‘FOR SOME OF US, IT WAS ALWAYS LIKE THIS’: Anti-migrant politics as a fascist touchstone

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Europe's anti-migrant politics has a long history – and while obscured by technocratic language – has built a border-industrial complex and political elite consensus behind ever more brutal forms of border fascism.

I was a pre-schooler when my family moved to Canada from Jamaica. Initially, we lived in Toronto, the country's largest city, before moving to Chatham, a mid-sized city about 300 kilometres away in Southwestern Ontario.

Chatham was a sleepy town. Manufacturing was a dominant industry, but you didn't have to drive long before finding yourself in fields. Today, just 2% of Chatham's population is black, but before the abolition of slavery it was the northernmost point of the Underground Railroad and in the 1950s was considered the 'Black Mecca' of Canada, with black people making up a third of its population. Indigenous communities live in nearby Moraviantown and Bkejwanong, also known as Walpole Island.

One afternoon at break, I was sitting by the trees at the extremity of the playground when I saw a man approach from the other side of the fence. 'You're Jamaican', he said, in a familiar accent. I nodded and he smiled before turning and walking away. I learned later from my parents that he was probably a seasonal labourer at one of the nearby farms.

That moment by the fence came back to me when reading Donald Trump's words in August 2025, talking, in the midst of a nation-wide immigration crack-down, about the needs of US agribusiness: 'We can't let our farmers not have anybody'. Referring to migrant farm workers, he continued:

> 'These people do it naturally, naturally. I said, what happens if they get a bad back? He said, they don't get a bad back, sir, because if they get a bad back, they die'.

Like the US and Canada, Jamaica is a child of settler colonialism. Then as now, disposable labour was essential to the project of prosperity for a few. Britain's plantocracy was sustained through violence and the exploitation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans, *'exclud[ing] the kidnapped agricultural populations of Africa from its conception of what it was to be human'.*[283] Today, our globalised economic system requires an underclass of disposable – often deportable – workers, and an ever-expanding security apparatus to discipline them.

In other words, for some, there is little new in the racialised brutalities of our contemporary economic order. Nearly a century ago, the *exploitable worker* of Mussolini's Italy was the 'foreign' person who moved from the country's impoverished rural south to its urban north.[284] Fascism has taught us how dehumanisation is not only essential to sustaining an economic status quo, but also a powerful tool for mobilising political power.

Today, I live in Brussels, the seat of the European Union (EU). Like liberal democracies around the world, anti-migrant politics here are a touchstone of neofascists and the far right; they are also business as usual for the political establishment. In this essay, I will argue that Europe's anti-migrant politics, often masked in technocratic policy-speak, expresses *multiple elements of fascist politics*, or fascist tactics to build and sustain political and economic power. These include systematic efforts to solidify distinctions between 'us' and 'them' based on ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions; pervasive victimhood conveyed through the incessant language of threat; rising militarism in response to the supposed threat; and concentrations and collaborations of state and corporate power nourished and extended by all of the above.

The embers of fascism in the US and Europe

Jason Stanley, in *How Fascism Works*, reminds us that Charles Lindbergh, aviator, military author, and US citizen, opposed his country's involvement in World War II, arguing for the need to build a white nation and 'guard against becom[ing] engulfed in a limitless foreign sea'. Stanley writes:

> 'The America First movement was the public face of pro-fascist sentiment in the United States at the time. In the twenties and thirties, many Americans shared Lindbergh's views against immigration, especially by non-Europeans. The Immigration Act of 1924 strictly limited immigration into the country, and it was specifically intended to restrict immigration both nonwhites and Jews.'[285]

Stanley's book is concerned with fascist politics, understood as fascist tactics used to achieve power. He identifies multiple such tactics, which generally align with variously described features of classic fascist movements and regimes,[286] including return to a mythic past; a strong emphasis on nationalism; propaganda; militarism and imperialist aspirations; demonisation of perceived enemies, often in ethnic terms; a sense of victimisation; authoritarianism and a hierarchical order; and the rejection of democratic institutions.[287] Central, however, in his account 'is the very specific way that fascist politics distinguishes "us" from "them," appealing to ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions, and using this division to shape ideology and, ultimately, policy. Every mechanism of fascist politics works to create or solidify this distinction'[288] – a distinction that is a central feature of anti-migrant politics.

The embers of fascism continue to burn in European politics today: in France's National Rally, which now has 126 seats in the French parliament; in Italy's ruling Brothers of Italy Party, descended from the neofascist Italian Social Movement; and in the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the largest of five parties in Austria's lower parliament, founded in 1956 and whose first leader was a former Nazi bureaucratic and SS officer. At the time of writing, far-right parties head or are junior members of coalition governments in nine EU member states, with the Sweden Democrats supporting the country's minority government since 2022; and hold a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament, following their surge in the 2024 elections.[289] Each of these parties has exploited anti-migrant vitriol in its rise.

In France, the National Rally (formerly the National Front, or NF) has played a crucial role in the country's history of the far right since its founding in 1972 by a group of influential political activists on the French extreme right, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, father of its current leader. Like extreme right-wing parties elsewhere in Europe, the NF has succeeded in driving a rightward shift in French politics, particularly on the issue of immigration. Chris Millington, in *A History of Fascism in France*, writes about the FN's electoral breakthrough in 1986:

> '[I]t was the FN's stance on immigration that trumped all other matters for both the party's supporters and its opponents. The issue assumed central importance in the FN's 1986 parliamentary election manifesto. Under the influence of GRECE [*Groupe de Recherche et d'Etude pour la Civilisation Européene*] thinking on the subject, the party's strategy aimed to ostracize the immigrant in political, cultural and economic, rather than racial, terms. FN candidates blamed foreigners for a growing sense of *insécurité,* a nebulous term that came to encompass concerns over crime, drugs, gang warfare, urban violence, civil disorder and the threat of civil war. The focus of FN rhetoric shifted from skin colour to matters of historical and cultural difference.'[290]

Jean-Marie Le Pen publicly rejected racism and, shrewdly, called on his followers to avoid inflammatory language in favour of more 'technical' terms – for instance, demanding the 'repatriation of Third World immigrants' and not that they be 'dump[ed] in the sea'.[291] That year, the NF won 2.7 million votes in the parliamentary elections, sending 35 deputies to the National Assembly. Mainstream political parties took note of the FN's success in exploiting immigration as a political issue and increasingly emphasised immigration and *insécurité* in their language and platforms. When Marine Le Pen took over the party leadership in 2010, she sought to detoxify its image, especially on economic issues – but retained its campaign against immigration.

Technocratic Fascism

Today's European political establishment has fully integrated a deeply anti-immigration – and anti-migrant – politics, with 'security' as a touchstone issue. This form of technocratic fascism is characterised by 'a series of constrained "quick fixes" of a militarised, exceptional and managerial character'.[292] In defining its programme and priorities, it relies on the 'expertise' of the same commercial interests keen to shape and benefit from the expansion of state violence. While less prone to directly scapegoating migrants than their colleagues on the extreme right, mainstream parties do not challenge the neofascists' racism and xenophobia, and have adopted the same calls for 'border security'. They've done so not only to seize ground from the far right, but because they also accept the basic premise that defending borders is needed to sustain and reinforce the economic status quo.

In Brussels, the EU's implementation of a historically hostile and notoriously deadly immigration politics has been led by centrists. The current president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who began her second five-year mandate in 2025, is a member of Germany's CDU, which is part of centre-right European People's Party (EPP) political group in the European Parliament. Its manifesto in the last elections emphasised the EPP's belief in a 'European way of life', defined by freedom and security, and a 'strong Europe' that 'protects its borders and tackles illegal [sic] migration'.[293]

Reflecting increased pressure from its member states, the past decade has seen a steady churn of EU legislation on migration, progressively restricting rights for migrants and expanding the apparatus of deterrence and brutality.[294] 2024 and 2025 were particularly productive. May 2024 saw the passage of the Pact on Asylum and Migration, a legislative package that extends the use of biometric data collection of migrants from the age of six; introduces screening and border procedures with mandatory security checks for every undocumented person entering the EU; enables increased searches of personal items, opening the door to the extraction of mobile-phone data and seizing and mining of personal electronic devices to establish identity or assess credibility; foresees the use of high-tech prison-like facilities for containment; and encourages more surveillance, through drones, motion sensors, thermal imaging cameras and the like, at internal and external borders. Also in May 2024, the EU adopted the world's first comprehensive regulation on artificial intelligence (AI) – which was significantly weakened at the eleventh hour by member states eager to retain their power to use AI for migration and law enforcement.

‘Efficiency’ and the violence of deportations

In March 2025, weeks before introducing the first wave of pro-industry deregulation packages attacking labour rights, climate policies, digital rights and more, the European Commission proposed a sweeping new regulation aimed at achieving ‘swifter and more effective returns’. According to the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, just 20% of people issued with an order to leave the territory are deported: ‘This number is far too low’.[295] To achieve greater ‘efficiency’ in the rate of deportations, the EU plans to harden the existing rules by creating a ‘common European system of returns’, expanding the use of detention and establishing deportation zones (so-called ‘hubs’) in countries outside Europe. In December 2025, European heads of states voted to add new provisions to the draft deportation law that would allow home raids and the seizure of electronic and other personal devices – bringing the EU closer to a climate of US-style ICE raids.

Meanwhile, at the time of writing, there are signs that staunchly liberal and socialist parties within the European Parliament – a joint partner in EU lawmaking alongside the Council – are prepared to compromise with far right parties to achieve a majority for the plenary vote. These parties include European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), for whom border security and ‘preserving national identity’ are defining issues; and the Patriots group, which is ‘determined to protect [Europe’s] borders, to stop illegal [sic] migration and preserve its cultural identity’.

This focus on deportations, and the ‘efficiency’ of their enforcement, is not new. The EU’s Agenda on Migration, adopted in 2015, had as its first priority reducing incentives for irregular migration and strengthening of Frontex’s role in deportations. According to Statewatch:

> ‘There has long-been coordinated policy, legal and operational action on migration at EU level, and efforts to increase deportations have always been a part of this. However, since the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015 there has been a rapid increase in new initiatives, the overall aim of which is to limit the legal protections afforded to ‘deportable’ individuals at the same time as expanding the ability of national and EU authorities to track, detail and remove people with increasing efficiency.’[296]

This fixation on ‘efficiency’ has in turn led to the creation of complex EU systems for the tracking and monitoring of migrants, and methods to identify individuals potentially subject to deportation. In other words, it has led to an extensive infrastructure of surveillance, monitoring and control. Within a year of the passage of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a watershed in data privacy, the EU adopted legislation to establish interoperable migration databases – a colossal information technology infrastructure for immigration control encompassing the personal, including sensitive biometric, data of virtually every non-European with administrative ties to the EU. This infrastructure, which ignores the GDPR’s guarantees in the name of security, is intended to support efforts to ‘tackle irregular migration’ and ‘serious crimes like terrorism’ and ultimately assist national efforts to increase deportations. The system’s scope is immense, sweeping up millions of people forced to engage with EU immigration processes and now-interconnected databases.

The language of ‘efficiency’ – and indeed of ‘interoperability’ – obscures the racist and cruel nature of the mass deportation project. Deportations, which the EU refers to euphemistically as ‘returns’, have a long history in Europe as a tool – including by openly fascist leaders – to consolidate borders and homogenise populations. They were a hallmark of mass purges in the twentieth century, including Stalin’s Great Purge of 1934, Poland’s Operation Vistula in 1947, and the Nazis’ campaigns of deportation and other forced displacement. Modern deportations are not only characterised

by anguish for those facing expulsion, who are uprooted from family, friends and livelihood and confronted with degrading and sometimes aggressive treatment; the condition of being 'deportable' also functions as a form of coercive control, limiting a person's movements and installing a sense of perpetual fear and anxiety in the face of potential deportation and exile.[297]

Deportation is also part of wider forms of social control[298] and, in Europe, are part of a disturbing pattern of repression involving threats to deport or to strip people of their residence status (thus rendering them deportable) if they criticise the state or champion the rights of marginalised people.[299] Hasha Walia, a writer and activist, reminds us in her 2021 book *Border and Rule* of the role of deportation, 'globally, as a tool of historical control and repression, against sex workers, women, indigenous people and others subjected to processes of 'constructing national identity through race and racial difference'.[300]

Criminalisation and the migrant 'threat'

The notion of 'threat' that permeates EU migration politics, and that is integral to any fascist project, is deeply racialised in its conflation of 'foreign-ness' and the risk of violence, and contributes to the systematic criminalisation and demonisation of non-citizens. In the wake of attacks in October and November 2020 in Austria and France, European leaders 'single[d] out migrants (explicitly) and Muslims (implicitly) as a problem',[301] attributing extremism to migrants' failure to 'integrate' and the need to fortify the EU's borders and cities with more policing and surveillance.

The paradox of criminalisation is that, as in early twentieth-century fascism, it is paired with victimhood and the invocation of fear to justify increasingly militarised responses and repression in the name of 'safety' and 'security'. The EU's internal security strategy refers to a multitude of supposed border-related risks,[302] like identity fraud, non-citizens presenting unspecified 'security risks', migrant smuggling, terrorism, and human trafficking – all of which are used to rationalise proposals for deepened securitisation, from a tripling of EU's border force to enhancing surveillance of air and maritime travellers, and the video-surveillance of roadways. The military-style focus on risk is also used to further justify an insatiable appetite for personal data to assess and predict threat.

Countries at Europe's periphery have long had a role in the outsourcing of immigration controls and containment of undesired migrants, leveraging differential power dynamics – a form of violence referred to in EU technocratic language as 'externalisation':

> '[W]ith the prospect of full membership in the Schengen space, the EU space or both, some states along the Balkan Route willingly submit to carrying out extreme violence (most notably massive and violent pushbacks) to protect the external EU border (Croatia, Bulgaria) or to comply with the newly assigned role of being an EU 'dumping ground' for deterred migrants (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina).[303]

The EU also uses its economic and political power to extract cooperation from countries like Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Türkiye, which accept to deter people from crossing or leaving their territories in exchange for development aid, visa liberalisation or cash.[304] Atrocities committed against migrants in Libya and elsewhere are well-documented, including torture and EU-funded kidnapping operations that forcibly transport people to the desert and leave them to die. All are outcomes of the EU's mass deportation agenda.

For European bureaucrats, the inflammatory language of vulgar extreme far-right politicians is replaced with the language of 'security' – no less vague in 2025 than the *sécurité* invoked by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1986. Far from the fiery agitation of the prototypical fascist, a punitive system of containment and dislocation – or, in the EU's language, detention and return – is approached dispassionately as a matter of enforcement of rules. Irregular migration is not the product of imperial bordering, it's a question of people not following rules. The hideous work of deterrence is outsourced to other countries, or to specialised enforcement agencies in Europe or abroad. Technocrats are therefore comforted by their faith in the possibility of 'solving' migration through technological[305] and technocratic security fixes that sanitise the border regime's brutality through the language of efficiency, while feeding notions of safety centred on (expanding) the coercive power of the state.

Much as 'protecting the border' through the 'massive expansion of the carceral state and its subsequent privatisation was a bipartisan project' in the US,[306] so it is a unifying theme for the EU's 27 member states. Despite squabbles about the mechanics of enforcement and what constitute tolerable levels of brutality, there is broad consensus, reflected in the EU's Treaty of Lisbon, about the need for 'measures to combat' irregular migration – that is, forms of mobility formally restricted by the EU or its member states. As with other liberal regimes, the EU's borders are 'permeable for white expats, a handpicked immigrant diaspora, and the rich investor class', while forming a 'fortress against the million in the 'deportspora', who are shut out, immobilized, and expelled'.[307]

Of course, selective permeability also includes categories of labour – seasonal, temporary, undocumented – for whom reluctant admission is conditioned on profound and perpetual precarity. This is the contradiction of imperial bordering: the brutality of immigration control coexists with the dependence of Western economies on the labour of non-citizens. As the immigrant rights organiser Maru Mora-Villalpando notes, 'We are not only dealing with the monster of detention and deportation; we are also dealing with the monster of liberalism'.[308] Both monsters have not only become widely tolerated in the West, but are longstanding 'policy tools' deployed by the ruling class to preserve their economic position.

Coalitions of Crisis and the Political Economy of Border Fascism

Today's political system is tightly controlled by transnational capital. According to Bernard Gross in *Friendly Fascism*, this co-mingling and conflating of state and corporate interests has contributed to the mainstreaming of neofascist positions: 'This is not the result of Radical Right shifts towards the centre. On the contrary, it is the result of a decisive movement towards the right by Ultra-Rich and the Corporate Overseers'.[309]

Richard Brady wrote in 1943, in *Business as a System of Power*, that a key transformation highly relevant to the formation of fascism was the rapid amassing of organised economic power by businesses – particularly big business – through the creation of trade associations, such that 'by the late thirties, the industrial and financial giants had practically without exception moved into the citadels of peak-association power all over the world'.[310] Before World War II, trade associations and related industry groupings were rare. After the war, 'they sprang up everywhere, and shortly began to serve as centralized, coordinating, business-policy boards for vast segments of several national economies'.[311] This structure was streamlined, not abolished, under the Nazis.

The early nineteenth century was therefore a critical moment for the consolidation of corporate power in a way that was leveraged by fascists in their rise to power, and that continues to shape corporate power, and corporate–state collaboration, today.

In Europe, scholars like Martin Lemberg-Pedersen have studied the political economy of border securitisation and the systemic shifts towards private security companies' involvement in co-designing what he calls 'borderscapes'. This is achieved through partnership, lobbying, private rule- and standard-setting and framing their input as expert knowledge.[312] The result is the intense merging of economic and political power, with the interests of traditional and newer security actors, including tech companies, shaping, and reaping the financial benefits of, an increasingly securitised anti-migrant politics.

Lobby groups of border security companies like the European Organization for Security and Association of AeroSpace and Defence Associations of Europe are enormously influential in European policy circles. As are informal groups like the Kangaroo Group, established in 1979 as 'friends of the European Parliament'. The Kangaroo Group seeks a 'truly borderless single market' and strong EU external borders. Honorary members in 2019 included a former French president, a former Italian prime minister and a former Spanish foreign minister.[313] In 2024, regular members included high-ranking Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), former MEPs, representatives from other European institutions, academics, and aerospace and defence companies Airbus, Boeing, Safran Group, and the European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL).[314]

In 2025, the EU is in the throes of a feverish deregulation agenda to sweep aside obstacles to growth, competition, and sovereignty, alongside a push to both rearm and invest in national industries, most notably defence and tech. In other words, it has openly embraced a corporate agenda in an effort to shore up its global economic position. Accelerated by the 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) target agreed by many NATO members, this course of action was spurred by the 'Draghi report', published in September 2024, which describes 'security' as a 'precondition for sustainable growth'. The report calls for bolstering competitiveness and growth through investments in 'defence industrial capacity', which increasingly includes technological capacity. The EU's new internal security strategy predictably calls for investments in 'modern' technology like AI and its exploitation in both civil and defence contexts. Demonstrating how EU industrial and security policies are deeply informed by anti-migrant politics, the internal security strategy including priorities on 'border security', such as the tripling of the EU's border force, Frontex, to 30 000 officers 'equip[ped] with advanced tech for surveillance and situational awareness'.

We see, then, in the EU context, the profound interconnections between the expansion of racialised repression and the deeply embedded and intertwined interests of states and corporations. This is a symptom of the current capitalist order where technological advancements have liberated capital from the strictures of the state and massively expanded corporate power, and giving rise to a class of transnational capitalists.[315] Borders have become even more crucial in this context: while capital flows freely, labour remains largely contained. Indeed, the 'free flow of capital *requires* precarious labour, which is shaped by borders through immobility'.[316]

Transnational capital's enormous accumulation of wealth and power has also driven massive inequality and the depletion of the planet – and profoundly eroded the legitimacy of liberal governments among those it has left behind. The resulting social unrest has led to an unprecedented expansion of repression and surveillance – providing additional business to the very companies that are policing labour and borders.

It's not surprising, given the economic incentives, that the border and tech industries are also ideological advocates for fascism and far-right politics, The founding mission of US firm Palantir, for example, whose global revenue reached USD 2.87 billion in 2024, is 'saving the West'. The

CIA's venture capital fund, In-Q-Tel, gave Palantir its first injection of cash to create data-analytics technology to help the agency's work. Today Palantir's software is used by militaries, police forces and corporations throughout the world. Co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) Alex Karp said in December 2025 that he cares about two things: immigration and 're-establishing the deterrent capacity of America'. He declared in a recent book that 'the rise of the West was not made possible by the superiority of its ideas, values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence'.[317] The Trump administration's national security strategy, published on 11 December 2025, echoes this vision, elevating 'border security' as the 'primary element of national' security:

> 'We must protect our country from invasion, not just from unchecked migration but from cross-border threats such as terrorism, drugs, espionage, and human trafficking. A border controlled by the will of the American people as implemented by their government is fundamental to the survival of the United States as a sovereign republic.'

We see, then, the 'fusion of financial, extractive, and digital capital with the military-prison-and-border-security industrial complexes that offer capitalists a potential solution to the crisis of liberal hegemony, though only through the pursuit of increasingly aggressive forms of domination and repression'.[318]

Beyond the banal and the brutal

Today, I live far from Jamaica and the Americas and their legacies of empire; in the EU's capital city, the seat of regional power and of rising technocratic nativism.

Sitting at a recent event in Brussels, where there was much hand-wringing about the EU's plans to massively deregulate rights and protections across multiple sectors, a speaker reminded the audience that, 'for some of us, it was always like this'. Advocates and activists are rightfully concerned about Europe's shift towards a blatantly pro-industry agenda. The speaker – a migrant woman, activist and scholar – was recalling, for an audience steeped in policy and Euro-speak, that for those from communities systematically excluded from frameworks of protection and targeted for repression for the 'threat' they pose to the status quo, this feels less like a major shift than like continuity.

Brendan O'Connor argues that defeating fascism requires clarity of understanding that the struggle against fascism is 'necessarily anti-capitalist'. What he calls border fascism is alive and well in Europe and is deeply rooted in global apartheid, where '[b]orders maintain hoarded concentrations of wealth accrued from colonial domination while ensuring mobility for some and containment for most'.[319] Its elements are exposed in the political economy of bordering, and the web of power and mutually reinforcing interests of European elites in perpetuating the justifications and expansions of border brutality, in the sanitised language of technocrats. Unlike the raw racism articulated by far-right politicians in Europe, or the Trump administration in its attack on migrants in the US, European bureaucrats and elites veil their 'war on migrants' in policy-speak, a focus on efficiency, 'risk-based' security management, and administrative rule-following, while outsourcing the most violent work of enforcement to repressive forces – in European cities, at sites of border control on EU territory and well beyond.

The normalisation across society of cruelty and exceptionalism in the treatment and position of foreigners – of non-citizens, sex workers, Indigenous people, ethnic, religious and gender minorities – has meant the normalisation of elements of fascism that are now ascendant as a neoliberal order in crisis. For those of us active in social justice, our aim cannot be to join the reformists in tinkering

at the edges of the crisis, or to defend democracy and rights without questioning the broader economic system that defines power and for whose benefit and protection it is exercised. On 20 January 2026, inspired by anti-ICE and pro-Palestine efforts, civil society launched #WekeepUsSafe to track and share resistance against deportations across the EU, and press for the defeat of the deportation regulation.

In refusing the violence of border politics, we must also refuse 'the banal liberal centre' that answers anti-migrant politics with paternalistic calls to humanitarianism or instrumentalising claims about migrants' benefits to European society. We must instead shift from 'notions of charity and humanitarianism to restitution, reparations, and responsibility'[320] and support the movements challenging these interlocking systems of oppression, through local action and global solidarity.

BIO

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