we continue playing the game of republican fronts on election Sundays? Are the tactics of anti-fascist resistance back on the agenda? Is it still meaningful to rely on the framework of social democracy, or is it time to acknowledge that it has long since ceased to mean anything to those who govern us?

This is a particularly thorny question because it arises at a moment when antifascist identity has become increasingly diluted, claimed across a broad spectrum. Today, it’s the same people banning collectives fighting Islamophobia and far-right groups alike. The same people who grant a licence to kill young Black and Arab men to the Republican police while claiming to be the last democratic bulwark against the RN. The same people who ban demonstrations in support of Palestine while invoking the memory of the resistance to Nazism as a shield for the French Jewish community.

My hypothesis is that the ongoing genocide in Gaza should be a moment of reckoning for our camp—bringing to a close what could be called the era of moral antifascism, particular to the West. This term refers to a political framework that reduces fascism to organised far-right groups, seen primarily as archaic remnants. In this worldview, republican antifascism means support for the post-1945 institutions, with the ultimate goal of electoral harmony on Sunday nights. For moral antifascists, ever since WWII, history has been a linear path toward progress, where racist horror is either a leftover of the past or a system error. The spread of global markets is seen as inherently promoting peace and minority rights, with occasional setbacks from rogue states.

But the genocide in Gaza—already the defining event of this century—clashes head-on with that narrative. Andreas Malm calls it the first genocide of late capitalism. What makes this genocide unique is the full coordination and complicity of the Western camp. In Rwanda or elsewhere, imperial centres were complicit by inaction. In Gaza, Western, especially U.S. and German, arms shipments have enabled the bombings, with France also involved. Throughout the genocide, Western leaders have parroted Israel’s “right to self-defence.” Large swaths of the Western press actively serve Israeli

propaganda. The same journalists who praise press freedom uncritically repeat Hasbara fake news while downplaying or ignoring Israel's crimes—crimes well-documented by international institutions.

The horror of moral antifascism lies perhaps in this: the genocide of Palestinians is justified in the name of remembering the genocide of European Jews. Capitalist Western powers once again reveal their genocidal face—this time in the name of memory.

If Gaza marks the end of moral antifascism, let us recall that even in 1945, the supposed innocence masked an ongoing latent fascism, always present as a toolkit of practices and techniques.

Take Israel. Long hailed as the only democracy in the Middle East, its response to October 7 reignited debates on whether its government is fascist. From Haaretz editorials to Zeev Sternhell, claims of Israel's fascization are not new. Before October 7, Western media sympathetically covered protests against Netanyahu's constitutional reforms. Yet, as Alberto Toscano points out, Palestinians were systematically absent from these discussions. Fascism here referred to what impacts Western populations, not decades of violence against Palestinians.

This colonial blind spot applies equally to France. May 8, 1945—Victory Day in France—was also the day of the massacres in Sétif, Guelma, and Kherrata, where tens of thousands of Algerians were killed during anti-colonial protests. A reminder, if one was needed, that fascist "exceptions" in Europe are often just the domestic echo of colonial norms. As Résistance Algérienne once wrote: "What is fascism, if not colonialism within traditionally colonialist countries?"

From the start, the antifascist narrative obscured a more troubling reality: the persistence of French fascist elements aligned with anti-communist and decolonisation wars. In 1954, amid the defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the start of the Algerian insurgency, fascist gangs regrouped in mainland France. Recruiting from veterans of Indochina and Africa, they attacked Communist Party headquarters and birthed the "OAS-métro." Colonial counterinsurgency provided both space and manpower to the far right. A few years later, power struggles erupted between two military-political factions that emerged from this logic—leading to the birth of the Fifth Republic.

At the same time in Europe, NATO's secret armies were recruiting from the ranks of defeated fascist troops and played a decisive role in the anti-communist struggle across the continent. "Who better than fascists to fight communists?" summarised one of the American operatives stationed in Italy at the time. France's particularity perhaps lies in the fact that De Gaulle, wary of the Americans' ties to the OAS, decided to create his own agency: the Direct Action Service. Then, in 1968, faced with the popular uprising, De Gaulle went to Baden-Baden to meet General Massu in order to secure the support of the OAS's "lost soldiers," whose members were soon granted amnesty. It was in this context that the GUD, Ordre Nouveau, GRECE, and other groups were born—groups that would later give rise to the Rassemblement National and serve as a breeding ground for the cadres of French fascism.

What emerges here is an apparently purely instrumental relationship with the far right—one that could be seen continuing with the support given by the socialist Mitterrand in the 1980s to the rise of the National Front. The right would use far-right gangs and its networks within the deep state and the army to ensure the defeat of the Red threat. The left, meanwhile, would use the far right institutionally to weaken the right and the Communist Party at the ballot box. But what actually takes shape is a far more complex and dialectical phenomenon, developing as France sinks deeper into neoliberalism.

As privatisations accelerate, as hard-won social gains are unravelled one by one, and as the space for compromise with the bourgeoisie narrows, the role of the far right in the French political system begins to change. Although cast as a monstrous outsider, completely alien to the acceptable political field, the far right in reality plays a dual role: as a supplier of fascist ideas, but also as a justification for the implementation of racist and authoritarian policies. By rolling out the red carpet while constantly disassociating from it, the moral antifascism of the ruling capitalist bloc helps advance far-right ideas—while giving them a subversive gloss. The electoral successes that inevitably follow then provide the perfect excuse for successive governments to implement major portions of the far-right programme. As early as 2008, Daniel Bensaïd noted that by 2005, the Chirac government had implemented 11 out of 24 security measures from the National Front's 2001 platform—this, after the supposed antifascist tidal wave of April 21, 2002.

Two clarifications are needed here. First, the elites continuously justify their racist turn by pointing to the alleged racism of the white working classes. But it's far from that simple. One nuance to this oversimplified narrative is the fact that, despite the racist surge in the media and among the political class, there is no mass fascist movement in the country. That doesn't mean nothing is happening. Far-right gangs are spreading and attempting—at places like Crépol and elsewhere—to revive agitation tactics; far-right terrorist plots are being foiled; and racist acts are on the rise. But it must be said: we are still far from a situation of mass fascist activity in the streets. On the contrary, though they tried to be present in some social movements—like the Yellow Vests—they were pushed out by revolutionary activists, failed to turn the anti-health pass protests into the mass movement they hoped for, and were beaten back when they tried to appear during the riots after Nahel’s death. Even though the National Rally opposed the pension reform, it led no marches. Its mainstreaming in the National Assembly doesn’t translate to a presence in the massive popular demonstrations. Today’s fascists differ from those of the 1930s: they are, for now, incapable of embedding themselves in or competing with the social movement. We’re far from mass fascist politics and the fear once inspired by Blackshirts or militias capable of pogroms and coups.

Contemporary fascism is more diffuse, fashionable even—disseminated through social media, or propagated via ideological apparatuses like CNews and certain YouTube self-help channels touting a “tough white guy” aesthetic. The real danger lies in the possible fusion of a generation raised on this content with a network of police officers, ex-cops, and former soldiers—ready-made for forming a militia without needing to be politically organised. This formation doesn’t exist yet, but it could emerge in the unlikely event of a future social-democratic electoral victory.

Second clarification: the ongoing authoritarian shift we've been experiencing for nearly two decades. From the 2004 law banning the veil to the "separatism" law, from anti-riot and anti-terror laws to the progressive suppression of mediating bodies through repeated dissolutions and the expansion of the state of emergency—this is the trajectory. Add to it imperialist interventions abroad and the belligerent cries of those pushing for rearmament. All this is obviously fuelled by far-right ideologues, but it would be a mistake to imagine they alone hold the reins of reaction. As the neoliberal crisis deepens and its ideological grip loosens, the "parties of government" reconnect with the darker sides of their own history.

The Socialist Party's move to enshrine the state of emergency in the Constitution after the 2015 Islamist attacks echoed Socialist Guy Mollet's actions during the Algerian War. The right didn't have to look far to draft the law banning headscarves in public schools.

This is a crucial point that "Republican antifascism" has tried to obscure. The development and implementation of fascist policies not only draw from colonial and exploitative practices of capitalist states but also enlist a range of actors far beyond the traditional far right. Pierre Laval, after all, was a thoroughly sincere socialist in 1939. That is key to dismantling the fetishism of "the turn." Our side often remains trapped in the idea that, one day, suddenly, a great night will mark the advent of fascism—just as, for some, a great night will also suddenly usher in communism.

Given the current state of affairs—with no mass fascist movement on the horizon, but also with the revolutionary camp in deep decline—it is highly likely that any future "turn" could take the form of a perfectly conventional election, without the need for a Reichstag fire. However, since this far right is fully aligned with capitalist interests, as well as with transatlantic imperialism, it is unlikely to fulfil even its meagre social promises—except, perhaps, to drastically intensify state racism.

What must be emphasised is that the culmination of the normalization process could very well result in the far right being fully integrated into the political game of alternation that defines moral antifascism in France. We would then witness what Utsa and Prahbat Patnaik coined as *lingering fascism of less murderous intensity*. It is therefore necessary to break with the idea of an irreversible tipping point or a dramatic fascist "great night." What we need today is less a rigid, narrowly defined concept of the far right or fascism, and more an understanding of the dialectic between the extreme centre and the extreme right—and an analysis of the dynamic this creates, in order to fight it effectively.

I've said that Gaza marks the end of the era of moral antifascism—also known as institutional or republican antifascism. But we know that sometimes, corpses take a long time to die, especially in our camp. That's why immediate action must be taken to avoid being haunted by zombies.

The fight against fascism cannot be reduced to the fight against organised far-right groups. This is a double mistake. First, it entirely misses the target of what might actually lead us toward fascism. Second, it reproduces the illusion of moral antifascism. By targeting only the far right, by turning it into an absolute evil that justifies even temporary alliances with the most systemic and managerial forces, we commit political suicide, cutting ourselves off from revolts and the popular masses.

Because resistance to fascism in France takes place above all in the streets. So far, it has been the most effective way to push back its growing hegemony, to sideline the centrality of its questions, and to undo the effectiveness of its slogans. “The streets” refers to the series of social explosions that have made France the stage for the most intense conflict in Europe over the past ten years: from the labour law protests to the pension reform movement, from the ZAD in Sainte-Soline to the dignity march and protests against police violence in memory of Adama, from the revolt for Nahel to the 2014 movement for Gaza and the current mobilisations. Generations of struggles erupt, challenging the racist and authoritarian consensus spreading among the elites.

It is the connection between these struggles that anti-fascism today must commit to. Without deluding ourselves about the real contradictions that exist — for example, between the environmental movement and non-white uprisings in metropolitan centres — we must hold firm to the principle of autonomy for these struggles while working toward ways to articulate them together into victorious, practical fronts. What we lack today is a space for collective strategic elaboration, one capable of moving beyond the old binary between institutional and extra-parliamentary paths. Not just to organise for action, but to be able to craft a grand narrative of popular unity that can attract part of the abstentionist bloc and fracture the 10 million RN (National Rally) voters.

To weave this network of alliances, we must let go of the ethos tied to moral anti-fascism — that of respectability and clean hands. An ethos that leads some to avoid speaking plainly about occupied Palestine or to distance themselves from certain street practices or fields of struggle for fear of isolation. The time for respectability is over. Capital no longer seeks compromise. The strategy that sought to oppose traditional union strikes to the social strike of young people burning trash bins during the recent pension protests has led us into a wall. We must “Yellow-Vest” the social movement even as we maintain a hard union line. We must disarm — that is, concretely neutralise — the machinery of ecological disaster while also creating spaces for mass mobilisation during protests and movements.

This reflexive attitude toward power also applies to the popular movement. Let’s remember all those comrades who turned their noses up at Yellow Vests who didn’t speak the language of 2.0 activism. Those who didn’t hesitate to enter the movement and polarise it from within helped to push out the organised fascists who were trying to steer it in a reactionary direction.

If we refuse to get our hands dirty in the complexity of the social movement, we will be incapable of combining various realities and sensibilities, different practical approaches. Just as we now have Les Soulèvements de la Terre, we also need uprisings against police violence, against the high cost of living, against imperialism. This is the only path to forming an offensive popular bloc.

There will be no escape outside of this bloc. Whatever the scenario — acceleration of the neoliberal catastrophe under Macronism; sharp fascist drift; betrayal or opportunism by the left-wing FI (France Insoumise); or a generalised assault by the bourgeoisie against even a minimally social-democratic government — the need to

impose a strong balance of power from outside the parliamentary system will remain the same.

This is the only way to build a meaningful alternative, where the seeds of a new life can grow — one that frees us from a capitalism that will never hesitate to turn to fascism as a genocidal last resort to enforce its agenda.