

## **Right-Wing Movements in the Crisis of Capitalism: A Conceptualisation of Fascism within the Marxist Theory**

Karim Pourhamzavi, Noah R. Bassil & Gabriel Bayarri

A lot has been written in the years following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis explaining that the shift to the far right witnessed in countries around the world, most notably the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). Many have associated the “rise” of the right with some form of “alienation” of the white working class.<sup>1</sup> The grievances and anger of this group, it has been said, results from the dislocation caused by deindustrialisation and other dynamics of globalisation which have destabilised established social relations and further eroded the position of the white working class. From key constituent, breadwinner, head of the family, etc., the white working-class male is increasingly viewed by “progressives” as an anachronism. As a result, this group has rebelled and turned to right-wing movements who fan the flames of xenophobia, sexism, racism, and anti-intellectualism. In some sense, this portrayal of the current political dynamic in many countries, principally the US and the UK, is accurate and should not be entirely dismissed. Yet, this view remains incomplete for it fails to consider the role of dominant classes and ascribes an unrealistic level of influence and power to the so-called disenfranchised white working class.

Another more recent development that highlights the necessity of a theoretical framework for comprehending the rise of far-right movements and a possible subsequent fascist political establishment is the election and then electoral defeat of Donald Trump in the United States’ Presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. In this regard, the general analytical trend has either reduced Trump’s first term election to miscalculation of mainstream media and voting polls or his over 73 million votes in the second election, as reflected by Barack Obama in a CNN interview, as a “social division” created by right-wing media. Again, while neither position is entirely untrue, they are also incomplete. More is needed to understand the phenomenon of the contemporary form of reactionary right-wing politics.

This article attempts to intervene in the debates about contemporary right-wing movements in three ways. The first “intervention” is to locate the rise of these movements historically with a particular emphasis on historical accounts of fascism. The second intervention is theoretical. We aim to resituate the debate within the context of the classic Marxist

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<sup>1</sup> Noam Gidron and Peter Hall, “The Politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right”. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 68:1 (2017), pp 57-84; Erik Loomis, “White Nationalism, the Working Class, and Organized Labor”. *New Labor Forum*, 21:1 (2019), pp 2027.

interpretations of fascism especially those of Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky as ways of assisting in explaining contemporary right-wing politics. The reason for this will be clearer as this article progresses. That is, while far-right politics and fascism are distinguishable, both can be analysed as part of a grand political project of the dominant class response to challenges to its dominance. The third “way” is to historically and theoretically demonstrate the appeal of right-wing movements for securing neoliberalism during a period in which it is in crisis.

The argument underpinning this article is not a new one at all but a re-articulation of the connection between reactionary forces and the crisis of capitalism. Our examination indicates that while classic Marxist interpretations still provide a solid theoretical base to build upon for understanding the current transformed right-wing movements, more recent works, for reasons that are sometimes unclear, have either departed from the classic foundation or have no connection to them. Therefore, the current study is also an attempt to bring the classic and subsequent theoretical works together to comprehend the structure in which far-right movements emerges and to posit the extent that it is agent, i.e., capitalist-driven historical development.

### **Debate on the rise of far-right movements: a historical context**

When right-wing extremists eliminate political rivals and monopolise power, they are no longer merely a right-wing movement. Instead, they become a *fascist* one. This is what happened in Europe, precisely in Italy and Germany, in the 1920s and 1930s. Comprehensive theorisation within the Marxist tradition on fascism dates back to the 1920s-30s in the works of Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky. These elaborations reflect on different aspects of fascism, from the organic crisis of capitalism which gives birth to such phenomenon to the social classes and groups that establish its historical bloc.<sup>2</sup> We will get back to these classic works when we suggest that they are still crucial for developing a coherent and structural theoretical outline by which fascism can be comprehended. Yet, neither the concern with fascism nor critical reflections on this phenomenon have disappeared since the defeat of the last classic fascist regime in Germany in World War 2 (henceforth WWII).

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of “historical bloc” here is used in its Gramscian sense to mean the coming together of different, sometimes conflicting, social groups and classes under a common banner. Hence, a historical bloc is a social and political phenomenon which operates beyond mere alliances and political coalitions. The establishment of a particular hegemony over a particular society, in a Gramscian sense, takes place through a triumphant historical bloc to eliminate an old regime to establish its own new hegemonic order. See: Panagotis Stirtis, “Gramsci and the Challenges for the Left: The Historical Bloc as a Strategic Concept”. *Science and Society*, 82:1 (2018), pp 94-119.

One attempt to sustain the analysis of fascism in the years after the end of WWII came from the Frankfurt School. As Peter E. Gordon puts it, as a result of the events of the 1930s, the European left was forced to grapple with a fundamental question:

...if the bourgeoisie was yielding to demagogues and the working class no longer proved reliable as the collective agent of emancipatory politics, then key precepts of historical materialism seemed to be thrown into doubt.<sup>3</sup>

The “doubt” that historical materialism was a relevant methodology to explain fascism is not what distinguishes Gordon and his colleagues, including Theodor Adorno, from the classic works. On the contrary, both Gordon and Adorno acknowledge the fact that fascism was born at a decisive historical moment of an organic crisis of capitalism and the elimination of a leftist alternative.<sup>4</sup> It is within this structural environment that the working class is mobilised, by both authoritarian politics and the middle class toward conservatism and ultimately fascism.<sup>5</sup> This is part of a process, that Adorno referred to as the theory of “Authoritarian Personality”.<sup>6</sup> Hence, for Adorno, the elements that give birth or lead to the re-emergence of fascism and neo-fascism have existed in European society even after the defeat of fascism in WWII.<sup>7</sup> Yet, what distinguishes Adorno and the theory of Authoritarian Personality from the classic works is the absence of a direct link between fascism and capitalism or more precisely with the crisis of liberal capitalism.<sup>8</sup> While offering much, this perspective struggles with attempts to explain how post-war liberal democracies result in fascist and neo-fascist outcomes.

Moreover, there seems to be theoretical and methodological differences between Adorno’s post-war perspective and the classic works within the Marxist tradition. Whereas Gramsci and Trotsky provided a political theory of fascism, Adorno’s combined methods of psychoanalysis and sociology were meant to produce a psychological theory of fascism.<sup>9</sup>

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3 Theodor Adorno, Frenkel-Brenswiek, Else, Levinson, Daniel, Sanform, and Nevil, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), p xxvi.

4 John Duckitt, “Authoritarian Personality”, in Wright J. D. (ed). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier), pp 255-261.

5 Ibid.

6 Adorno, et al, op. cit.

7 Theodor Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2020).

8 Adorno, et al, op. cit.

9 For the combination of the methods of psychoanalysis and sociology produced by the Frankfurt School with the aim of articulating a psychological theory of fascism, see: Adorno, et al, op. cit.; Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A study of the techniques of the American Agitator*, (London: Verso, 2021); Theodor Adorno and Bernstein, J. M, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1981).

The above-mentioned gap is considered and even well-filled by other scholars of the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse. Writing during the American post-WWII “embedded liberal” world order, to quote David Harvey, Marcuse found an “inner relationship” between liberalism and fascism.<sup>10</sup> That is, “dictatorship and authoritarian direction of the state is not at all foreign to liberalism”.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Marcuse is expounding a view found in the classic works on fascism in the Marxist tradition which view fascism as “a particular response to capitalist crisis”. In his words:

... during the rule of liberalism, powerful intervention in economic life by state authority frequently occurred, whenever the threatened freedom and security of private property required it, especially if the threat came from the proletariat.<sup>12</sup>

At the time of publication of the above-mentioned thoughts in 1968, the seemingly endless post war boom was showing signs of unravelling and within a few years, according to most accounts, the global economic system was experiencing a deep structural crisis.

Critical reflections and analysis on the phenomenon of fascism continued to cover the 1970s. Among the existing literature in this period, the work of Eqbal Ahmad seems to offer a very interesting approach for analysing the exploitative nature of the partnership between the elite in the global core and the elite in the global periphery utilising elements of the Marxist explanation of fascism.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Ahmad viewed the developing authoritarian states such as Iran, Indonesia, Brazil, Argentina, etc. in the 1970s as neo-fascist states that oppress their societies based on the American partnership and doctrine of the Cold War. In this regard, the American doctrine of “national security” to “fight communism” was the metaphor on which “development” in the Third World was justified by ruling elites.<sup>14</sup> What underpinned the oppression was a system of the accumulation of capital by the comprador elite to consume luxury western products and also transfer their surplus wealth to western banks. The power of Ahmed’s analysis is that he has taken the Marxist approaches to fascism as a national phenomenon and applied it beyond the nation-state. In doing so, Ahmad demonstrates that fascism and imperialism are seen as bedfellows.

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10 David Harvey, *The Limits to Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2018).

11 Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, (London: May Fly Books, 2009), p 5.

12 Ibid.

13 Eqbal Ahmad. “The Neo-Fascist State: Notes on the Pathology of Power in the Third World.” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 3:1, (1981), pp 170-180.

14 Ibid.

In more recent years, with neoliberalism and globalisation, and the re-emergence of right-wing extremism and fascism new approaches have emerged. One example is the work of Enzo Traverso who aims to shed light on current far-right political movements in Europe and North America.<sup>15</sup> For Traverso, these movements are neither fascist in a classical sense nor neofascists, in the sense of reviving a classic fascist movement. The term he prefers is a “postfascist” which refers to a “transitional” and even still ambiguous phenomenon. Another analysis of contemporary movements is that by sociologist William Robinson.<sup>16</sup> Robinson is more precise in his determination that classic reactionary movements must be distinguished from the current ones. For Robinson, today’s capitalism is different from the capitalist system of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, the current organic crisis of capitalism is also different from the crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. Fascism here is a different outcome of a different social relations of production. Given that the current global economic system is characterised by neoliberalism and globalisation, the question of far-right political movements and fascism must also be addressed within the crisis of the neoliberal global economy.

The aim of the next section is to highlight the significance and relevance of the classic theories on fascism along with subsequent developments in these thoughts to conceptualise fascism and to provide an insight for understanding the current global right-extremist politics. In doing so, we categorise the discussion into five main characteristics.

### **Organic crisis of capitalism, democracies, and fascism in a classic context**

Capitalism from a classic Marxian sense, carries within it, its own contradiction and ultimately its downfall. Contradictions have been a consistent reality since the emergence of industrial capitalism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernández-Armesto date the “organic crisis of capitalism”, as a result of “endless accumulation of capital”, to the Mercantile capitalist era and the establishment of modern forms of states from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Since then, colonialism and imperial rivalries, world wars, uneven developments and profound inequality at a global level are some of the outcomes of the multiple, and recurring, organic crises of capitalism. Fascism is one product of such crisis, or one of its “morbid symptoms”, to use a term coined by Gramsci.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, (London: Verso, 2019).

16 Robinson, W. I. “Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype”, *Science and Society*, 83:2, (2019), pp 155-183.

17 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1983); Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *1492: The Year our World Began*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

The crisis of capitalism occurs on two levels. This system commonly produces a crisis almost each decade which is referred to as a cyclic pattern of crisis. However, it is not the cyclic crises that create the conditions for the emergence and/or empowerment of right-wing movements. Instead, it is the *structural crisis*, which leads to the restructuring of the entire system in order to refresh the cycle of the accumulation of capital.<sup>19</sup> The Great Depression of the 1930s, the end of the long boom in the 1970s, and more recently the global recession of 2008 are examples of such structural crises. Hence, the current global crisis is a structural crisis demanding solutions beyond imposing austerity or further intensifying conditions of capital accumulation. However, the reforms that are needed require major sacrifices from the dominant class. Hence, in this impasse between the struggle for urgent major structural reform and preserving the prevailing system in the interests of those who benefit from it the conditions for right-wing movements and fascism occur. Liberal democracies operate most effectively whenever the prevailing system does not face significant pressure for progressive reform.

The critique of fascism is also a critique of the state and liberal democratic orders. This can be traced back to the writing of Karl Marx and his early attempt to critique Friedrich Hegel. Unlike Hegel, Marx remained critical to constitutional monarchies and saw them cannibalising their own democracies when they have to choose between democracy and capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Later critique within the Marxist theory has located a correlation between a structural crisis of capitalism- along with its hegemony- and liberal democracies. This is particularly significant when liberal democracies are taken for granted as a universal political system and their global enforcement is at the heart of the US foreign policy in both the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>21</sup> According to Francis Fukuyama *the end of history*, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, promised worldwide stability based on liberal principles.<sup>22</sup> What occurred, however, has been rather different. The events that follow demonstrated that liberal democracy, even a triumphant one, cannot be taken for granted when the capitalist system that it protects carries the seeds of its own destruction. To put it differently, the solid

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18 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Translated, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1992), p 276.

19 William I. Robinson, "The next economic crisis: digital capitalism and global police state", *Race and Class*, 60:1, (2018), pp 77-92.

20 See: Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Rights"*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1970).

21 Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the national interest: American realism for a new world", *Foreign Affairs*, 87:4 (2008), pp 2-26.

22 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (London: H. Hamilton, 1992).

pillars of liberal democracies were shaken by the structural crisis of capitalism that occurred in the corresponding period.

Leon Trotsky's contribution is a penetrating scrutiny of the mobilisation of fascist social forces by liberal democracy. Trotsky wrote:

... [members of parliaments] who consider themselves connoisseurs of the people like to repeat: "One must not frighten the middle classes with revolution. They do not like extremes". In this general form, this affirmation is absolutely false. Naturally, the petty proprietor prefers order so long as business is going well and so long as he hopes that tomorrow it will go better.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, it is common for parliamentary systems to give birth to fascist regimes when capitalism is at the stage of an organic crisis. Gramsci's view on fascism is helpful here to further elaborate on the point. He saw fascism as a form of Caesarism, which "A Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar, without any great, 'heroic' and representative personality".<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a parliamentary system can provide the "mechanism" for the rise of fascism, or the very parliamentary system collapses at the time of an organic crisis and the rise of fascist forces.

Moreover, in updating a Bonapartist situation, elaborated by Karl Marx in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in relation to the rule of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, around the concept of fascism, Gramsci anticipated neoliberal conditions which systematically oppress leftist forces in favour of right-wing politics to maintain capitalism. In Gramsci's words, "The functionaries of the parties and economic unions can be corrupted or terrorised, without any need for military action in the grand style - of a Caesar or 18 Brumaire type".<sup>25</sup> This has been a global reality since the 1980s when a pillar of neoliberalism was to seek to remove any ability of the workers to organise themselves against their employers, including through the semi-elimination of the unions.<sup>26</sup>

At times when the liberal democratic order is not facing a significant threat, such as in the period from the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s, fascism suffers some level of marginalisation.<sup>27</sup> At other times, fascism re-emerges as a reaction to potential counter-

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23 León Trotsky, *Fascism: What it is and how to fight it*. (New York: Pioneer, 1979).

24 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Translated, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p 220.

25 Ibid.

26 See: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

27 David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right*, (Haymarket Books, 2019); Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far-Right Became Mainstream*. (London: Verso, 2020).

hegemony. However, this is not merely a mechanistic dynamic. Instead, as Gramsci and Trotsky note, distinguishing between different states and the different levels of capitalist development is crucial to any analysis of fascism. That said, there is also an interpretation of Trotsky's analysis that suggests he believed fascism was an inevitable, and necessary, moment of the historical decline of capitalism. This is mainly because regardless of different levels of capitalist developments "capitalist decline" is a "historic law". Trotsky continues:

The bourgeoisie is leading its society to complete bankruptcy. It is capable of assuring the people neither bread nor peace. This is precisely why it cannot any longer tolerate the democratic order.<sup>28</sup>

In this quote, Trotsky highlights the connection between an organic crisis of capitalism and the disintegration of democratic forms of government, as was the case in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. The universality of the inherent crisis of capitalism and the impact of crisis on democratic governance is hardly a matter of dispute. Regardless of the level of capitalist development, currently, highly developed states such as the US and UK, semi-peripheral states such as Brazil, and peripheral states such as the Philippines are grappling with the rise of powerful far-right movements. Whereas Trotsky might be understood to have viewed the response to the crisis as universal, there might be a case for a more nuanced approach. For undoubtedly, states that have developed stronger economies and a consolidated capitalist class generally are able to construct a more coherent alignment of the material relations and ideological system, what Gramsci refers to as "hegemony". That is:

(Gramsci) Refers to a particular relation of social domination in which subordinate groups lend their "active consent" to the system of domination. Projects of hegemony involve not merely rule but political and ideological leadership based on a set of class alliances. Such hegemony must be constantly reconstructed, because the possibility of hegemonic or consensual domination rests on both ideological and material foundations. Hegemony therefore requires a material base, or the material conditions, institutions, and concomitant norms that allow for the social reproduction of a sufficient number of people among subordinate groups. No would-be ruling class can exercise hegemony without developing diverse mechanisms of legitimation and securing a social base — a combination of consensual integration through material reward for some, and coercive exclusion of others that the system is unwilling or unable to coopt.<sup>29</sup>

States where hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, are stronger should be less vulnerable to fascism than others.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Trotsky, op. cit., p 18.

29 Robinson, *Global Capitalist Crisis*.

30 Britain was one of the European states which were subject to the emergence of a significant fascist movement in the 1930s. However, the British ruling elite were able to ban the fascist party, namely the British



## The Current Capitalist Crisis

In an article entitled “Capitalism After the Pandemic” in *Foreign Affairs*, Mariana Mazzucato pathologises the current global capitalist crisis.<sup>31</sup> As a key problematic, she identifies the finance sector which she claims has morphed into a system of “finance itself”. Mazzucato’s argument rests on the idea that giant corporations with enormous financial power have only become interested in deriving short-term profits rather than investing in long-term growth and returns on profit on which capitalism as a system demands. These corporations, according to Mazzucato, no longer invest in infrastructure and the production of goods, or the “real economy”, and instead concentrate on recycling finance through insurance services and real estate. The solution to this, Mazzucato explains, is to reclaim the spirit of capitalism whereby corporations resume investing in infrastructure, clean energy and other similar forms of production.<sup>32</sup> Mazzucato’s resolution is typical of problem-solving theory that targets the symptom rather than the problem and rescues the system. Critical theories identify that the inadequacy of any such problem-solving approach is that the structural causes of the problem are left unaltered.<sup>33</sup> Such that even the most effective problem-solving tactic only offers a temporary solution that might reduce, or mitigate, the crisis. While successful problem-solving approaches might overcome an immediate problem; problem-solving never resolves the crisis.

Apart from the problem-solving nature of the above-mentioned analysis, the other issue with Mazzucato’s review is that it is empirically inaccurate. There is indeed production undertaken by multinational corporations but most of this production is now outsourced to the peripheral areas of the global economy. As long as the global periphery accelerates the accumulation of profit for transnational corporations through cheap labour, the structural inequalities responsible for the global crisis will continue. The acceleration of militarism is also an element of the crisis, especially for the peripheries, which also cannot be ignored. The main

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Union of Fascists, early in WWII, in 1941. See: Matthew Worley, “Why Fascism? Sir Oswald Mosley and the Conception of the British Union of Fascists”, *History*, 96:1, (2011), pp 68-83; Also, Gramsci distinguishes between two kinds of states and their abilities to handle crisis. The first are Western European states which, parallel to their strong economy, enjoy a well-established hegemony as a sophisticated form of social control. The ruling class in the other kind of states, those which struggle with their underdevelopment and underdeveloped economies, are not as hegemonic as the former. In the latter case, the political establishments can be easier overthrown by way of revolutionary organisations, guerrilla warfare or what Gramsci refers to as “War of Movements”. See: Gramsci, op. cit.

31 Mariana Mazzucato, “Capitalism After the Pandemic”, *Foreign Affairs*, (2020), Retrieved, 28/08/2022, from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-02/capitalism-after-covid-19-pandemic>.

32 Ibid.

33 Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory.” *Journal of International Studies*, 10:2, (1981), pp 126-155.

investors in the operations of the top three weapon producers, Lockheed Martin Corporation, Northrop Grumman Corporation, and Boeing Company, as revealed by Peter Phillips, that 100 percent of investment in 2017 came from finance corporations.<sup>34</sup> Phillips further explains how the function of the market and its extraction of surplus has increasingly also become reliant on destroying infrastructure in the global periphery such as happened in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s and then the subsequent contracting of western corporations in the rebuilding efforts. Whichever way we look at it the current crisis is deeper than a failure of major corporations investing in the infrastructure of advanced economies. The causes of the crisis of today, as in the 1920s and 1930s, are located in the contradictions of capitalism and imperialism.

We argue that the ongoing structural crisis, which has been simply accelerated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, is deeply rooted in the structural adjustment of the 1980s and the global enforcement of neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism itself was a response to another structural crisis that preceded it. The over-accumulation of the post-WWII Bretton Woods system could only be sustained for two decades. As Yanis Varoufakis has shown, by the late 1960s, the Bretton Woods system was reaching a stage of structural crisis leading to the need for the global economic system to initiate the change to a new phase of accumulation.<sup>35</sup> The answer to the problem had been primed by neoliberal theorists, primarily Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman and which both Reagan and the Thatcher administrations implemented in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup>

The turn to “total” accumulation and the global and incorporation of previously independent areas of the world into the neoliberal global economy accelerated the monopoly control of capital and resources. In 2016, 62 people held as much wealth as half of the entire global population.<sup>37</sup> According to Oxfam International, a year later only eight people held that amount of wealth.<sup>38</sup> The other 50% of wealth is far from evenly distributed. Three billion of the world’s population are currently struggling on less than \$2 a day.<sup>39</sup> In a variety of ways, the world is reeling from the consequences of over-accumulation worldwide.

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34 Peter Phillips, *Giants: The Global Power Elite*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2018).

35 Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*. (London: Zed Books, 2013) pp 57-58.

36 Daniel Stedman-Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).

37 Phillips, op. cit., p 21.

38 Ibid.

39 Harvey, op. cit. *The Limits to Capitalism*, p xii.

William Robinson identifies five dimensions of the current crisis linked to over-accumulation and inequality:<sup>40</sup>

- The exploitation of the planet and the subsequent ecological crisis has reached the “no-returning point”.
- Permanent wars and violence have become a pillar for accumulation within the neoliberal system. A few states have the technology to launch “computerised wars”, but large parts of the world experience permanent wars as normalised aspects- Afghanistan, the north of Pakistan, Palestine, Yemen, Libya, and peoples living in favellas, slums, etc, in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, US, etc.
- Capitalism has reached its limitation in terms of geographical expansion. There is no significant state, market or even a rural area left which is not incorporated into the post-1970s global economic system. Capitalism has always relied on expansion for its survival and now there is nowhere to expand to. Neoliberalism introduced vertical integration, but this is almost exhausted or efforts to further privatise are now being met by resistance such as electoral challenges to the privatisation of healthcare in the UK.
- The system is globally incapable of addressing the rising population of what Mike Davis refers to as the “Planet of Slums”. The only solution these masses have been offered is “sophisticated systems of social control and destruction”.<sup>41</sup>
- The concept of the nation-state is weakened by globalisation. Accordingly, the mechanism of delivering public goods is to a large extent replaced by privatisation and accumulation of capital. The influence of a transnational capitalist class on their host states has increased more than ever and they exercise such power in a way that destabilises the system more than strengthening its hegemony.

We might add a sixth, the disproportionate capacity of the uber-wealthy to propagate their views through ownership of traditional media, institutions such as schools, churches, etc., funding of right-wing think tanks, and dissemination of (mis) information through social media.<sup>42</sup>

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40 William I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp 17-18.

41 For the notion of Planet of Slums, see: Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, (London: Verso, 2007).

42 Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

It is within the context of this organic and structural crisis of capitalism that the current far-right movements have arisen. The extent that the far-right movements arise from the crisis of capitalism or as a mechanism to protect the privileges of dominant classes in the face of a changing world and as a way of deviating lower classes from the actual causes of the crisis will be the focus of the next section.

### **Fascism as an anti-establishment movement to maintain the establishment**

As mentioned earlier, the middle classes might support the *status quo* at all costs. Trotsky believed that the middle classes might embrace even the most extreme political ideologies when their material conditions are seriously threatened.<sup>43</sup> The petty bourgeoisie and middle classes in the UK, Italy, and Germany marched behind respective national fascisms during times when faced with the real fear of *declassé*.<sup>44</sup> Trump's voters, while characterised as "white working class" were almost all white but not entirely working class.<sup>45</sup> Brazil's Bolsonaro also mobilised a large constituency of support amongst the middle and upper classes.<sup>46</sup> It is empirically accurate to say that at times of crisis the middle class will mechanically tend towards an alliance with the upper classes rather than with the lower classes. The right-wing movements rely on anti-establishment discourse and the capitalist elite rely on denouncing them. After all, as Adorno reminded his readers, the audience of the right-wing movements are those who are disadvantaged by the very establishment which destabilised their social standing by instituting the conditions which creates the crisis in the first place.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the salvation that the right-wing movements offer is to turn attention away from the failure of the existing socio-economic system, towards scapegoats, especially the demonisation of the "other" such as migrants, and (re)producing historical cleavages based on "race", gender, "class" and sexuality. Jason Stanley provides a useful account of the characteristics of fascism such as the use of propaganda, the use of selected historical tropes, etc., and celebration of violence.<sup>48</sup> However, Stanley like a number of scholars of fascism and right-wing groups fails to locate these movements in capitalism or connect their rise, fall, and resurgence to the crises of hegemony of the capitalist system. Nor have many of these

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43 Trotsky, op. cit., p 19.

44 For classic fascism in the UK, see: Worley, op. cit.

45 Even the notion of "working class" is too broad here, given that only specific fractions of the American working class supported Trump while others logically stood for Bernie Sanders who was representing a progressive trend. For detailed discussion, see: Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, (London: Verso, 2019), pp 18-23.

46 Jairo Nicolau, *O Brasil dobrou à direita: Uma radiografia da eleição de Bolsonaro em 2018*, (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2020).

47 Adorno, op. cit. *Aspects of the New Right-Wing*.

scholars identified the absence of an effective “left” as a consequence of the way that capitalist elites have led the middle and lower classes to march behind the banners of far-right movements.

The resurgence of right-wing movements is a typical modern capitalist response to a structural crisis. It is also problem-solving because it aims to alleviate the excesses of capitalism on the popular classes without the need for a reorganisation of the ownership and distribution of wealth that is harmful to the continued practices of hyper-accumulation by the rich. While with the rise of right-wing movements the capitalist elite lose some control over the popular and middle classes to demagogues and incoherent political allies, they maintain control over production, finance, and profits (Worldy, 2018: 14). The unpredictability of right-wing political project means that while it is opportunist to bring them to power to crush opposition and rescue the system, they are not an ideal and long-term ally. As Adorno postulated in his 1967 lecture, industries [industrial capitalism] selects fascism only as a last resort.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, while capitalist elites denounce fascism, they also need it, and use it, to overcome the revolutionary and alternative option and to restructure the system for the post-crisis epoch of accumulating capital.

As such, in times of crisis, the capitalist elite has limited options. Robinson and Barrera identify three categories of options. The first is the reformist response, or what Robert Cox has referred to as the “problem solving” solution.<sup>50</sup> The problem with this response is that it only works when the system is not wracked by a *structural* crisis. The second option is surrendering to the revolutionary forces which seek an egalitarian alternative to the current capitalist system.<sup>51</sup> The last 500 years history of capitalism provides countless examples that demonstrate that this option is not one that is countenanced by those in power. In fact, the opposite has repeatedly occurred, capitalists resist the egalitarian solution, and in many instances have shown a preference for far-right solutions including fascism when required.

### **Fascism as a form of Caesarism**

Gramsci viewed fascism as a form of Caesarism. As mentioned, the departure point for Gramsci’s concept of Caesarism is Karl Marx and his notion of Bonapartism.<sup>52</sup> Both Karl

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49 Adorno, op. cit. *Aspects of the New Right-Wing*.

50 Cox, op. cit.

51 William I. Robinson and Mario Barrera, “Global capitalism and twenty-first century fascism: a US case study”, *Race and Class*, 53:3, (2012), pp 4-29.

52 See: Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982).

Marx, within the context of capitalist crisis of the mid-nineteenth century, and Antonio Gramsci's articulation of a crisis of capitalism and its hegemony in the 1920s, reflect on the nature of conflicting social-political forces. In the words of Gramsci:

Caesarism can be said to express a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction.<sup>53</sup>

Gramsci also depicted a scenario in which a third force may overcome the exhausted forces in conflict, becoming a triumphant Caesarist. Nevertheless, fascism, as a Caesarist trend, emerges only with the failure of capitalist-reformist and democratic solutions as well as the collapse of capitalist hegemony.

A crucial feature of the Gramscian depiction of Caesarism is that this political phenomenon can be either progressive or reactionary. Yet, Gramsci is also clear in viewing fascism as a reactionary phenomenon in the criteria he sets to distinguish between the above-mentioned. In his words:

The problem [of distinguishing a progressive Caesarism from a reactionary one] is to see whether in the dialectic "revolution/restoration" it is revolution or restoration which predominates; for it is certain that in the movement of history there is never any turning back, and that restorations *in tato* do not exist.<sup>54</sup>

Hence, for Gramsci, the bottom-line is whether or not a Caesarist force is altering a specific old regime for a better one or to restore the struggling socio-economic regime. In this sense fascism is an unconventional force to save and restore the struggling capitalist order. Gramsci is indeed dialectical in his analysis, and he acknowledges the fact that once the capitalist economy is restructured, the new phase of accumulation of capital necessarily leads in time to a new crisis which itself requires either a reactionary response or to an organic solution. Hence, Gramsci's conclusion that there can be no such thing as "restoration *in tato*".

### **Fascism as an organic movement**

When attempting to explain the rise of fascism and right-wing movements it is important to refer to the dynamic of the social classes and forces at the time of crisis when conventional and mainstream politics is suspended.<sup>55</sup> The election of Donald Trump in the United States is

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53 Gramsci, (1971), op. cit., p 219.

54 Ibid, pp 219-220.

55 Trotsky cites the example of the Italian social democrats attempts to mobilise opposition against fascists in the 1920s through normal channels as an example of the failure of conventional politics during crises. See:

a recent example of the distortion of conventional and mainstream politics in the US. Almost all polls and media predicting that Hilary Clinton would win the US election in 2016.<sup>56</sup> Events since Trump's election including the election loss in 2020, the attempts to overthrow the election result, the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters, and the failure of Democrat party efforts to impeach former President Trump all signal the distortion of US politics. The volte-face towards Trump by Murdoch media, including *Fox News* and the *Wall Street Journal*, is evidence that even Murdoch was not prepared for the complete overthrow of the political system that Trump represented.<sup>57</sup> Given that a Biden presidency does not pose a major threat to the privileges of the elite, or the continuation of the politics permitted by crisis, Murdoch's turn away from Trump is not particularly surprising.

It is difficult to predict whether the ongoing war against progressive and collective alternatives to neoliberalism will be reversed in any substantive way by the election of Biden. It is unlikely as the time of the crisis is also a time when the war on leftist, alternative, and revolutionary politics is rife. In the US, and other developed countries, the alternatives are muted at best as a result of systematic repression and the adoption of sophisticated forms of social control.<sup>58</sup> In the United States, the Democrats setting aside the socialist candidate Bernie Sanders twice and accepting the risk of confronting Trump with a less popular candidate indicates systemic intolerance of any form of leftist politics.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the lower classes have come to believe that they are voiceless and powerless unless they support political charlatans that gain support by demonising the most vulnerable such as refugees and racial, religious, or ethnic minorities.

The middle class has historically tended toward far-right politics at times of crisis. Accordingly, in the absence of an effective leftist force to represent the lower classes, far-right movements are able to mobilise middle and lower classes behind their cause.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, a point that led to an underestimation of the classic fascists in both Italy and Germany was the organic character of these movements. As Trotsky noted, the phenomenon is "a mass movement growing out of the collapse of capitalism".<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in reminding

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Trotsky, op. cit., p 7.

56 Traverso, op. cit.

57 Editorial Board Wall Street Journal. "The Trump Impeachment Evidence: He might be acquitted, but he won't live down his disgraceful conduct". *Wall Street Journal*. (February 10, 2021).

58 Robinson and Barrera, op. cit.

59 Even the New York Times identified the extent that the Democrats were spooked by the popularity of Sanders. Lerer. L. and Epstein. R. Democratic Leaders Willing to Risk Party Damage to Stop Bernie Sanders. *New York Times*. (February 28, 2020).

60 Trotsky, op. cit., p 10.

61 Ibid, p 7.

his readers that not all forms of dictatorships are fascists, Trotsky distinguished the political developments in Italy and Germany from the 1920s to 1932 (when he was writing his letters on fascism) from those in Spain. To him, Germany and Italy were fascist developments while Spain was subject to military dictatorship. The criteria for such a distinction are that the former movements enjoyed organic grassroots support while the latter lacked this character. In Italy, the fascist movement “was a spontaneous movement of large masses, with new leaders from the rank and file. It is a plebeian movement in origin, directed and financed by big capitalist powers”. Similarly, the fascist movement in Germany was “a mass, with its leaders employing a great deal of socialist demagoguery”.<sup>62</sup> The socialist demagoguery though did not prevent the “genuine basis [for fascism] is the petty bourgeoisie movement” supporting fascism.<sup>63</sup> Both Mussolini and Hitler were self-made leaders while the Spanish dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera came from, and represented, the aristocracy. Moreover, Rivera relied more on the state and its military institution to assume power than on the mobilisation of an organic social basis.

Classic fascism delivered some material benefit to those it mobilised. At a time of severe economic crisis, fascists in Italy and Germany improved employment and provided social benefits to a section of the working class. This was mainly possible given that classical fascism had emerged “at the height of nation-state capitalism” and because it confiscated the property of a section of the population it would vilify and later massacre in huge numbers.<sup>64</sup> These movements were corporatist and while not domesticated by the industrial capital on which it first relied to come to power still remained connected. Yet, the current far-right movements are a product of neoliberal and global capitalism where state loyalties and systems of production differ from those that existed in the inter-war years.

The different capitalist models of the twenty-first century have produced different forms of reactionary politics. The current right-wing movements face a dilemma delivering to the various social groups that it is either indebted to economically (capitalists) and politically (popular classes). As Karl Polanyi demonstrated in-depth, labour requires protection from the market.<sup>65</sup> Protection necessitates regulation. Markets and capital, especially in this era of neoliberalism, abjure regulation unless it is regulation that strips workers and the state from holding capital accountable.

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62 Ibid, p 5.

63 Ibid.

64 Robinson, op. cit. *Global Capitalist Crisis*.

65 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: Economic and Political Origins of Our Time*, Vol 1. (New York: Rinehart, 1944), p. 257



In reflecting on Trump's policies, Robinson comments:

The Trump regime's public discourse of populists and nationalism, for example, bears no relation to its actual policies. In its first year, Trumponomics involved deregulation- the virtual smashing of the regulatory state- slashing social spending, dismantling what remained of the welfare state, privatisation, tax breaks to corporations and the rich, and an expansion of state subsidies to capital- in short, neoliberalism on steroids.<sup>66</sup>

Similar tendencies are common among other far-right leaders. Bolsonaro in Brazil and his administration, chief among them his Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes who is also known as a "Chicago Boy", are relevant examples of purveyors of more privatisation in Brazil. The justification of more neoliberalism to respond to the crisis of neoliberalism in Brazil is not less delusional than the American one. In Brazil, more privatisation was portrayed to the Brazilian public as less "corruption".<sup>67</sup>

Utilising another Gramscian insight, part of the strength of right-wing movements is that they enjoy the support of a vocal and generously-funded group of organic intellectuals. Enzo Traverso sheds detailed light on the intellectuals of the European far-right movements. The far-right French National Front political party, for instance, is backed by theorists, commentators, media presenters, and think tanks such as the GRECE (Traverso, 2019).<sup>68</sup> The same is true for US, Brazilian, Indian, and many other countries as well. The extent that the media, press, and other elements of cultural production are significant components of the success of right-wing and fascist movements should not be overlooked.

### **Fascism as a transhistorical phenomenon**

The fact that fascism has a transformative character is an indication that this phenomenon is able to adapt itself to different social-political environments in different times and places. It can present itself in different shapes and forms and adopt different tactics. Yet, the trend, or as Adorno put it, the "social conditions" that had given birth to classic fascism, also gives birth to the most recent version of this phenomenon. Accordingly, "postfascism" is conceptually linked to the notion of fascism, especially to the classic forms that Gramsci and Trotsky experienced.

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<sup>66</sup> Robinson, op. cit. *Global Capitalist Crisis*.

<sup>67</sup> Camila Rocha, Esther Solano and Jonas Medeiros, *The Bolsonaro Paradox: The Public Sphere and Right-Wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Springer, 2021), p.149.

<sup>68</sup> Traverso, op. cit.

Fascism, it can be argued, repeats across history. Whether the fascist solution presents itself in a classic form, which in the current capitalist system is very unlikely, or, as Gramsci predicted, can present itself “without a Caesar, without any great, ‘heroic’ and representative personality”, the structure which produces fascism will also reproduce it.<sup>69</sup>

Fascism, in one form or another, is a danger to the world today as it was in the period between the world wars. Undoubtedly what is emerging is different precisely because the capitalist system has shifted and the crisis it is producing is not being experienced identically to the one that produced fascism in the last century. The words penned by George Lavan Weissman in his introduction to Trotsky’s letters on fascism should remain a warning to us all: that “[T]he germ of fascism is endemic in capitalism” and most importantly that “a crisis can raise it to epidemic proportions unless drastic countermeasures are applied”.<sup>70</sup> Many have assumed that the defeat of Trump is a return to politics as usual and is evidence that the strength of modern forms of democracy is immune to the disease of fascism. However, as Jerry Harris amongst others have argued for some time now, neoliberal capitalism weakens and unravels democracy.<sup>71</sup> Hence, as Trump’s conservatism appeared more extreme than George W. Bush’s neo-conservatism, the remaining structural problems in both US and global economic systems may introduce the world to a further extreme option in the White House after Biden. Regardless of the future of liberal democracy, what this article has shown is that both Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky remain relevant for examining the conditions in which right-wing movements and fascist regimes flourish. The two Marxist theoreticians experienced first-hand the capacity of capitalism at a time of crisis when threatened by revolutionary forces to prefer the most reactionary and repressive elements in society rather than countenance reform. They both also revealed the extent that the “left” opposition will fail to challenge reactionary movements if they do not fully mobilise, commit to struggle and cooperate. For now, Trump is gone, yet “Trumpism” has not and a number of other proto-fascists remain in power. The struggle against right-wing movements continues and utilising the insights of Gramsci and Trotsky, it becomes imperative that for the “left” to succeed it must seek a solution to the organic crisis of capitalism.

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69 Gramsci, op. cit.

70 Trotsky, op. cit., p 4.

71 ; Jerry Harris, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy*, (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2016).