



Bart Cammaerts

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Elon Musk's Nazi salute, George Orwell and five lessons from past anti-fascist struggles

LSE's Professor Bart Cammaerts explains what we can learn today from historical anti-fascist resistance movements, in light of recent events.

In his dystopian novel **1984**, George Orwell wrote: "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command". Indeed, it is true power to be able to not merely refute, minimise, and deny the very thing that you are doing or saying, but to be able to make people believe that they did not see or hear what you did in front of their very eyes.

At a rally to celebrate Donald Trump's inauguration as the 47th President of the United States, 'tech bro' Elon Musk performed a nazi salute, not just once, but twice, ... just to be sure the world noticed. The crowd loved it and responded with a despicable and perverse roar of delight. When confronted with the logical backlash of his action, Musk simply retorted that "[t]he legacy media is pure propaganda" and "[t]he 'everyone is Hitler' attack is sooo tired [sleeping emoji]". A few days later though he mockingly doubled down by posting the following on X:



Don't say Hess to Nazi accusations! Some people will Goebbels anything down! Stop Göring your enemies. His pronouns would've been He/Himmler! Bet you did nazi that coming [laughing emoji] ()*



These vicious put-downs and fascist lingo are in themselves not surprising, coming from the self-proclaimed *troll-in-chief*, but they are highly revealing. What is surprising, however, and which speaks to Orwell's quote above, is how the media, as well as part of the commentariat and civil society reacted to this. What we saw before our eyes was being denied by some, doubted by others, or put in 'alleged' terms, even by more progressive outlets.

"Musk appears to give fascist-style salute ...", writes *The Guardian*. The *Washington Post* *spoke* of a "controversial gesture, which some interpreted as a nazi salute". What do they mean here with using the verb 'appears', or 'some interpret as'? It does not *appear* to be a nazi salute, there is no room for interpretation here; they *were* two back-to-back nazi salutes, full stop, full stop.

The 'gesture' was clear and straightforward leaving no room for doubt. The neo-nazi sites and vloggers saw and *celebrated it* for what it was. Others, however, are of course invested in sowing doubt and confusion, such as republican Senator Ted Cruz, who claimed on X that Musk "literally said 'my heart goes out to you' as he made the gesture from his heart to the people" (*). Really? Who are 'the people' to whom Musk was nazi-saluting 'from his heart'?

What is even more jaw dropping in this regard is that the US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which *purports* to "stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment of all", stated on X (of all platforms!):



It seems that @elonmusk made an awkward gesture in a moment of enthusiasm, not a Nazi salute, but again, we appreciate that people are on edge. In this moment, all sides should give one another a bit of grace, perhaps even the benefit of the doubt, and take a breath. ()*



It is disconcerting and scary that even a Jewish organisation, devoted to counter racism, denotes the blatant and in-your-face political use of a freaking Nazi salute merely as 'an awkward gesture', which they not only explicitly deny was a Nazi salute but added that we should give the tech-fascist

who deliberately used it to provoke, 'a bit of grace'. In this regard, another quote from Orwell's 1984 comes to mind:



... everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth ...



We are living in dangerous and bewildering times. Not just in the US, but also in Italy, Hungary, Netherlands, Germany, and France we see fascism either in power already or knocking on the doors of power. Those of us who believe not just in a democratic system of governance but even more so in the core democratic values of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* must very quickly find and develop ways of countering this creeping normalisation and glorification of fascist symbols, ideas, values and policies.

The problem contemporary anti-fascists are faced with, however, is that reacting to such provocations by discursively calling out fascists and (neo-)Nazis for what they are, say and do, has become ineffective as it is simply positioned as 'tiring' or 'sooo last century'. Speaking of last century, Orwell **noted** in early 1946, that "[t]he word fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'". Unfortunately, just as in the 1930s, it is increasingly something that is desirable to more and more people as well as economic elites. In the UK, a recent poll commissioned by Channel 4 **found** that 52% of 13-27 year-olds are of the opinion that "the UK would be a better place if a strong leader was in charge who does not have to bother with parliament and elections".

So, how do we combat this existential democratic threat? To answer this question, it might be a good idea to travel down memory lane and have a closer look at the long history of resistance against fascism, before, during and after the Second World War; a history of which Orwell was an active proponent. This history provides us, in my view, with five valuable lessons:

- 1. Build transnational and cross-ideological coalitions of anti-fascist resistance within civil society and beyond:** The anti-fascist movement not only **bridged** the geographical boundaries but also the ideological ones. Through the anti-fascist struggle, a strong chain of equivalence was constructed between socialists, communists, anarchists, liberals, Catholics, and freemasons.
- 2. Develop democratic alternatives to the fascist discourse and its allure to young and working class people:** As in the past, there is a material and socio-economic ground for the resurgence of

fascism, and as in the last century an interregnum, during which the “old is dying but the new cannot be born” as of yet (**dixit** Antonio Gramsci), also characterises these times.

3. Re-invigorate a culture and an aesthetic of anti-fascist resistance: Emotions and the affective dimension as well as a sophisticated publicity regime were central to the fascist appeal, which was in turn contested by a creative and exuberant **culture and aesthetic of resistance** (f.e. Bertold Brecht, John Heartfield, Walter Benjamin, André Malraux, and indeed George Orwell). This aesthetic and affect of resistance not only de-mystified and contested fascism but also celebrated freedom, equality and democratic alternatives; we need something similarly exuberant and contestational today.

4. Document, record and prepare future litigation: The fascist modus operandi is one of the flagrant abuses of human rights and the manifest flaunting of the rule of law and the separation of powers. History also teaches us, however, that fascist rule is never absolute nor eternal, and that there is always a moment of **reckoning**. Hence, anti-fascist resistance must also document, record, and gather evidence.

5. Civil disobedience, disruption and sabotage: Finally, **sabotage** of fascist policies and disruption of their infiltration of state apparatuses was also crucial historically. The resistance against fascism was never just an affair of elites or artists, but also of workers, civil servants, farmers, and even (small) businesspeople, all circumventing and sabotaging fascist rule and policies. This is also something that will become crucial and necessary to develop and nurture again.

The anti-fascist struggle was also one of political violence, or dare I say counter-violence, but today, in spite of everything, I think we need to heed Michelle Obama’s **crede**; “when they go low, we go high”, and step away from advocating for violence, as **some did** in the wake of the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson by Luigi Mangione. Recent revolutionary history teaches us that democratic ideals can easily become fraught and stifled if and when they are regained through the barrel of a gun. At the same time, however, as anti-fascists we need to prepare, build coalitions and develop strategies for an existential fight; that much has become clear in recent years. These five lessons from anti-fascist struggles of the past are a good starting point, let’s get into gear, *no pasarán!*

(*) the quotes that emanated from X do not have a link, for obvious reasons...

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author

Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

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