BACKLASH

The Global Rise of the Radical Right

Edited by
Don Kalb & Walden Bello

Backlash

"An urgent book. Its historical materialist approach has produced a depth and grounding too often lacking in contemporary debates about the rise of illiberal politics, and the clear focus on what is to be done is substantive rather than shrill. The collected essays show how the rise of autocracy links to global upward transfers of wealth, in ways that are crucial to our understanding of the world today and what we might do – politically – in response."

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"*Backlash* refuses to dither while fascists burn our planet. A High Noon call to analytical arms for academics and activists; global, local, everywhere."

—Patrick Neveling, Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences, Bournemouth University

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Introduction: Counterrevolution *within and against* the Counterrevolution

Don Kalb

The reactionary political backlash spoken of in the title of this book should be seen, more expansively, as an ongoing worldwide counterrevolution (Bello 2019). It is a slow rolling one, but certainly accelerating, and in some places perhaps peaking. Not a counterrevolution happening just here or there, but a late capitalist, late modern, systemic and global counterrevolution, one as much anchored in world time as in the politics of place. Place and space cannot be separated of course. The twelve chapters in this book research this entanglement each in their own way, mostly focused on one national case. The total, however, is more than the sum of the cases, as each influences the next one and adds to a global field of pressure in reactionary direction.

Counterrevolution is an overarching and encompassing notion. It is less specific than other terms that circulate these days, like fascism or late fascism (Toscano 2023). It also refers to a political dynamic in time rather than just a state of mind. The notion of counterrevolution allows the encompassment of multiple concrete forms of right-wing reaction, and affords broad historical contextualization that envisions social forces rather than just actors and events here and there. We use terms like right-wing populism, the radical right, neo-nationalism, illiberalism, authoritarian populism, supremacism, and fascism too – Walden Bello in his chapter features fascism as his key concept – but we do so loosely. Such terms do descriptive work at a subordinate level. And as you will see, preferences for any of these terms are quite regionally and nationally specific, embedded in local histories that shape and limit what can be said and what cannot. The political phenomena we focus on are multiple and variegated, but they do share a direction and do spring from kindred and more general processes.

Against which prior revolution is this counterrevolution aimed? The one of liberalism we hear all around, both from right-wing voices and from more high-brow ones from the declining liberal camp itself. Jan Zielonka (2018), for example, published a book with a similar main title, *Counterrevolution*, subtitle, *Liberal Europe in Retreat*. In such liberal stories, the key date is 1989. Zielonka sees a counterrevolution against the continent-wide liberal reform that began around the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of “really existing socialism.” It is a counterrevolution against the great liberal idea of

pluralism and "checks and balances" on state power. He is one among many Western and Westernized liberal pundits sharing that story (Krastev 2017; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Mudde 2017; Müller 2017). However, we suspect that the ups and downs of the liberal idea, as idea, obscure as much as they reveal and should be seen as part of a larger story.

David Harvey (2005) is helpful for shifting the signifying context from liberalism as an idea to neoliberalism as a capitalist practice of power. Harvey points out, with echoes of Karl Polanyi, that neoliberalism had originated as a planned counterrevolution against the coming of popular democracy in the twentieth century, with the purpose of disabling electoral socialism and disciplining mass democracies for capital accumulation (see also Cooper 2024; Mattei 2022; Slobodian 2020). That neoliberal counterrevolution had been prepared in ideas since the 1920s, was kept alive in the circles of the Mont Pelerin Society, the Trilateral Commission, the Bilderberg meetings, etc., and was finally rolled out in the capitalist crises of the 1970s "when the time was ripe" and Keynesianism was descending into stagflation.

The story has often been told. The first punch came from the core of the system: the end of Bretton Woods in 1972, the end of the convertibility of the US dollar to gold, the bankruptcy of New York City in 1973–75, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionality imposed on that great metropolis as well as on the UK under Labour in 1976. Next came the Pinochet coup in Chile and the Thatcher and Reagan electoral victories. Neoliberalism was imposed in the 1980s in the form of "shock therapy" in Latin America and Africa, while socialist bureaucrats in Eastern Europe began deploying the same tools against their own "really existing socialist" societies in the same years, societies that rebelled. The Third and Second Worlds of the 1970s/1980s had become deeply indebted to Western capital. In the 1980s/1990s, they collapsed as coherent political actors and viable developmental regimes ("import substitution industrialization") into a disparate set of "emerging markets" collectively macro-managed by the IMF, which had been turned into a global "debt collection agency" for that purpose. By 1990, the rule of the bond market now also hovered over much of the First World, with national debts now often amounting to more than 50 percent of GDP. The new global regime, as Perry Anderson (2025) has succinctly summarized, prioritized the circulation of capital assets over labor, place, and everything else. Labor and places were squeezed in a seesaw movement of devaluation and revaluation, flexibilization, privatization, and deregulation, while capital relocated, financialized, and became brilliantly liquid and footloose. Rather than national accumulation it now served global circulation and fictitious accumulation, driving a series of subsequent speculative asset binges with real-life consequences such as magnifying class polarization. The leveling of income and wealth inequalities that had marked the decolonizing social democratic-urban-industrial twentieth century

until the 1970s (Piketty 2014; Wilterdink 2000) had definitely turned into its opposite.

That prior capitalist counterrevolution encapsulated but was also obscured by the "happy" national democratic breakthroughs in the Global South and East of the 1980s/1990s (see below). These "refolutions" (Kalb 2002) were not entirely what they seemed. They were like Russian dolls: a doll in a doll in a doll. Nations were given liberal democracy and human rights with one hand, while popular sovereignty was taken away with the other, and inequality began rising everywhere. Newly democratic national elites had to endorse neoliberal principles – economic liberalization, privatization, financial stabilization, welfare retrenchment – as the self-evident price of their opportunity to rule. The IMF was watching over them. A whole flanking administrative architecture, seemingly technocratic but supremely political, hovered in the background, imposing "structural adjustment," giving "advice" at every corner, while often sheltering core state decisions from any genuine democratic discussion, let alone claim-making.

The reactionary backlash of the 2010s/2020s is a "populist" global counterrevolution *within and against* that prior capitalist counterrevolution. Classical Marxism may have expected the popular response to be a revolution on the left. But the left, although lively and dynamic in the preceding decades, had structurally been switched off, as I will discuss below. Ultimately, the real punch came from the reactionary right. The Russian doll of neoliberal capitalism and class polarization, with a smaller doll of procedural liberal democracy and human rights in its belly, is why the present is so confusing for the liberals and the left, and so contradictory for the illiberals themselves. The doll must be unpacked.

From the 1970s onwards, the neoliberal capitalist counterrevolution against popular democracy has mutated gradually into what Nancy Fraser has perceptively called "progressive neoliberalism" (2023); a deliberate oxymoron. While Harvey focuses on neoliberalism's political economic core, where capital subdues and disciplines democratic society for its own expanded reproduction, Fraser points out that neoliberalism, over time, has succeeded in curating a cultural alliance that hardly resembled the days of Margaret Thatcher's "little England" type of nationalist chauvinism of shopkeepers anymore. The culturally liberal Third Way lefts in the West and the Pink Tide in Latin America of the 1990s/2000s aligned their political and cultural "modernization" programs smoothly with the dominant tenets of market rule (as summarized in Giddens 2013). This allowed neoliberalism to adopt the now gentrified and "responsibilized" remnants of 1970s counterculture – and the accompanying celebration of liberal rights, multiculturalism, and the liberating play of poststructuralist identity positions, as its own. Endless accumulation sexed up with endless identity openings. Borderless flow and trickle-down liquidity instead of the old

regime of status and structure. Majorities on the modernized right, in the center, and among the modernized left liked it, while making incremental claims for reform to it. Thus emerged Nancy Fraser's "progressive neoliberalism" (2023).

When we say that the ongoing *reactionary counterrevolution is a counter-revolution within and against progressive neoliberalism*, we hint at a plethora of tensions and contradictions, forces and counterforces, both of a cultural and political-economic nature, that allow us to X-ray the doll and see the doll in the doll in the doll. It also allows us to capture the structured contingencies and multiple interacting forces, forms, and accents of the present moment beyond descriptive terms such as "right-wing populism," illiberalism, and fascism, while contextualizing the present broadly in an adequate history (and histories), of which it is not necessarily always fully aware. This book presents eleven of such (national) histories.

First, this way of framing makes clear that this is a history of neoliberal inequalities, class formations and class deformations exacted by capital over decades. Second, it is therefore not just a culture but also a class story. This is essential: aspiring political actors are more than likely to deflect the structural pressures coming from the political and economic strands of the story onto the readily visible, audible, and communicable culture wars. This is where the hate machine is located: attacking immigrants and the culture of liberal "wokeness" among the higher educated cosmopolitan classes of the big cities, the universities, and the media – itself often profoundly intolerant and in love with itself – is far easier and good for short-term political gain than turning the neoliberal order and its deeply embedded political economic disciplines around on behalf of the national interest, let alone popular democratic interest, let alone on a global level – which is what would be required. The hyper-politics of identity, and its scapegoating effects, is therefore a must on all sides (Kalb 2025). What anthropologists call "ritual excess" is scripted and foretold. Deflection of inescapable political and economic contradictions onto the daily heat of the culture wars helps aspiring political actors to capture the anger, ride the tiger, and survive another day.

LOCAL NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: UNEVEN AND COMBINED

We need to ground this grand narrative (after the proverbial "end of the grand narratives") in spaces and places; a first approximation, at least. The chapters in this book will do further localizing work.

Progressive neoliberalism is identified as "liberal reform" by various recent regional narratives of transformation. In Europe and much of the Global North that liberal reform is epitomized in the 1989 "unipolar" moment of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of "really existing socialism," as for instance in

Zielonka (2018) and Krastev and Holmes (2019): in other words, the now unimpeded globalization of "democratic capitalism."[1] That 1989 story also includes the making of the European Union (EU) – including the coming of the euro; inclusion of Sweden, Ireland, Finland, and Austria; and then the accession of multiple East European countries in the 2000s. Also, the Eastern expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the borders of the former Soviet Union. For a good decade it also seemed to encompass – ideologically as well as economically – Russia and the Eurasian states, including Central Asia, and, of course, China and Vietnam; but always hesitantly and uncertainly. In the stripped-down sense of "market liberation," this narrative of liberal reform also includes India, which had its own economic liberalization moment from central planning in 1991 (see Shah's chapter).

Postsocialist Europe is part and parcel also of another and overlapping global narrative, that of the "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1991). Starting in the mid-1970s with the Iberian countries and Greece, this "third wave" rolled into Latin America in the late 1980s, and subsequently incorporated Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), much of Africa and East and Southeast Asia, including the important case of apartheid South Africa (see Westhuizen's chapter). This is a narrative driven by political science with an emphasis on liberal political transitions away from "authoritarianism" and toward the supposedly Western democratic and civil form (Stepan and Linz 1996). The current backlash is labeled here primarily as "democratic backsliding," "authoritarianism," and "autocracy" and quantitative scores have been developed to measure this. "Backsliding" now includes leading countries of "the West," above all the USA, apart from recently democratized states such as Hungary, Turkey, Kenya, Indonesia, and the Philipines as well as much of Africa.

Obscured by that democratization label is that the newly won democracy was everywhere paired with economic liberalization, privatization of public assets, and monetary and fiscal "stabilization," and that its context was deep indebtedness to Western capital and practical vassalage to the IMF. The economic subtext of the "third wave of democratization," just like "postsocialist transition" in CEE, was the Washington Consensus as summarized in that iconic year of 1989 by John Williamson (1993). That context severely cut short any chances for substantial popular sovereignty right at the moment that nations were celebrating their newly won freedom. Disillusionment was all but scripted, but it was not class-neutral.

There are other narratives involved. The radical right, in particular in the Global North, is obsessed by immigrants and refugees. It loves them and the left as a hate object. It suspects the left of liking immigrants and refugees better than their own nationals. Their hate concerns both the radical left and the liberals of the center left. For them, these political forces are the embodiment of

cultural liberalism and woke ideology, embracing feminism, LGTBQ+, decolonialism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, environmentalism, and global civil and human rights regimes, putting these above the national and religious traditions and sense of hierarchy and order of what used to be called the silent majority. Nationalist reactionaries pose particularistic values over universalistic ones, hierarchy over equality, and national sovereignty over cosmopolitan and global governance. J.D. Vance, US vice president under Trump, addressed the core of right-wing thinking when he claimed that the Christian *ordo amoris* meant privileging one's kin and neighbors over far away others (he was corrected by Pope Francis). Elon Musk pointed at human compassion as a "major civilizational failure."[2]

While attacking the "legacy" print media and the universities, the counterrevolution's base is in the new digital media, the social media, and the podcasts (Seymour 2024). With this independent and increasingly well-funded ideological base, it sees itself as the protector of democracy and "free speech"; not by accident banners of left liberalism and historical totems of the story of the "free" West. The class bases of these opposite positions on democracy and free speech are supposedly neatly polarized too, and homological. A section of domestic capital, both big and petty, plus the conservative provincial sections of the middle and working classes have become aligned on the populist right. Educated cosmopolitan "elites" and the "professional managerial class," with their supposed embrace of mobility and the poor and the oppressed worldwide, align with some of the enlightened sections of transnational capital on the liberal left.

The counterrevolution comes in multiple local/regional instantiations. There are varieties in form, class alliances, and ideological accents, all embedded in local and regional histories; and important varieties also in resources. In the Global North, it is often driven by an angry ethno-nationalist, revengeful, reactionary, illiberal, sometimes outright fascist, core electorate, supported by a broad sphere of intolerant conservatism and cultural angst. This Northern reactionary right has adopted some of the socially protective simulacra of the social democratic lefts of yore, thus responding to a profound popular nostalgia for the imagined good old days of the cohesive, bounded, and presumably "careful" community of the welfare state. This is often captured in the broad notion of "the (white) working class," conveying a romance with authochtony and traditional blue-collar labor.

This popular nostalgia implies a certain resentment and a pessimism about the course and the future of modern societies and places itself against the "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) steadily emanating from liberalism. This clash in the popular "chronotope" was not entirely new, but the liberal left ignored it for a very long time. Of course, there was an undeniable class connotation to it. When leading liberals finally confronted working-class nostalgia and pessi-

mism – in the West only in the mid-2010s well after the financial crisis, in Eastern Europe much earlier – they resolutely rejected it and treated those who displayed it with utter moral disdain. Liberalism imagined itself as the natural owner of the future, the optimistic heir of the enlightenment, coaching modern societies with technocratic skill, wisdom, tolerance, and moderation toward an always beaming future of ever greater opportunity and freedom. The morality of liberalism under neoliberal conditions was fundamentally anchored in aspiration, not in doubt or skepticism (despite its Popperian credentials otherwise, one is tempted to say).

This fight for hegemonic dominance over the "chronotope" is an essential part of the contemporary political struggle. Rejecting the liberal respect for the always upward pointing "arrow of time" creates space for genuine and legitimate popular anger, based in a sense of betrayal. Anger, as against mere indignation, is a capacity which the liberal left has almost totally lost as Steven Sampson (2016) once noted. The radical right, in contrast, is authentically angry, cynical, and skeptical of the future, and advocates bunkering behind ritualized and weaponized borders (of identity, the nation, and civilization) in order to deflect the accumulating threats of the age. Their future is the lost national past, but then even better: a revitalized, purified, sovereign white Christian civilization of duty, order, and freedom.[3]

Those threats of the age, however, do not come just from this or that. They spring from the basic workings of twenty-first-century global capitalism *as such*. These *have* to be confronted. There *is* no escape. Unfortunately, since it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, as they say, we have also lost our capacity to grab that big elephant of capital by the horns, even when it is now all but stampeding through our crowded room. National publics are therefore compelled to address the big beast through so many separate technocratic issues: from mass migration (both in and out) and demographic decline, to geopolitical rivalries, mercantilist elbowing, runaway global heating, planetary exhaustion, loss of competitiveness, indebtedness, loss of equitable and effective governance, loss of a sense of belonging. Underneath these news items lies the profound existential loss that springs from the capitalist devaluation of the modes of living of the national working and middle classes and of the habitats they inhabit. Devaluation, if not yet in fact then at least by fearful anticipation. Angst is often more unlivable than the banal fact. Sovereignty, take back control, is the national-populist answer; immigrants and refugees, and those who protect them, the predictable scapegoats and immediate targets.

In the Global South, some of this Northern cocktail is present too. But sturdy economic growth in most Southern countries – often driven by exports to the Global North and China – produces a different picture here, as Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia argue (2023). While we acknowledge this difference, we

warn against the liberal assumption that economic growth comes necessarily *without* dispossession and devaluation of people, skills, and places. It is often the opposite, as underlined by the examples of CEE, South Africa, Turkey, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. Strong economic growth often combines with sharp inequalities, unevenness, and displacement. Many of the economic success stories of globalization are classic heartlands of the twenty-first-century counterrevolution.[4] To capture such contradictions requires a more anthropological type of class analysis than is commonly provided.

The counterrevolution in the Global South often seems driven by a new version of an old middle-class fear: a fear of the surrounding surplus populations knocking on the doors of their overcrowded and undersupplied cities. The surplus populations are demanding civil rights and using the legal openings of democratization. To this civil rights revolution is now added feminism. This fuels a patriarchal middle-class fear and disgust for subaltern informal economies and the urban spaces in which such economies are embedded, as well as of the liberal political alliances that protect such perceived disorder. Key word: "security." The Northern middle classes (or imagined middle classes) have their proverbial "fear of falling," while their Southern counterparts nurture a fear of physical security and public order. In the Global South, this sets up "criminality" as an even more powerful political symbol than in the North – where it is obviously very effective too. There are also the old military, masculine, and patriarchal reflexes against unruly subaltern and feminist demands, such as in Brazil, El Salvador, and the Philippines. Reactionary forces are targeting feminism, Indigenous movements, migrants, universities, social movements, and any spaces for liberal claim-making – as they are in the North, but here often without the romance around the "working class." In Latin America, sub-Sahara Africa, and the Philippines, there is also the old but renewed force for cultural hierarchy and neoliberal aspiration associated with "white religion," in particular supremacist evangelicalism, as in the USA. In India and the Muslim world, a neoliberalized Hinduism and Islam are used to mobilize popular support from the aspiring classes for big-man politics. In South Africa, it is paradoxically decolonial discourse that sometimes fulfills a similar function.

Russia and China, meanwhile, represent their own powerful Eurasian narratives of how, why, and when the initially expected convergence to liberal norms was thrown out. This began sometime between 2003 and 2013, earlier in Russia than in China, though 2012/13 were for both states important moments of autocratic acceleration. It started with the US-sponsored "color revolutions" for non-governmental organization (NGO)-led democratic regime change in the former Soviet Empire (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan; earlier, the Balkans) and the similarly branded, calamitous US wars of choice in the Balkans, Middle East, and West Asia of the early 2000s. All the while NATO was marching up to the Russian frontier. Then came the collapse of the Western financial system

in 2008–13 and worldwide popular unrest, which in Russia and China were repressed, respectively, by Putin and Xi.

After this decade of violent failure, the USA and the West could not but appear as the king without clothes for all to see: hypocritical, aggressive, war-mongering, and shockingly incompetent in its own capitalist game while lecturing others incessantly. The crisis of global capital in the wake of the financial crunch also prompted both China and Russia[5] to switch to a more domestically driven mode of accumulation. They understood the inevitability of that switch much faster than the EU, which soldiered on in self-defeating globalist austerity mode until 2020. The USA meanwhile pulled itself out of crisis via quantitative easing: unlimited amounts of central bank fiat money were thrown into the markets, fueling massive investment into the new Silicon Valley-based IT-economies of "technofeudalism," which by the end of this period all but dominated the global tech-economy (the "magnificent seven"). In the end, then, it was US hubris, with in the background Europe's self-defeating institutional attachment to the neoliberal utopia of 1989, that resolutely produced the slide into the new epoch of global fragmentation, rivalry, and hegemonic decline.

The new epoch was announced by three global developments. First, the political rise of the BRICS alliance (initially in 2005: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa; now circa 25 members) claiming to represent the Global South under Chinese leadership. Second, China's "Silk Road" program of global loans and infrastructure investment (starting 2013), now amounting to circa half of all loans to the Global South, even including European countries. And third, the beginning of fighting over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (2014) followed by the full Russian invasion (2022), on the one hand, and the US support for Israel to pursue full out war on Gaza and the Palestinians, including its signing up for genocide and population replacement, plus its aggressive domination of the skies over Iran, Iraq, and Syria, on the other. Global "warring" and fragmentation allowed for sub-hegemons to come to the fore and for new international dependencies to emerge outside and alongside the old Western-led ones. China offered a stunning example of supercharged sovereign state-capitalist development. While the West was paralyzed by crisis, it offered new forms of multilateral finance outside the sphere of Wall Street, the IMF, and the World Bank under an ideology of multipolarity, sovereignty, and decolonialism. China's "firewall" also allowed it to emerge as the single rival of the USA in the new IT economies and artificial intelligence. By the time we began writing this book, the liberal West was a decidedly shrunken place, despite the enormous daily noise coming from Trump's government and notwithstanding the 900 or so US military bases around the world (compounded by other military data).

This then is a counterrevolution that is as uneven and combined as world capitalism itself, playing itself out on local, regional, national, and world-encompassing scales (and vice versa) in a context of global fragmentation and

liberal hegemonic decline. It is inevitably confronted, too, once again uneven and combined, by residual left and liberal forces that sometimes succeed in aligning and holding it up in elections – though elections in place after place have become "unfree," "managed," "stolen," "gerrymandered," "influenced by disinformation," and in any case grossly manipulated by money in particular in the USA. Left-wing forces of purportedly universal emancipation have as yet failed to produce any convincing counter-mobilizing formulas. Despite some promising talk about "democratic and green socialism," the left as a whole seems stuck in the liberal register of moral indignation against the reactionary wave. It seems passionately attached to progressive neoliberalism, hooked on free trade, and convinced that adding layers of liberal rights and poststructural identities on to a capitalist order of property and accumulation it once was the fiercest critic of is the singular path to the future – even while it knows that global warming and the necessary global energy transition can never be managed that way. Since the left has abandoned the working classes and the working classes have abandoned the left – and both have logically abandoned anti-capitalist class thinking – the left does not yet know on which peoples-classes the coming left revolution, after the present reactionary backlash has failed, it should rely and what exactly is to be done if and when that revolution, which it also fears, suddenly happens. It has little vision yet of what might or should come next. And these absences are true locally as well as globally.

UP AND DOWN THE GLOBALIZATION TRAIN

Let us return to that important issue of local and global timing. We hear a lot about hegemonic decline. Gramsci's observations about the "interregnum," a time "when the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born and all sorts of morbid symptoms appear" (2011), have been parroted more widely in recent years than ever before, in particular by liberals who normally do not read Marxists. To many this dictum captures the political and existential kernel of our predicament. Gramsci's concept, however, was meant to speak to the national level. The authoritarian (but electoral) Bonapartism that he analyzed, following Marx, as an historical instance of such an interregnum was based on the experience of France after the revolution of 1848, a revolution both thwarted in its radical democratic content but incorporated in its bourgeois-legal ones. The rise of fascism in Italy, associated with Gramsci's and Marx's notion of Caesarism, was another instance (see Antonini 2020). It makes sense to think of the age of counterrevolution in analogy to the rise of Bonapartism and Caesarism. For both Marx and Gramsci, the shifting balance of class forces was fundamental to that, a shift expressed in the manifest slide from "war of position" to "war of maneuver," as left- and right-wing movements begin to clash openly. The reactionary backlash is a contemporary instance.

However, for us to understand what is happening in the early twenty-first century and forge a realistic sense of what we are confronted with – not just a set of national backlashes as one damned thing after another happening here and there but rather a globally systemic counterrevolution (albeit uneven and combined) – we need to link these Gramscian insights to notions of global cycles of accumulation and their contradictions, cycles presided over by a "global" hegemon, notions that we owe perhaps most to Giovanni Arrighi's (2010) reworking of Fernand Braudel.

The coming of the second Trump government in the USA makes this transparent even for those whose thinking is liable to get stuck at nation-state level – which is to say, for most liberals, conservatives, and reactionaries: The US-centered hegemonic cycle of neoliberal globalism (1990–2025, or 2015?) is by broad agreement now over or nearing its end, as Arrighi analyzed.[6] That is why the talk of multipolarity comes easily and naturally.

As elsewhere, the Trump counterrevolution could not have succeeded if parts of domestic US capital (finance, oil and gas, the parts of Silicon Valley that are not dependent on globalized mass manufacturing) had not supported it with an eye on their expanded reproduction. Trump himself of course is a typical domestic rentier capitalist of all trades, in particular, in real estate and entertainment, and now in crypto and social media. Roughly the same type of domestically oriented capital in construction, defense, and extractivism has been supporting Modi's India, Erdoğan's Turkey, Putin's Russia, Argentina, Hungary, Poland, even Brexit Britain. Moreover, the accelerating competition for global power connoted by "multipolarity," plus the example of China's state capitalism, is increasingly leading for calls on the state to step in on behalf of national bourgeoisies, national interests and national security, as well as control over value chains, privileging "resilience" over short-term competitiveness.

However, without a nostalgic populist undertow seeking to Make America Great Again (MAGA) and the type of pro-worker ethno-nationalist rhetoric that combines some of the old sentiments of the welfare state left with a hatred for the liberalism and cosmopolitan identity politics of the educated middle classes, appealing to the support of the devalued and declassed (former) working classes, who might as well think about themselves as deserving middle classes (Kalb 2023), Trump would never have won the elections or be able to dominate the Republican Party to the extraordinary extent that he does now.

This is, then, a cross-class alliance, but a deeply contradictory one. In the first months of 2025, it first appeared that the capitalist segment in the Trump government was winning out over MAGA populism. A fierce austerity and techno-neoliberal state-downsizing agenda under the leadership of Elon Musk's extra-legal Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) – note the linguistic affinity with *il Duce* (Mussolini) and the Venetian *Doge*. The assault on "illegal" immigrants, universities, the cultural sector, international develop-

ment cooperation and DEI ("diversity, equity, inclusion") rules in institutions took off immediately. Authoritarian neoliberalism combined with populist culture war appeared as the dominant threads.

By April 2025, however, Trump and his inner economic circle (Peter Navarro, Stephen Miran) began facing up to "cosmopolitan" capital. Seeking to "liberate" the USA from the rules-based liberal world order of free trade that allows others to "steal from America," while doing away with some of the "expensive" aspects of dollar dominance in the global system that come from being a hegemon, Trump began trying to reverse "American carnage" and make US-based manufacturing great again, all to the satisfaction of MAGA. On "Liberation Day" (April 3, 2025), shape-shifting tariffs of between 50 and 150 percent on imported goods, in fact amounting to embargoes, were imposed for national security reasons, then again partly and temporarily withdrawn when the stock market abruptly declined and US capital panicked, only to come back in less grotesque proportions in the summer, leaving the US economy behind a tariff wall of over 20 percent that had not been seen since the 1880s. Trump's "big beautiful budget" of May 2025, however, by taking welfare unashamedly away from the poor and those on low incomes and transferring the exact same amount to the 10 percent most wealthy tax payers, was an affront to MAGA. Citing national security, that budget also massively stepped up military, paramilitary, and policing expenses, injecting $180 billion in policing and incarcerating immigrants. Significantly, in all its nationalist grandeur, the bill rejected any austerity and had no qualms in further driving up the US state debt, which was already among the highest in the Western world (Wolf 2025). Reactionary Caesarism may work in tandem with segments of Big Capital but it is not going to adhere to the obvious dictates of the capitalist law of value, as also the Trumpian attack on the independence of the Fed (the US central bank) underlines.

The tariffs hit Chinese and Southeast Asian imports particularly hard (as well as those from the EU), manufacturing nations that were "stealing from us." In other words, they hit precisely at those global working classes whose exploitation in manufacturing since the 1970s had become crucial for the expansion of global chains of value. Such chains ultimately come together in dollar-denominated streams of circulating capitalist surplus value; exactly the value that feeds the higher reaches of the US bourgeoisie but destroys blue-collar manufacturing in the USA. This is *the* deep class contradiction underlying MAGA. The targeted nations were also precisely the exporting locations where, in World Bank speak, "the poor" had been ascending out of poverty and into "the middle classes" on a mass scale since the 1990s (even though these were far more highly exploited than the concept of "middle class" suggests). These were *the* success stories of neoliberal development in the Global South. Many were in fact non-liberal "political capitalisms," state led as much as market led, with the state seriously involved in keeping labor down and national capital and the

domestic bourgeoisie and property-owning middle classes up – giving the lie to the IMF's and World Bank's persistent advertising for neoliberal economics to "end poverty." The two most important of these states were run by Communist Parties in China and Vietnam.

While Trump's ideas are as contradictory as his cross-class alliance, he remains a con-man enjoying the quick win amid public consternation or applause probably more than the long-term bureaucratic trench warfare that will be required to bring manufacturing back to the US heartland, if that is possible at all. The wish for a cheaper dollar also does not go together with the aggressively stated desire to sustain the dollar's status as the world reserve currency and "the exorbitant privileges" that come with it, both essential elements of what Peter Gowan once called the Washington-Wall Street regime (Gowan 1999). Similarly for the attack on the independence of the Fed and the idea, coming out of Trump's inner circle, that the USA would for all practical purposes default on its state debt – for example, by forcibly converting it into perpetual bonds. While Trump and his allies are desperate to retain and augment the trappings of US global financial and military dominance, it is indisputable that the US structural "twin deficits" are unsustainable in the long term – that is, the trade deficit and the fiscal deficit, which underlie its fast rising state debt (soon predicted to be 130 percent of GDP, the level last reached at the end of the Second World War). All this is inevitably pushing itself onto the agenda. And it will do so even more urgently if the Republican Party continues to claim radical limits on the tax intake from the rich and the corporations, as it has done for half a century now (fiscal income from the tariffs is apparently supposed to compensate for that).

In a cool response to the Trump tariffs of "Liberation Day," China's Communist Party pointed out that "rather than being cheated, the US had been living beyond its means, taking a free ride on the globalization train" (Davidson 2025). This is not the complete story but not untrue. In the eyes of the West, China was the "freeloader," keeping all those "market distorting" mechanisms in place and "stealing the property rights" over Western technology. "Stop the steal" as Trumped quipped. But no one could deny that Chinese workers, from blue-collar manufacturing employees to engineers, had been working extremely hard for decades, among others for US capital, and that after China's "age of humiliations" they did have a right to become a developed nation too. Shared narratives and non-zero-sum thinking had gone out of the window. From economic competition the fight was now about global status, deservingness, national sovereignty, imperial rights, and the rules of the game.

Running the twin deficits is an "exorbitant privilege" that comes with being a hegemon over the world system, as it was with the UK in the early twentieth century. But this seems to be reaching saturation point. The threat is expressed in the notion of "American carnage," now not just pointing to lost manufac-

turing in the heartland but to the deeper shared fears of the beneficial US and Western bourgeoisies for a rising China – seen in the bipartisan position against China, shared largely by the EU.

Whether 2025 will be a definite inflection point of these contradictions or only a significant moment in a longer drawn-out process of acceleration does not matter. The ghost is out of the bottle and he is there for everyone to hear and see, just like the king without clothes in the face of lost Middle Eastern wars and financial collapse in an earlier phase – hence, perhaps, Trump's desire to pose and act openly as a monarch (as well as a pope and a central banker). Now, not just Russia and China but all the rest of the world notices this and is likely to draw conclusions, reluctantly or not, and this includes other reactionary Bonapartist/Caesarist rulers such as Orbán, Erdoğan, and Modi. As a consequence, trust in capitalist value as we used to know it is both evaporating and at the same time accelerating its speculative and futurist thrust – seen in "crypto," "general artificial intelligence," and "Mars." Routine expectations embodied in the value of the dollar, capital flows toward the USA, the monetary value of assets everywhere, and assumptions about the form and operation of global value chains, the nature and location of globalized labor – in fact the very value and values of living labor – are likely to shift fundamentally again. This includes all the social and international relationships through which such value and values are realized.[7] Most vulnerable are all the liberal and internationalist values, however hypocrital, that trumped an earlier epoch of liberal globalization. This is what the interregnum signifies.

The contradictions of the US-led global system, visible already in the early 2000s, have been fast accelerating in the 2010s and 2020s – this is what underlies the global reactionary backlash. This is also visible in the rise of regional sub-hegemons and their embrace of the seemingly democratic but not less contradictory claim for a "multipolar" system. Those contradictions are now openly destroying the older edifice from within, domestically and internationally. The ramifications are unpredictable throughout. The increasingly nervous and fast diminishing US hegemon, used to enjoying a "free ride on the globalization train," is not sure whether its moment has definitely passed or maybe not entirely yet; and the same uncertainty reigns for the sub-hegemons. The departing hegemon hesitates whether to negotiate or take a flight forward, flex the muscles, and show a flash of super power – the Department of Defense was renamed the War Department in August 2025. Or perhaps better to voluntarily shoot oneself in the foot and retreat into a secure regional sphere of influence (where he can happily bully his smaller neighbors, such as Venezuela, Mexico, Canada, Denmark's Greenland)? Its sovereignty should be deployed to chip away, and preferably openly humiliate, the sovereignty of others. Declining historical hegemons have never gone quietly and have never behaved according to the "civilized rules" they previously proclaimed valid for all. Mussolini-like

theatrics of energetic masculinity fed by a restless manosphere and the regular staging of the physical proximity between Trump and the tattooed heavies of the United Fighting Championships are entirely appropriate to the situation.

To be emphasized: While the smoke and fire of the culture war and the cruel show of autocratic executive force against rights and (international) legality – including basics such as *habeas corpus* – will inevitably continue to burn up a lot of public energy, the underlying issue of class balances, capital and accumulation, remain fundamental for our understanding. They should be so too in the strategic thinking of the left. After a generation of neoliberal globalized economics, planetary value chains, unlimited circulation of speculative capital, structural public austerity (except for the upper middle classes), and escalating geopolitical and environmental crises, will societies, or rather *planetary human society*, collectively find a way forward to democratically controlled "green" accumulation, equality, redistribution, and public ownership over the key conditions of the production and reproduction of life? Can we design new forms of sustainable and interesting urban life for the many everywhere? A left populist ecological socialism? Or will the ongoing *counterrevolution within and against that earlier capitalist counterrevolution* dump all of that as "woke" rubbish in the bin of history and consolidate an increasingly brutal, illiberal, ethno-nationalist statist project – fascist or merely reactionary – erratically aligned with alternating segments of the ruling classes and the upper middle layers, assembled under a banner of national security, borders, fear and anger, while throwing bread, circuses, and other symbolic satisfactions – "red meat" – to the repressed, exploited, and devalued masses domestically, while being ready to mete out punishments and wage war internationally?

THE CHAPTERS

This book discusses key aspects of this rolling backlash and traces them through a worldwide series of case studies. It does so in the form of an open but sustained conversation. In the first chapter, Walden Bello discusses the historical concept of fascism and its significance for the global present. Our authors respond to Bello's chapter by reflecting on the contextual dynamics of counterrevolution in places such as the USA, the Netherlands, Hungary, India, Argentina, Ukraine, Russia, South Africa, Germany, and France. Our accounts seek to be somewhat holistic case studies, refusing to reduce our narratives to "this factor or that factor" lifted out of context. In particular, we seek to interrogate the dialectical unfolding in time of two key relations: the relations of reactionary political developments with class inequalities; and the relations between such inequalities and the politics of victimization of self and others, nostalgia, and the construction of "culturally alien" enemies of the people, from "cosmopolitan liberal elites" and the "professional managerial class" to

minorities, immigrants, and "surplus populations," all projected as fundamental political enemies of the happiness and interests of racial, ethno-national or ethno-religious majority populations. In short, we look at the interwoven contextual unfolding of class inequalities and counterrevolutionary politics over time. We look at nation-states that occupy definite and differing positions in the global capitalist order, positions that for all of these states have increasingly become both profitable for certain classes and threatening for others, sometimes both simultaneously. We discuss popular politics and elite politics and show the articulation of illiberal processes with global capitalism in its current stage – financialized, tech-driven, based on global divisions of labor and widespread value chains, increasingly (and violently) mercantilist. The chapters are, after Bello's opening, ordered according to a rough chronological order based on when the counterrevolution began announcing itself. In that sense, too, the chapters accumulate: as time passes and illiberal reaction becomes a new normality, the global order as a whole begins to tune into the counterrevolution, with the last two chapters on the USA giving the last blow to a long-term worldwide process.

In "What Is Fascism, and Why We Should Be Really, Really Worried about Fascists," Walden Bello notes that when far-right personalities and movements started popping up during the last two decades, there was in some quarters a strong hesitation to use the "f" word to describe them. With his experience in Chile, the Philippines, and other countries, he himself felt no such qualms. In this chapter, he analyzes in particular the Philippines under President Duterte. A movement or a person must be regarded as fascist, Bello claims, when they fuse the following five features: (1) they show a disdain or hatred for democratic and progressive principles and procedures; (2) they tolerate or promote violence; (3) they have a heated mass base that supports their anti-democratic thinking and behavior; (4) they scapegoat and support the persecution of certain social groups; and (5) they are led by a charismatic individual who exhibits and normalizes all of the above. How they weld these five features together accounts for their uniqueness as fascist leader and movement.

In "Autocracy and Resistance in India," Svati Shah argues against the misconception that what she calls autocratic counterrevolution in the Global South is somehow explicable by ethno-nationalism alone, as liberal writing sometimes seems to suggest. Shah argues that the gradual autocratization of the Federal State of India under Modi is an avowedly late capitalist project that seeks to monopolize power with the help of ethno-nationalism, casteism, and anti-Muslim sentiment. Shah uses the concept of caste capitalism to show how the biopolitical regulation of sexuality is deeply imbricated within a Hindu nationalist project that, as elsewhere, has facilitated and entailed the consolidation of oligarchic economic power among a state supported, and state supporting, ruling class here based primarily in domestic extractive capitalism. Shah shows

how violence against Muslims and the assertion of casteism is part of globally legible right-wing instantiations of nationalism, normative social reproduction, as well as big-scale crony capitalism. Shah seeks to complicate approaches that focus solely on ethnic or interreligious "cultural" conflict, which, Shah argues, come from an orientalist vision of Eastern despotism and miss the big forest of capital lurking in the background for the numerous foregrounded and therefore eye-catching trees of ethno-nationalism.

In "South Africa's Postcolonial Right Wing: Authoritarian Populism as Anti-Liberal 'Revolutionary Politics,'" Christi van der Westhuizen emphasizes that its 1996 Constitution offers an unusually strong combination of liberal-democratic and socio-economic rights, including the possibility of expropriating land in the public interest. However, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) simultaneously adopted a neoliberal macroeconomic framework (1994) that allowed pervasive structural poverty to deepen fast, leaving South Africa with the world's highest socio-economic inequality globally as measured by the Gini coefficient. Of course, these deepening socio-economic inequalities are racial. The ANC governments failed to address the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, in particular the territorially and racially segregated legacy of the townships. In response, South Africans increasingly withdrew from elections. The voting percentage dropped to 37 percent in the 2024 national election. After ruling without interruption for 30 years, the ANC plummeted to 40 percent, and is now actively supported only by some 15 percent of the population. In one of the most protest intensive countries in the world, these conditions led to a peculiar type of populism personified by President Jacob Zuma. Credited with bringing together an ethno-populist coalition of marginalized rural constituencies with disaffected urban workers, his nine years as president are now mostly associated with blatant state capture by insider groups and grand-scale economic predation. After his removal, Zuma staged a return in 2024 with a new party that openly embraced anti-constitutionalism. He lost the election but embarked upon a Trump-like campaign alleging that the election had been "stolen." Westhuizen explores the special features of this authoritarian populism, coming in the form of a nativist nationalism driven by the manipulation of identarian discourse amid social polarization – including ethnicist, Afrophobic, and heteropatriarchal elements – to target democratic institutions for paralysis and dismantlement. Uniquely, the postcolonial African right-wing legitimizes its actions by invoking the ANC's revolutionary anti-colonial struggle. Here, counterrevolution comes in the paradoxical mantle of democratic anti-colonial revolution.

In "Unraveling Liberalisms: Hungarian Insights for America and Elsewhere," Gábor Scheiring and Ábel Csathó locate the roots of illiberalism in Hungary and East-Central Europe more broadly in the "double devaluation" (Kalb 2023, 2025) of working and lower middle classes in the provinces. They use their

precise insights into the by now classic Hungarian case of democratic backsliding to offer a more general view of the deeper dynamics behind Trumpism in the USA. Detailed quantitative evidence on the role of long-term socio-economic shocks allows them to highlight the failure of left-liberalism to shelter people from those shocks. This was the pivotal factor behind the illiberal breakthrough in Hungary after 2008. A dual shock of local deindustrialization and skyrocketing (male) death rates in the affected towns and regions planted the seeds of deep working-class anger with the "stolen" outcomes of the 1989 liberal "refolution." Over time, the authors argue, the persistent denial and neglect (in Hungary, CEE, and the USA) of the physical and mental suffering of these workers allowed an ever more reactionary right to channel their resentment into an illiberal nationalist counterrevolution. In 2014, now all but dominating parliament, that counterrevolution rewrote the exemplary liberal constitution of 1992 into an illiberal framework for a "Hungarian worker state" – note both the rhetorical nostalgia for socialism and the perversion of that into a capitalist workfare state deploying "slave laws" on behalf of local foreign capital investments – that continues to rule the country in 2025.

Politics in Western Europe did not polarize as radically as in the postsocialist East, but many provincial areas in the West often exhibited similar tendencies of public and private disinvestment, abandonment, impoverishment, and structural outmigration – in short, roundabout devaluation. In "Us First: Counterrevolutionary Consciousness in the French Working Class," Benoit Coquard keeps our focus on deindustrializing and depopulating regions. France, in fact, suffered far more deindustrialization than the USA or Italy, and the effects were strongly localized in areas of the North. Coquard writes that for rural French working-class people "us first" has become a common expression in everyday life, justifying life strategies, relations toward others, and, more broadly, political behavior. It reflects a sentiment of belonging and a worldview that is structured around selective solidarity for friends and kin and of competition with the rest, as Coquard explains. He describes how social ties are reconfigured in a context where stable working-class life trajectories have gradually fallen apart. Local opinion leaders – small business owners, self-employed workers – play a prominent part in these social dynamics by promoting meritocratic narratives that underline their capacity to labor and their moral deservingness, justifying social hierarchies. This moral economy of deservingness, hierarchy, and status has ultimately served to undergird the consistent rise of the radical right in many of these areas.

Vladimir Putin has, in the third decade of his rule, become something of a preeminent symbol of the counterrevolution, writes Jeremy Morris in "Russia's Vanguard Authoritarian Neoliberal System." Over time, and accelerating after 2013, Putinism evolved into presenting Russia as the ultimate defender of the Judeo-Christian tradition that Western Europe and the USA had purportedly

abandoned. Resentment in Russia is more than just about the loss of empire and prestige after 1991. It also contains a heady mix of anti-globalism, social populism, and nostalgia: the idea that only under the leadership of the ruling party, "United Russia," can the real and imagined social guarantees of the 1970s USSR be restored. In reality there are few concessions to genuine social populism beyond rhetoric. Russia is in fact the posterchild for full-blown authoritarian neoliberalism. The neoconservative and neo-traditionalist discourse emanating from the center is intended to distract and displace opposition within the country from deteriorating living standards and a loss of social purpose. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the authoritarian neoliberalism we see in Russia is most of all a *vanguard* movement. While it borrows methods like post-truth from American politics, and biopolitical digitized control from China, it is actively reexported and copied even unconsciously by wanna-be authoritarians in the West. Morris argues that just as forms of repression diffuse from there, so too do potential forms of resistance.

Ukraine appears in the media and in its current self-understanding as a liberal and pro-Western exception to right-wing nationalist dominance emerging elsewhere in the region. Volodymyr Ishchenko and Don Kalb argue against this superficial impression in "Eastern European Reactionary Nationalism: A Ukrainian Exception?" Ukraine, of course, is not an exception to the classed processes of "double devaluation." The supposedly "pro-Russian" camp in Ukraine – a deeply problematic label in itself, a product of war and civil war – was capable of winning electoral majorities up until the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbass in 2014. Even until 2021, the Opposition Platform "For Life" – the biggest supposedly "pro-Russian" party – retained a strong position in Ukrainian politics in particular in southern and eastern Ukraine. It was second in the 2019 national elections, which were won by the political upstart Volodymyr Zelensky, who campaigned for peace with Russia but was prevented from doing so by Ukrainian anti-Russian nationalists. The chapter shows that the apparent dominance of pro-European liberalism in Ukraine is explained by the war itself and by the relative power of class coalitions vis-à-vis each other in the 2010s. An alliance between pro-Western professional middle classes in the big cities and violently anti-Russian (more than pro-Western) neo-nationalist groups turned out to be superior on the streets, in the media, and during elections.

Ewald Engelen's chapter, "Which Fascism, Whose Counterrevolution? Unpacking the Current Political Conjuncture from the Netherlands," shifts the perspective to a country that by all means has been a core liberal country for centuries, in some ways "the original" of the historical bourgeois revolution. Engelen engages with Bello's embrace of the fascism concept and reflects upon the nature of the global counterrevolution more generally. He starts from the global popular backlash against the failure of the neoliberal marketization of

everything to make good on its own trickle-down narrative, noting that the forces of universal emancipation, the left, do not seem to profit from this. He doubts whether it makes sense to frame the backlash as fascist. Distinguishing between the Global South and the Global North is key here, Engelen argues. While the Global South after 1989 has seen reactionary responses to the third wave of democracy and the expansion of rights that sometimes deserve the label "fascist," as Walden Bello argues, the story in the Global North is significantly different (see also above). Engelen argues that it doesn't help the left to frame nationalist counterrevolution in the Global North as fascist. Turning his gaze to the Netherlands, he shows that the electoral revolt is about the failures and in particular the spatial inequalities of technocratic neoliberalism more than about rights as such. Undergirded by a long-run alliance of the center right and the center left, the "extreme center" now tries to stymie critical discussion of their abject policy performance by evoking an illusory fascism scare.

In "Turning Points and Undertows: German Authoritarianism and History's Long Reach," Petra Rethmann has produced the most intimate set of reflections on the global counterrevolution offered in this book. She does so by deploying an ethnographic magnifying glass on one of those key structures of feeling that regularly flow into the capacities of the radical right: wounded ethno-national feelings. In relating the case of Mr. K., a self-identified Russian-German man whose biography stretches from Soviet Kazakhstan to the German Federal Republic – she argues that "nation" marks not just a localized ritual pattern of life but a politically paradigmatic groove that carries national affects from one political entity to another and across borders. Focusing on the German national context and the German world, she tries to illuminate from within how economic and social registers – disappointment, betrayal, innocence, and resentment amid profound and durable poverty – that are habitually associated with right-wing nationalism are deeply lived, never just abstract, and how they help to explain the vindictive kind of politics of deservingness in the context of social fracturing that Cocquard describes for the French periphery.

With the presidential win of Javier Milei, Argentina has recently seen an unexpected electoral shift to a libertarian radical right. Julia Soul, in "'Learning the Value of Things': Why Working People Consent to the Far-Right Government in Argentina," develops a nuanced assessment of working people's endorsement of far-right libertarian rhetoric and policies in the classic country of Peronism. She describes the ebbs and flows of far-right sensibilities amid the shifting dynamics of working lives during two historical contexts of profound change: the steelworkers' experience of the "privatization crisis" that preceded the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony between 1989 and 1990, and agro-industrial workers in the oilseed industry facing far-right government interventions in the present. She explores what Raymond Williams called the common "structure of feeling" in these working-class communities, revealing the possibilities

of popular consent toward the radical right, and their readiness for fundamental changes as an older Peronist accumulation model seemed all but exhausted. But those structures of feeling also define the limits to that consent, which she suggests have to do with duration and fairness.

At this moment of writing it almost seems as if the national episodes of counterrevolution analyzed in this book could not but teleologically add up to the second Trump victory in the 2024 US presidential elections. A small victory in terms of the popular vote – 2 percentage points difference, mainly explained by non-voting on the Democratic side, that is, "de-alignment" rather than "re-alignment" (see Karp 2024) – it underlines that counterrevolutionary events are not going to be a passing political surface phenomenon but seem deeply anchored in the uneven contradictions of US-led global capitalism at this point in its evolution. With the nature of US power and the US-focused system at stake, Trump II might well turn out to be an exceptionally consequential moment in the global backlash, one that reactionaries elsewhere are not necessarily going to appreciate, export dependent that many of them are. We conclude our itinerary with two chapters on the USA.

Marc Edelman's "Fascism USA: Class and Identity Politics in the Age of Trump" begins with historical reflections on growing up in the shadow of fascism, in response to Bello. Trump's triumph represents for Edelman the consolidation of an oligarchical authoritarian project, emanating from an always already potentially "imperial US presidency," driven by the executive, and backed by a multi-class and – surprisingly, for some – multi-racial electorate. It portends intensified state and freelance attacks on immigrants and immigrant students, labor unions, women, LGBTQ+ people, journalists, "political enemies," and others that have crossed the hairs of the MAGA movement, including the rights and legalities that used to protect them. Edelman expects that it will institutionalize authoritarian governance in ways that will be difficult to undo. Edelman challenges both the "middle-class narrative" and the "working-class narrative" that are common identarian tropes in US political discourse, and sees a lot of "declassing" going on amid pervasive social and territorial processes of double devaluation (Kalb 2023, 2025). The chapter ends by wondering, like Engelen, but on other grounds, whether the language of fascism that the left has deployed to warn against a Trump win still has any resonance in what Edelman calls the historically amnesiac atmosphere of today's USA. Do people actually care?

In "The Trumpist Movement: A Class-Driven Counterrevolution against Those Who Would Strand the Assets of Capital?" Don Nonini contends that the Trumpist MAGA movement is not only an insurgent right-wing populist movement from below but also an alliance with segments of the US capitalist class, mainly those located in fossil fuels, information platforms, and finance; an unwieldy alliance mediated by Trump and his closest allies. What Walden

Bello (2019) calls a "class-based counterrevolution" is here described as a deeply contradictory class alliance of "the people" with particular types of Big Capital. Since the 1980s, fossil fuel and finance capitalists have come together in a revanchist class project against the US working-class and social movements. Since the 2010s, they have been joined by big Silicon Valley information platform capitalists, often with explicit radical right-wing, often "high IQ"-supremacist "civilizational" visions, such as Peter Thiel and Elon Musk. Each of these fractions of the US capitalist class stands to benefit from their alliance with MAGA. These three fractions of capital have come together with Trump and MAGA to attack progressive movements, in particular, the environmental movement, whose militancy against fossil fuel extraction threatens fossil capital's very basis of accumulation by promoting the adoption of renewable energy, and to regulate and strand fossil assets.

Walden Bello points out in his opening chapter that the old Marxist claim that Big Capital was the ultimate driver behind the fascist counterrevolution of 1930s Germany tended to overlook that capital would be made subordinate to the plans of the *Führer* and be driven into violent self-destruction. The same was true for the victimized "German people," for whose devalued lives the *Führer* was going to fight in the first place. Whatever the global backlash will do with the power it is forging rhetorically in the name of the victimized classes and on behalf of a muscular national capitalism that should be made great again, it is surely taking us all on a dangerous and rocky ride. As the planetary emergency of global warming and polycrisis is speeding up, humanity's position looks arguably worse than in 1914. A weak contemporary left, which was actually strong in 1914 but willingly and fatally threw in the towel, urgently needs new practices and new ideas. Instead of the *bienpensant* liberalism, pro-capitalist social democracy, and anarcho-ethical identarian communitarianism of the 2010s, we need, to speak with Perry Anderson, new shocking ideas that can truly shake the world (2025).

NOTES

1. See for interventions of the present editors at the time Bello (2004, 2025), Kalb (2002, 2005), and Kalb et al. (2000).
2. For Vance utterance, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=o98PoolWZxE&t=274s, accessed June 15, 2025. Musk's original statement has disappeared but there is a lot of commentary on his remark on the internet. He has an obsession with "civilizational collapse," with which he means "white capitalist civilization."
3. Note the inspirational popularity among key thinkers of the radical right of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, from Giorgia Meloni in Italy to Peter Thiel in the USA.
4. The simultaneity of economic growth and illiberalism allows liberal pundits such as Ivan Krastev to argue against all evidence that grievances about inequality and stagnation are irrelevant for the ascent of illiberalism (Krastev and Holmes 2019).

5. Alexander Etkind (2023) argues that the Western embrace of a "green transition" in the 2010s made it clear to Putin that there would be no place for carbon-exporting Russia. Putin explicitly noted at some point, "Why would we be interested in a world that has no place for Russia?" Warmaking for Putin was a convenient mechanism to counter the mass urban resistance against his third presidency in 2012/13 and to generate patriotism while exploring new modes of domestically driven accumulation in a context where the global engine of growth was not working anymore (see also Morris 2025).
6. We can consider the US "globalist cycle" to run from 1973 to 2025. The US-led Fordist/national/developmentalist/Keynesian cycle (1947–73) was of course also profoundly international, but not globalist. The contemporary super commentator on public affairs and author of the Chartbook Newsletter, the economic historian Adam Tooze, is no fan of the interregnum concept. He seems to think that the concept suggests historical structural repetition whereas he sees on the contrary a lot of contingency in the management of global affairs in the current conjuncture. But that is precisely the point about the interregnum concept: lots of contingency, structures are dying. That is not the same though as the establishment of a new hegemony. Arrighi, of course, thought that any new hegemonic structure for global accumulation should rest in a cooperative framework between the USA and China. There is also a lot of confusion about when the interregnum started and when/how it ends. Some authors imagine Trump is the end of the interregnum. Others think the interregnum starts with him. These authors would be well advised to delink the interregnum from this or that event at a national level: the global interregnum started in 2003–08 and is ongoing and deepening; it is linked to the decline of US hegemony over the global system of capitalist accumulation. I suspect Giovanni Arrighi would agree with that.
7. To give a sense of what the "free ride on the globalization train" means: In the 2020s , 80 percent of circulating global capital flowed annually into the US markets, massively supporting the value of the dollar despite the twin deficits and of US corporations, who thus enjoyed globally subsidized access to cheap investment capital. Since 2000 (China in WTO = 2002), US multinationals have reversed their profit squeeze of the 1970s–1990s, and doubled their margins to an annual average of 13 percent. They generally generated more than 40 percent of their sales revenue abroad and paid their workers overseas on average 40 percent of what they pay their staff at home (Sharma 2025). Sharma's data do not include the contribution to profits of foreign labor exploitation but it is hard to imagine that there would be any profits at all. If Apple iPhones were largely produced in the USA, their price would be 350 percent higher, Apple suggests (Milmo and Bannock 2025). While Nike has only 4000 workers in the USA, it exploits more than a million in China and Southeast Asia.

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What Is Fascism, and Why We Should Be Really, Really Worried about Fascists

Walden Bello

INTRODUCTION

Compared to his departure from power in January 2021, Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025 was relatively peaceful. His Make America Great Again (MAGA) base had given him more votes in the November 24 presidential race than in 2020, while his opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, lost millions of votes that had gone to Joe Biden in that earlier election. His legitimacy was not questioned by the losers, who sat stony-faced as he ripped their policies to shreds in his inaugural speech at the US Capitol on January 20, 2025.

That was the calm before the storm.

Just hours after his inauguration on January 20, 2025, Trump signed multiple executive orders, the most significant of which were his pardoning some 1600 supporters that had participated in the January 6, 2021 storming of Congress; the elimination of "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) programs in the federal government; and the mass firing of thousands of government employees. Washington was in virtual chaos as his "Government Efficiency Czar" Elon Musk went into government agencies demanding to see their records and books and, in one case, shut down a whole organization, the Agency for International Development founded by President John F. Kennedy nearly 65 years ago.

Trump's critics said some of his moves were downright illegal, though there were those who doubted if court orders to stop his moves would be respected by his minions. A US senator, Chris Murphy from Connecticut, expressed the fear of many in the beleaguered Democratic Party opposition that there would be no presidential elections in 2028 (Karni 2025). A *New York Times* columnist, Bret Stephens, writing about the threat of the far right coming to power in Germany, could very well have been thinking about something that had already occurred in his own country, when he quoted Hitler's propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels: "We enter the Reichstag to arm ourselves with democracy's weapons … If democracy is foolish enough to give us free railway passes and salaries, that is its problem. It does not concern us. Any way of bringing about the revolution is fine by us" (Stephens 2025).

The original aim of this chapter, which was written before the US elections, was to illuminate various dimensions of fascism, and Donald Trump prior to his new term in office was a central figure in one of my arguments, that a "far-rightist is a fascist who has not yet seized power, for it is only once they are in power that fascists fully reveal their political propensities." Given his behavior in his first term, especially his endorsement of the January 6 insurrection to keep him in power, Trump, I contended, was a fascist. But it is definitely a fair question to ask if Trump in his reincarnation as Trump II will conform to that definition. Here, I can only repeat the same answer that Zhou En Lai gave when Henry Kissinger asked him about the impact of the French Revolution: "It's too early to say." In the meantime, where this chapter takes on Donald Trump, it will be in his first incarnation, as Trump I.

HOW I BECAME INTERESTED IN FASCISM

This chapter is written not as an academic analysis but as a reflection in the first person of someone who has engaged the far right both theoretically and politically.

My interest in fascism started when I went to Chile in 1972 to do field research during the presidency of Salvador Allende, which was cut short by a military coup on September 11, 1973. I arrived in the capital, Santiago, in the midst of the Chilean winter, greeted by tear gas and skirmishes of opposing political groups in the aftermath of a demonstration. Hauling two suitcases, I made it with great difficulty from the bus depot to the historic Hotel Claridge.

I had gone to Chile to study how the left was organizing people in the shantytowns or *callampas* for the socialist revolution that the Popular Unity government had initiated. A few weeks in Santiago disabused me of the impression of a revolutionary momentum that I had gathered reading about events in Chile in left-wing publications in the USA. People on the left were constantly being mobilized for marches and rallies in the center of Santiago, and increasingly, the reason for this was to counter the demonstrations mounted by the right. My friends brought me to these events, where there were an increasing number of skirmishes with right-wing thugs.

I noticed a certain defensiveness among participants in these mobilizations and a reluctance to be caught alone when leaving them, for fear of being harassed or worse by roaming bands of rightists. The revolution, it dawned on me, was on the defensive, and the right was beginning to take command of the streets. Twice I was nearly beaten up because I made the stupid mistake of observing right-wing demonstrations with *El Siglo*, the Communist Party newspaper, tucked prominently under my arm. Stopped by some Christian Democratic youth partisans, I said I was a Princeton University graduate student doing research on Chilean politics. They sneered and told me I was one of Allende's

"thugs" imported from Cuba. I could understand if they thought I was being provocative, with *El Siglo* tucked under my arm. Thankfully, the sudden arrival of a Mexican friend saved me from a beating. On the other occasion, my fleet feet did the job.

When I looked at the faces of the predominantly white right-wing crowds, many of them blond-haired, I imagined the same enraged faces at the fascist and Nazi demonstrations that took control of the streets in Italy and Germany. These were people who looked with disdain at what they called the *rotos*, or "broken ones," that filled the left-wing demonstrations, people who were darker, many of them clearly of Indigenous extraction.[1]

My experience in Chile did two things to me. First, it gave me an abiding academic fascination with counterrevolutionary movements. Second, it turned me into a lifelong activist with a deep loathing for the far right and instilled a commitment to fight authoritarianism and the far right. In many ways, these contradictory drives have determined my personal, political, and academic trajectories.

IS IT FASCISM?

Fast forward to the present. When far-right personalities and movements started popping up during the last two decades, there was, in some quarters, strong hesitation to use the "f" word to describe them (in particular, see Chapter 8 by Ewald Engelen in this volume). With my experience in Chile, the Philippines, and other countries behind me, I had no such qualms. This apparently was the reason I was invited by the famous Cambridge Union for a debate on the topic "This House Believes That We Are Witnessing a Global Fascist Resurgence" on April 29, 2021, where I would speak for the affirmative. Of course, a great incentive for agreeing to participate was that one of my intellectual heroes, John Maynard Keynes, had been involved in a famous Cambridge Union debate. Joining me in the debate by Zoom that evening were New York University Professor Ruth Ben Ghiat, Russian journalist Masha Gessen, staff writer for the *New Yorker*, the prominent historian of Germany and the Second World War Sir Richard Evans, and Isabel Hernandez and Sam Rubinstein, two Cambridge University students.

In that debate, I said that a movement or person must be regarded as fascist when they fuse the following five features: (1) they show a disdain or hatred for democratic and progressive principles and procedures; (2) they tolerate or promote violence; (3) they have a heated mass base that supports their anti-democratic thinking and behavior; (4) they scapegoat and support the persecution of certain social groups; and (5) they are led by a charismatic individual who exhibits and normalizes all of the above. It is how they fuse these

five features together that accounts for the uniqueness of particular fascist leaders and movements.

Not surprisingly, Donald Trump figured prominently in that debate. And one of my main arguments was that what Donald Trump and the January 6, 2021 insurrection showed was that the distinction between "far right" and "fascist" is academic. Or one can say that a "far-rightist" is a fascist who has not yet seized power, for it is only once they are in power that fascists fully reveal their political propensities, that is, they display all of the five features mentioned above. By the way, the Cambridge audience agreed with me. The *Cambridge Independent* carried the news the next day that "the motion was carried with 38 votes in favour, 28 against, and 2 abstentions" (Peel 2021). Thank god, I didn't let Keynes down.

FASCISTS AND COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES

As Don Kalb notes in his Introduction, we deploy the concept of "counterrevolution" to broadly capture the manifold manifestations of the movement against the left, liberals, neoliberals, and elites that animates significant sectors of the masses in both the Global North and Global South. What we are witnessing is an "overdetermined" phenomenon, to use Althusserian terms, that unites the counterrevolution against liberal democracy, with its espousal of human rights, democratic rights, civil liberties, and due process, with a broader global counterrevolution against the prior counterrevolution of neoliberalism, with its doctrinaire deployment of market forces on behalf of growth and accumulation, which have in fact ravaged the living standards of many, deepened social inequalities dramatically, and shaken long-standing political arrangements the world over. This "global counterrevolution within and against that prior counterrevolution" (Kalb, Introduction) is a complex and contradictory process that translates into unique features at the country level.

In my work on the right, I have used the word "counterrevolutionary" interchangeably with the word "fascist." Here I have been greatly indebted to the great historian of counterrevolution, Arno Mayer (2000: 51–2), who distinguished between the three types of actors in what he called the "counterrevolutionary coalition": reactionaries, conservatives, and counterrevolutionaries. "Reactionaries," said Mayer, "are daunted by change and long for a return to a world of a mythical and romanticized past." Conservatives do not make a fetish of the past, and whatever the makeup of civil and political society, their "core value is the preservation of the established order."

Counterrevolutionaries are more interesting theoretically and more dangerous politically. They may have, like the reactionaries, illusions about a past golden age, and they share the reactionaries' and conservatives' "appreciation, not to say celebration, of order, tradition, hierarchy, authority, discipline,

and loyalty" (2000: 52). But in a world of rapid flux, where the old order has become unhinged by the emergence of new political actors, "counterrevolutionaries embrace mass politics to promote their objectives, appealing to the lower orders of city and country, inflaming and manipulating their resentment of those above them, their fear of those below them, and their estrangement from the real world about them" (p. 52). Counterrevolutionaries or fascists, to borrow from another great historian, Barrington Moore, seek to "make reaction popular" (1966: 447).

FASCISM AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

The rise of fascism is a global phenomenon, one that cuts through the North-South divide.

Narendra Modi has made the secular and diverse India of Gandhi and Nehru a thing of the past with his Hindu nationalist project, which relegates the country's large Muslim minority to second-class citizens, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 by Svati Shah. Currently, he is carrying out the most sustained attack on the freedom of the press since the Emergency in 1976 by putting progressive journalists in jail and bringing charges against noted writers like Arundhati Roy.

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro lost the 2022 presidential elections to Lula da Silva by a slight margin, but his followers refused to accept the verdict, and thousands of people from the right invaded the capital Brasilia on January 8, 2023, in an attempt to overthrow the new government, in a remarkable replication of the January 6, 2021 insurrection in Washington.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party have almost completed their neutering of democracy (see Chapter 4 by Scheiring and Csathó in this volume). Indeed, Europe is the region where fascist or radical right parties have made the most inroads. From having no radical right-wing regime in the 2000s, except occasionally and briefly as junior partners in unstable governing coalitions as in Austria, the region now has two in power – one in Hungary and the government of Giorgia Meloni in Italy. The far right is part of ruling coalitions in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. The region has five more countries where a party of the far right is the main opposition party, sometimes in fact claiming the presidency, as in Poland (after May 2025). And it has seven where the far right has become a major presence both in parliament and in the streets.

In the Philippines, I wrote two months into Duterte's presidency that he was a "fascist original." I was criticized by many opinion-makers, academics, and even progressives for using the "f" word. Over seven years and 27,000 extra-judicial executions of alleged drug users later, the "f" word is one of the milder terms used for Rodrigo Duterte, with many preferring "mass murderer" or "serial killer." He has been delivered to the International Criminal Court in

February 2025, but only because of ferocious infighting within the current governing classes of the Philippines.

FASCIST CHARISMA AND DISCOURSE(S)

Let me spend some time on Duterte since he is the fascist figure I am most familiar with. Like Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orbán, Wilders in the Netherlands, and now Javier Milei in Argentina, Duterte is a charismatic figure. Charisma, that quality in a leader that creates a special bond with his or her followers, is not just of one variety. Modi's charisma is different from that of Duterte. While Modi's charisma is more of the familiar inspirational type, Duterte has what I called "gangster charm." In the way he connects with the masses, in his discourse, Duterte has similarities to Donald Trump, with his penchant for saying the outrageous and delivering it in an unorthodox fashion – precisely what drives their supporters wild.

On Duterte's discourse while he was president, I would like to share three observations.[2] First, from a progressive and liberal point of view, his discourse was politically incorrect, but that was its very strength. It came across as liberating to its middle-class and lower-class audience. Duterte was seen as telling it as it was, as deliberately mocking the dominant discourse of human rights, democratic rights, and social justice that had been ritually invoked but was increasingly regarded as a cynical cover-up for the failure of the post-Marcos liberal democratic regime to deliver on its promise bringing about genuine democratic political and economic reform.

Second, Duterte's discourse involved a unique application of what Bourdieu calls the strategy of condescension (Bourdieu 1984: 472–3). His coarse discourse, delivered conversationally and with frequent shifts from Tagalog, a Filipino language, to another, Bisaya, to English, made people identify with him, eliciting laughter with his portrayal of himself as someone who bumbled along like the rest the crowd or had the same illicit desires, at the same time that it also reminded the audience that he was someone different from and above them, as someone with power. This was especially evident when he paused and uttered his signature, "*Papatayin kita*," or "I will kill you," as in "If you destroy the youth of my country by giving them drugs, I will kill you."

Third, Duterte's speechmaking did not follow a conceptual or rhetorical logic, and this was another reason he could connect with the masses. The formal conceptual message written by speechwriters was deliberately overridden by a series of long digressions where he told tales in which he was invariably at the center of things that he knew would hold the audience's attention, even when they had heard it several times. Let me confess here that when I listened to Duterte's digressions, peppered as they were with outrageous comments, like telling an audience he would pardon policemen convicted of extra-judicial exe-

cutions so they could go after the people who brought them to court, my mind had to restrain my body from joining the chorus of laughter at the sheer comic effrontery of his words. With Duterte, the digression was the message.

Duterte, of course, is not unique among far-right leaders in his ability to connect to his base by trampling on accepted conversational conventions and admitting to illicit desires. One of the sources of Donald Trump's appeal is that he, like Duterte, connects, without subterfuge or euphemism, with his white male base's' "deeply missed privilege of being able to publicly and unabashedly act on whatever savagery or even mundane racism they wished to," as Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan put it (Ventura and Chan 2023: 102). To many aggrieved white American males he came across as refreshingly candid in publicly calling Mexicans rapists, Muslims terrorists, colored immigrants as coming from "shithole countries" instead of pristinely white Norway, and boasting that "When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (Nelson 2016).

ECONOMICS AND FASCISM

Leaders are critical in fascist movements, but social conditions create the opportunities for the ascent of those leaders. Here one cannot overemphasize the role that neoliberalism and globalization have played in spawning movements of the radical right, as all chapters in this book demonstrate – with Gábor Scheiring and Ábel Csathó deploying a razor sharp focus precisely on this in their chapter on Hungary). The worsening living standards and great inequalities spawned by neoliberal policies created disillusionment among people who felt that liberal democracy had been captured by the rich. Deep popular distrust emerged against the center-right and center-left parties that had promoted those policies while they ignored the victims and sometimes loudly blamed them for their plight.

Perhaps there is no better testimony of the role of neoliberal policies than that of former President Barack Obama, who represents the dominant, neoliberal, "Third Way" wing of the Democratic Party, along with the Clintons. In a speech in Johannesburg in July 2017, Obama remarked that the "politics of fear and resentment" stemmed from a process of globalization that "upended the agricultural and manufacturing sectors in many countries … greatly reduced the demand for certain workers … helped weaken unions and labor's bargaining power … [and] made it easier for capital to avoid tax laws and the regulations of nation states." He further noted that

> challenges to globalization first came from the left but then came more forcefully from the right, as you started seeing populist movements … [that] tapped the unease that was felt by many people that lived outside the urban

> cores; fears that economic security was slipping away, that their social status and privileges were eroding; that their cultural identities were being threatened by outsiders, somebody that didn't look like them or sound like them or pray as they did. (Obama 2018)

These resentful, discontented masses are the base of fascist parties.

Disenchanted with the Democratic Party's embrace of job-killing neoliberal policies, the white working-class vote put the Republican Trump over the top in the traditionally Democratic swing states in the Mid-West during the 2016 US presidential elections (see Chapters 11 and 12 by Edelman and Nonini in this volume) (see Bello 2016). But it is not only neoliberal policies that white workers are protesting by walking out of the Democratic Party and walking into the Trump tent; they also feel professional and intellectual elites have captured their old party, along with Blacks and other minorities (see in particular Chapter 8 by Engelen in this volume).

In France, the Socialist Party collapsed, with a significant part of its former working class adherents going to Marine Le Pen and her National Front (see Chapter 5 by Coquard in this volume). Their sentiments were probably best expressed by a Socialist senator who said,

> Left-wing voters are crossing the red line because they think that salvation from their plight is embodied by Madame Le Pen … They say "no" to a world that seems hard, globalized, implacable. These are working-class people, pensioners, office workers who say: "We don't want this capitalism and competition in a world where Europe is losing its leadership." (Quoted in Bremner 2014)

It is not only the white working class that now forms the base of the Republican Party. Large parts of rural America have long been marked by economic depression, creating ideal ground for the politics of resentment and the incubation of far-right militias (see Chapter 11 by Edelman in this volume), who made their intimidating presence felt in the cities where protests against police brutality spread after the killling of George Floyd (see Banerjee 2020).

FASCISM AND FEAR

It is not only economic insecurity that helps create a mass base for fascism but also fear and the sense of physical insecurity. Practically alone among Filipino politicians in his quest for the presidency in 2016, Duterte appealed to "rampant criminality" as his main, indeed only road to power. A blistering fivefold increase in reported crime and a marked decline in effective law enforcement were recorded in the years prior to the elections and a generalized

sense of lawlessness took hold in the public consciousness, especially among the "aspirational middle classes, who benefited from concentrated growth in the retail, real estate, and business outsourcing sectors, but now worried about their basic safety," noted analyst Richard Heydarian (2018: 32). This conjoining of economic insecurity and physical insecurity was deadly, and, with his instinct for the jugular, Duterte seized on it, his most memorable campaign statement being his promise to cut up common criminals and drug dealers into small pieces and feed them to the fish in Manila Bay. Duterte's success in stoking crime as the path to power is a grim reminder of Hobbes' counterthesis to Locke's on the state: that at its origins it is a primordial contract between a people who are willing to hand over their rights to a sovereign who promises to protect their life and limb.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF FASCISM

Economic conditions and fear, however, cannot fully account for the emergence of fascist movements. There are other factors, social psychological in nature, that fuel them. One is the sense felt by many white males of being adrift in a world where the traditional gender hierarchies are being shaken, the binary gender classification is being abandoned, women are gaining control over their bodies, and the traditional norm of the heteropatriarchal family is being put into question by new familial arrangements. One of the drivers of far-right politics, especially in the white nationalist movement, is what Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan characterize as "besieged and aggrieved white manhood" (2023: 44).

Counterrevolutionary patriarchal attitudes usually come together with the most salient drives of far-right mobilization: racism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. These behavioral or ideological drives are the burning core of the fascist project, which is to create a cross-class solidarity based on skin color, religion, language, or culture by defining as the Enemy or the Big Other those who are perceived to be different. It is not accidental that Hitler's project was called national socialism – that is, it was "equality" but only for those of the same race and not for the Other.

In Europe today, the Big Other is no longer the Big Brother of the Cold War era but non-white migrants that, in dark conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement Theory, treasonous liberal elites are allying with and using to destroy one's imagined community. One of the signature expressions of this theory is provided by Orbán, with the European Union and its immigrant quota system that the far right despises, in the role played by Washington's liberal elite in the USA:

> The situation … is that there are those who want to take our country from us. Not with the stroke of a pen, as happened one hundred years ago at Trianon; now they want us to voluntarily hand our country over to others, over a period of a few decades. They want us to hand it over to foreigners from other continents, who do not speak our language, and who do not respect our culture, our laws or our way of life: people who want to replace what is ours with what is theirs. (Ventura and Chan 2023: 68)

But just to show how ethnocentrism and racism have made inroads in the European consciousness, it was no less than the foreign policy chief of the European Union itself, Josep Borrell, who bared the subliminal fears driving the continent when in a speech in 2022 he pontificated that "Europe is a garden" but "most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden" (quoted in Bishara 2022).

In the USA, white nationalism or white supremacy is the main ideological expression of the fascist project. Racism has always been ideologically reproduced by a social structure in which racial domination has been a central plank of exploitation and class domination. Since the late 1960s, the Republican Party, with its color-coded or "dogwhistle" politics and programs, has been the preferred vehicle of the white majority. White nationalism has been exacerbated in recent decades by perceived gains made by minorities, in particular, the Black community, notably the election in 2008 of Barack Obama as president of the United States.

To the fear of Blacks gaining at the expense of whites was added the popular conspiracy theory that immigration is a plot by liberal elites in Washington to make the white majority the minority by 2042 (Wilkerson 2020: 6). This set the stage for the man that CIA analyst Barbara Walter called "the biggest ethnic entrepreneur of all," Donald Trump (Walter 2022: 147). According to her, "No Republican president in the past fifty years had ever pursued a more racist platform, or championed white, evangelical Americans at the expense of every one else" (p. 146).

In the mind of Trump, America is an exclusively white creation. This was in full display in Trump's acceptance speech as presidential candidate at the 2020 Republican National Convention, where he said that what was unique to America was the spirit of the conquest of the land and the West by white "ranchers and miners, cowboys and sheriffs, farmers and settlers," a white world made possible by the likes of "Wyatt Earp, Annie Oakley, Davy Crockett, and Buffalo Bill."[3] Those names of television characters that Trump apparently loved as a child reflected nostalgia for the lost white America of the 1950s and a subliminal unwillingness to reconcile with the post-Civil Rights America that succeeded it.

But the fear of the Other of Trump and his *enrages* goes beyond nostalgia for a lost Jurassic world. According to Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, white nationalism, "rather than being fueled by a fear that new immigrants will fail to assimilate into American culture, is fueled by a fear that they will assimilate all too successfully." Drawing on the work of Marcel Detienne, they write that

> [T]he implication of successful assimilation is that the cultural identity of natives is not a genetic inheritance but, instead, something disturbingly superficial and relatively easy for newcomers to adopt. If those with an entirely different genetic inheritance can internalize the cultural legacy of multi-generational inhabitants of their host country, then national identity does not really reflect a blood bond tying the current generation to its dead forefathers. If true, Detienne's thesis helps explain the roiling emotionalism of anti-immigration politics. It stems, on this account, from an unspoken fear of identity theft. Subconsciously, we can speculate, white nationalists fear that recent arrivals, with biologically unrelated ancestry, will expose the embarrassingly shallow roots of their cherished but fictional national identity. (Krastev and Holmes 2019: 170–1)

In India, a veritable witches' brew of resentments, from a sense of Hindus being despised for being a non-martial race to insecurities related to a demographic decline relative to Muslims, one that is said to be actively abetted by "love jihad," has been skillfully exploited by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Sangh Parivar, led by Modi, to pursue a strategy of electoral polarization cum violence that has proved eminently successful in the drive to turn India from a secular democracy into an "ethnic democracy," to use the term coined by Christophe Jaffrelot (2019); or perhaps even more candid, "caste capitalism," as proposed by Svati Shah (Chapter 2).

Whether in India, Europe, or the USA, it is this heated base motivated by a mix of economic insecurity, physical fear, *ressentiment*, or pure hatred, disseminated by conspiracy theories on the internet that accounts for the fact that fascism, not liberal democracy, and certainly not socialism, has momentum globally today. Opportunistic fascist leaders are certainly a good part of the explanation, but if Trump, Orbán, Modi, Duterte, Bolsonaro did not exist, they would have to be created. Indeed, this is the reason why although they are no longer in power, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Poland's Law and Justice Party, and, of course, Donald Trump in 2020–24, do not fade away (perhaps unless they are jailed, like Duterte at this point) and can be returned to power.

Take the USA. The 2020 election of Joe Biden drew a sigh of relief from quarters concerned with the health of democracy in the country. But 11 million more Americans voted for Trump in 2020 than in 2016, while 70 percent of the Republican Party believed against all evidence that he won the election. Before

the 2024 elections, Trump faced 91 felony counts across two state courts and two different federal districts, any of which could have potentially produced a prison sentence (Graham 2024). Yet he defied all the usual laws of American politics, survived an effort at assassination, and was borne to victory by a solid and expansive MAGA base.[4]

FASCISM AND BIG CAPITAL

Fascism cannot be reduced to a conspiracy by Big Capital to repressively stabilize society and promote its interests, as some traditional Marxists saw it. Fascists are not mere instruments of the capitalist class. In fact, their rhetoric is not only anti-democratic or anti-liberal but also often anti-capitalist or anti-Big Business. Witness how Steve Bannon and other key MAGA personalities claim that they are anti-Big Tech or against the "plutocrats."

Rather than an instrumental relationship, the far right and Big Capital have a complex relationship that has both complementary and contradictory aspects. Trump's tax cuts have indeed benefited the richer strata but his trade wars have almost universally earned the disapproval of Wall Street and US corporations owing to their fears these would have a negative impact on global growth and cut into their profits. Powerful members of the Trump team have regarded US transnational corporations as a big part of the problem and see trade and technology policies as disciplinary measures intended to bring American capital back to the USA. Trump's radical overhaul of US foreign policy is meant to end the pro-globalization policies that have been favored by Wall Street and US transnational corporations.

Fascists, however, do not seek to overthrow Big Business; they merely want an accommodation with capital to serve their movement's own interests, but with them in the driver's seat (see Chapter 12 by Don Nonini for a longer discussion with more emphasis on the long-run power of capital). Fascism in power, in fact, often has detrimental consequences for capital. To cite a classic case, in return for protection from a militant labor movement, German capital allowed itself to be hijacked by Hitler, leading to its near destruction while serving as a tool of his expansionist war.

FASCISM AND VIOLENCE

Fascists can come to power through elections, the classic case being Hitler and the Nazis' first place finish in the 1932 Reichstag elections in Germany that served as the springboard for their lunge for absolute power. In fact, in many cases though not all, the closer they come to power, the more they try to project a constitutionalist or moderate image, as Giorgia Meloni did in Italy in the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections and Geert Wilders did in 2023 in the Netherlands.

But once in power, they often seek to remain there through the use of force or repressive violence. Violence is the main instrument by which fascists want to carry out their revolution or counterrevolution to "purify" society to assert or reassert the supremacy of the traditionally dominant majority defined by skin color, ethnic identity, or culture. Thus, in India, as Svati Shah shows (Chapter 2), while they are reshaping the institutions of the country via their parliamentary majority, the Hindu nationalists see their power as based in the final analysis on their capacity for violence, which they periodically unleash to remind subordinate communities like the Muslims of their "inferior status," as they did in the Gujarat massacre of 2002.

As for the USA, Moira Donegan of the *Guardian* reminds us,

> America is no stranger to political violence. But usually, it comes from the right. Mass shootings are routinely carried out in public in America by men with far-right political agendas, who massacre church worshippers, grocery shoppers or high school students in the service of a cause; the death toll from these explicitly political atrocities has been assimilated into our social fabric, hardly registered as assaults made on behalf of a movement. Meanwhile, far-right militias, from the polo-wearing Proud Boys to the masked and khakied Patriot Front, hold parades meant to intimidate their political enemies and the populations they consider undesirable. Sometimes, they threaten or beat people; sometimes, they surround state capitols with guns on display. Once, they stormed the Capitol. Rightwing political violence is likely … to be a feature of American life for the foreseeable future. (Donegan 2024)

Blatant espousal of violence is now common, even among elected members of the Republican Party. For instance, Marjorie Taylor Greene, a leading member of the far right in Congress, has told the Republican base that "the only way you get your freedoms back is [if] it's earned with the price of blood" (quoted in Walter 2022: 175).

HOW TO COUNTER FASCISM

Let me end by switching from the analytical to the normative, from being the analyst to being the activist.

First, we need to stop resorting to easy explanations about the rise of the far right, like the claim that internet trolls are responsible for it, and acknowledge that far-right personalities and movements have a critical mass of popular support.

Second, we must acknowledge that in being able to mobilize people using the most up to date methods available on the internet, the fascists are far ahead of us. To cite just one example, in 2020, Modi, who was among the top five most

followed world leaders on social media, had 45.9 million followers compared to opposition leader Rahul Gandhi's 3.5 million on Facebook (Hindustan Times 2020). Though Musk split with Trump a few months later, the "Department of Government Efficiency" he established continued to intervene in many offices, to the chagrin of career bureaucrats, while Mark Zuckerberg has been willing to immediately implement Trump's anti-moderation, fact-checking, and anti-DEI policies at Facebook (see also Chapter 12 by Nonini in this volume).

Next, we need to find ways of stopping the extreme right from coming to power in the first place, like building broad united electoral fronts, even with non-fascist groups we may have differences with. It's much harder to remove the far right once they're in power. Even if they lose elections after they're in power, their work in reshaping democratic institutions may be very difficult to undo. As *New York Times* commentator Michelle Goldberg, notes, with respect to the transition in Poland from the Law and Justice regime that lost the October 2023 elections to the new liberal government led by Donald Tusk, "The new coalition government has a mandate to rehabilitate [government] institutions, but the former rulers aren't ceding control willingly, and often there's no consensus about who has the authority to settle conflicts related to the transition. For Poland's new leadership, roadblocks to reform are everywhere" (Goldberg 2024).

Fourth, we need to make sure we have at the leading edge of our resistance those movements which have a great deal of resonance among broad sectors of the population including the middle classes, such as the movements to stop climate change, promote gender equality and reproductive rights, and advance racial justice. Again, the example of Poland provides encouragement. As Goldberg points out, playing the key role in the electoral outcome of the October 2023 elections was "public revulsion toward a far-reaching abortion ban" (Goldberg 2024).

Fifth, we must fiercely defend human rights and democratic values, even where – or especially where – they have become unpopular. This will involve aggressively championing people and groups that are currently repressed and persecuted, with majority opinion being whipped up against them, like Muslims in India and non-white immigrants in both the USA and Europe. International solidarity with the persecuted is an essential element of the anti-fascist project. Compromise here will only encourage the fascists. Moreover, equality, human rights, democratic rights, and due process are the cornerstone of the democratic worldview. When it comes to freedom of movement, of course, every country has the right to manage migration in an orderly manner. But this is very different from virtually sealing off its borders for racist, chauvinist, or religious reasons that are disguised as "protecting our values" or "preventing disorder" or "saving jobs."

Sixth, let's not fear to see what we can learn from the extreme right, especially when it comes to the politics of passion or the politics of charisma, and see how our values can be advanced or promoted in passionate and charismatic ways. We must unite reason to passion and not see them as being in contradiction, though, of course, we must not violate our commitments to truth, justice, and fair play in the process

Seventh, if history, especially of the USA, is any indication, one must not preclude the possibility of violent civil war, and should that become a real threat, to take the appropriate steps to counter it. In the case of the USA, the CIA analyst Barbara Walter is not crying wolf when she writes:

> Where is the United States today? We are a factionalized anocracy [a degenerating democracy] that is quickly approaching the open insurgency stage, which means we are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe. January 6 was a major announcement by at least some groups – such as the Oath Keepers – that they are moving toward outright violence … In fact, the attack on the Capitol could very well be the first series of organized attacks in an open insurgency stage. It targeted infrastructure. There were plans to assassinate certain politicians and attempts to coordinate activity. (Walter 2022: 159–60)

Following the return of Trump to the presidency, we now have an unprecedented situation where the far right is in power, in command of the repressive agencies of the state, while also enoying the support of many of the paramilitary groups described by Walter.

But, probably most important, we need to have a transformative vision that can compete with that of the far right, one based on genuine equality and genuine democratic empowerment that goes beyond the now discredited neoliberal democracy. Some call this vision socialism. Others would prefer another term, but the important thing is its message of radical, real equality. Our gamble is that that side of human beings that values cooperation and, yes, love, will triumph over that side that seeks a regression to Nietszche's blonde beasts.

Having proposed these key points of an anti-fascist agenda, let me just flag the reality that with the far right having captured the presidency of the world's leading democracy, we have an uphill struggle in our hands.

Rosa Luxemburg, the martyred German Marxist, wrote that the future belonged either to socialism or barbarism. In the twentieth century, barbarism was stopped in its tracks, but only after bloody catastrophe. Will that also be the case in the twenty-first century? Are we condemned to repeat? Let me end by saying that there is no guarantee that fascism will not triumph, but it will certainly win unless we put ourselves, body and soul, fully and smartly, on the line to stop it.

NOTES

1. The full thesis, *The Roots and Dynamics of Revolution and Counterrevolution in Chile,1970–73*, is available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan. My writings based on it include Bello (2017, 2019: 34–48).
2. See, for instance, Walden Bello, "Democracy in the Era of Charismatic Politics in India and the Philippines." Talk delivered to audiences in Canberra, Perth, and Melbourne during a book promotion tour, November 26–December 10, 2019. https://waldenbello.org/democracy-and-charisma-a-dangerous-liaison/ (accessed February 24, 2024). See also Bello (2020).
3. Donald Trump, "Full Text: President Trump's RNC Acceptance Speech," Republican National Convention, August 20, 2020. www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/read-full-text-president-donald-trump-s-acceptance-speech-rnc-n1238636 (accessed February 24, 2024).
4. Mathew Karp (2024) has demonstrated that "democratic dealignment" was the ultimate cause of the tight Trump win; see also Chapter 11 by Marc Edelman in this volume.

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2
Autocracy and Resistance in India[1]

Svati Shah

INTRODUCTION

In the Indian context, and indeed almost everywhere at this point in history, Horkheimer's adage bears repeating, that "he who will not speak about capitalism should keep silent about fascism too" (Horkheimer 2005: 226). In this chapter, I proceed from this observation in order to highlight the ways in which autocracy in India is a late capitalist enterprise powered by ethno-nationalism, casteism, and anti-Muslim sentiment. Following Walden Bello's comment on fascism's often detrimental consequences for capital (Chapter 1), I synthesize recent work that shows how Hindu nationalism in India has been a crony capitalist enterprise that has had extremely detrimental consequences for the economy. What is happening in India is part of a global upward transfer of wealth. This perspective complicates those which focus solely on ethnic or interreligious conflict that, descended from an orientalist vision of Eastern despotism, often miss the forest of personal enrichment for fascist plutocrats for the trees of ethno-nationalism. At the same time, I do not seek to argue that the consolidation of economic power in a tiny oligarchy somehow outweighs the importance of understanding anti-Muslim and casteist violence. Instead, I show how violence against Muslims and the assertion of casteism is part of globally legible right-wing instantiations of nationalism, normative social reproduction (which reinscribes patriarchy and male-headed householding), and crony capitalism. I do so through a review of independent media reports, research and analysis done by civil society groups, and scholarly research on the ways in which Hindu nationalist authoritarianism is concomitant with the oligarchic consolidation of wealth in India. The method I employ is a reading practice that emerges from more than two decades of alignment and participation in Indian autonomous movements while engaging in ethnographic research in India.

In this book, Bello comments on the rise of fascism as a global phenomenon, placing India, the Philippines, the USA, Brazil, the Netherlands, and Hungary within a shared analytic frame. This perspective on the rise of fascism in both the Euro-Atlantic North and in postcolonial countries ruptures older ideas of the North as the vanguard of history and the central referent for the rest of

the world. As Bello demonstrates, it is no longer possible to speak of politics in Europe or the USA and claim to be addressing what is happening in "the world." As Bello also acknowledges, the places where fascist and autocratic governance are advancing are extremely diverse. The differences in scale amongst these countries alone – India's population is ten times that of the Philippines – point to deeper differences in how autocracy proceeds in each of them. One thing that they all have in common is that secularism and diversity cannot simply be erased. Instead, they become weaponized by fascistic regimes. Secularism and diversity in India are not of the past. Their continued presence in a country of more than 1.4 billion people, where more than 10 percent of the population are Muslim, are now alibis for autocratic rule and the repression of civil liberties. This dynamic tracks with the ways in which diversity and migration in the USA and in Europe were once hailed as strengths, and now cited as cause for alarm, even by centrist political parties like Labour in the UK (Walker and Elgot 2025). Critiques like the one I present here are possible because of continued resistance and dissent against the Hindu nationalist project. This dissent tracks growing discontent with the ways the Hindu right has governed, generating both economic and security calamities in its wake.

In the sections that follow, I review the widening wealth gap in India, synthesizing research done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, and academics on the contradictions between the government's projection of prosperity and deepening widespread impoverishment. This picture is part of a larger crisis of late advanced capitalism around the world. Showing how Hindu nationalism in India uses ethno-nationalism alongside enriching a small minority of industrialists matters in showing how, despite its assertions to timelessness and an ancient legacy, Hindu nationalism in India is a decidedly modern phenomenon. This perspective counters the idea that Indian illiberalism is culturally unique to India or, at most, to the region of South Asia. The idea of sectarian conflict between social groups has long been naturalized as a filter for understanding Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, and for understanding Indigenous and non-white social groups and societies throughout the world. This legacy of colonial racism and orientalism frays in the face of the extensive literature on the Indian economy, for example, which shows the ways in which ethno-nationalism and casteism must be framed alongside extractive capitalism in order to understand India's autocratic turn (Chakrabarti et al. 2020; Desai 2011). This literature is clear in showing how the suppression of dissent and the violent disenfranchisement of minorities is being coupled with a rapacious consolidation of the engines of economic growth. Treating ethno-nationalism as distinct from oligarchic and extractive capitalist consolidation in India papers over the ways in which the pomp and circumstance of the Hindu right's public facing power is concurrent with a massive wealth transfer to India's 1 percent. This is part of a global consolidation of wealth that

undermines any and all mechanisms for distributing wealth more equally, such as taxes and even the most basic social welfare programs.

Some of the ways in which this has manifested in India are identical to how it has happened elsewhere, for example, through virulent attacks on unions, the organized left, civil society groups, and the independent press. At the same time, the Hindu right has claimed to make social welfare, and the space for dissent, much more widespread than under preceding governments. Here the resonances with the claims of the American right are powerful, with a rhetoric for "justice" that is manifest in a strident nationalist tone that simultaneously undermines judicial and legislative checks on power. The Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its coalition partners have also made extensive use of the rhetoric and legal apparatus of anti-terrorism, fueled by anti-Muslim violence and rhetoric, to suppress dissent. Authoritarianism in India is unique in the ways it has used its upper caste Hindu diaspora to fund some of its rise, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, and in the ways it has deployed a pro-gay stance alongside an extremely regressive position on caste-based endogamy. The complexity of Indian governance means that understanding Hindu nationalism, also known as "Hindutva," and its virulent Islamophobia and casteism, entails understanding some of the history of liberalization and changes in Indian economic policies from the 1990s.

The Indian economy began to liberalize in 1991, a year before a Hindu mob led by leaders of the BJP and other Hindu right political parties tore down a 400-year-old mosque, the Babri Masjid, in the northern town of Ayodhya (Hasan 2023). The concurrence of the signal moment of Hindutva's modern history with changing Indian economic policy from an emphasis on redistribution to growth and wealth generation is part of a longer story of the ebbs and flows of domestic tensions between a vision for a strong private sector and a "labor-centered version of political economy" (Selwyn 2023). Today, the Indian economy resembles what Amartya Sen has called "growth without development" (Sen 1999). Calculating India's GDP is highly politicized, with the government's figures being regularly shown to be inaccurate (Kumar 2024) or simply "mystifing" (Scroll Staff 2024). However, it is clear that much of the country's increased wealth is held by a few select companies and the families behind them (Faleiro 2024). This is detailed in a 2023 report, "Survival of the Richest" (Oxfam India 2023), on India's widening wealth gap, which is marked by the further shrinking of the Indian middle class (Mohan and Govindkrishnan 2024) in the post-Covid period. Any fruits of growth, however large or small, are going to a coterie of firms that are in close proximity to the government. The Oxfam report shows that the richest 1 percent owns 40 percent of the country's wealth, with the bottom 50 percent owning a mere 13 percent of national income. This startling and worsening situation is facilitated by the prodigious use of anti-terrorism laws against activists and government critics

(Mudium 2022), as well as a trend of the BJP-led government passing laws by excluding the opposition from participation, sometimes by literally suspending MPs from opposition parties en masse (Shamim 2023) and using legislative tools to promote further disenfranchisement (Reuters 2024).

India's widening wealth gap also means worsening development indicators. India was ranked 111 out of 125 countries on the Global Hunger Index for 2023. This ranking, dismissed outright by the central government (Mohan et al. 2023), is based on measures of undernourishment, child stunting, child wasting, and child death. It is consistent with chronic unemployment and an alarming "jobs crisis" (Biswas 2022) amongst young people. While the government courts popular support by touting schemes like the distribution of food grains and cooking gas, these read more as band aids and public relations stunts than actual social welfare programs, which are being choked into non-existence through stalled or stopped payments. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), for example, a program that guarantees 100 days of paid employment to extremely low-income workers in rural areas, has been facing steep cuts (Nair 2023) that portend making the project untenable. For those who can still be paid for work under the program, these funds can now only be accessed via fulfilling biometric identification requirements that are often impossible for the millions living in areas without access to bank accounts, internet, or adequate infrastructure. This "threatens to create a situation where a majority of NREGA workers cannot be paid" (Drèze 2023).

THE HINDU RIGHT, IN BRIEF

The BJP is part of a group of Hindu nationalist political parties known as the "Sangh Parivar," which means "family of organizations." The BJP is the political wing of the Sangh, and was founded by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ("National Volunteer Organization"). The RSS was founded in 1925. The secular democratic fathers of the country, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Dalit intellectual B.R. Ambedkar, saw the potential danger of the RSS, which is why it has been intermittently banned throughout India's history, especially during the first decades of independence (Andersen 1972). An RSS cadre member assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 on the orders of the party's leadership, in retaliation for agreeing to partition during negotiations for independence from British rule. That member, Nathuram Godse, was allegedly following an RSS directive, and was publicly reviled for decades. The RSS has always vehemently denied this charge, while now leading Godse's rehabilitation as a nationalist hero in mainstream Indian media. A statue of Godse was unveiled in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located, on Gandhi's birth anniversary in 2021 (PTI 2021). The timing of the statue's inauguration was a clear message. The government repeated this message when Hindutva's

macabre political theater greeted the start of 2024, with the prime minister, Narendra Modi, inaugurating a temple on the site of the Babri Masjid, which Hindu nationalists claimed had been built on the site of the birthplace of the god Ram. Then, as now, the performance of razing a functioning mosque and installing a temple under the pretext of taking back something that was lost is part of a strategy for shoring up political power through majoritarian violence. We see similar gestures in illiberal claims to lost cultural and religious capital in Putin's very public association with the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia and in US conservatives' conflation of the American state with a militarized interpretation of "Christian values" that rationalize giving carte blanche to the American arms industry.

The RSS's founders openly admired Hitler's national socialism and Italian fascism (Chaturvedi 2022), and especially the discourses of eugenic ethnonationalism, racial purity, and militarized majoritarianism that they advocated. They agreed with Nazi Germany's genocidal project against Europe's Jews, seeking to apply their own "final solution" to "the Muslim question" (Casolari 2020). In an echo of European fascists' uses of history, the RSS's revanchism is expressed in arguing that India is a *Hindu civilization* that existed for millennia, interrupted only by Mughal rule (1526–1857). Mughal rule has become the pretext for claiming that Muslims are "invaders" who do not belong in India. The aim, therefore, is less to "establish" a Hindu supremacist nation than it is to recover it. This historically unsupported view now suffuses school curricula throughout India (Ellis-Petersen 2023), advancing rhetoric that is undergirded by a civilizationalist paradigm in which "Hindus" are the world's "true Aryans" and constitute the origin of civilization itself.

This eugenicist and casteist project of ethnic purity brooks no political dissent. The government and extra-judicial forces sympathetic to this project have sanctioned violence against Muslims, Christians, students, journalists, academics, trade unions, farmers, and the organized left, as well as using or inventing state apparatuses to shut down news outlets, activist groups, and NGOs that are seen as threats to its authority and to the advancement of the project's chosen corporate partners (Patel 2022). When the suppression of dissent has been done using the veneer of legality, this has been wrought through tax raids against government critics and canceling permission to receive foreign funding. Tax raids were used in 2023 against the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), an esteemed think tank in New Delhi. Questions have arisen about whether targeting CPR had more to do with its research and advocacy in the mining belt in central India and the interests of the Adani Group there than with potential violations of India's tax code (MS 2023). The suppression of dissent has also been accomplished through widespread application of anti-terrorism laws, and particularly the UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act) (Scroll Staff 2023). In a sense, the application of these tactics is an expansion of the ways in which the North-

east, Kashmir, and portions of India's tribal belts have endured the suspension of the rule of law for decades (Sundar 2023).

FASCISM, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN INDIA

While there are numerous filters for understanding how Hindutva operates in India, including gender and sexuality amongst these has been particularly challenging, especially in the absence of the kind of "culture wars" conflicts that have become familiar in places like the USA and Hungary. India, for example, has not produced stark rhetoric about eliminating abortion rights for women, in part because abortion rights in India are vested in physicians, who have ultimate decision-making power to terminate a pregnancy rather than women themselves. In showing that Hindu nationalism is a project of economic consolidation in as much as it is a project of eugenic ethno-nationalism, it becomes necessary to discuss how controlling gender and sexuality within the normative bounds of caste-based endogamy becomes integral to this enterprise. Drawing on Jairus Banaji's reading of Wilhelm Reich for understanding Hindutva (Banaji 2016), we can understand caste-based endogamy in India as a means of buttressing and reproducing violent dominant caste Hindu masculinity. Drawing on Tithi Bhattacharya's work on social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017), we can also understand this reassertion of caste boundaries through discourses like "Love Jihad" as a way to maintain a socially uniform and therefore pliable workforce, and a regulated reserve army of labor. I explain "Love Jihad" below. Drawing on both of these readings alongside early feminist anthropology on sexuality and biopolitical regulation, controlling sex, reproduction, kinship, and women's bodies become primary functions of a state that seeks total control of all the resources under its purview. While it may seem that this is a system that can never be breached, it is in fact highly inefficient and also constantly resisted. This is evidenced here by the citational practice of this chapter, for example, which draws on journalism and scholarship, produced during the consolidation of Hindu nationalist power, that serve as efforts to countermand the rightward shift of Indian politics.

One of the challenges in discussing gender and sexuality in almost any context in the modern era is that of resisting the liberal tropes of the public and private, which perpetuate the idea that the economic sphere is distinct from gender, sexuality, and ethno-nationalism. In the context of Hindu nationalism in India, it is clear that the politics of sexuality and gender do not simply happen "in private." Identity questions serve as leverage for the ruse of economic prosperity and individual freedom under this government, while also serving as sites of resistance and materialist critique. Regarding the former, while taking ideological credit for the 2018 Supreme Court decision to decriminalize consensual same sex between adults (Dutta 2023; Srivastava 2020; Dutta 2023), the gov-

ernment has pushed a program of legislating normative social reproduction on an unprecedented scale. This has included both legal and extra-judicial means of preventing inter-caste and interreligious marriages (Rao 2011), as well as restricting and punishing religious conversion (Gupta 2018).

In an earlier article, I marked this regime of using normative social reproduction and caste-based endogamy to shore up crony capitalist wealth extraction and consolidation as “caste capitalism” (Shah 2024). In that article, I situated caste capitalism as resonant with the concept of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) and an understanding of caste, class, and capital as overlapping and intertwined social phenomena. “[Caste capitalism is] a means of undoing the idea of sexuality as a scientized aspect of the individual self, privatized and ‘private,’ the product of an idea of the body that is hived off from questions of land rights, economic autonomy, and historically contingent iterations of caste categories and relations” (Shah 2024: 107).

If “race is the modality through which class is lived” (Hall et al. 1978: 394), in India caste is the modality through which class is lived. Caste is a mode of social hierarchy that tracks class, impoverishment, and dispossession. Caste is both an overwhelming predictor of class status and the means of maintaining an unequal status quo. Caste is embedded within Hinduism, to be sure, but its social proscriptions regarding commensality, labor divisions, and the organization of neighborhoods goes beyond the confines of Hindu identity. While caste is often interpreted by non-specialists as an outmoded set of rules and “traditions” that predict strict adherence, caste is better understood as a discourse of comportment that, when reified and reinstantiated, metes out terrible violence against people of oppressed castes. This violence overlays an economic hierarchy in which the poorest of the poor are comprised overwhelmingly of marginalized caste groups. I say “overwhelming” but not “total” because, as in every system, there are leaks, inconsistencies, and varying historical legacies and regional differences that are all in simultaneous play. For the present argument, it bears emphasizing that, as in the West, where class tracks race and vice versa, in India, caste tracks class, and caste is maintained, and resisted, in part by engaging endogamous norms of sexuality and social reproduction. It is these norms that implicate queer and transgender life and politics.

SEXUALITY AND AUTHORITARIANISM

If there was queer subtext in German national socialism in the early twentieth century, there is overt instrumentalization of sexuality and gender identity politics by authoritarian regimes around the world. For the forces of Hindutva, for example, overturning anti-sodomy law is instrumentalized to claim that Hinduism was historically tolerant of queerness. The Hindu right in India has carved out the incorporation of legal recognition for sexual and gender diver-

sity as a means of furthering its claim to being the font of human civilization and the "Mother of Democracy." This has been done through the conflation of modernity and neoliberal prosperity by the Hindu nationalist state, where its mass support also includes Hindu majoritarian elements within queer and transgender communities. As Nishant Shahani writes, the complexity of the contemporary context requires us

> to depart from an idealized assumption of the sexually nonnormative or gender-variant body in India as alterity tout court, without attending to some of its more uneasy co-optations by neoliberal projects for modernity and alliances with nationalist frameworks. (Shahani 2021: 6)

If a mainstream non-heterosexual and non-cisgender subject is part of the gamut of responses to Hindu nationalism from the queer and transgender "margins," then this is a segment of what Dilip Simeon calls "tendencies that were present beforehand" in India that have allowed fascism to gain traction in a Gramscian "war of position" (Simeon 2016).

This war of position has entailed opposing Hindu tolerance (e.g., of queerness and transfeminine communities legible under monikers like *hijra* and *kinnar*) against Muslim excess. When Kashmir, a disputed Himalayan region split between Pakistan and India, lost its special semi-autonomous status due to the Indian government's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution (Goel 2019), some commentators made the homonationalist argument that this was just because Kashmir is a Muslim-majority region and this abrogation would serve queer people there better. A widely circulating example of the uses of sexuality in Hindu nationalist consolidation is also evident in the invention of the term "Love Jihad," an accusation levied against Muslim men in relationships with Hindu women, decrying these relationships as efforts to convert Hindu women away from the Hindu fold. The term and violent extra-judicial attacks against interreligious relationships are designed to racialize Muslim men as dangerous nodes of sexual excess (Malji and Raza 2021). At the same time, the Hindu right reaped public relations rewards in taking credit for India being the first non-Western country to decriminalize sodomy, and homosexuality by proxy, in 2018 (Mandal 2018). This new legal landscape was the result of a campaign that began years before this BJP government came to power. Nevertheless, this government and many of their supporters used the anti-sodomy law change to great effect in promoting the mythos of a timeless and perpetually coherent Hinduism that was always already tolerant of sexual and gender diversity. This rhetoric belies the distance between the law and its practice, as evidenced in the extremely uneven application of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and criticisms the Act has drawn from transgender advocates (Bhattacharya et al. 2022). The assertion of a uniform, millennia-long Hindu tradition,[2]

interrupted by Mughal rule, sustains the idea of an eternal "Hindu India" that must now be rewon. The mythic tolerance of sexual diversity within this narrative is a foil to the charge that Hindu nationalism propounds the genocidal erasure of Muslims and all forms of dissent within expanding imaginaries of Hindu territoriality and economic extractivism.

The Hindu plight's rhetorical embrace of queer and transgender tolerance is notable given the shifting status of homosexuality in discourses of Indian nationalism. In the late 1990s, the Hindu right's attacks on movie theaters showing the lesbian-themed film *Fire* were well documented (Ghosh 2010). Homosexuality was, at that time, marked as a foreign imposition by right-wing Hindu parties, like the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Over time, it came to be read as a sign of neoliberal, "Westernized" elite subjectivity bounded by the wealth of Indian cities (Shah 2015), despite evidence to the contrary (Sharma 2006). This shift in rhetoric reveals something of the nationalist stakes of sexuality and gender politics in general, and of LGBTQI+ politics in particular. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether India will continue indefinitely as a constitutional democracy, or if the BJP will succeed in rewriting the Constitution and doing away with democratic norms, even for a time.

If racial purity and white supremacy drive European fascist ideologies, caste purity and Brahmin supremacy drive fascism in India. The government now discourages discussion of caste in public fora, citing any mention of caste as itself divisive (Punyani 2020). Maintaining caste "purity" is another way of saying that caste endogamy is being mandated as never before. This requires even more stringent control over gender and sexuality in the service of normative social reproduction. Placing this alongside an understanding of the entities that are benefiting from the lucrative government tenders for airports, roads, bridges, and dams throughout the country, not to mention the mining blocks that are being opened up at a hectic pace, we might see where the needs for the oligarchic restructuring of the Indian economy intersect with the requirement for normative social reproduction. Normative social reproduction in India maintains caste-based economic hierarchies. These hierarchies cannot be challenged without drawing some form of unofficial sanction from the Hindu right. These hierarchies maintain a vast exploitable workforce and markets for the goods and services that India's new ruling class requires. In the following section, I briefly discuss the ways in which this unofficial sanction is becoming official through a recent overhaul of India's Code of Criminal Procedure.

DIVERSION, DISTRACTION, CHAOS

As of July 1, 2023, India's Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) was completely overhauled, replacing the Indian Penal Code, which had been in place since 1860, when India was governed by the British Raj. While the government

claims that the overhaul was necessary as a long-delayed step in "decolonization," civil society groups have been extremely critical of the ways in which the law takes away civil liberties, including the right to protest, and replaces these with a much more centralized state security apparatus. I name this section of the chapter "Diversion, distraction, chaos" because this is the term being used by activists to describe how this government has been operating, lobbying rapid fire changes to how Indian bureaucracy is managed and how laws are both enacted and enforced. We need only look as far as the American Trump 2.0 presidency within its first 100 days to see how this rapid fire strategy has operated in the West. The legal overhaul in India seems to be designed as an attack against legal advocates in particular. It constitutes a confusing and overwhelming change of hundreds of laws all at once. Critics predict that such a major and sudden change on such a vast scale is designed to fail, thereby necessitating even further centralization of power, and undermining the legal system as it currently stands.

The bill to replace the CrPC with the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) ("Indian Citizen Safety Code") was introduced by the Home minister, who is in charge of domestic security matters, rather than the Law minister, a fact that signals the centralization of power in the Home Ministry and the emphasis on "security," a mnemonic for the suppression of dissent, protest, and speech that is evident in the new criminal code. In this section, I summarize commentary on the BNSS made at a public event held in February 2024 at the India International Centre in New Delhi. Hosted by two prominent civil society organizations (Common Cause and the Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms), the event convened a panel of legal experts to assess the new code of criminal procedure. The continued work of these organizations is also evidence of the kind of resistance I cite above, when the law itself is being weaponized against critical speech.

Amid a wide-ranging discussion two points bear emphasizing for the purposes of this chapter. One, made by Mohan Gopal, a former vice chancellor of the National Law School in Bangalore, India, is that the new laws constitute direct attacks on Articles 19 and 21 of the Indian Constitution. Article 19 protects the right to freedom of speech, residence, assembly, movement, occupation, and to form associations, including unions, and occupation. Article 21 protects the right to life and personal liberty. Professor Gopal explained the problem as one that ultimately opens a path to oligarchy. He began by pointing out that Article 21 is "the light that shines on everything, 19 is where it's fleshed out," "but the particular attack is on [Article] 19 (1) (a), 19 (1) (b) and 19 (1) (c) because the purpose is to ensure that there is no challenge on behalf of democracy, and it is directed at democratic forces" (Live Law 2024: 1:57:37–1:58:50).

Gopal went on to describe the law as "the unreformed star chamber that the British left us. Colonialism is putting in place a brutal system which punishes

the poor and protects the rich because the purpose is to subjugate people and allow an oligarchy to rule" (Live Law 2024: 1:57:37–1:58:50).

The "star chamber" is a reference to the two-tiered system of justice in the UK from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, when the legal transgressions of the rich and powerful had a different set of courts from those of the masses, who would be penalized far more harshly for the same transgressions.

Senior advocate Vrinda Grover followed with a critique that also focused on the ways in which the overhaul, which came into force July 1, 2024, changes what Justice K.G. Kannabiran described as the movement from being a subject of British rule to becoming a rights-bearing citizen under the Indian Constitution (Kannabiran 2018). She argued that "we have now moved from suspect to supplicant" (Live Law 2024) rather than being treated as holders of rights. Rather than aiming to protect, the new laws are intended to control, suppress, and contain the Indian citizenry in private and public life, particularly if there is any challenge to the state's authority. Within the framework of the new laws, several laws have essentially been "deleted" in the name of appearing to be decolonial. This includes Section 377, the anti-sodomy law that was "read down" in 2018. Grover pointed out that this leaves a gap in the law that at present has no remedy, citing the example of transgender men in custody who face sexual assault but, at present, have no legal recourse. The overhaul draws similar criticisms for seeming to eliminate the crime of sedition, while expanding the scope of being able to detain citizens without trial and to accuse individuals of treason under a much wider remit. According to Grover, "decolonization really would mean making the state accountable to the citizens – this does not do that at all" (Live Law 2024). This legal overhaul has significant bearing on the foregoing analysis, not least because of the contradictions between the rhetoric of decolonialism and its practice in law. All of the parameters of sexuality and gender-based judicialism were wiped out overnight, with no public consultation whatsoever. Everything from marriage to anti-sodomy law has been upended. The upshot is far more opportunities for detention without trial, and greater leeway for extra-judicial modes of maintaining caste-based endogamy while restricting the ways in which people organize and protest policies and politics that are ultimately in the interest of the very few.

CONCLUSION

In marking and resisting the rise of illiberalism around the world, it might be easy to miss the consolidation of wealth that majoritarianism in India facilitates, especially when focusing on the eugenic majoritarianism in which Hindu nationalism traffics. Subsuming the political economy of fascist authoritarianism facilitates other erasures as well, including the erasure that is constituted by

marking each place where illiberalism manifests as a site of uniquely specific hateful rhetoric. In this chapter, I have drawn on Bello's comparison of trends toward authoritarianism in India with those elsewhere, while pointing to key specificities in the Indian situation. At this point in history, it becomes necessary to emphasize the always already transnational nature of oligarchic consolidation, and why it requires authoritarian, ethno-nationalist rule that suppresses dissent and opposition. A key difference in how this is proceeding in India is in the overt role that gender and sexuality politics have played, in a way that may seem counterintuitive to those more familiar with the career of authoritarianism in the Euro-American North and attendant "culture wars" in those regions.

In a country that is indelibly marked by syncretism, secularism, and wide-ranging diversity, the rise of Hindu nationalism is anathema. Yet, much ink has been spilled (Zachariah 2015) trying to account for the mass support for Hindutva, as indicated by the parliamentary majorities that the BJP garnered twice, in 2014 and again in 2019. For non-South Asianist observers, these wins may imply a uniformity of thought and acquiescence that is far from reality. Every religion on earth is practiced in India, and more than 400 languages are spoken there. It is home to more than a sixth of all humanity, with almost twice the population of Europe as a whole. In light of India's vast diversity, it could just as well be thought of as a world region that is a nation, in as much as it is a nation within a world region. India's diversity overlays the historically uneven project of bringing everyone living within the post-partition borders of Indian territory into the official ambit of Indian national governance. Hindutva seeks to resolve this project once and for all, waging it through extreme anti-minoritarian violence, coupled with the promise of prosperity for a Hindu majority that the Hindu right is actively consolidating, via the constant iteration of Indian Muslims as anti-national Others and maintaining the violent norms of caste hierarchy. Understanding the rise of "fascism in India" also means asking what the economic impact of this consolidation of power is, for the few and for the many.

NOTES

1. Portions of this chapter appeared in a blog post entitled "Growth without Development Redux," published by the Global Research Programme on Inequality at the University of Bergen (https://gripinequality.org/growth-without-development-redux-in-india/).
2. This mythic representation of Hinduism is at odds with the much more complicated history of how local devotional traditions and regional religious movements came to be associated with "Hinduism," becoming consolidated in a form we would recognize in the present in the late nineteenth century (Doniger 2010).

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3

South Africa's Postcolonial Right Wing: Authoritarian Populism as Anti-Liberal "Revolutionary Politics"

Christi van der Westhuizen

INTRODUCTION

Democracy as an idea and as a system of governance most associated with political equality and inclusion faces what is arguably its most dangerous challenge since the totalitarian rise of fascism and communism a century ago. Making sense of seemingly similar and frequently populist permutations of right-wing extremism is urgent, as well as to understand resonances across Global North/South divides. Theories emanating from the Global North about the right usually pay scant regard to postcolonial contexts (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023). But, as Walden Bello (2019) points out, far-right ascendance to state power is also common in the Global South. Homing in on Africa, politics on the continent is still all too frequently treated as anomalous, either outside of history or forever caught in an earlier time. This chapter examines postcolonial right-wing politics with a focus on South Africa, avoiding the error of exceptionalism that assumes that this country – being a settler-colonial state – is different to the rest of the continent. As seen elsewhere in the world, the socio-economic devastation of neoliberal capitalism prepared the ground for the rise of a populist demagogue, Jacob Zuma, who presents ethno-racial nativism and economic nationalism as the solution. What sets Zuma apart from illiberal forces is that he emerges from and claims an anti-colonial genealogy and therefore a politics that is explicitly anti-liberal. The following analysis explores postcolonial African populism's "revolutionary" anti-liberalism as a vehicle for authoritarianism and economic predation.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY FROM AN AFRICAN VANTAGE POINT

In the context of the much-discussed passing of the liberal world order or even the "death" of liberalism (see, e.g., Gray 2023; Luce 2017), historical specificities are important to note in the analysis of right-wing reaction – specifically to

bring in the postcolonial dimension, as Bello (2019) suggests. From a Pan-Africanist vantage point supporting egalitarianism in the face of global structural inequalities, the end of liberalism may offer new transformative possibilities, as Rita Abrahamsen (2020: 58) points out:

> Discussions of the "liberal world order" frequently proceed as if the term is self-explanatory, and slip easily from description and analysis to normative endorsement of the status quo as a defence against chaos, violence, and civilisational decline. Bringing African visions into these debates shatters any illusion of the postwar world order as harmonious and equal, and highlights instead the persistence of international domination and hierarchy.

The critique of liberal democracy extends to it being unsuitable and even anathema for African states to adopt as a system of governance. Reginald Oduor's (2019) argument is representative in this regard: Western states espoused liberal democratic values at the very same time as enslaving Africans and colonizing their land and resources. In contemporary times, Western states deny African states the self-determination that is purportedly core to democracy while not allowing Africans cultural emancipation. Liberal democracy's emphasis on the individual loses sight of ethnic identity, and hence clashes with the communalistic focus that is inherent to African ontology, according to Oduor. The rejection of liberal democracy extends to political elites affirming authoritarianism as more suited to the "African personality" and to development.

But this denunciation of liberal democracy and the privileging of a unique Africanness and developmentalism transpire not to represent a commitment to egalitarianism. Rather, it presents opposition to democratic inclusion and citizen engagement. Democracy – liberal or not – has been a struggling project on the African continent, and also because of the weaponization of difference. After independence from Western colonial powers from the mid-twentieth century onwards, amid the ideological vagaries of the Cold War, fledgling African states emerged from anti-democratic colonialism with incoherent borders and identities. Democratization was frequently proffered as the rationale for African anti-colonial resistance but, soon after colonies achieved independence from European states, political elites regarded democracy as an obstacle to development. Liberation movements and their ideas and practices were "colonised and infected by the conquests, dominations, exploitations and oppressions that they originally set out to challenge and to dethrone" (Mpofu 2019: 7). Hence, the African postcolony was fashioned from "the most despotic aspects of ancestral traditions," in combination with a reappropriation of colonial rationality that perpetuated subjection according to colonial stratifications (Mbembe 2001: 42).

Post-independence Africa shows how authoritarianism has been bolstered with populism and nativism to stave off popular discontent over the lack of development. The broken promises of developmental nationalism caused widespread public disillusionment, as Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) explains. State nationalist attempts to subsume differences within imposed singular national identities failed. African nationalist elites reverted to nativism, that is, to elevate indigeneity and ethnicity as criteria for political inclusion in a bid to control restive populations. As such, nationalist elites continued the logic of the racial order into which Western colonialism had inducted African subjects, as first elucidated by Frantz Fanon (1986 [1952]; 2004 [1963]). Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes African populism as a political reaction to reassert control over populations by containing discontent over lack of socio-economic transformation.

The shift toward democracy only started after the debt crisis of the 1970s and the imposed structural adjustment programs of the 1980s reduced resources for patronage. From the late 1980s, as part of the third wave of democratization, a growing number of African countries moved to hold elections, adopt laws to entrench rights and create institutions to protect those rights. By the mid-2010s, about a quarter of African states were politically liberalized – despite high levels of inequality and poverty that are regarded as poor indicators for democracy (Cheeseman 2016). However, from the 2010s onwards, democratic backsliding can be seen in anti-democratic populism and faux versions of democracy such as electoral authoritarianism. Similar to Latin American and Eastern European "neo-democracies," disillusionment in democracy has become notable because of the perceived inability of democratic institutions to drive socio-economic reform (Taguieff 1997).

SOUTH AFRICA AMID DEMOCRATIC AND NEOLIBERAL FORCES

Southern Africa was the last region on the continent to emerge from colonialism when Portugal finally withdrew from Mozambique and Angola in 1975, and when the cluster of settler-colonial states including Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South-West Africa (Namibia), and South Africa belatedly held one person-one vote elections in, respectively, 1980, 1989, and 1994. Roger Southall (2013) finds post-liberation democracy weakening in these three states due to the following factors: colonial legacies of poverty and inequality and the limits to transformation imposed by transitional arrangements; and the cultures and ideologies of liberation movements-turned-governments and their ambivalence toward constitutionalism. Focusing in on South Africa, it seems to be on the same challenging path of unmet developmental needs as other African postcolonies. This is despite an explicit inclusion of socio-economic rights in the democratic Constitution, adopted in 1996.

The apartheid state (1948–94) was based on parliamentary sovereignty with which white settler domination was entrenched. The transition from apartheid was negotiated by the outgoing settler minority ruling party, the National Party, and the liberation movements, led by the African National Congress (ANC). The negotiations produced a constitutional democratic state, in which the Constitution formed the highest authority and hence the basis of sovereignty.

Postapartheid democratic constitutionalism centers on a constitution which contains the liberal principles of separation of powers, the rule of law, and equality before the law. It is also, unusually, a social democratic constitution. It contains second generation socio-economic rights alongside the legal affordance of redress of inequalities, most prominently to overturn the race-class inequality bequeathed by the apartheid system of institutionalized racist economic dispossession and exploitation. Necessarily, socio-economic rights are to be realized in a progressive manner, based on state capacity. Notably, however, the Constitution allows for the expropriation of property in the public interest and without compensation, thereby directly addressing colonial dispossession (Davis and Klare 2024).

The arrival at this Constitution was part of the third wave of democratization, which in the early 1990s precipitated the triumphalist claim of a liberal "end of history" alongside intensified globalization of neoliberal capitalism. In the wake of the withdrawal of both Western anti-communist support for the outgoing National Party (NP) and Soviet support for the incoming ANC, these contenders had to adapt to changed global conditions. The NP capitulated due to a range of factors, and discarded its future vision of "power-sharing" in which the white minority would have held a parliamentary veto on policies and executive decisions. The ANC's democratic vision of majoritarian "people's power" came to pass, but with the Constitution as the highest authority, and it had to tone down ambitions to establish a Leninist command state. Ironically, the year of the adoption of the Constitution also confirms the ANC's official shift to neoliberal capitalism. In its position as majority party in government, it approved the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) neoliberal macroeconomic framework in 1996. Postapartheid policies subsequently deracialized the upper echelons of the economy and grew the Black middle class but failed to substantively improve the lives of more than half of the population, who remained mired in poverty. The ANC government failed to utilize the powers enabled by democratic constitutionalism sufficiently and effectively to address persistent socio-economic inequality (van der Westhuizen 2024). Hence, at the milestone of 30 years of constitutional democracy, the postapartheid social compact was under immense pressure as South Africa struggled with one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world. The situation is comparable to that in Eastern European postsocialist states as described by Don Kalb (2019), particularly insofar as a crisis in social reproduction and the problem

of surplus populations, previously existing in South Africa but exacerbated by neoliberalism, prepared the ground for a cultural and ethnic backlash.

Ten years into South Africa's democracy, while Africa was still awash with the third wave of democratization, John Saul (2005: 83) already sounded a pessimistic note that resonates with Polanyi's critique of the danger of disconnecting politics from the economy: "Should we not admit that it is in fact hard to be sanguine about the prospects for the social and economic transformation of Africa under the current regime of neoliberalism and global-market hegemony?" Saul's analysis speaks to that of Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995), who criticizes liberal democracy as diminishing democracy through the empowerment of corporations to pursue profit without responsibility. Hence, capitalist economics is rendered politically unaccountable, to the disadvantage of other social spheres. Michelle Williams (2021: 3) underlines the necessity of "limiting the economy's power over these other realms." In South Africa's case, Saul (2005) was concerned that any sense of greater social inclusion and shared citizenship established through the political imagination of constitution-making had already been slipping away due to the "fragmenting logic of 'underdevelopment' and of peripheral capitalism" (p. 67). He criticized both mainstream and leftist academic authors for their errors in analysis: the former for separating the "political science of democratisation" from the "political economy of democratisation," and the latter for reducing the political science of democratization to political economy and therefore not taking account sufficiently of factors beyond class (p. 84).

The neoliberal mainstream's avoidance of political economy indeed contributes to a misreading of the real material reasons that underpin the rise in authoritarian populisms. Neoliberal politics marginalizes "undeserving" groups and individuals while underestimating authoritarian populists and the traction that they might gain with such marginalized people at the intersections of class with race, ethnicity, and gender (Mondon and Winter 2020; van der Westhuizen et al. 2023). The door is opened to populist anger by the "unresolved opposition … within liberal and neoliberal governmentality" between deserved and undeserved opportunities and privileges, given the neoliberal denial of the "universal expectation that governments should take care of populations" (Chatterjee 2020: 59). In the neoliberal imaginary, the market economy is not complementary to liberal democracy but an alternative to it, with citizens becoming consumers and political decisions being replaced by private interests and consumer preferences (Hobsbawm 2007: 104). No attention is paid to the "social and human consequences of unfettered global capitalism" (p. 110). Existing political mechanisms of electoral democracy with unaccountable technocratic elites cannot meet the challenges of inequality: "the solution or mitigation of these problems will require – it must require – measures for which almost certainly no support will be found by counting votes or mea-

suring consumer preferences. This is not an encouraging prospect either for the longer term prospects of democracy or for those of the globe" (Hobsbawm 2007: 113–14). Electoral participation drops as citizens opt for direct action that bypasses representative government (p. 105).

The days of military dictatorship to solve such a crisis are over, according to Hobsbawm. This is where the authoritarian populist leader steps in, appealing to "the people" by promising to embody and enact their will. Indeed, democracies do not come to an end "at the hands of tanks and generals, but of elected governments themselves" (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021: 274). Constituencies are mobilized but not to solve developmental crises, as Saul (2005: 72) points out in relation to South Africa. Instead, we see a politics of cultural-nationalist translation of "socio-economic contradictions into starkly racial terms [which do not solve] structural problems but prove to be attractive in some popular circles." This global political trend manifested in the figure of Jacob Zuma, the fourth president of the democratic era.

THE ANC'S SLIDING LEGITIMACY AND ITS CONFLICTED RELATIONSHIP WITH DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONALISM

Similar to surveys in Latin America (Lupu et al. 2021), an increasing number of South Africans would be willing to forego democracy if an autocratic government would establish "law and order" and provide housing and jobs, according to the Afrobarometer survey (Moosa and Hofmeyr 2021). This has manifested in South Africans increasingly withdrawing from elections since the first democratic election in 1994, with the voting percentage dropping to 37 percent in the 2024 national election when counting all eligible voters. After ruling for 30 years, the ANC lost its absolute majority, plummeting to 40 percent in 2024 as primarily ANC voters became disillusioned with electoral democracy. An explanation could be found in the limited redistributive effect that ANC policies such as Black economic empowerment (BEE) had on socio-economic inequality. BEE and various related policies benefited a new social class of politically connected individuals, created through ethno-racially determined "cadre deployment" (Southall 2013: 337). As the promised improvement in lives failed to materialize, the party's authority was eroded and it was unable to contain mass aspirations within formal channels of politics, such as electoral and parliamentary processes. Communities continued to seek accountability from the ruling elite, however, with the country becoming known as one of the most protest intensive in the world (Powell et al. 2015). The erosion of ANC authority could also be attributed to its instrumentalist approach to the historically excluded majority, with mobilization sought only to advance party or factional interests (Reddy 2015: 79). "The people" serves as the legitimizing authority in populism, and in the South African example this is as defined

by the ANC in its conception of itself as the embodiment of the will of the people (van der Westhuizen 2016). This "people" is an ideologically circumscribed collective, consisting of compliant persons ("our people" is the phrase used by ANC leaders) guided by the cadres of the vanguard party who possess the correct vision of what a transformed society would be. A social hierarchy is created with the party elite raised above the general party membership, and party members standing in a top-down relation to "our people," who are in turn elevated in relation to the general citizenry. The cult of the leader is central, with the leader as the embodiment of the movement. Dissent against the liberation movement is interpreted as disloyalty to "our people," as personified by the party and its leader. Thiven Reddy (2015: 34) draws on Frantz Fanon to say that:

> In order to retain state power, nationalist leaders inevitably gravitated towards mobilisational politics and promised state favours in electoral periods, aiming to strengthen the link to their followers. This mode of engagement, in which popular support is filtered through charisma and loyalty to individual personalities and/or factions in the party, encourages personalised forms of political interactions. However, power-holders suspect and denigrate those outside the circle, contributing to the uncivil discourses that have become increasingly prominent within the dominant party and its relationship to its supporters.

The disillusionment with democracy was also due to ANC ambivalence about constitutional democracy, as identified by Southall. Similar to other African nationalist parties, the ANC's struggle again apartheid was focused on national self-determination and majoritarianism rather than democracy (Southall 2013). The ANC in particular pursued the Soviet notion of a "national democratic revolution" (NDR), geared toward a command economy in which "the central state should control all the levers of power" (Engel and Saunders 2023: 343). The ANC hence had a conflicted relationship with the system of democratic constitutionalism created after apartheid.

As can be gleaned from this discussion, the nationalist party loomed large during the first three decades after the democratic transition. This mirrored post-independence developments on the African continent but with a one-party dominant system rather than a single-party system, as elsewhere. With the NDR dictating hegemony over all three spheres of the political, economic, and social to be the overriding goal, the ANC violated the liberal principle of separation between party and state, in a resonance with authoritarian leaders such as Turkey's Erdoğan and India's Modi. A "party-state," anathema to liberal democracy, was created through the merger of government and party, of state bureaucracy and the masses, as nationalist leaders' principal instruments of

rule (Southall 2013: 14). Ivor Chipkin (2009: 49) uses the term "nationalist state" to capture the phenomenon of the liberation movement becoming the dominant state apparatus. These processes were already underway during the first ANC presidency of Nelson Mandela, when Thabo Mbeki as deputy president employed a paradoxical mixture of neoliberal technocracy and Leninist commandism to centralize power. He further strengthened the concentration of power in the state presidency after he succeeded Mandela, creating a powerful platform for Zuma's approach of economic predation buttressed by ethno-racial essentialism when he became president in 2009.

From Mbeki to Zuma we witness a shift between two versions of the NDR, both of which stand in tension to democratic constitutionalism, as discussed by Daryl Glaser (2017). Constitutional democracy in South Africa brings a social imperative to liberalism, insisting that "the realisation of liberal values such as freedom and equal rights required state intervention to ensure a more even distribution of resources in society" (p. 280). "If core liberal rights bound majorities with negative prohibitions, the new rights bound majorities and their representatives with positive obligations of social provision" (p. 281). These obligations include the right to health, education, water, and housing. Democracy is understood as participatory democracy, which compels broad-based public consultation on laws and policies. Constitutionalism constrains simple majoritarianism, which is made beholden to rule-bound institutions, of which the Constitutional Court is the apex institution.

The ANC's NDR was the counterpoint to democratic constitutionalism. The NDR is of particular interest in addressing the phenomenon of illiberalism. Before its banning in 1960, the ANC held a liberal orientation. In exile and in alliance with the South African Communist Party, the ANC adopted a Leninist and anti-liberal orientation, influenced by radical nationalist and Afro-Marxist postcolonial regimes across the rest of Africa (p. 283). The NDR is derived from Soviet theory in which a "Marxist class project … [and] a nationalist, anticolonial" project became allied during the twentieth century (p. 276) as part of the global attack on imperialist Western capitalist powers in the twentieth century. Marxism-Leninism was adapted to accommodate the question of national determination in anti-colonial struggles (p. 277). The NDR hence consists of the following three elements: the "national" against external colonizing forces; the "popular," referencing the mobilizing of "the people"; and the "democratic," which refers to "collective self-determination under bourgeois, popular or proletarian democracy" (p. 278).

Within the NDR, two versions of the "revolution" emerge: democratic versus authoritarian. Mbeki and Zuma served as the respective protagonists of these two strands. According to Glaser (2017: 275), the democratic NDR strand is amenable to democratic constitutionalism in that it acknowledges a popular mandate as the basis of authority. It also abides by procedural, "liberal-

democratic rules of permissible political action." This strand understands "the people" as a "civic-territorial rather than ethno-racial" diverse and plural collective "entitled recursively to decide between a range of futures for itself" (p. 275). In contrast, the authoritarian strand of the NDR opposes constitutional democracy, interpreting constitutional strictures on majoritarianism as "counter-revolutionary" due to the impediments on vanguardist directivism. The Constitution is interpreted as "selling out" to white and capitalist interests and is challenged with an "anti-institutional populism and a practice of low-level civil insurgency" (p. 284). This strand of the NDR is ethnic-nationalist, advancing "a differentiated and hierarchical citizenship … [that] privileges particular ethno-racial subjects and encourages group chauvinism and division" (p. 290). "'The people' is understood as struggling with the aim to represent themselves as distinct from others, marked by language, religion, lifestyle or physiognomy" (p. 289).

While Glaser's distinction is borne out with reference to historical fault lines in the ANC, it is not as clear-cut as he suggests. The faction amenable to constitutionalism, associated with Thabo Mbeki as the second postapartheid president, also stands accused of undermining the Constitution, first, through the neoliberal GEAR policy, of which he was the main champion, and second, through paralyzing or politicizing key constitutional institutions. He is implicated in interference in the democratic parliament to prevent investigation into corruption during the first large-scale purchase of arms in the late 1990s. He also politicized state entities such as the National Prosecuting Authority and the police in his bid to protect a former police commissioner, an ally of his, from prosecution for corruption. The next section grapples with the authoritarian strand, of which his successor Jacob Zuma is representative.

THE RISE OF THE POSTCOLONIAL POPULIST RIGHT IN SOUTH AFRICA: ZUMA AND THE MK PARTY

In South Africa, in the figure of Zuma, a form of populism has arisen that affirms colonial ethno-racial and patriarchal gender and sexual norms, which succeeded in stitching together constituencies across class divisions, as well as across urban and rural divisions. Zuma emerges as a prototype of populism as a style of politics, leading the way with strategies subsequently noted in countries as diverse as the USA, India, Turkey, and Hungary. From 2005, when Zuma's political fightback campaign started, he adopted strategies that have since become the global playbook for right-wing populist demagoguery: appealing to sections of the population suffering the socio-economic fallout of neoliberal capitalism by positioning himself similarly as a victim of the establishment who will fight for "the people"; promising a return to an imagined past of cultural glory and heteropatriarchal order; advancing economic nationalism bolstered

by ethnic, racial, and nativist scapegoating; and claiming power unfettered by liberal democratic constraints, to enable a personalistic program of economic predation.

Bello in his discussion of counterrevolution in the Global South points out that "class interest can play second fiddle to culture and ideology in driving a counterrevolutionary process" (2019: 9). Under Mbeki, internal party dissent was blocked with the opportunistic use of "revolutionary discipline" to enforce adherence to a reinterpreted NDR that justified the neoliberal orientation of the ANC (Nash 2020). The revolt led by Zuma promised "radical economic transformation" (RET) in a renewed interpretation of the NDR competing with that of Mbeki. However, once Zuma became president, the RET intent transpired to be economic predation through state capture. Zuma led the most sustained attack on the democratic Constitution, but instead of a purported alternative political imagination with which to overturn apartheid injustice, it was driven by internecine battles about self-enrichment through extraction of state resources. Following Zuma's removal as ANC leader, he regrouped and formed the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party, with which he continued his campaign, challenging the fundamentals of South Africa's constitutional democracy. The MK Party's explicit aim, as stated in its 2024 election manifesto, was "scrapping" the 1996 Constitution – which includes a Bill of Rights and so-called Chapter 9 institutions aimed at safeguarding citizens in both their vertical relations with the state and their horizontal relations with one another – and appointing unelected officials to parliament on the basis of bloodline and gender.

Zuma ousted Mbeki as ANC leader in 2007 with the help of a "coalition of the wounded," combining the forces of Black nationalism and communism which had historically jostled for dominance inside the ANC. While the antagonism toward Mbeki may at first seem ideological, as a response to his imposition of the neoliberal GEAR, "neither faction was defined by any particular ideology or policy orientation" (Cooper 2015: 155; see also Lodge 2006):

> Whilst many communists and trade unionists undoubtedly believed sincerely in the need to pursue a pro-poor agenda, their antagonism towards Mbeki was derived as much from his tendency to marginalise and exclude critics as it was from his association with neo-liberal orthodoxy. This tendency also attracted to Zuma's cause many people who made little pretence at advocating a distinct, or even coherent, ideological position. Patronage, rather than policy influence, motivated many of the party officials seeking Mbeki's deposition. (Cooper 2015: 155)

With Zuma's masculinist everyday charm and invocation of nostalgic struggle militarism as their beachhead, a disparate and ideologically contradictory alliance of leaders congregated who had felt slighted by the "aloof"

Mbeki. These included the South African Communist Party, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, rural-based traditional leaders,[1] veterans of the defunct armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe, the ANC Women's League, and the ANC Youth League. Notably, the alliance included provincial ANC leadership that felt excluded from patronage opportunities and Black capitalists who similarly felt sidelined in BEE deals (Hart 2013: 201). It also included exile-era ANC intelligence operatives, hailing from Zuma's days as head of Mbokodo, the internal security wing.

Transforming himself from a low-key and unremarkable presence during the 1990s negotiations for democracy and as deputy president to Mbeki, Zuma reinvented himself as a pro-poor "man of the left," a traditionalist wearing leopard skins, anti-elitist and uneducated (a simple 'herd boy' without formal education) (Hart 2013: 203). He also projected himself as a victim, "unfairly targeted and persecuted by those who want to prevent him from becoming president" (Breakfast and Chindoga 2021: 103). He countered with an imagined past of anti-apartheid struggle glory by adopting the song "Awaleth' Umshini Wami" ("Bring Me My Machine Gun") as his signature tune at gatherings: it was a "powerful, unruly song – with its weighty solemnity carrying the gravitas of a Zulu war song, the weight of heavy masculinity, echoes of the just struggle for a free country, shards of the anger of those who feel the new dispensation has brought them nothing" (Gunner 2009: 48).

He was credited in academic literature as creating a version of "ethno-populism" that brought together marginalized rural constituencies with disaffected urban workers (Cheeseman 2016). However, this interpretation misses the gendered and sexual consequences that Zuma's discourse of ethno-racialism enabled, as communicated by "Umshini Wami" first being sung during his trial in 2006 on charges of raping a friend's daughter, creating associations of a hypersexualized masculinist militarism (Hart 2013). His rallying cry included being a "100% Zulu boy," which fitted with his testimony in court about the sexual duties of Zulu men in relation to Zulu women's "corral." During the same period, he indicated that the "correct" way to treat gay men is to strike them down physically – something that he already "knew" when he was young. Zuma's interpretation of Zuluness included an insistence on returning women to their biological "destiny" of motherhood: for example, he declared he would not want daughters who were not "trained" in domestic duties and not able to fulfill their ordained roles as mothers.

Hence, on the basis of idealized visions of a precolonial rural homestead, Zuma as populist capitalized on the social unease brought by democracy's challenge to hierarchies of age, gender, and sexuality within ethnic frames. This social unease was greatly exacerbated by the economic dislocation of rural communities due to neoliberal deindustrialization (Hickel 2015; see also Scheiring and Csathó in this volume). Socio-economic collapse was attributed to

democracy as bringing about "a kind of social death," provoking an anti-liberal backlash (p. 133). Moreover, Zuma exhibited an

> ability to connect the personal and political in ways that talk to South Africa's "crisis of social reproduction" … [he] embodied a vision of an active state that is both modern/democratic, having abolished apartheid, but also incorporative of a past (somewhat imagined) world where young men and women were more respectful of gendered and generational hierarchies – and when the young enjoyed more economic prospects and domestic respect. (Hunter 2011: 1121)

In the process, Zuma deployed a discourse of normalization of gender-based violence by reasserting colonial stereotypes about Black women, as Pumla Gqola (2015) shows.

The Zuma faction's *raison d'être* was revealed as not only sexual but also economic predation. Under the guise of economic transformation and Black majoritarianism, Zuma in his nine years as president presided over a network of ANC politicians, public servants, and private sector companies that siphoned off more than R1 trillion from the country's state-owned enterprises. The onslaught was so comprehensive as to warrant the term "state capture," referring to the "extensive repurposing of state institutions to redirect rents away from development and into the hands of an increasingly confident power elite that intentionally operates in extra-legal and anti-constitutional ways" (State Capacity Research Project 2017: 3). State capture amounted to a "silent coup": "both undermining the democratic and constitutional form of the South African state as well as weakening the capability of government and of public institutions – the very administrations that progressive policies, for example, in health or education need for effective implementation" (p. 53). The abuse of state resources to appease rent-seeking spun out of control, to the extent that South Africa's debt-to-GDP ratio increased from 27.8 percent in 2008 (when Mbeki left office) to 49.9 percent in 2018 (when Zuma left office). During the same time, social indicators worsened, for example, the proportion of children under five years old stunted due to malnutrition grew to 27 percent.

Hence, this portrayal of economic predation is not done lightly. Peter Evans (1989) describes economic predation as extraction with a negative impact on development:

> such large amounts of otherwise investable surplus [are extracted] and so little in the way of "collective goods" [provided] in return that [the predation] do[es] indeed impede economic transformation … Those who control the state apparatus seem to plunder without any more regard for the welfare of the citizenry than a predator has for the welfare of its prey. (Evans 1989: 562)[2]

This led Mbeki (2024), in an uncharacteristic public attack, to label his nemesis a "counter-revolutionary" and "a wolf in sheep's skin." Apart from law enforcement agencies and the courts, Zuma also targeted the South African Revenue Services (SARS) for incapacitation:

> Obviously, the destruction of SARS would mean the destruction of the democratic State, given its unique place in terms of the provision of state revenues … [W]e have a Head of Government who joins a process to reduce the very revenues he needs to enable the Government to discharge its responsibilities, up to the point of the possible collapse of that Government. (Mbeki 2024)

When Zuma's misdemeanors as president started to come to light, he adjusted his rhetoric to further emphasize redistribution while targeting the Constitution and, by implication, the agencies responsible for law enforcement (Breakfast and Chindoga 2021). His "speeches [espousing] expropriation of land without compensation are evident from the beginning of 2015 after the 2014 Public Protector's findings that he should pay back the taxpayer's money that was used to upgrade his Nkandla [private homestead]" (p. 101). Therefore, the RET faction targeted the Constitution in their bid to weaken the rule of law "to subvert and bypass constitutionally entrenched institutions" to continue misappropriating state resources without legal consequence (State Capacity Research Project 2017: 10).

Indeed, since being first charged in 2005 with corruption related to receiving bribes in the 1990s arms deal, he adopted what is called a "Stalingrad legal defence and litigation" strategy.[3] Zuma is on record for questioning whether the judges of the Constitutional Court have the power to make decisions in cases concerning him as president (The Economist 2011). Rebuffing the constitutional principles of the rule of law, equality before the law, and the separation of powers even while he was under oath as president to uphold the Constitution, he successively attempted to create constitutional crises, for example: (1) the Nkandla affair (illegal improvements to his homestead) – he paralyzed parliament and compromised government departments; (2) the Waterkloof military base landing (he allowed the Gupta family, who facilitated state capture on his behalf, to land a passenger jet plane at this national key point) – he undermined state sovereignty; (3) his refusal to appear before the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector – he dared law enforcement agencies to act against him and when they did by arresting him for contempt of court, his faction in July 2021 unleashed unprecedented sabotage, looting, and arson in three of nine South African provinces. More than 350 people died and at least 2.8 billion euros were lost in revenue and infrastructure damage.

Zuma's relative domination of South Africa's political landscape since 2007, when he was elected as ANC president, coincided with the mass withdrawal of especially ANC voters from the electoral process. Unlike what Hobsbawm (2007: 102) observes, this should not be read as political disaffection. As mentioned, South Africa is a protest intensive society, with people redirecting energies of agitation by reverting to direct channels of appeal to political elites. What Helen Dawson (2014: 538) calls a "battle for patronage from below" was being waged. The findings of Mcebisi Ndletyane's (2015) research are worth quoting:

> [T]he ANC has become a political machine. Its main preoccupation is seizure of political power. Premium is placed not on what the party is able to achieve with state power, but largely on the spoils of office. Political power has become less of an instrument to transform society along certain values, but more for self-aggrandisement … [P]oliticians are not the only ones involved in patronage politics. Ordinary people too are involved. Their involvement is a function of their dependence on the state for livelihood. They get jobs in return for supporting politicians in their contests. This is a reciprocal relationship … Whilst mutually beneficial, such patron-client relations are, however, detrimental to social cohesion and civic participation [as] local communities split into beneficiaries and losers, and enthusiasm for participation in public institutions is dampened. (p. 115; also see Anciano 2018)

The leftist posture of the RET faction was reinforced with nativism, which advances that African decolonization can be achieved through a return to idealized precolonial Indigenous ways of being and doing. Nativism's hope is the reclaiming of Black Africans' humanity after the ravages of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, claiming an essentialist African identity by imagining that "their race, traditions, and customs confer to them a peculiar self, irreducible to that of any other human group" (Mbembe 2006 in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007: 15): "Nativism is ranged against the remnants of settler colonialism and apartheid represented by the white dominated academy, the farm owned by white people, public discourse dominated by white neo-liberal scholars, as well as the mine and industry still owned by whites" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007: 20).

Nativism is a resource for African populism, which takes the form of a "retrospectively applied populism" that repeatedly pitches political elites against former imperial powers to claim an infinite right to rule (Melber 2022). Old hostilities are repackaged "under the cover of transforming and unravelling the legacies of the past" (Reddy 2015: 80). In the South African case, Zuma offered "white monopoly capital" as the source of poor people's woes. His nativist discourse was purportedly anti-colonial, aimed at the ousting of the colonial and apartheid establishment as defined by race. But "white monopoly capital" was

a term promoted by the notorious British public relations firm Bell Pottinger hired by Zuma's associates, the corruption-accused Gupta brothers (AmaBhungane 2017).

The other target of nativism is foreign African nationals, which also comes to light in relation to "Umshini Wami." Afrophobia[4] was building up already at the start of the democratic era, in political discourses and with occasional bouts of violence (van der Westhuizen 2023a). The first major outbreak of Afrophobic violence was in 2008, not long after Zuma's election as ANC president. "Umshini Wami" featured as rallying call in the attacks (Hart 2013). Since then, thousands of foreign Africans in postapartheid South Africa have been subjected to killings, assault, looting, and displacement, combined with ANC accusations of foreign Africans harboring political motivations or even plots against the state. In 2013, Zuma while president told a university audience: "We can't think like Africans in Africa generally. We're in Johannesburg … This is not some national road in Malawi." The July 2021 violence instigated by Zuma-aligned forces (subsequently described as an attempted coup by the sitting president, Cyril Ramaphosa) started with attacks on foreign African nationals. Nativism works as a radically exclusionary form of nationalism, which is a point of convergence with the illiberal right in Europe and the USA. A continuing colonial ethno-racial logic is mapped onto national inclusion/exclusion, with new political insiders and outsiders created along racial and ethnic lines. Here we see the combination of nativism and authoritarianism, core to the right. Notably, charges of foreignness are also directed at South Africans of minority ethnic groups. Victims of both official and informal xenophobia include poor South Africans who are of the wrong political affiliation but also of the "wrong" ethnicity, "wrong" degree of "blackness" or "in the wrong place" (Naicker 2016). In this imaginary, marked by a "pernicious racial exclusivity," "the people" is more "akin to '*our* people' and is meant to delineate those who belong from those who do not (immigrants, outsiders, ethnic minorities)" (Vincent 2011: 4, emphasis added). Moses Ochonu (2020: 513) describes it as "post-colonial elite nationalist demagoguery":

> A toxic Black nationalism marked by Black-on-Black racism has supplanted apartheid White nationalism, but both have as their constant targets Black bodies that are perceived as foreign and are thus outside the boundaries of a designated special community of belonging. That community was exclusively White under apartheid. Today, it is multiracial, but it is still constructed as exceptional. In other words, South African nationalist exceptionalism, originally posited by the architects of apartheid as a divide-and-conquer strategy, has been carried forward by some Black superintendents of post-apartheid South Africa.

Ramaphosa, after gaining the upper hand in the ANC, succeeded in pressuring Zuma to resign as president of the country. Zuma subsequently cast off all pretentions to democratic constitutionalism to form the first political party to explicitly adopt the cancellation of the Constitution as a policy position, as expressed in its election manifesto. Building on his success with mixing nostalgic nativism and left posturing, and also by invoking anti-apartheid struggle mythology, Zuma in a signature move named his new political vehicle the uMkhonto weSizwe[5] (MK) Party after the disbanded military wing of the ANC. The MK Party's manifesto advances that the 1996 Constitution be "scrapped" as it is "liberal" and "colonial," providing "extensive legal protections for the former oppressor" and "unelected institutions" (read courts) as "the true wielders of power" (MK Party 2024a). The NDR-informed RET posture is reactivated, with reference to "white monopoly capitalists," the "nationalisation" of the Reserve Bank and defeating the "unconstrained power … of money." Nativist claiming of the nation as Black transpires in repeated references to white South Africans as an "alien" group, with its unavoidable xenophobic ring that suggests a denial of white South Africans' citizenship. Doing away with the Constitution is promised in order to also do away with the "legal protections for the former oppressor."

The MK Party followed Zuma's Stalingrad strategy of subverting the rule of law through frivolous court challenges. In a move that reminds of Donald Trump in the USA, the MK Party cast aspersions over the election results before the 2024 election, threatening with violence if the party did not achieve "two-thirds of the vote." It spread videos on social media with allegations that vote rigging had taken place in KwaZulu Natal. While it withdrew its legal challenge of the results, it embarked on a "Where's my vote?" campaign, "as a response to the growing frustration and confusion among citizens who voted overwhelmingly for the uMkhonto weSizwe Party, yet find themselves governed by a coalition they did not elect" (MK Party 2024b). Zuma challenged the foundational rules that ensure free and fair elections in the run-up to the elections:

> If you are black and you do not vote with fellow blacks, you will die … If it was up to me, I would say every black person must pass before me to see which party they voted for and stop this thing of a secret vote. Why would you hide when you vote for something you love? When we govern, we will change voting laws and there will be no secret voting system.

Zuma's position on the basic democratic premise of open elective processes is confirmed by his decision not to allow a competitive leadership selection process in the MK Party. Instead, leaders are to be handpicked and "deployed" as he sees fit (Manjeya 2024). This fits with observations on the deterioration of the ANC's own internal democracy during his tenure as party president, as wit-

nessed in leadership elections (Cooper 2015). Votes were manipulated through bribery and the creation of ghost members or branches, among others.

This top-down exercise of power yet again supports an analysis of Zuma as a personification of authoritarian populism. Drawing on Bello's work, does this qualify Zuma for the label of fascism? For Jonathan Hyslop (2020), making sense of African authoritarian populism in comparison with European fascism,

> certain core ideological themes … appear in all extreme right movements: the "need" for strong leadership, xenophobia and racism, hostility to organized labor, resistance to gender equality, the dream of a past golden age threatened by modernist degeneracy, the notion of the good rural people versus the corrupt urban world. (p. 467)

Bello (2019: 8) similarly regards the extreme right, the authoritarian right, and fascism as possessing family resemblances that render them variants of "counterrevolution." Among permutations of counterrevolution, the Zuma faction seems to best fit the more comprehensive version that Bello (p. 9) identifies: "what is being rejected by the counterrevolutionary coalition is not just a class-based movement but a whole political and ideological paradigm that is seen as either having disrupted a 'natural' social order or failed to fulfill the aspirations of those who initially had faith in it." It may be argued that Zuma does advance a cross-class alliance of urban and rural poor. However, given his faction's implication in predatory extraction and associated destruction of the state's developmental capabilities, the ends toward which his cross-class alliance is constituted is not as a transformative force against poverty but to reinforce his power abuse.

I concur with Ernesto Laclau's (2005) analysis of populism as not inherently anti-democratic but politically contingent, depending on historical conditions.[6] Particularly useful here is Laclau's (1977) earlier work on populism differentiating between populism of the *dominant* classes or of the *dominated* classes. The former variant is "always highly repressive" as it generates antagonisms simply to manipulate the need for social change to its own narrow ends (also see Hart 2013). Measured against Bello's definition of a fascist leader, Zuma fits: (1) a charismatic individual with strong inclinations toward authoritarian rule, (2) who is engaged in or supports the systematic violation of basic human, civil, and political rights, (3) who derives strength from a heated multi-class mass base; and (4) who pursues a political project that contradicts the fundamental values and aims of liberal democracy or social democracy (p. 104).

How does this fit with the notion of the "illiberal right"? Illiberal democracy is here understood as referring to "countries which still adhere to the forms and rituals of democracy, such as elections, but whose actual practice – free and fair elections, civil and political liberties, and, perhaps most importantly, the rule

of law – is questionable" (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021: 274). South Africa still follows the liberal precepts of the 1996 Constitution, but it is clear from the analysis so far that the Zuma faction's onslaught sought to undo this, which could have the effect of turning South Africa into an illiberal democracy, using Nyyssönen and Metsälä's definition.

The notion of illiberal democracy resonates strongly with the concept of "democracy capture," which describes a similar phenomenon but grounded in the African context. Developed by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (2021) in a study of Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria, "democracy capture" describes the interplay between corruption and the degradation of democracy to make sense of how destructive elite manipulation of political and economic processes feeds into an onslaught on democracy. Democracy capture (1) involves "distortion" and "corrosion" of democratic politics, principles, and institutions to favor elites at the expense of populations, and undermine democratic political culture or prevent it from emerging (p. 10); and (2) is

> the way in which interconnected processes of clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, the personalization of politics and state capture impact on the democratic process – and highlights how the image of democracy is used to legitimate this process … it can create a vicious cycle, in which the deliberate actions and practices of those in control of the state undermines the prospects for democratic renewal and so reinforces the hollowing out of key democratic institutions. (p. 10)

Democracy capture may be a more apt term, and because the Zuma faction is self-consciously anti-liberal, as opposed to "illiberal." This has to do with the anti-colonial struggle genealogy that Zuma, the RET faction, and now the MK Party claim as central to their existence. The concluding section makes sense of the seeming ideological confusion of an anti-colonial position that is "right wing."

CONCLUSION: ANTI-COLONIAL RIGHT WING?

Zuma demonstrates "that nationalism can equally serve the purposes of authoritarian regimes emerging both from imperialist histories and from histories of anticolonial struggle and state socialism" (Hyslop 2020: 467). The populist casting of the Zuma faction's nationalist politics is relevant because it allows the necessary ideological flexibility that provides a cover to the authoritarianism that informs this politics. Populism works as a bridging style of politics between left and right (Vincent 2011). As Partha Chatterjee (2020: 59) expresses it, "an unpredictable mix of social democratic and neoliberal tactics, as well as rightwing and leftwing ideologies, is fundamental to present-day

populist politics." Ideological flexibility, if not promiscuity, increases with the conjoining of populism and nationalism. "Ultra-nationalist populisms look much the same, whatever their background" (Hyslop 2020: 2). Referencing the ideological "emptiness" of populism, Vincent (2011) argues that populists seek to capitalize on disgruntlements by opposing whatever the predominant values might be. As the current political orthodoxy in South Africa is democratic constitutionalism with its values of "individual rights, gender equality, tolerance of moral diversity and non-discrimination with respect to religion and lifestyle choice, populist appeals will target these values as being out of touch with the views of 'the people'" (p. 4). These values can then be presented as forced on "the people" by "minority elites" in the judiciary, academic institutions, and the independent media (p. 5).

As populism can take an authoritarian or a democratic form, the practices and effects of the politics must be studied. Historically, a binary approach to anti-colonialism caused leftist scholars to take anti-imperialist discourse at face value instead of confronting politics that in practice served a reactionary, if not fascist, elite at the expense of the population, argues Scarnecchia (2006) with reference to postcolonial Zimbabwe. Recent scholarship serves as a caution against simplifying idealization, showing that Cold War relations in Africa were complex and not reducible to bipolar terms of West versus East or capitalism versus communism; instead, liberation movements were part of an interplay of regional organizations and actors within a network of variable global forces, troubling neat ideological divisions (Saunders et al. 2023). Angolan liberation movement UNITA serves as a case in point, receiving support from China, the USA, and apartheid South Africa. Indeed, even those postcolonial regimes officially pursuing socialism were wielding ideology pragmatically to benefit from Cold War rivalries (Matusevich 2009). Similarly, in apartheid South Africa, political divisions among African nationalists had more to do with organizational competition for influence than with ideological differences, which shifted as and when required (Heffernan 2016). These analyses suggest that ideological malleability was part of African politics before it was identified as a feature of the contemporary far right in the Global North. Such a line of enquiry confirms the usefulness of bringing Africa into analyses of the global right wing.

In the South African liberation movements, challenges to liberal principles such as the rule of law and equality before the law are not new; it is rather a "consistent but submerged thread in ANC thinking" (Vincent 2011: 5). It can be traced to Black nationalist populism as a historical strand within African nationalism, which was resistant to liberal democracy and particularly human rights while supportive of a so-called "people's capitalism" (Halisi 1998). Pan-Africanist thinking influenced Black nationalist populism in South Africa. This link assists in making sense of the seeming oxymoron of an "anti-colonial right-wing" position.

Rita Abrahamsen (2020: 58) argues that Pan-Africanism possesses the necessary material for the creation of a multilateral order that is "more just, equal and rule-bound." But Pan-Africanism is also used to assert sovereignty to shield state repression, and hence cannot be assumed to be progressive. She notes "the intersection of Pan-African notions of difference with the identitarian appeals of the Radical Right, [which] show[s] how in the current political landscape progressivism and nativism blend, laying waste to traditional distinctions between the left and the right" (p. 58). Of specific concern is the nativist strand within Pan-Africanism, which Abrahamsen describes as an "imaginary of a world of distinct races or authentic groups of people each inhabiting their own territory and living according to their own traditions, cultures, and religions" (p. 67). The pressures of globalization have provoked a similar response to elsewhere in the world: "ideas of difference and authenticity have returned to the heart of Pan-African discussions, and in drawing their emotional and rhetorical power from opposition to something 'other', they contain audible echoes of a nativist, racialised imaginary" (p. 69). In South Africa, the Zuma faction and its current manifestation in the MK Party represents this strand. Zuma reanimated this nativism as an alternative to Mbeki's version of the National Democratic Revolution by giving it a class infusion in the form of radical economic transformation. In the MK Party's version, nativism is joined by anti-constitutionalism. All the while, populist cloaking allows for contradictory ideological moves that advance authoritarianism bent on economic predation.

NOTES

1. Customary law under colonialism granted native authorities despotic powers characterized by violence and reinforced by colonial administrations – what Mahmood Mamdani (1996) calls "decentralised despotism." Democratic South Africa has a continuing bifurcated legal system in which rural Black people living under traditional leaders do not enjoy the full civil rights of other citizens, as enshrined in the 1996 Constitution. Various laws have been adopted by the ruling ANC to entrench the authoritarian indirect rule of the apartheid era by maintaining boundaries set during apartheid and concentrating power in the hands of unelected traditional leaders. Contrary to customary practices which accord traditional communities with the status of land rights holders, the law gives traditional leaders sway over natural resources, such as land and water. Traditional leaders can enter into mining or other deals with companies without consulting communities, thereby denying inhabitants of these jurisdictions their property and citizenship rights.
2. In comparison, elites in developmental states "may not be immune to 'rent seeking' or to using some of the social surplus for the ends of incumbents and their friends rather that those of the citizenry as a whole, but on balance, the consequences of their actions promote rather than impeding transformation" (Evans 1989: 563).

3. The abuse of court processes with frivolous litigation and appeals to obstruct, delay, and prevent his prosecution for corruption. See www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/judge-opens-door-for-zuma-trial-delays-despite-damning-stalingrad-findings-against-him-20240830 (accessed May 3, 2024).
4. A more apposite term for African xenophobia is Afrophobia, as it captures the distinct ethno-racial features of this intra-Africa animus.
5. uMkhonto weSizwe translates from the Xhosa and Zulu languages as “spear of the nation.”
6. See my analysis of his protégé Julius Malema in van der Westhuizen (2023b).

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4

Unraveling Liberalisms: Hungarian Insights for America and Elsewhere

Gábor Scheiring and Ábel Csathó

INTRODUCTION

As the European Union's first self-proclaimed illiberal state, Hungary has become a symbol of democratic backsliding. Orbán's model of governance – combining institutional hijacking with economic nationalism – has drawn admiration from populist leaders globally, including Trump and his team. Under Orbán, Hungary has dismantled the institutional safeguards of democracy, turning elections into a facade and transforming the media into an echo chamber for state propaganda. His ability to cement power reflects his political acumen and the structural crises in Hungary's political economy. Deindustrialization, mortality shocks, and the unraveling of liberalism created fertile ground for illiberalism.

The parallels with Trump's America are striking. In both countries, voters disillusioned by economic shocks and rising mortality – exemplified by the epidemic of "deaths of despair" – turned to populist leaders promising radical breaks with the status quo. Trump and Orbán capitalized on these grievances, offering narratives of national revival and scapegoating elites, immigrants, or minorities as the source of societal decline. Their success is not an aberration but a symptom of broader structural crises, what Don Kalb (2023) appositely described as the "double devaluation" of the material and cultural realities of working- and lower-middle-class lives.

Despite the wealth of literature on radical right illiberal populism, at least three critical gaps remain. First, cultural backlash theories dominate the conversation, framing populism as a reactionary response to progressive social change. Scholars like Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart emphasize the role of older, conservative voters opposing the values of younger, liberal generations (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Existing literature on the radical right in Hungary often follows this logic. For instance, in a much-cited contribution, Karácsony and Róna (2011) argued that nationalism and anti-Roma sentiments, rather

than economic grievances, drove Jobbik's support during its rise between 2006 and 2010.

While racism, misogyny, and cultural grievances undeniably play a role, this perspective often overlooks the material conditions that underpin such sentiments. It relies on an ahistorical, decontextualized definition of culture, attempting to elusively capture it by measuring attitudes – those reified, mythical beings supposedly living in people's heads – rather than unpicking them as dynamically changing products of conflictual social relations fractured by the accumulation of capital. Furthermore, a superficial reliance on the cultural backlash theory shifts the blame for illiberal populism on citizens hurt by these globalized processes of capital accumulation. Socio-economic shocks – such as deindustrialization and the concomitant rise of mortality – intersect with cultural dynamics in ways that cultural backlash theories fail to capture (Scheiring et al. 2024). Inspired by Kalb's (2023) notion of double devaluation, this chapter situates cultural grievances within the broader context of social dislocation, thereby revealing how economic shocks shape the symbolic politics of the radical right. Our key theoretical contribution lies in integrating economic, health, and political dimensions into a unified explanation of illiberal populist backlash.

Second, another gap lies in the neglect of health and mortality crises as political phenomena. The concept of "deaths of despair," popularized by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, has transformed our understanding of the health consequences of economic shocks (Case and Deaton 2020). Yet, its political implications remain underexplored. Rising mortality rates are not merely individual tragedies; they are collective indicators of systemic failure. Mortality shocks foster the sense of abandonment that illiberal populists exploit. In this study, we provide novel empirical evidence that the 1990s mortality shock undermined the Socialist Party's support and boosted the popularity of Jobbik in Hungary, mirroring the association between death rates and support for Trump.

Third, much of the existing scholarship treats the USA and Eastern Europe as unique separate cases, often framing populism in the former as an outgrowth of cultural or racial divides and in the latter as a legacy of socialist authoritarianism. This dichotomy obscures the shared global forces at play, including the neoliberal restructuring of economies, the dismantling of welfare states, the erosion of industrial employment, and the attendant devaluation of working-class lives fueling populist backlash in both regions. The experiences of Hungary and the USA reveal that these dynamics are deeply interconnected, producing similar outcomes in different contexts.

In this chapter, we address these gaps by weaving together economic, political, and health dimensions in a comparative analysis of Hungary and the USA. We advance the argument that the interplay between long-term economic

shocks, rising mortality, and the failures of liberalism has paved the way for illiberal populism in both contexts. The chapter leverages unique town-level data from Hungary to provide novel insights into how long-term economic and mortality shocks shaped the collapse of liberal political forces and the rise of illiberalism in Hungary. By juxtaposing the Hungarian and American experiences, the chapter illuminates how these forces transcend regional boundaries, reshaping democracies across the globe.

Before continuing, some conceptual clarifications. In this study, *liberalism* refers to a political philosophy centered on individual freedoms, open markets, and democracy. It includes left-of-center liberalism in the USA, focused on civil rights and regulated capitalism, and the social liberal turn of European social democratic parties, combining market-oriented policies with social justice and welfare commitments. This usage captures the shared ideological framework that has shaped left-of-center liberal politics across the Atlantic. In contrast to liberalism, *illiberalism* refers to a political orientation that challenges liberal democratic norms, emphasizing majoritarianism, nationalism, cultural differences, moral hierarchy, and the erosion of institutional checks and balances. Often synonymous with radical right populism, illiberalism mobilizes economic and cultural grievances to construct exclusionary narratives, targeting elites, minorities, and liberal institutions as adversaries of the "true people."

THE POLITICAL AFTERLIFE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC SHOCKS

We combined insights from Marx, Durkheim, and Polanyi to outline a theoretical framework for analyzing the social consequences of deindustrialization elsewhere (Scheiring and King 2023). The collapse of industrial employment triggers far-reaching disruptions beyond immediate economic losses, reshaping the social fabric and destabilizing communities. Industry has historically functioned as more than a site of production; it served as a foundational institution, organizing social relationships, fostering collective identities, and providing critical infrastructure for social lives. Its disappearance unleashes cascading effects that undermine both social reproduction and political stability. Industrial employment historically provided stable jobs with relatively high wages, forming the economic backbone of communities. Its collapse leads to mass layoffs, rising unemployment, and increasing job insecurity, disproportionately affecting less-educated workers. Unlike service sector jobs, industrial work often came with structured routines and clear career trajectories, which fostered long-term economic security. The skills acquired in manufacturing are poorly transferable to service occupations, leaving displaced workers with limited reemployment opportunities and lower earning potential.

This economic dislocation is compounded by the loss of ancillary benefits once provided by industrial employers. Large industrial plants often contributed to local infrastructure by funding healthcare, education, and housing, particularly in socialist economies like Hungary's. Corporate welfare and ancillary corporate services were also important in ensuring the stability of the Fordist political-economic arrangement in the USA. Mass industrial plant closures not only eliminate these services but also erode the economic base of local governments, leaving communities with dwindling resources to address the growing needs of their populations. Beyond economic impacts, deindustrialization disrupts social cohesion. Industry is a social institution that integrates individuals into networks of mutual support, creating a sense of belonging and shared identity. Industrial workplaces were often hubs of community life, organizing cultural and sports activities, fostering relationships, and anchoring collective identities. We documented elsewhere how the collapse of industries in Hungary during the 1990s hastened the dissolution of workplace and place-based communities, contributing to a broader sense of alienation (Scheiring 2020a). The liquidation of socialist enterprises hastened the erosion of local cultural and social life, severing the ties that had sustained collective solidarity.

Hungary's deindustrialization was among the most severe in postsocialist Eastern Europe. The rapid privatization and collapse of state-owned industries left entire regions economically desolate. Unlike neighboring countries like Czechia and Slovenia, which adopted gradualist restructuring approaches, Hungary's shock therapy policies prioritized market reforms over economic protection (Scheiring 2021). Industrial employment fell by 43 percent between 1988 and 1995, far exceeding the increase in unemployment. Hungary's deindustrialization was devastating by international standards, with almost every second person employed in manufacturing losing their job within less than a decade. Researchers often overlook this deindustrialization shock because the inflow of foreign investment created the impression of successful industrial restructuring in Hungary. Despite the benefits of foreign investment, the employment rate remained chronically low, and wages failed to converge to Western levels until the 2010s (Scheiring 2020b). The shock of the industrial collapse left long-lasting scars on communities, even when multinationals brought some new export activities a decade later.

The socio-economic shock stemming from deindustrialization is one of the most powerful catalysts of the rising demand for a radical break with the liberal status quo. In a recent meta-analysis of the causal evidence on globalization and the populist backlash, we showed that undeniably robust evidence demonstrates the central role of economic insecurity behind the rise of populism (Scheiring et al. 2024). Deindustrialization is not only a short-term economic calamity but also profoundly reshapes the fabric of communities. This lingering effect – what Sheri Linkon (2018) called the half-life of deindustrialization – explains

the delayed timing of the populist backlash. Initially, people in post-industrial areas hoped the much-touted economic reforms would benefit them. They also were typically embedded in networks of labor unions and had access to strong left-of-center party organizations locally. However, these connections frayed with time, and the hope for socio-economic improvements gradually evaporated, and erstwhile left-wing workers turned to the right (Kalb 2011, 2023). Our perspective aligns with Maria Snegovaya's research, which found that when left parties maintained their market-oriented political position for a long time, voters were gradually alienated and ceased to support their respective parties, shifting to the radical right (Snegovaya 2024).

Furthermore, previous research has also shown that the shock of privatization and deindustrialization was a crucial factor behind the elevated death rates in Eastern Europe (Scheiring and King 2023; Scheiring et al. 2023) as well as in the USA (Venkataramani et al. 2020). Even as life chances have improved since the second half of the 1990s, health inequalities have continued to grow, with lingering effects of deindustrialization in left-behind towns (Bíró et al. 2021; Scheiring and King 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that workers' physical and mental suffering in left-behind areas is also a critical correlate of radical populist attitudes and voting in the USA (Bor 2017; Broz et al. 2021; Monnat and Brown 2017). Mortality crises are powerful symbols of systemic failure, amplifying economic grievances and eroding trust in liberal institutions. These crises are not just consequences of economic dislocation but also key drivers of political realignment. By framing physical and mental suffering as evidence of elite indifference and liberal neglect, populist leaders like Orbán and Trump have successfully mobilized these tragedies into narratives of national decline and renewal.

The neoliberal turn of left-of-center parties is a common trajectory across many countries, signaling liberalism's unraveling in the context of deindustrialization, rising socio-economic inequalities, and mortality shocks. This strategic shortcoming of liberal politics plays a crucial role in enabling the rise of the illiberal populist right. In this chapter, we argue that in Hungary and the USA, left-of-center parties, historically rooted in working-class movements, pivoted toward centrist, market-oriented strategies that prioritized globalization, fiscal discipline, and deregulation over the economic security of their traditional bases. This shift alienated working-class voters, particularly in regions devastated by industrial decline, where economic dislocation was compounded by psychosocial stress and rising mortality. By privileging elite-driven narratives of progress – Europeanization in Hungary, free trade in the USA, democracy in both cases – these parties neglected the material and cultural grievances of disenfranchised populations. This failure not only eroded the legitimacy of liberal institutions but also created a political vacuum, which radical right pop-

ulists exploited by framing economic discontent and cultural anxieties within a broader narrative of national decline and renewal.

Concerning our primary empirical case, our central contention is that the political landslide between 2006 and 2010 that consolidated illiberal hegemony in Hungary cannot be understood without considering the long-term political effects of economic and mortality shocks in the early 1990s. The dislocation caused by deindustrialization is not politically neutral. Economic, social, and health shocks create a fertile ground for political realignment, and illiberal populists have proven especially adept at exploiting these disruptions. Hungary's Jobbik party exemplifies this dynamic. While the party began as a fringe far-right movement, it gained significant traction in the regions hardest hit by industrial collapse. Jobbik's anti-globalization rhetoric and promises of economic security resonated with voters who felt abandoned by the Socialist Party's shift toward market liberalization. This ability to combine economic grievances with cultural appeals positioned Jobbik as a key beneficiary of deindustrialization's political afterlife.

The striking success of Jobbik in provincial Hungary in the second half of the 2000s shaped Viktor Orbán's political strategy in two ways. First, Jobbik's rise in former left-leaning, deindustrialized areas effectively undermined the Socialist Party's rural base, fracturing the political landscape and paving the way for Fidesz to dominate as a hegemonic party. Second, Jobbik provided a blueprint for Fidesz to organize provincial Hungary by combining working- and middle-class racial hatred toward the Roma minority with promises of state-engineered social protection and economic opportunity for the hard-working Magyar family (Szombati 2018). While our empirical evidence focuses on Jobbik votes, the underlying story concerns the broader emergence of illiberal hegemony, offering insights that extend beyond Hungary. This allows us to draw parallels with the American case. For some time, the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system seemed to keep the American radical right at the fringes. However, the rise of the Tea Party movement foreshadowed the political impact of profound socio-economic disruptions and liberal neglect convulsing American society – processes that eventually enabled Trump to reorganize the Republican Party along illiberal populist lines.

This chapter integrates empirical evidence from two key sources. The town-level data used in this analysis are derived from the Hungarian Statistical Office and the Bureau of Elections. They include granular information on industrial employment, demographic shifts, mortality rates, and electoral outcomes across Hungary's municipalities from the late 1980s to the 2010s. These data allow for a spatial and temporal analysis of how economic and health shocks shaped political behavior at the local level. The second data source is a content analysis of political party manifestos, drawing on the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) database. The CMP provides systematic data on party

platforms, coding the frequency of specific themes, such as economic policies, cultural identity, and anti-globalization rhetoric. This analysis focuses on the manifestos of Hungary's major political parties, including the Socialist Party (MSZP), Fidesz, and Jobbik, from the 1990s to the 2010s.

Ultimately, the mix of this novel preliminary evidence allows us to underpin our holistic approach to understanding illiberal populism. Rather than treating economic, health, and political factors as separate or competing explanations, our empirical analysis shows their interconnectedness. These are crucial insights also into the foundations of illiberal populism in the USA and beyond.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND THE DEMAND FOR A RADICAL BREAK

Figure 4.1 shows a scatter plot and a fitted regression line capturing the association between the deindustrialization and mortality shocks of the 1990s and the decline in MSZP's vote share between 2006 and 2010. Both panels visualize a clear association. The bigger the deindustrialization shock in the 1990s, the more votes MSZP lost in 2006–10. The bigger the mortality shock in the 1990s, the more votes MSZP lost. The figure summarizes a crucial political-economic aspect of the transition: while the lived experience of the 1990s shocks strongly influenced people's thinking, identity, and political orientation, experts, intellectuals, and party pundits on the left neglected this embodied suffering, or even portrayed it as something imagined. As we argued above, the effect of deindustrialization goes beyond its immediate impact on incomes and jobs. It negatively affects communities, working-class culture, meaning, pride, and identity – processes with major consequences for health and politics alike.

The preliminary results of the regression show the more severe the deindustrialization shock of the 1990s was, the bigger the loss that the Socialists suffered between 2006 and 2010 ($b = -0.137$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 2702$). This regression model uses the above-described town-level data and includes controls for factors such as the town's population size, death rate and age structure in 2010, unemployment and income level in 2010, the share of people with primary education only, the share of Catholics and Protestants, the size of the Roma population in 2011, as well as the town's initial income level and age structure in 1990 to control for potential preexisting differences. A similar fully adjusted model also shows that the 1990s deindustrialization shock led to a statistically significant increase in Jobbik's vote share between 2006 and 2010 ($b = 0.128$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 2702$). The effect of the 1990s mortality shock is also robust and statistically significant in various model specifications, including a fully adjusted model with the same set of control variables (MSZP: $b = -0.104$, $p < 0.001$; Jobbik: $b = 0.086$, $p < 0.01$, $N = 2703$). The bigger the mortality shock in

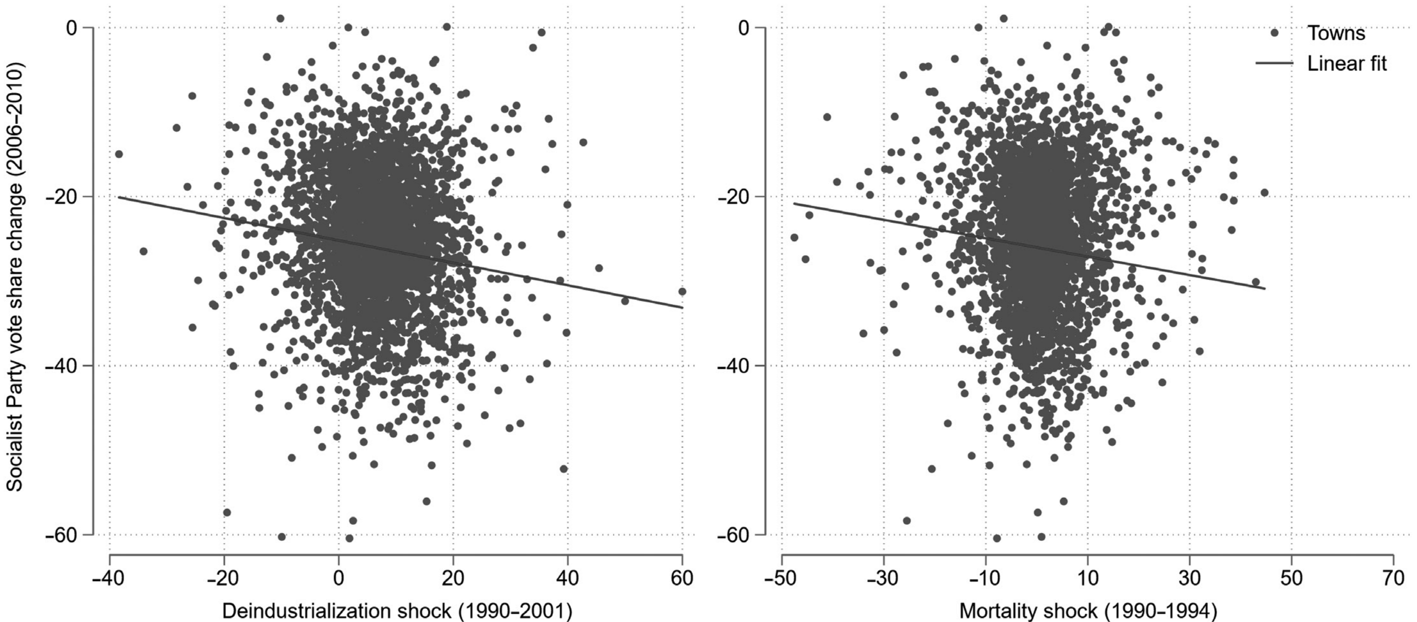

Figure 4.1 The long-term political effects of deindustrialization and mortality

Note: The deindustrialization shock is defined as the difference between the industrial employment rate in 1990 and 2001 – the higher the number, the bigger the decline in industrial employment. Mortality shock is defined as the difference between the mortality rate in 1994 and 1990 – the bigger the number, the bigger the increase in mortality. The fitted line depicts predicted vote share change from a fully adjusted regression model, as explained below.

Source: Authors.

the 1990s, the higher the vote share loss of MSZP and the higher the gains of Jobbik between 2006 and 2010 net of other factors.

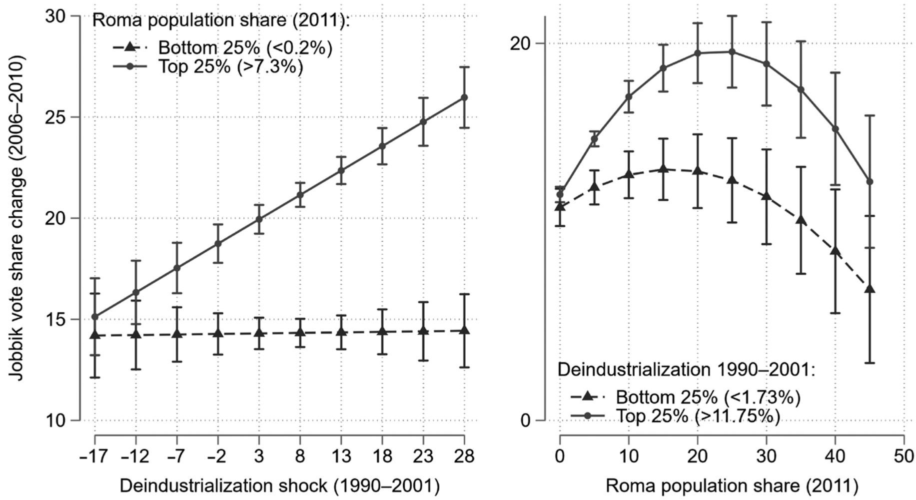

Figure 4.2 Interaction between deindustrialization and Roma population size

Note: Predicted vote shares from fully adjusted regression models as described in the text. N = 2964.

Source: Authors.

It is also worth noting that we found a crucial non-linearity in the way the Roma population share affected Jobbik's support. The Roma population share at low levels of deindustrialization has little and statistically non-significant positive effect on Jobbik's vote shares. On the other hand, if deindustrialization is severe (top quartile of the towns where the industrial employment rate difference exceeded 11.75 percent), the increase in Roma population share steeply boosts Jobbik's votes until the Roma population reaches 22 percent, where the effect turns negative. In other words, the success of the Roma-scapegoating political strategy seems to hinge on the extent of deindustrialization. Jobbik could only significantly exploit ethno-nationalist anti-Roma sentiments in towns left behind by severe deindustrialization. In economically more successful, less deindustrialized towns, a higher Roma share has little effect. The same interactions are not significant for MSZP votes, suggesting that the Socialist Party lost votes due to deindustrialization, irrespective of the size of the Roma population (Figure 4.2).

We do not think that these long-term factors would work only directly. Therefore, quantifying their effect on electoral outcomes 10–15 years later would require complex mediation models. Our data are unsuitable for such analyses,

but the existing literature suggests that a host of town-level socio-economic and cultural factors might be influenced by deindustrialization and mortality shocks. The qualitative evidence further underpins that the lived experience of these shocks affected social capital, community cohesion, inequality, the availability of services, stable jobs and income, all of which have been linked to radical right populist voting in the literature. Without fine-grained annual time series data at the level of towns, we cannot evaluate these mediations.

The town-level data from Hungary highlight the localized effects of deindustrialization and mortality shocks on political behavior. These findings underscore the importance of material conditions in shaping political identities, challenging the dominant cultural explanations for radical right support. By revealing how socio-economic shocks fostered the collapse of the Hungarian Socialist Party and fed into the rise of the illiberal right, the data provide empirical support for the chapter's central argument: that illiberal populism thrives where economic failures intersect with liberal neglect.

THE SELF-DEFEAT OF LIBERALISM

Figure 4.3 presents the results of a content analysis of party manifestos relying on data from the Party Manifesto Project database, covering manifestos from 1990 to 2010. The left-side panel of the figure focuses on "polity" topics, and the right-side panel focuses on "economy" topics. In both dimensions, there is a clear division between the parties of the left and right. The Socialist Party and the Free Democrats (SZDSZ) placed a significant emphasis in their manifestos on democratization, the constitution, and international and European integration. Democracy, rule of law, and internationalism were central pillars of the Socialists' political identity. While expectations toward global and European integration were high among Hungarians in the 1990s, their gradual disillusionment in the 2000s meant that parties (Socialists, Free Democrats) that built their identity on international and European integration were particularly vulnerable.

The right-side panel of Figure 4.3 shows that all this discourse about democracy did not go together with democratic control over the economy. Regarding economic policy, the Socialist Party's (and the Free Democrats') manifestos are to the right of Fidesz and Jobbik. Market regulation comprises topics such as consumer protection, the defense of small businesses against the disruptive powers of big business, and a social market economy. For instance, concerning protecting debtors against banks, Jobbik and Fidesz were more aggressively on the debtors' side against banks. A controlled economy refers to more direct state intervention to regulate markets, such as price controls/caps and minimum wages. For example, concerning minimum wages, Jobbik and Fidesz outcompeted MSZP from the left. A pro-growth budget refers to statements

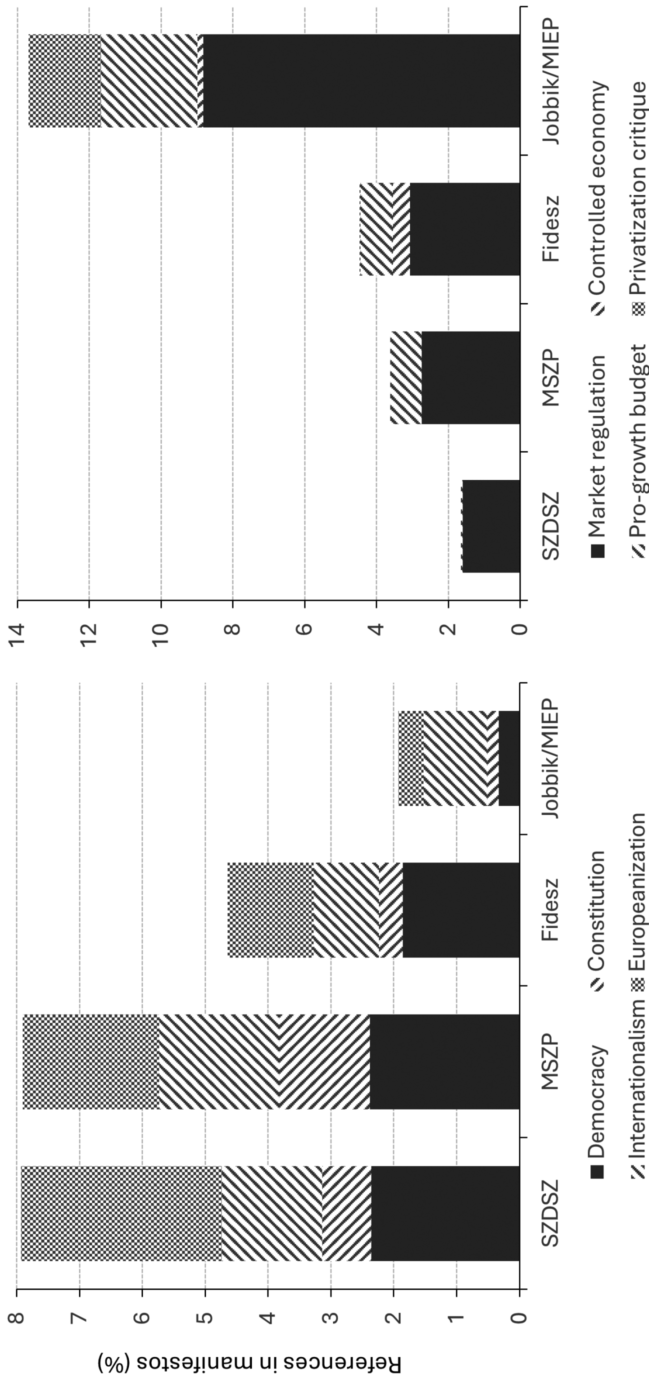

Figure 4.3 Key political topics in party manifestos (1990–2010)

Note: Authors' calculations based on the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) database.

Source: Authors.

in manifestos that embrace Keynesian demand management, that is, using government spending to boost employment and growth. In this regard again, the Socialists adhered far more strictly to neoliberal orthodoxy than Jobbik or Fidesz.

Combining internationalism, the rule of law, and democratization with an adherence to neoliberal orthodoxy created a political identity that led to a shallow view of liberal institutions among liberal parties (MSZP, SZDSZ). The liberal elite defined democracy as a set of top-down institutions without instruments for intervening in market processes. This elitist constitutionalism meant that there was no social democratic agenda offering an attachment to democratic institutions to fight the redistributive struggle to favor the masses over elites, leading to what Paul Blokker called "constitutional anomie" (Blokker 2010).

Finally, Figure 4.3 also shows that Jobbik was the only party criticizing the privatization process. This critical stance is especially important among voters and towns negatively affected by the early transition years' market radicalism, including plant closures, asset stripping, and deindustrialization. Privatization for most people meant that a few got rich while the masses faced increased precarity. Jobbik was the only party that addressed these concerns; MSZP and SZDSZ were fierce defenders of the 1990s neoliberal agenda. It was the radical populist right that positioned itself as the protector of everyday people against elites in a neo-nationalist, anti-liberal framework. The lack of a progressive economic inclusionary agenda opened the door for the radical right populist agenda of attacking liberalism in the name of the people. This political identity constructed by MSZP and SZDSZ is also related to why the masses did not feel much pain when Fidesz started to destroy the institutions of liberal democracy. People did not vote for an anti-democratic turn, as the support of liberal institutions was higher in 2009 in Hungary than in neighboring postsocialist countries (Pew Research Center 2009); however, they were not firmly attached to them either.

The Socialist Party did try to formulate messages targeting working-class and low-income citizens under the banner of welfarism. However, because the Socialists were always in government in coalition with SZDSZ, SZDSZ's anti-welfare stance dampened the Socialists' welfarism. Considering that the Socialists were reluctant to extend their social democratic approach to the economy, their thin and toothless welfarism remained confined to social policy and was often overshadowed by their coalition partner's anti-welfarism. In fact, some of the most symbolic political conflicts of the 1990–2010 period involved the MSZP-SZDSZ government's austerity measures under the Bokros package in 1994 or the attempted privatization of health insurance after 2006. In 2002, the Socialist Party stood out as a welfarist and social democratic party, building the manifesto around the message of "social correction of the transition."

However, in 1994, 1998, and 2006, Fidesz consistently made more positive references to welfare than MSZP. The Socialists also received intense competition from the radical populist right – Jobbik was not a typical neoliberal right populist party like the ones that dominated Western politics until the 2000s.

The Socialist Party's weak welfarism could not balance its active adherence to neoliberal economic orthodoxy. While in the early 1990s, the Socialists made some references to democratic socialism, active state and market regulation, these references vanished and were overshadowed by Fidesz's and Jobbik's penchant for economic interventionism and regulation by 2006 and 2010. This is crucial because most voters prefer active state involvement to regulate the economy and increase the availability of high-quality, stable jobs over a deregulated economy buffered by social assistance targeting the poor.

Finally, Figure 4.4 drives home the point of the Hungarian Socialist Party's neoliberal social democracy in international comparison. Comparing MSZP to a series of social democratic sister parties in Europe, the figure shows that the only social democratic party more neoliberal than MSZP was its Polish sister party, which suffered a similar fate. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) in Poland experienced a significant decline in the 2000s, and eventually fell out of the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) following the 2015 parliamentary election. The Hungarian Socialists stand out not only with the few positive references to economic planning but also concerning the weight attached to free markets in their manifestos.

The market-oriented economic policies of left-of-center parties contributed to the deindustrialization and mortality shocks analyzed in the previous section. In Hungary, the Socialist Party and its perennial coalition partner, the Free Democrats (SZDSZ), played a crucial role in these reforms. Both parties embraced centrist liberalism, epitomized by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton in the Anglo-Saxon West. The Hungarian Socialist Party adopted a neoliberalized social democratic strategy, emphasizing Europeanization, democracy, social assistance with market-making, liberalizing economic reforms, and rejecting state intervention (Grzymala-Busse 2002; Snegovaya 2024). After 1994, the MSZP-led government implemented liberal economic reforms, such as privatizing national utility services and cutting public spending. After a brief flirtation with social democracy in 2002–04, the party doubled down on neoliberalism in the second part of the 2000s. Between 2006 and 2010, Ferenc Gyurcsány's government attempted further unpopular economic reforms, including welfare spending cuts and health insurance privatization. In a country where the working class suffered a significant mortality crisis during the 1990s neoliberal reforms, attempting to privatize healthcare was politically disastrous, allowing Fidesz to mobilize against these reforms.

Altogether, this liberal social democratic party strategy proved incapable of detecting, let alone addressing, the growing economic frustration of voters left

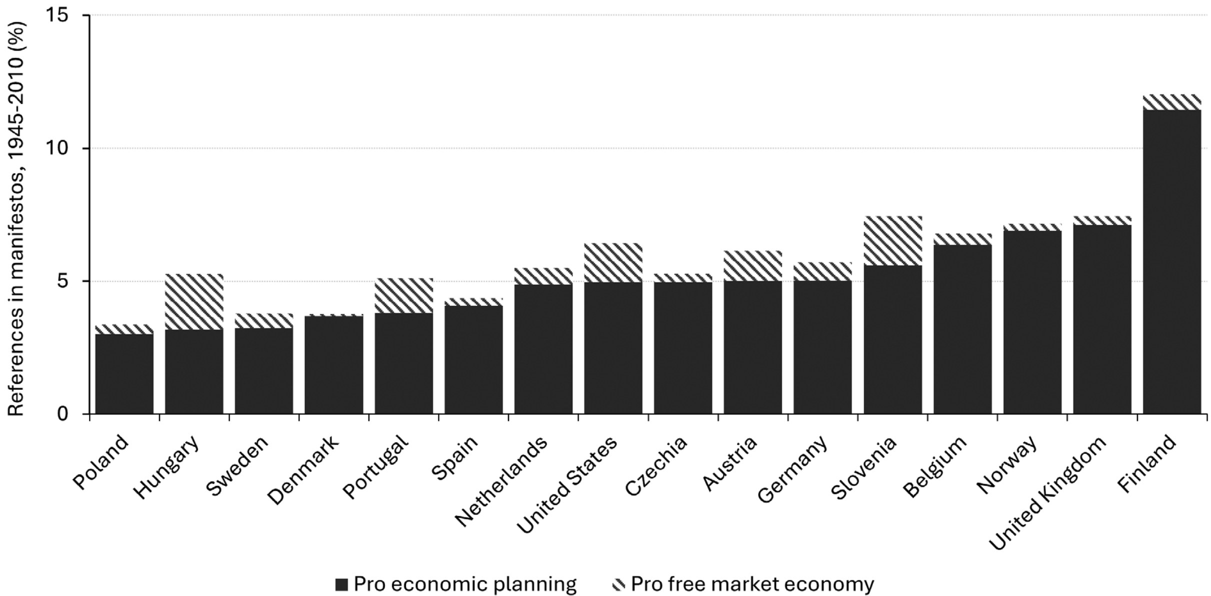

Figure 4.4 The Hungarian Socialists are highly pro-market in European comparison

Note: Positive references to economic planning and free market economy in party manifestos of major parties belonging to the social democratic party family. Authors' calculations based on the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) database. For post-socialist countries, party manifestos are included starting from 1990.

Source: Authors.

behind in deindustrialized areas. The party's roots in its former strongholds in medium-sized industrial towns were severed as the party leadership concentrated on media politics at the expense of hegemony building and organizing. As the Socialists increasingly lost institutional touch with voters outside the biggest cities, working-class people without a graduate degree grew increasingly frustrated with the transition. These frustrations were particularly intense in towns where the deindustrialization and mortality shocks of the 1990s were strongly felt. Without any progressive platform and identity left for these voters, they became apathetic, stayed home, or switched to the right.

Jobbik, with its populist right platform combining socio-economic protectionism, economic interventionism, the critique of transition-era policies and neo-nationalism, proved particularly effective in exploiting the political vacuum left behind by neoliberalized social democracy. Unlike traditional leftist movements, which emphasize class solidarity and redistributive policies, Jobbik framed its message in ethno-nationalist terms, presenting itself as the defender of Hungary's sovereignty and cultural identity (Feischmidt and Szombati 2017). The party framed its anti-globalization rhetoric as a defense of national sovereignty and economic security, appealing to voters in regions hardest hit by deindustrialization. This narrative allowed the party to appeal to workers as economic actors and members of an imagined national community under siege by globalization and liberal elites. By aligning economic discontent with cultural grievances, Jobbik effectively converted economic anxieties into a broader narrative of national decline and renewal. Fidesz actively competed with Jobbik over commanding the illiberal political pole, especially outside Budapest, in the former regional strongholds of the Socialist Party (Szombati 2018). The breakthrough of Jobbik allowed Fidesz to dislodge the Socialist Party and construct a stable illiberal hegemony in provincial towns.

We do not think voters directly shifted from the Socialist Party to the Jobbik in masses. Some voters likely did this; however, we believe the dominant mechanism is more indirect. Crucially, there is a demographic mismatch between Socialist and Jobbik voters, with the latter being significantly younger in 2010. The collapse of left-wing working-class culture in deindustrialized towns created a disintegrated, anomic local culture as a breeding ground for illiberal populist youth activism. The disillusionment with the transition was more substantial among younger people. The elderly voters who grew critical of the Socialists were more likely to stay home and not vote, which explains why the growth in Jobbik's and Fidesz's votes did not match the dramatic drop in the votes the Socialist Party lost. In parallel, the children of apathetic parents were attracted to the populist right (Pirro and Róna 2019).

These long-term political-strategic and economic factors proved decisive for the 2010 election. Between 2006 and 2010, the Socialist Party lost 1.34 million votes, while Fidesz gained 0.43 million and Jobbik 0.74 million voters. It was

foremost the collapse of the Socialist Party and, second, the explosive growth of Jobbik that sealed the fate of Hungarian democracy in 2010, allowing Fidesz to move from opposition to government. Until today, even after the collapse of Jobbik, Fidesz continues to rely on radical populist challengers (such as the Our Homeland Movement) to sweep up votes in deindustrialized regions of Hungary.

PARALLELS WITH THE USA

The self-defeat of liberalism is not a uniquely Hungarian phenomenon. Similar dynamics have unfolded in the USA, where the Democratic Party's retreat from labor politics and embracing centrist liberalism alienated its working-class base. The parallels between these cases reveal shared global patterns of economic dislocation and political realignment that have fueled the rise of illiberal populism in both nations. The Hungarian experience of economic and mortality shocks shaping political realignment provides a critical framework for understanding the role of socio-economic shocks and the Trumpian illiberal turn in the USA.

Much of the popular narrative surrounding Trumpism focuses on racial hostility (Sides et al. 2019), yet this emphasis risks obscuring the material grievances of his working-class supporters. Trumpism – racist as Trump is – attracts support not just because of racism's appeal to a narrow group of white nationalists. The Republican Party under Trump has assembled a multi-racial working-class support coalition that cannot be understood without considering the role of economic grievances that drove an increasing number of low-income Black and Latino voters to the Republican Party. Trump's appeal to a multi-racial working-class coalition underscores the centrality of economic discontent in his populist platform. While his rhetoric included explicit racial dog whistles, it also resonated with low-income Black and Latino voters who felt abandoned by a Democratic Party increasingly aligned with wealthy donors and cultural elites. This alignment of economic and cultural grievances allowed Trump to present himself as the champion of a disenfranchised working class, bridging racial divides that had previously constrained Republican coalitions.

Liberal narratives are often opposed to acknowledging the role of socio-economic factors in Trump's rising popularity. For example, a much-cited Gallup study argued that Trump's supporters in 2016 were more affluent than those who did not support Trump and that Trump supporters tended to be even wealthier than generic white Republicans (Rothwell and Diego-Rosell 2016). This superficial cross-sectional snapshot of voters is often interpreted as supposed proof that class dislocations or economic insecurity do not matter in explaining Trumpism, leading to headlines like "A Gallup Study Just Debunked the Most Popular Theories about Trump's Rise" (Nwanevu 2016) or "Trump's Supporters Are Not Motivated by Economic Anxiety, But by Its Opposite" (Buckle 2024).

If you go with the assumption that class does not matter, then you can sideline the systemic, structural problems with the economy and keep the focus on race or on "cognitive inability" or "identity" – factors that have no real economic foundations. For some, this is a genuine scholarly conviction. For others, it conveniently dovetails with their preferred pro-market approach. By focusing on "poor whites with poor character," the liberal elite hopes to distract attention from the discontents of globalization and maintain the supremacy of economic and cultural liberalism.

However, this narrative is misleading. First, equating economic desperation with abject poverty oversimplifies the issue. It is well documented that Americans without a college degree have experienced wage stagnation over the past few decades. When accounting for the unequal burden of housing and health insurance costs, we see the emergence of new generations of workers whose real, inflation-adjusted material living standards are lower than those of their parents. As inequality skyrocketed, the top 1 percent saw their wages grow by 138 percent between 1979 and 2015, while wages for the bottom 90 percent grew only 15 percent, and wages for low-wage workers declined by 5 percent during the same period (Mishel et al. 2015). Studies have shown that economic insecurity "has risen steadily since the mid-1980s for virtually all sub-groups of Americans" (Hacker et al. 2014, p. S5). Although real wages grew significantly during Trump's presidency, median weekly real wages just before the 2024 elections were lower than in early 2021 when Biden took office (Federal Reserve Economic Data 2024). Moreover, insecurity extends beyond the USA, with Western Europe experiencing widespread economic precarity that "reaches across income groups and occupational classes, extending into the middle classes" (Ranci et al. 2021, p. 539).

Second, cross-sectional snapshots miss the crucial question of how the support of low-income groups has changed over time. Low-income voters have been leaning toward the Democrats for many a decade. Yet, by the 2010s, this trend began to shift. Between 2012 and 2016, Republican support among voters earning less than $30,000 rose from 35 percent to 41 percent, while Democratic support in this group fell by an equal degree (Huang et al. 2016). This erosion continued into the 2020s. By 2024, for the first time since the 1960s, Republicans outperformed Democrats among voters earning less than $50,000 annually (Xiao et al. 2024). Moreover, as Democrats increasingly relied on wealthy donors and corporate fundraising, their connection to working-class voters weakened further. Black, Latino, Arab American, and young voters shifted to the Republican camp in significant numbers, accelerating the Democrats' decline in these key demographic groups. Polls in March 2024 showed that Democrats were going backward faster with Black and Latino as well as young voters than with any other demographic between 2020 and 2024

(Carlson and Burn-Murdoch 2024). Trump made the biggest gains among non-whites without a college degree – the racial working class. These tendencies were already there before 2020 (Zhang and Burn-Murdoch 2020). This working-class realignment simply cannot be reduced to race or identity.

This trend reflects more than income disparities; it captures the broader devaluation of working-class skills, material status, and ways of life. Economic dislocation, particularly in manufacturing and construction sectors, was compounded by physical and mental suffering, aligning with the concept of "deaths of despair." Evidence shows that regions exposed to trade shocks and industrial decline were significantly more likely to support Trump in 2016 (Autor et al. 2020; Colantone and Stanig 2018). Similarly, Trump dramatically increased Republican vote share in areas with poor health and rising mortality from deaths of despair (Bor 2017; Broz et al. 2021; Monnat and Brown 2017). These trends directly mirror patterns seen in Hungary, where radical right support surged in towns hit hardest by mortality crises.

The Democratic Party's embrace of neoliberalism followed a trajectory like its Hungarian counterparts, reflecting broader global trends described by Stephanie Mudge (2018) in *Leftism Reinvented*. Under leaders like Bill Clinton, the party reoriented itself away from labor-based coalitions and toward a professionalized, technocratic form of leftism that prioritized market liberalization and fiscal discipline. Clinton's policies, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), welfare reform, and financial sector deregulation epitomized this shift. These measures alienated the party's traditional working-class base, particularly in regions hit hardest by deindustrialization and economic stagnation. As McQuarrie (2017) also argues, this neoliberal turn not only weakened the ideological distinctiveness of the Democrats but also deepened socio-economic inequalities, fostering political disillusionment that opened the door for right-wing populist appeals.

The Democratic Party's failure to emotionally connect with working-class voters compounded these structural trends. This disconnect was not merely a reflection of individual candidates like Hillary Clinton or Kamala Harris, but a deliberate strategic choice rooted in centrist liberalism. Chuck Schumer's infamous assertion: "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs" epitomizes this approach. By focusing on suburban moderates, Democrats deprioritized symbolic and policy alignment with the styles and values of low-income voters. Yet, with racial minorities disproportionately represented among the working class, this neglect also alienated minority voters, undermining the Democrats' base. As McQuarrie (2017) demonstrates, the Democratic Party's failure to address the grievances of deindustrialized communities fueled a sense of betrayal, driving voters toward populist alternatives like Donald Trump. This pattern mirrors

Hungary's experience, where the Socialist Party's neoliberal pivot alienated its working-class base, enabling Jobbik to mobilize socio-economic grievances into a coherent illiberal project.

At the same time, the Democrats have avoided the fate of the Hungarian Socialist Party, which is partly a consequence of the rigidity of the US dual party structure and majoritarian political system, but also the party's more deliberate efforts to counterbalance its liberal pivot and focus on educated suburban voters with a continued, albeit truncated, effort to offer inclusive socio-economic policies protecting the interests of lower-income Americans. This attempt to go beyond neoliberalism was most recently signified by Joe Biden's Build Back Better agenda, which promised significant improvements to working-class Americans. However, this program was significantly diluted between 2020 and 2024, transforming Bidenomics largely into an economic nationalist agenda focusing on security concerns (Elrod 2024; Tooze 2024). These dynamics highlight a critical dilemma: how centrist liberalism's reliance on affluent and suburban constituencies constrains its ability to pursue robust redistributive policies and maintain embeddedness in the working class.

Over the last decades, the Democratic Party has significantly increased its support in metro and suburban areas while losing much of its non-metro working-class voters (Hacker et al. 2024). Yet this working-class dealignment has been slower than in the case of Hungary, which also leaves more opportunity for course corrections. As Hacker et al. (2024) argue, the Democratic Party's "U-shaped" coalition – combining affluent suburban voters with economically precarious urban populations – has necessitated a delicate balancing act between cultural liberalism and economic redistribution. This trajectory parallels the Hungarian Socialist Party's attempt to reconcile market-oriented reforms with the demands of a shrinking working-class base in deindustrialized regions. The Socialist Party was most effective in doing this in 1994 and 2002, suffering terminal losses among rural working-class voters after 2004. In the USA, Donald Trump's populist appeal to a multi-racial working-class coalition exposed the Democratic Party's inability to address the socio-economic foundations of political disillusionment, even as it retained a more significant embedding among low-income Americans than its Hungarian counterpart.

In sum, at the heart of both Hungary's and America's populist turns lies the unraveling of liberalism. In Hungary, the Socialist Party's neoliberal pivot alienated its working-class base, enabling Fidesz and Jobbik to consolidate power in deindustrialized regions. Similarly, in the USA, the Democratic Party's failure to address the economic and social fallout of globalization left a void filled by Trump's economic nationalism, even if not leading to a left-wing collapse comparable to Hungary's.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the deep roots of illiberalism by focusing on Hungary's pivotal case and drawing parallels with the USA. We presented preliminary quantitative evidence on the role of long-term socio-economic shocks and the failure of mainstream left-of-center liberalism as pivotal factors behind the illiberal breakthrough. Building on these results, we drew comparative insights into the social foundations of Trumpian illiberal populism in the USA. Specifically, we argued that the dual shocks of deindustrialization and skyrocketing death rates in affected towns and regions planted the seeds of working-class disillusionment in both countries. Over time, liberal elites' neglect of the physical and mental suffering of these workers allowed the populist right to channel their grievances into an illiberal revolt. These findings highlight how the interplay of socio-economic shocks and liberal neglect reshapes the terrain of democratic contestation, fueling the emergence of illiberal populism.

In Hungary, the dual shocks of rapid deindustrialization and mortality crises during the 1990s contributed to the restructuring of the political landscape in 2010. The Socialist Party's liberalism alienated its traditional working-class base, severing the institutional and emotional ties that had once sustained its legitimacy. This vacuum allowed the radical right – embodied by Fidesz and Jobbik – to construct a compelling narrative of national renewal that resonated deeply with those left behind by globalization. Orbán's consolidation of power, far from an isolated phenomenon, reflects the broader disintegration of Hungary's liberal democratic foundations, as liberal elites failed to address the suffering unleashed by economic and social upheaval.

The rise and transformation of Jobbik played a pivotal role in enabling Fidesz to construct its illiberal hegemony in Hungary. Our results echo Kristóf Szombati's (2018) work, which demonstrated that Jobbik initially thrived by addressing the grievances of deindustrialized and economically marginalized regions, framing these issues through an ethno-nationalist lens that combined anti-Roma rhetoric with a critique of liberalism. This turbulent episode disrupted Hungary's political landscape, creating a competitive dynamic that forced Fidesz to co-opt and normalize Jobbik's discourse and strategies. By adopting Jobbik's nationalist and protectionist rhetoric, Fidesz managed to outflank its rival, absorbing much of Jobbik's voter base and consolidating its dominance in provincial strongholds. Jobbik's subsequent shift toward a centrist, more moderate position left it stagnating, as Fidesz had successfully co-opted its illiberal agenda while retaining the flexibility to position itself as both a mainstream and populist force. This process highlights how Jobbik served as both a disruptor and enabler, providing the ideological and tactical blueprint for Fidesz's enduring illiberal hegemony.

The USA presents a parallel story, albeit shaped by different historical and institutional contexts. Much like Hungary's industrial towns, the American Rust Belt experienced the devastating effects of deindustrialization. These economic shocks, compounded by the health crises described as "deaths of despair," created widespread disillusionment with the promises of globalization. The Democratic Party's retreat from labor politics and its alignment with wealthy donors further alienated working-class voters, including racial minorities. Trump capitalized on this discontent, transforming the Republican Party into a multi-racial working-class coalition while framing globalization as both an economic and cultural threat.

The shared dynamics of economic and mortality shocks, compounded by the failures of liberalism, illustrate a broader crisis of the post-Cold War liberal order, rooted in the double devaluation of working- and lower-middle-class lives (Kalb 2023). As both Hungary and the USA demonstrate, the inability of liberal institutions to address structural inequalities has left them vulnerable to illiberal populist challenges. When the economy fails to deliver, disillusionment with capitalism often extends to liberal democratic institutions. If liberal elites appear indifferent to economic suffering, authoritarian populists can reframe globalization as both an economic and cultural threat. The key lesson is that you don't protect democracy by talking about democracy – you protect democracy by protecting people. Only a democracy that works for the people is sustainable. In Hungary, liberal parties have retreated to urban centers, ceding provincial strongholds to the right. A parallel shift is underway in the USA, where Republicans increasingly dominate non-metropolitan areas and position themselves as a party of the multi-racial working class. The combination of economic precarity and cultural condescension has created a powder keg that right-wing populists have proven far more adept at harnessing than their liberal opponents.

The Hungary-US comparison highlights shared dynamics that are not unique to these two countries but resonate across a broader spectrum of political landscapes where socio-economic dislocation and liberal neglect have fueled illiberal populist surges. The first mature experiment in the Eastern European political laboratory of illiberalism took place in Poland. The rise of the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party similarly reflects the fallout of neoliberal reforms and deindustrialization, with PiS leveraging cultural nationalism and economic interventionism to build a stable support base in regions abandoned by liberal elites (Kalb 2009; Ost 2006). In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) capitalized on economic insecurity and cultural anxiety, particularly in the former East Germany, where deindustrialization and demographic decline created fertile ground for right-wing populist appeals (Adorf 2018; Westheuser 2021). In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally has effectively woven economic discontent and anti-globalization rhetoric into a broader

narrative of cultural preservation, resonating in deindustrialized areas such as northern France's rustbelt (Desan 2020; Malgouyres 2017). Beyond Europe, South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) provide a left-populist parallel, articulating economic grievances stemming from persistent inequality and neoliberal restructuring while framing their agenda in nationalist and anti-elite terms (Roux 2022; van der Westhuizen 2023). These cases underscore the transnational relevance of the Hungary-US comparison, highlighting how structural economic disruptions and political disillusionment provide fertile ground for divergent forms of illiberal populism across diverse political and cultural contexts.

The unique contribution to the scholarly discussion on illiberalism we offer in this chapter lies in systematically linking economic and mortality shocks (on the demand side) with the political failures of liberalism (on the supply side) to explain the rise of illiberalism. This approach not only bridges gaps in the existing literature but also offers a framework for understanding how systemic failures in capitalism and democracy interact to produce illiberal backlashes. Moreover, this chapter is the first to bring Hungary's detailed empirical insights – using town-level data and manifesto analysis – into direct conversation with the US case. The results illuminate shared dynamics that challenge the notion of American exceptionalism, showing how global processes of economic liberalization and deindustrialization generate similar political outcomes across diverse contexts.

Ultimately, the findings underscore a critical lesson: democracy cannot be sustained without socio-economic cohesion. Liberal elites' focus on abstract principles of democracy while neglecting the lived realities of socio-economic shocks has proven self-defeating. Protecting democracy requires policies that deliver tangible improvements in people's lives, restoring faith in institutions and countering the appeal of authoritarian alternatives. Without addressing these structural failures, the twin crises of capitalism and democracy will continue to fuel the illiberal revolt, with consequences far beyond Hungary and the USA.

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5

"Us First": A Counterrevolutionary Consciousness in the French Working Class

Benoît Coquard

When analyzing the counterrevolutionary dynamics at work in Europe and the USA, Walden Bello emphasizes how liberal governments have dismantled the welfare state and how this process fuels opposition between precarious immigrant populations and other segments of the working class (Bello 2019). This principle of division has accelerated in recent years, even in countries where the far right has not yet formally taken control of the state. In France, while the Yellow Vests had brought social issues back to the forefront, Emmanuel Macron's liberal government has since shifted the debate toward immigration, embracing the principle of "national preference," which originates from the far right. It was by relentlessly promoting the slogan "French people first" that Jean-Marie Le Pen made significant electoral gains from the 1980s onward. Today, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the *Rassemblement National* has become the country's leading party in terms of votes. The social groups most inclined to vote for Le Pen tend to be those with lower levels of education, working in arduous jobs – particularly manual workers and employees living outside major metropolitan areas (Mayer 2024). Following a distinctly counterrevolutionary logic, these classes, which historically played a central role in France's major social movements, have largely assimilated the far right's worldview. Philosopher Michel Feher identifies this worldview around an opposition between "producers" and "parasites" (Feher 2024). The so-called producers are defined as workers whose position is allegedly threatened by "parasites" – often assumed to be immigrants – who supposedly live off state benefits funded by the taxes paid by the "producers." In my research on working-class populations in rural industrial areas, I have observed the anti-welfare discourse in action in everyday life. It works as a "symbolic denigration" (Wacquant 2010) among peers, which takes place in a context of growing competition for jobs following factory closures, a competition all the more pressing and acutely felt given that in these depopulated rural areas, as they say, "everyone knows each other." It is within this context that I have sought to understand what remains of collective and class consciousness among the working classes today.

In Hoggart's time, the formulation "us/them" attested to a common consciousness as well as a break with the remote neighborhoods of bosses and the rich, and he designated it as the structuring dialectic of collective consciousness and the working-class worldview (Hoggart 2009 [1957]). Decades later, sociologists Olivier Schwartz and Paul Pasquali note that "in a context where the subjective attachment of individuals to an 'us' has become more fragile and uncertain in the dominated classes, their attachment to such a structure of perception can hardly have the power that Hoggart attributed to it" (Pasquali and Schwartz 2016). Nonetheless, they do not rule out the possibility of a resurgence of an "us," albeit one that is "less certain, more complex, and more fragile" (p. 38), a hypothesis that is clearly supported by my analysis of "us first" that follows. During a nine-year ethnography in the declining industrial countryside,[1] I didn't hear the working-class people I'd been living among say "us workers" or "us locals," rather "us first" or even "just us": the "us" referring in this case to the closest friends, so-called family, or the "real mates you can count on." It is within the protective and rewarding confines of a small group of solidarity that a sense of collective consciousness is enhanced, one which is no longer based on belonging to a broader and unifying "us," but instead on a sense of "us first" which is more restricted and selective than in the past. After the disappearance of structures that once ensured the existence of a stable and honorable social class – factories, unions, and the like – "us first" is characteristic of the context where it emerges and makes sense, it corresponds to the ways in which the rural working class forms groups and helps or opposes each other, for jobs, housing, or even respectability (Skeggs 2002). Upon closer study, I realized that most of the people who served as my ethnographic informants over the years (about 120 people) had found jobs through their "gang of friends." This had played a substantial role in social reproduction. In addition, I'll argue that "us first" directly resonates with and is concretely appropriated by a far right highlighting the intrinsically conflictual nature of society and the necessity of putting those who most resemble you before everyone else. This promotes understanding of how "us first" was related to "French first," and more generally how the worldview of the far right seizes upon a fundamental impulse in how working-class people relate to the world.

A CONTRIBUTION FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF BELONGING

My fieldwork took place in a French region that has experienced the most significant demographic decline in the country over the past 20 years. Here, leaving seems like a necessity for young people who want to pursue higher education. But this departure is rarely followed by a return. The few jobs available locally don't align with their educational qualifications, and the social and symbolic cost of coming back is often too high. I began my ethnography

by following young adults, mostly in their twenties and thirties, who had left. Women were overrepresented among them. Those I met often shared reflections like this one: "I'm not going to come back and work in the factory with a four-year degree." These words were rarely spoken without discomfort. Behind this statement lay a deeper tension: the desire to return, to once again feel "at home," conflicted with the sense that their educational trajectory had become socially illegible in their home environment. This dissonance was palpable in their interactions when they returned for brief visits. Working-class women students, for instance, told me that no one ever asked about their life at university. A university degree, here, is not recognized as a sign of accomplishment. This silence was not insignificant; it revealed a social dynamic in which educational success was perceived less as a personal achievement than as a form of social distancing – an implicit betrayal of the community's shared world. Conversely, those who stayed were generally the ones with the lowest educational attainment in their generation. This selective departure of the most educated leads to a marked concentration of the working classes in these declining rural areas. Women in particular work in the care sector, often as home aides for the elderly – a demographic group growing as younger generations leave. Others find jobs in call centers, warehouses, or the few remaining factories. Yet employment conditions remain precarious: women's unemployment rates are more than double those of men between the ages of 18 and 35, and part-time work is far more common among them. This structural inequality in the labor market is reflected in gendered power relations, both within couples and among friends. In comparison with the youth of their parents' generation – a period to which these young people often refer with a certain nostalgia – the markers of a successful life have shifted. Material and symbolic success no longer primarily depends on building a stable career with the local industrial employer. Instead, it increasingly involves a set of life strategies in which formal employment becomes secondary to more informal economic practices.[2]

For those people, in contrast to expressions induced by an interview situation (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), "us first" is a spontaneous discursive category that makes sense in their world of reference, and is in line with the practices I observed. It is rooted in a conflictual vision of the world, wherein the interests of one's own group should be clearly put ahead of the interests of others. Analysis of the political resonance of "us first" is consistent with the ethnography of civic life (Mariot 2010) inspired in particular by some well-known studies on politics through sociability (Cramer-Walsh 2004; Eliasoph 1998; Gans 1967; White 1993). In order to get to "us first," I had to set aside the classic institutional points of entry into research in order to participate in the everyday sociability of groups of friends. As a difference with Hoggart, who saw the neighborhood's streets and neighborly relations as the site for the demonstration of belonging, "us first" marks a genuine break with the public space

(Coquard 2016). Spending time together at each other's homes has become commonplace in rural areas in decline, where village centers have lost their bars and cafes, as well as other places where a sense of community could be felt. In this regard, "us first" could be a sign of the disappearance of solidarity among laborers, since, at the time when factories were running full tilt, greater numbers of co-workers met up with each other.

In this context, my successive memberships in groups or "clans" of friends even pressed me to take positions in relationships between local people to show that I was ready to prefer those proudly referred to as "real friends," who are supportive come what may.[3] For that matter, one day after several glasses of pastis with a "gang of friends," one of them said to me, "the problem with you, is that we don't know what you think." They were asking me to stand up for a member of the group, Alain, against another of my friends in the field, whom I'll call Vincent. They used to be good friends and had been part of the same "little clan," but competition over a job as a caretaker for a rich landowner had pitted them against each other the previous few weeks. "They don't shake hands anymore," I was warned, along with the possibility that they might come to blows if one insulted the honor of the other. Indeed, there was a string of clashes, in the form of slander and sabotage at each other's worksites. The reprisals grew as reputations were besmirched by defamatory accusations of laziness at work and conjugal infidelity. I continued seeing Alain for several years after this conflict (during which time I could no longer see Vincent out of loyalty to Alain), when I often heard him argue that helping hands and even trust should be limited to closest friends and family, with whom mutual help is beneficial and competition is unimaginable.

A NEW LOGIC FOR SORTING SIMILAR PEOPLE

Working classes in declining rural areas are not only dominated by big cities and in their professional relations. They also internalize a sense of downgraded worth, which fuels a defensive social logic. While facing this "double devaluation" process (Kalb 2022), the erosion of stable working-class identities and the decline of collective spaces of recognition push them to seek protection in selective forms of solidarity, where belonging to a close-knit group offers both material and symbolic security against an increasingly uncertain social order. In contrast to the relatively broad and inclusive Hoggartian "us," "us first" is meant to be more selective: everyone can list the members of their "us" and differentiate them from the rest of their local acquaintances and more distant friends. "Real friends only," regularly emphasizing the word "real"[4] to mark the fact that this isn't a new friendship and that it has stood the test of hard times.

That's why informants describe and enact clear lines of division between "the ones we can't stand" and "the ones you can rely on," "you can speak freely to"

and "do anything" with in complete trust. Insistence on trust refers to the fact that in addition to the common tastes and values that make their friendships fun and pleasurable, these "real friends" are implicated[5] in the same life strategies, such as working under the table, lending each other a hand, or running a leisure activity together, like a hunting club or soccer team. Furthermore, in conversation, they justified this preference for friends by expressing a feeling of solidarity in shared oppositions. Indeed, situations of competition between peers can proliferate in rural areas in decline, where there are relatively few future prospects and "good positions" are rare. Whether in acts or words, the effort to differentiate between "real friends" and "the others," be they friends or acquaintances, reflects a keen awareness of the competitive and conflictual logics of the social world, in opposition to a much-criticized angelism that, according to some informants, amounts to "being Care Bears" or "too nice, too stupid." In a declining rural post-industrial setting, workers both employed and unemployed tend to think that it's impossible for everyone to be in solidarity with everyone else, especially among people who are similar. Rather than vaunting the capacity of an entire social group to defend its interests, my interlocutors rely on experiences of friendship galvanized by conflict to assert "us first" as a realistic posture of solidarity. At this stage, it's important to understand that the research site is in a part of France historically marked by industrial paternalism (Coquard 2012) as well as small landownership and strong political conservatism (Noiriel 1986). It is currently one of the parts of France that votes the least for the left and the most for the far right, with a heavy overrepresentation of low-skilled wage-earning employees and manual workers and an even stronger underrepresentation of white-collar workers with managerial responsibilities.

Explaining the logic behind membership in friend groups to a vacationing student who thought he was seeing a group of similar and united young villagers, a local working-class man declared he could count his "real friends" on the fingers of one hand, even though he knew everyone in the wider acquaintanceship group quite well. He added that beyond seeming to get along on festive occasions, "behind the scenes" there are many conflicts ("dick moves") within the broader group. What the outside observer sees as a sort of "village community" (to use Robert Redfield's expression, 1960) is experienced and objectively found to be a group split into "clans."

Although my informants didn't explain their friendships in terms of this logic of competition, their practical sense of friendly alliances demonstrates a certain strategy. The "us first" marks the conviction that it would be better to give and take advice and return favors in the private sphere, between "trustworthy" people, than to cast one's net wide and include everyone one knows. "A good deal," a term frequently used to designate a piece of information held by a small group, is likely to interest social agents who are both socially similar

and potentially in competition. Belonging to a "clan" or a "gang" is thus a way to combine utility and pleasure. It favors access to resources while having fun with people one likes more than the average local person. In essence, these groups of friends are a kind of alliance that develops relatively late (although they can include childhood friends), formed as much through proximity with some people (at work, through leisure activities, by adoption by a member of the gang) as they are through the exclusion of incompatible people (due to an incompatible lifestyle, competition over jobs, or breakups excluding ex-partners and their friends).

"US FIRST" AS A CONTRADICTORY CONSCIOUSNESS

While the people who proclaim "us first" may be economically stable, the rising precarity of material living conditions is still present in their thoughts. They have either experienced insecurity in the past or observed it in members of the less secure factions of the working class they regularly see in town. It notably leads to fear of getting "a bad reputation" should they find themselves unemployed for a long time and end up labeled as "lazy" or a "freeloader" (terms I heard in the field in reference to unemployed young adults). Since the withdrawal of industry, the stigma of unemployment is part of "social image" in the places I studied.[6] Younger generations are thus aware that the more extensive unemployment is in a given area, the longer unemployment lasts, the faster unemployment will lead to being labeled as a "freeloader." It's as if belonging to a group of friends is insurance against these vagaries of working-class life, by fostering the lasting recognition of one's peers (provided that the group is not weakened by competition), even in the case of a hard blow (friends ensure reputation when someone loses their job, for example). The group of friends is thus generally seen as the useful scale of common consciousness, the most effective implement for selective collective strategies in critical situations where tensions are raised by the heightened competition between young adults. In this way, "us first," like all us/them configurations, continues to express a collective consciousness, even if the contours of "us" are limited by structural constraints that are often perceived as insurmountable. The conditions of reproduction of working-class groups have changed now that the morphology of groups of belonging has changed: factory-based groups are observably rarer, while small businesses survive and self-employment is on the rise in the rural area. It is thus logical for collective consciousness to change in relation to these economic realities.

Consequently, several of the "gangs" I studied included somewhat insecure laborers (especially in small construction businesses) as well as people in the trades with more economic capital. They are far enough apart on the employment market to avoid being in competition, and they think of each other as potential allies – especially for under-the-table construction gigs, where their

skills and contacts overlap, bound by mutual trust as they jointly engage in an illegal practice involving a degree of secrecy. Over the long term, the establishment of similar professional strategies can be observed within these groups, which further strengthens the cohesion of the "us." Indeed, when people share a worldview and agree on what is or isn't beneficial, their hopes for the future also tend to coincide. In this "gang" of friends, several young men and women "went into business for themselves" to meet the lifestyle model set by the elites in the group, who are building trade contractors or another kind of small-business owner. Beyond economic inequalities, this socializing power of the friends' group creates a sense of common interest between members of the working class and members of the economic petit bourgeoisie. Their "us first" is thus an invitation to empirically test class borders to reflect on belonging and explain collective consciousness as they stand today. These rural working-class people, who own their own homes and have relatively uniform social circles, have aspirations that are typical of the "lower right quadrant of the social space" (Beaumont et al. 2018) alongside people with a range of incomes and assets but who are comparable in terms of values, tastes, distance from the world of education, and distance from the cultural pole generally associated with large cities. Obviously, the economic petit bourgeoisie that influences the rural working classes is proud of its rightward, or far right, political leanings, making itself into the informal intermediary of political parties that are all but absent in local social situations (Cloteau 2020). In an interview, a construction worker singled out people "who made an ass out of me" and took advantage of what he thought was his "overly soft side."[7] Although he voted for Mélenchon (left) in 2012, when he was still a manual laborer, he now proudly says he's self-employed (Abdelnour and Lambert 2014) and declares himself "solidly on the right" in the presence of his new friends of the local economic petit bourgeoisie (a farmer and a tradesman) who assert their lifestyle and act as moral entrepreneurs (in Becker's sense) or local opinion leaders (in Lazarsfeld's sense) in their "gang."[8] Those people spread in the working class the idea of a meritocracy through work that justifies both the respect for social hierarchy according to economic capital and the stigmatization of the least secure. Furthermore, these groups dominate the working class by distributing the "good points" of people's reputations on the job market and all the scenes of social life, since in the country, "everyone knows everything" and everything is connected. These logics of reputation are thus the cornerstone of analyses tying social and spatial conditions to political position.

THE LEGITIMACY OF "100% LE PEN"

Now that I have presented the social meaning of "us first" in its world of reference, I will turn to the variety of correspondences between this "clan"-based

view of the local social space and declaring sympathy for the discourse of the *Rassemblement National* (RN, the far-right party formerly known as the *Front National*). To be clear, I simply mean expressing an affinity with the declared positions of the far right, because this attitude isn't necessarily connected to a vote for the party: some who do not vote declare an affinity with the discourse of the far right, and so do some voters for other parties on the right. It should also be said that conformity to an affinity for the far right (which amounts to hegemony in locally expressed political ideas) is tied to the fact that the right has deep roots in this rural zone, which has been heavily won over by the far right since the 1990s. Accordingly, the informants that I followed conformed closely to the dominant political thinking in their social circles. Saying you are on the right or far right,[9] even when you aren't interested in politics or sometimes vote for the left, is mostly due to a desire for cohesion within the "gang of friends." In order to understand the correspondences with "us first," it is thus important to stress that this is a legitimate, not to say hegemonic, political position that is easy to support publicly here, much more so than a position to the left, which often provokes lively criticism and mockery of the presumed laziness of anyone declaring themselves "on the left."[10] From the perspective of people who have made a connection between "us first" and their affinity with the far right, asserting that oppositions between peers are an inherent logic in the world is a form of lucidity. Indeed, mutual acquaintanceship is marked by a logic of "clans" that is then reflected in local and overarching worldviews. There is a relative continuity between the "us" of "us first" in local conflicts and alliances and aversion to diffuse groups designated as "the minority of the worst" (Elias and Scotson 1994) by the far right. In other words, "us" can continue to designate the "gang" of friends while also rising to the scale of a wider category in the mouths of those who are opposed to "immigrants" or (more commonly) "Arabs" or "guys from the projects" (most specifically used by rural white men of the younger generations). "Us" is thus possibly associated with "whites" or "the real French," as one expression I heard several times would have it, recalling the insistence of the expression "real friends."

In everyday relations, this position can lead to confrontation with the broader political positions. The study found that at times of competition and conflict, immigrants and the descendants of immigrants (most of them from North Africa in this field site) are more often singled out as targets. Put another way, depending on the configuration of local social relationships, as some work in Whiteness Studies (McDermott and Samson 2005) has suggested, there are variations in perceived skin color and the racism exerted. "Us first" is widely used to settle these moments of tension, either to exclude a racialized person or to designate them as "like us." It makes it possible for informants with racist speech or who say they are "100% Le Pen" (since they primarily associate this political affinity with racism) to explain their solidarity with racialized

members of the "gang." One night at a party, I was talking with Karim (construction worker, age 26) and Emilien (31, construction worker). They have been close friends since they worked for several months together for the same company. They are on the same soccer team, and were talking about the game the following Sunday against a team from a public housing neighborhood in a nearby city. Emilien showed his colors: "It's not even worth it for me … there's blacks and Arabs on their team. … As soon as there's one in town, I go nuts. You know I'm gonna get in a fight," he added, as a justification for not wanting to play them. Talk like this was rather commonplace in the conversations I was part of, but in this case, it was more provocative. Karim was standing right next to him, wearing his Algerian national team jersey with his arm over Emilien's shoulder in friendship. I prompted Emilien, saying Karim was right beside him and his presence as an "Arab" didn't seem to upset him, and he responded, "Oh, no, but that's him, he's my boo! He's like us! [Karim looked at me and rolled his eyes] We work together, he comes to my house, it's not the same." In a detached tone, Karim brushed it off, saying, "Nah, but, let it go, everyone's racist here anyway," he added, trying to change the music on the stereo. A few months later, after one of his friends made a racist comment about him while telling him about a brawl with young people from a nearby housing project, Karim explained to me that he "lets it go" when he's faced with this kind of talk, but "only when it's friends." Then, to save face, he stressed the fact that he "flies off the handle" when a young man he doesn't know insults him, whether it's racist or not, as I had witnessed. Karim is involved in a system of trade of help with construction and odd jobs (using his construction skills) that quickly builds a strong feeling of common interest and consequently a sense of belonging that is both strategic (earning money, building his house) and rewarding (showing that he knows how to work and that he can lend a hand) that lets the "us first" – and in his case, the "like us" – take hold. Membership in these friend groups is fragile for these young racialized people, however.

Much like the people living in insecurity whose challenges I mentioned earlier, racialized people (many of whom are also living in insecurity) tend to be held at even greater arm's length in the event of conflict. Likewise, the little provocations between friends that are commonplace in the social repertoire of "gangs of friends" are more likely to be more violent and exclusionary toward them due to the racist turn they sometimes take. At the same time, friends from different ethnicities have increasingly insisted on their capacity to "do everything for our peeps," and best friends are sometimes described as being "like brothers" or "like a sister." For that matter, devotion to the group is now commonly communicated by a new expression for closest friends that's widespread among working-class urban youth: "they're family!" or "just family." In sum, these rural working-class people, most of whom say they are favorable to the far right and who are all deeply attached to home ownership, are

far from cutting themselves off from others or being stripped of any collective consciousness. They are engaged in everyday struggles for respectability (or simply fun pastimes) that don't play out on the individual level. This is where the "first," as a negative and selective difference in expressing the feeling of belonging to an "us," takes on particular meanings in other registers, ranging from an explanation of who'll be invited to a party ("it'll just be us") to the occasional justification of voting for the far right, by saying they agree with its exclusionary discourse.

A LUCID CONSCIOUSNESS OF CONFLICT

Local people frequently say, "you can't fool us!" and – that "everyone" puts the interest of the "clan" above all else. There is a consensus among these members of the working class that "life isn't all rosy," as some put it, and is structured by competition and conflict between individuals and between groups, much like descriptions of the social world inherited from Marxism. But in their case, what is both a worldview and an everyday experience of conflict, in the dynamic of the most visible political options, gets attached to a far-right discourse that uses the register of disaster and conflict to justify its orientations: saying you agree with Le Pen or "are FN" ties in with what is seen as proof of the lucidity of "someone who doesn't get taken in." In the discourse of the far right, they find consensus over a divided social world made of violence and competition between antagonistic groups. From their perspective, the far right currently offers the truest portrayal of the social world that political professionals have to offer, providing the most accurate description of the competitive sociability between "clans" in which they have to live their lives. In this sense, their political affinities expressed in their social interactions highlight a logical coherence with "the social space of daily relations" (Blondel and Lacroix 1989). Thibault, age 29 and working as a temporary laborer, lamented to me, "She [Marine Le Pen] is right. Everyone looks out for themselves, anyway." Knowing I disagreed with him on that subject, he added that he "can't stand racists," but he didn't hide having voted for Le Pen in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections because he thought she was the only one who "dares say that everything's falling apart everywhere." A few minutes later, while we were having a drink and watching the evening news, after several friends (all men, laborers that night) had dropped by, Thibault made a crack about the newly elected president, François Hollande, who was giving a speech about gay marriage: "All the factories are closing and the guy's gonna take care of the fags," he exclaimed, getting up from the couch to turn off the TV and put on music while declaring that there was no point to politics anyway. The argument that the far right seduces its voters by saying out loud what everyone is thinking deep down is well known, but in this context, it resonates with the protective aspect of "us

first," or in this case : "what about us?" It is regularly said that they feel like they "come after everyone else" in a rural area where they say "no one gives a shit," a sentiment that is balanced when they state that the "us first" logic and voting for the FN make them feel like they are defending their own interests. Furthermore, statements like Thibaut's are even more validated and appreciated when they are made in a festive ambiance among friends, especially when the speaker is the host, and thus likely to be the most respected member of the group. Solidarity between friends, associated with awareness of sharing a common fate and interests, is even stronger because it is fueled by a shared feeling of being together in opposition to others, and this togetherness (in the "gang of friends") moreover lets them have fun, be hedonistic, and be united. Once again, we can see the principles of working-class conscientization led by the communist party in France that, until the 1980s, evoked the essential character of the class war and mobilized laboring voters.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the political implications of "us first" reveal the persistence of a working-class belief in the conflictual nature of the social world, a conflict that goes without saying and has to be anticipated. In the past, these ways of positioning oneself would probably have been harnessed, if not produced, by left-leaning political parties and unions. But today, fueled by everyday struggles and conflicts between peers, this worldview seems to have been harnessed by the far right, to its advantage. As Walden Bello has shown, the intensification of global inequalities has not only deepened economic divides but also fragmented traditional class solidarities, making space for reactive and localized forms of political identification. It aligns with a historical context of deepening inequalities, further burying any possibility of a class-based alliance between those who remain behind or solidarity with those who left.

"Us first" as a rural working-class positioning tends to fall into the hands of a far right that may not even have consciously made the connection between its old discourse and these more recent trends. This makes it even easier to understand the informants who unabashedly assert they "are FN" or "100% Le Pen" while championing "us first" and "what about us?" In working-class contexts like the one discussed in this chapter, where affinities with the far right have been seen as relatively legitimate for decades, splitting the world between "real friends" and the rest is a reference to the assertion (visceral in some, like Emilien) of being a "real French person" and showing oneself to be in solidarity with friends from immigrant backgrounds provided that they are "like us," respectable in their living conditions and compatible in their lifestyle, but above all members of the same selective social circles.

In fact, this kind of discourse is reminiscent of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the wages of whiteness" (Du Bois 1999 [1935]) in his analysis of white American working-class people who feel they can at least set themselves apart from the most stigmatized racial minorities to compensate for the social domination they experience. At the same time, "being FN" or "100% Le Pen" while celebrating the "us first" or "what about us?" is showing that one identifies with a worldview (and consequently a certain commonality of living conditions) that is clear-sighted, because it's conflictual and distrustful (which differs distinctly from the discourse of the left). In this situation of "double-devaluation," the "us" throughout Hoggart's work is present, but in a more limited form, reflecting the structure of local social relations marked by the individualization of working-class living conditions and a visible exacerbation of competition between rural social spaces, where mutual acquaintanceship is quite high. Furthermore, work is not a central topic of conversation (and consequently, not a theme that unites groups of friends) because people feel their situations are fluid and more or less unique. There are even times when very close friends can't describe each other's working conditions in detail. Relatedly, we have seen that rural working-class people are even less disposed to take a class position against another class because they are in conflicts with people like themselves and, on top of that, caught up in group memberships that may cross class lines, or at least be fuzzy and indeterminate. By this logic, perhaps living in an area that is numerically dominated by the working class makes it extremely difficult for people to see unity in their own class, and identify common enemies in the dominant classes. Seen another way, "us first" is also a sign of relative autonomy (Grignon and Passeron 1989) in a setting where work is disappearing (Wilson 1997), leaving a whole swathe of the working class without a possibility of making the most of themselves through a stable occupational status. These observations should probably be qualified with a reminder that the working class, rural or urban, has always been typified by a constant state of conflict. For every "us" there must necessarily be a "them," in a worldview that connects everyday reality to the wider issues of society's beliefs and political mobilization.

NOTES

1. The declining countryside in France comprises places situated far from the big cities, usually developed with the metallurgical and mining industries implanted there since the end of the nineteenth century. Their demographic and economic decline came along with the offshoring and closing of the local companies in the mid-twentieth century and the end of it. In France, the declining countryside is quite different from the rest of the French rural areas, because for the most part, France's countryside is actually attracting new residents and providing access to jobs in urban economies. There are attractive rural areas, often close to the sea and mountains, located not too far from the big cities. This is also where tourism

is vibrant, where the local traditions, language, cuisine, architecture, etc. are valued and promoted. Conversely, the areas I studied are losing population, struggling to keep afloat a dwindling economy and to find new social recognition.

2. These include purchasing low-cost properties to renovate and resell for profit, often financed through undeclared side jobs combined with legal employment. Gaining access to homeownership early, even if through irregular means, is seen as a key step toward long-term security and, ultimately, the accumulation of a small patrimony.
3. In this way, "real friends" are a sort of variation on the figure of "riders" in gangs in the USA (see Karandinos et al. 2014).
4. In opposition to "real friends," "fake guy" or "fake girl" can be insults.
5. Here, the word "implicated" invokes the often hidden and semi-legal character of the common strategies that unite the "gang." For example, there's a "little team" of friends who do construction work under the table. In order to be able to organize themselves into an informal business, they need to have full trust in their partners so they can share "inside lines" without "screaming from the rooftops" the fact that they earn money illegally.
6. The dynamics of territorial stigma observed in rural working-class areas are in many ways comparable to those in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, as processes generate a form of "lateral denigration" (Wacquant 2010) where stigmatized residents distance themselves from each other to avoid association with the collective stigma.
7. To be most precise, it should be said that this comparison between a time when one was "ready to help everyone" and the current logic of "us first" or "what about us?" is mobilized by several informants, both men and women, without being explicitly connected to a political position. What they have in common is that they have both sorted out who counts as "real friends" and who belongs to "the others."
8. Sociologist Raphaël Challier has shown that working-class enrollment in parties of the right and far right is tied to a desire to be positioned "on the same side as good people," as his informants put it (Challier, 2021).
9. In the social interactions between friends that I observed, these two positions are extremely compatible.
10. A political position on the left was criticized even more strongly because, in this group of friends, it was most typical of young adults in the most insecure factions of the working class, while those from more stable factions – the same ones who spend time with the economic petit bourgeoisie – had a strong tendency to identify with the right or far right.

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6

Russia's Vanguard Authoritarian Neoliberal System

Jeremy Morris

Despite his cautious and uninspiring personality, Vladimir Putin has, in the third decade of his rule, become something of a preeminent symbol of the counterrevolution this book examines. To many in Russia, his legitimacy rests on overcoming the double humiliation of the 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Empire was lost along with Russia's supposed tutelage over it. Not only that, but the new Russian Federation experienced a lost decade. This was a decade of enormous human misery: crime, unemployment, morbidity and early death especially for men, impoverishment, massive deindustrialization, and the emergence of a rapacious oligarchic class of primitively accumulative capitalists. It is remarkable that Russians are not more resentful about their recent history.

Along the way, seemingly because of direct and indirect exposure to reactionary thinkers including Carl Schmitt and Ivan Ilyin, Putin started espousing a philosophy of neoconservatism. Over time, this evolved into presenting Russia as a defender of the Judeo-Christian tradition that Europe (and the USA) had purportedly betrayed in the name of LGBT rights and the destruction of the gender-normative "natural" hierarchy. Subsequently, the threat of the supposedly dual-pronged geopolitical and biopolitical aggression of decadent Euroamerica justified (conveniently) ratcheting up repression at home and even attempts – as of this writing – at partially cutting off Russia from the rest of the internet. And of course, none of this can be detached from the vague justifications for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – hardly ever mentioned in public discourse without couching Russian actions as fighting a war for civilizational survival against a new kind of fascism cloaked in woke.

Regardless of the genuine appetite for the neoconservative turn at home in Russia, it cannot be denied that articulations of resentment are something successfully channeled by the state-media matrix, and by Putin himself. It is hardly possible not to be exposed to this hegemonic discourse because since 2014 the state rapidly moved to create a media desert: alternative and dissenting voices are either in emigration or underground. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Western-based messengers and social media platforms,

including YouTube (a crucial haven for liberal democratic opposition voices), have been blocked or throttled.

Thus, resentment is full-throated on TV and radio, in your car and on your smartphone screen: Soon, the "minorities" will take over France and Germany and put the whites into camps. The Americans will collapse into civil war because of the deep state that Trump is sincerely fighting. Britain throughout its history has controlled the West and gives direct orders to President Zelensky; it is MI6 that is developing biological weapons targeting Slavic DNA. The Nordics have banned parenthood and schools there force children to change gender. As you can see, Russia is something of an experiment in making post-truth mainstream – while not all these ideas are broadcast on "respectable" TV, all the above narratives filter quickly through to daily life, like dirty rainwater in a sewer.

Resentment then is more than just about the loss of empire and prestige for the so-called "state-forming people" of Russia. It also contains a heady mix of anti-globalism (or at least resentment at the peripheralization of what was once the Second World), and the channeling of social populism, the idea that only under the leadership of the ruling party (United Russia) can the real and imagined social guarantees of the 1970s and 1980s USSR be restored. Things like an adequate pension, healthcare for all, full employment, and so on. Once a "competitive electoral authoritarian" state, the ruling elites ditched even the veneer of multi-party elections after 2018, moving to a system where only loyal "alternative" parties can ballot, and where electronic voting leads to massive fraud. "Disdain" for democracy, then, could be added to the Russian template, even as the leader and party argue that they rule thanks to the legitimacy bestowed on them by their harmonious expression of Russians' real political and civilizational preferences. This is what one of the intellectual authors of Putinism once called "sovereign democracy." After all, they argue, look what competitive elections brought to Europe and the USA.

Does this brief portrait, drawing on Walden Bello's useful analytical breakdown of the new fascist threat, do justice to Russia's place in the vanguard of the counterrevolution? Yes and no. What's missing are some important differences. First, the state and elite make few concessions to genuine social populism beyond rhetoric. As I have argued elsewhere, Russia is in fact the posterchild for full-blown authoritarian neoliberalism and in many respects the neoconservative and neo-traditionalist discourse emanating from the center is intended to distract and displace opposition within the country to the terrible life-chances of all but a tiny, privileged percentage of the population (Morris 2025). The purpose of this chapter is to show how the variety of authoritarian neoliberalism in Russia has both commonalities and differences to the global counterrevolutionary reaction against social democracy, but is most of all a *vanguard* movement. While it borrows methods like post-truth from

American politics, and biopolitical digitized control from China, it is actively reexported and copied even unconsciously by wanna-be authoritarians in the West. Indeed, in some respects Orbán in Hungary and Fico in Slovakia are imitators of Putinist discourse and practice. The proposal in 2025 to censor even Wikipedia in the UK (to protect children) is an indirect product of authoritarian diffusion from the vanguard example of Russia.

THE "WILD" 1990s AND THE CLOSING OF THE DEMOCRATIC WINDOW

In the 1990s, following the elite-led transition from single-party rule, Russia faced a constitutional crisis by 1993 simultaneously with economic meltdown. The country needed new institutions that the USSR had lacked and a clear division of power between the executive and legislature. Boris Yeltsin solved this problem by creating a super-presidential system, but not without violence and bare-faced illegality. By 1996, with no end in sight of the economic woe, rampant criminality, and successionist war in Chechnya, Yeltsin was facing electoral death at the hands of the resurgent communists. With US financial support and more, he won reelection only thanks to every trick in the book of unfair and undemocratic electoral shenanigans. Because of the emergence of overwhelming power vested in the person and office of the president (much more constitutionally powerful than the US or French presidents, for example), the reempowering of the security services to fight organized crime, and the threat of succession by Chechnya and other federal subjects, along with the economic depression in which over 50 percent of national wealth was destroyed and tens of billions of dollars off-shored by the emerging oligarchs, Russia was hardly in a position for democratic transition to stick.

Some observers have also looked at the fateful 1990s in terms of different kinds of path dependency. There are those that see Russia as inevitably reproducing a non-democratic form due to its state-centric governance "culture": to rule a vast, diverse, and harsh land requires concentration of power in a small elite – be it the Bolsheviks, a fearfully loyal court around Peter the Great, a terroristic paramilitary headed by Ivan the Terrible, or a personal retinue drawn from the security elite (*siloviki*) around Putin. Others focus on the traditional and conservative structure of rural life in what was a peasant country still in living memory. The self-governing village *mir* was thought inimical to promoting private property and the development of civil society because decisions were reached on the basis of community survival and the external state's demands, not individual rights. The path dependency view can be further refined depending on one's predilictions: neoliberals focus more on property rights eroded by a network system of crony governance called "sistema." This is the "modernisation trap of informality" according to Ledeneva (2013). Liberals study the lack of representative voice that civil society institutions could provide. Contempo-

rary Marxists look at Russia as a periphery that could never develop sufficient capitalist momentum because of its reliance on resource extraction – industrialization and modernization were largely state-directed projects, even before 1917. We should note in passing that there are problems of overdeterministic thinking behind all these analyses, but that they too have kernels of truth in them.

Regardless of the long-term causes, the post-2000 period saw a return of overweening security culture (and secrecy, paranoia, and mistrust) at the heart of power. This had previously led to issues like delay in acknowledging the Chernobyl accident, and the cover-up of violence against protestors during the Soviet period. It had even made possible the attempted coup against Gorbachev in 1991. When, in the 2000s, journalists, unionists, or activists became too meddlesome, they were intimidated and even openly murdered with the connivance of parts of the security services; this was certainly part of the legacy of the "state-centric" idea of governance and the idea that the backstop was the FSB (KGB). Some postcommunist countries opted for lustration of individuals from the former regimes. In Russia, many former security service personnel spent the 1990s forging informal contacts with organized crime, which flourished in the economic turmoil. There was a logic in the breakdown of a formerly securitized state (the USSR) and the 1990s as a period of *bespredel* (utter lawlessness), where law enforcement was just as often allied with what Denis Volkov (2002) called the "violent entrepreneurs" who emerged to make the new Russian capitalism. In the early 2000s, Volkov estimated that 20 percent of FSB officers were engaged in extortion of private business. The irony of this situation was that companies often welcomed the "roof" provided by FSB officers, believing that it could prevent shakedowns by organized crime.

At the head of a semi-formalized system of tribute and "tax" farming stood the top elite itself and a more loyal network of oligarchs. It is, however, a simplification to point to Russian capitalism as one replicating the robber baron period of the late nineteenth century in the USA. There is also a plutocrat class of officials emerging. It is unstable because it relies on bribery and kickbacks by virtue of office held, but nonetheless as a "system" of informal governance it endures (Ledeneva 2013). At the top, the situation replicates itself continuously: once you have a solid gold toilet, a villa in Italy, a vineyard in Crimea, and half a million euros in cash in shoe-boxes in your apartment (a real example of a senior police officer in the southern provinces), how do you hang on to it? The only option is to steal more, to implicate more of your confreres and subordinates in kickbacks, a scheme known in Russian as "circular surety" or "collective responsibility." This is how Yeltsin's presidency ended, in a search for a "surety" against prosecution by a successor. He sourced the uninspiring (yet well "networked") bureaucrat Putin to ensure his "family" kept its ill-gotten gains in 1998. Now, as Putin ages, history is repeating itself, although the

outcome is unlikely to be a smooth transfer. Regime and personal survival are often overlooked as pundits and scholars alike try to build elaborate models of an ideology that drives Russia's elite. But all the way back to the first unfairly contested reelection of Putin in 2005, perpetuating rule to avoid the repercussions of ill-gotten gains is a much better diagnosis of the regime's impetus.

A SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF VANGUARDISM

Most chronologies of Putin's time in power since 1999 focus on "democratic backsliding" into full-blown authoritarianism after 2018 with a watershed moment in 2011–12 when he returned to the presidency after swapping jobs for four years with his prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev. But more rarely do observers contextualize Russian developments with the global capitalist conjunctions. The year 2008 and after the global financial crisis are key, because they showed how vulnerable the comprador resource export model was. In a sense, Putin was correct in surmising it would not survive long-term economic pressure. In this section, I present a very truncated materialist history of twenty-first-century Russian political moves. This is necessary for the reader to understand the active and passive transformations within Russia that led to the current conjuncture: object of neoliberal and authoritarian desire, by alt-right neo-traditional fascists, and technocrat authoritarians alike. It was certainly not preordained in the years of Putin's unparalleled domestic and international popularity of 2000–05 that he would remake Russia in this way. We have to get at the domestic trajectories (deindustrializing resource economy with recent socialist developmental modernizing past), the conservative instincts of its postcommunist elite, the trauma of its population leading to a readiness to seemingly "embrace" economic atomization and resentment, as well as its peripheral economic and geopolitical status, meaning it was more likely to engage in more extreme versions of the orthodoxies transmitted to it from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank even at the same time as it securitized and repressed domestic dissent.

The years 1999–2008 were the Goldilocks period. The commodities supercycle sustained massive fiscal expansion in Russia. Oil prices even in 2011 were above $100 a barrel as the Arab Spring began. Real incomes rose faster than inflation, for a number of years. Coming on the back of ten years of decline, even this modest recovery felt good to most people. Deindustrialization was at least partly halted with a stop-gap for uncompetitive industries thanks to devaluation, and the arrival of many light-industry and consumer-oriented firms from the global core providing much needed employment in manufacturing. At the same time, political stability provided some space for state consolidation: in particular, the economic ministries were given full scope to implement overdue consolidation of corporate tax and regulation laws, creating the kind

of neoliberal orthodoxy among the technocratic bureaucracy, exempt from public discussion, that would be familiar in both ordoliberal and neoliberal global states.

After the global financial crisis of 2008, Russians saw some of the worst income stagnation in Europe, staggering wealth concentration (far higher than the USA or China), and high levels of extreme poverty. By 2018, real incomes had likely declined by 11 percent since 2014. The true, and staggering, extent of high poverty and inequality levels in Russia is likely not adequately captured by statistics, but it is reasonable to say that as of 2025, incomes are no higher in real terms than in 2013. What makes Russia exceptional is that the post-1991 political economy was *designed* with wealth concentration in mind. Large-scale corruption grew, and the wealth of a new breed of the super-rich expanded. After the original oligarchs were politically neutered in the first five years of the twenty-first century, a new network of rich and powerful people emerged among those with political connections via the security services – the so-called *siloviki*.

The increasingly online population could no longer claim blissful ignorance; the tenacious efforts of oppositionist Alexei Navalny to publicize corruption at the highest level meant that no one could ignore the rapacious appetites of the new elite set against deteriorating standards in schooling, health, and social infrastructure more generally. While oil and gas revenues continued to make Russia, or rather Moscow, rich in terms of GDP, average incomes fell behind, and regional inequality remained enormous. Politicians responded with the rhetoric of social Darwinism. They lamented the lack of "entrepreneurialism" or bootstrapping among Russians. More than once, a minor scandal ensued after unguarded statements by politicians such as "no one asked you to have children," or "if you're not already successful then why should I talk to you?" So even before the present crisis, Russia had drifted into a long period of growing social discontent. A weak economy focused on export of raw materials only benefits a small minority who can extract rents – often via corruption. Russia after 2011 anticipates the move away from globalization, and domestic reaction: in public discourse, there is a marked turn to isolationism and chauvinism at the same time as neoliberal austerity is accelerated. As the chapter on the Netherlands in this volume indicates, austerity does its own work in exacerbating the search for "external" scapegoats. As in the US chapter, overindebtedness and dependence on a retrenching social security state also grows in Russia. The failure of liberal optimism about technocratic adjustment to fix overaccumulation in the current conjunction is anticipated in the authoritarian turn in Russia as early as 2008. The periphery shows the way to the pessimism of what Nick Trickett calls the "empire of austerity" and what I term "capitalist realism" with a social Darwinist ideology and digitalized authoritarian state architecture.

THE RUSSIAN REGIME IN 2025

Open a scholarly study of Russian politics in the 2020s, even after the invasion of Ukraine, and you will be met with one of two foci: the tracing of an exclusive patron-client political and economic network with Putin at its center, or a study of the flexible ideology of civilizational difference and neoconservatism. It is not to say that these studies are misguided or wrong, yet they reflect the biases of the liberal Western (or equally Russian) writers. If only, the liberals lament, Russia had developed a competitive political regime in the short opening of 1989–93, then it would have avoided jumping "out of the frying pan and into the fire" (as Vladimir Gel'man memorably put it). While there were signs of political competition, civil society, and institutional development until 2011, the one-sided prevalence of security and economic resources on the part of the conservative elite led to a "winner takes all" situation because coercion turned out to be cheaper than cooperation or competition (Gel'man 2008). No institutional compromise was needed by the presidency after protests against unfair elections failed to develop into a social movement broader than the Moscow middle class that could threaten the regime. A "frozen endgame" emerged with Putin at the center of a web of balancing elite figures, many of whom are odious by comparison. Elite conflict was there behind the scenes. But it was hardly visible, deferred to the day of his death. Politicians, appointed officials, and oligarchs might remain powerful actors, but still ultimately subordinate, required to perform loyalty, and subject to expropriation, jail, exile or demotion, as decided by the dominant actor in the system and a couple of his vampiric buddies and bankers.

In parallel with the political science literature of regime evolution, of which Gel'man represents a neat if functionalist strand, there has developed a cottage industry that decodes ideological dynamics. Without agreeing on its origin, scholars tracked what they saw as the development of "neoconservatism" as a national idea. For example, Makarychev and Yatsyk (2014) argued that Ukrainian regime change in 2014 invigorated neo-imperial retrenchment in Russian elite thinking. They were faced with the threat of domestic actors seeking to ape the Ukrainian example of regime change via a social movement. But they lacked a sufficiently attractive ideological purpose to counter this. Over time, then, collective identity against liberal universalism was coupled to a securitizing framework and the rhetoric of external threats ramped up. While Putin's appeal to conservative values that the Euro-Atlantic had rejected remained ambiguous, domestic consolidation using the idea of sovereignty as more than a political, but a civilizational and spiritual concept was part of building a national identity project after 25 years of self-doubt and confusion.

The problem with this was that it remained largely negative: "we are for normalcy, the Europeans are not." This was hardly attractive when Russia

remained a country of whopping corruption, demographic decline, terrible infrastructure like run-down schools and hospitals, not to mention extraordinary low salaries and draconian labor relations. Europe was to become an external, threatening other of moral relativism, sexual deviance, racial disorder, and political deadlock. "Things might be bad, but at least we're not in France" is a genuine and sincerely expressed phrase one might hear. Some of this ideological conjuring trick gained traction then, especially as it was finessed into a biopolitical defense against moral decay. But it was also hard for many to fully internalize the quite radical idea that Russia was somehow not European. Was it Asian then? If the regime was so bent on defense of tradition and the Russian people, why was abortion, divorce, and alcoholism still rampant, and prenatal and profamily policies almost laughably mean and tokenistic? As Andrei Melville argued (2017), while there was support for neoconservative ideas because of general fears and the legacy of the 1990s, there were many concerns that far outweighed the propagandized issues on TV: inflation, impoverishment, unemployment, economic crisis, and indeed, fear of armed conflict.

In one of the most sophisticated contributions to this literature, David Lewis (2020) argues that Russia has developed a new version of authoritarian politics with wide international resonance and was the "most significant case study of the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism in the post-Cold War world" (Lewis 2020: vii). Illiberalism rejected the international system of liberal intervention, universal values such as human rights, and cosmopolitanism more generally. Lewis saw Russia's illiberal emergence in the 2000s as a result of the experience of existential threat to its political order in the 1990s. Most helpfully, Lewis contended that the creation of a political laboratory in neoconservatism fused to authoritarian political order did not mean any departure from Western-centric models of neoliberal economics. For Lewis, Schmittian thinking has become *the* conservative paradigm now operative in the Russian elite. To be sovereign is to take decisions free from constraint, be it liberal rule of law or international agreements (Lewis 2020: x). Politics can never be more than a struggle within a field of conflict against enemies. For the elite, the Schmittian "exception": no rules should prevent the imposition of order. However, for Lewis, such claims to global leadership of illiberalism on the part of Russia are undermined by the result. Where any dissent is dismissed as the work of enemies and "fifth columns," repression naturally becomes the default response by authorities, increasing discontent and weakening any feedback mechanisms that exist. Such political orders are self-destructive in the long run, Lewis argues. Even the most comprehensive analysis of Putinism as a coherent ideology (Laruelle 2025: 215) ends up undercutting its thesis: civilizational tenets are a "repertoire" of semantic elasticity and gaps, more "scripts" than programs or worldviews. Once again, the most compelling argument here is that state-centrism trumps all. However, even perceptive political diagnoses

that bring in a Foucauldian perspective (like Lewis) miss out on how neoliberal rationality operates in Russia to stave off recognition of both political and economic dispossession among people. It is perfectly possible for authoritarianism to be both about the primacy of the captured state apparatus *and* imposing neoliberal rationality on its subjects.

NEOLIBERAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Michel Foucault (2008) conceptualizes neoliberalism not as a set of economic reforms, but as a form of governance that operates through the production of market-oriented subjectivities. In its mature form, biopolitics does not prohibit but rather shapes desires, motivations, and lifestyles, making them economically rational and morally legitimate. Governance through neoliberalism is thus not ideological but normative, working through discipline, market rationality, and entrepreneurial values. This is particularly relevant in the postcommunist context, where the state has shifted from governing through ideology to governing through the market. In this framework, the state becomes a facilitator rather than a regulator, and people are encouraged to govern themselves as "entrepreneurs of the self." This shift has had profound consequences for public life. The discourse of postsocialist neoliberalism systematically depreciates the political and social conditions necessary for the formation of the self. Confidence in oneself is redefined in business-like and instrumental terms, while the interactive public sphere is perceived as a competitive, gendered, and egocentric arena (Matza 2009, 2012).

This results in a symbolic order where social inequalities are depoliticized. The divide between those who succeed and those who fail becomes morally and economically justified, with no need for institutionalized representation of class interests. Belonging to the world of entrepreneurship carries significant symbolic weight in Russian society, dividing people into successful entrepreneurs and those deemed less socially valuable. Matza (2012) refers to this configuration as a "commercial-biopolitical matrix," in which people are not divided along political or ideological lines, but according to their capacity to be governed or to govern themselves as market actors. Kalb (2019) observes in postcommunist countries a similar transformation in which antagonism between "winners" and "losers" dominates, rather than contestation over class-based interests. This antagonism unfolds within the depoliticized logic of the commercial-biopolitical matrix, effectively replacing political articulation with tangible material markers of success and identity.[1]

A focus on political authoritarianism and patron-client relations deflect our attention from the dominant discursive reality as experienced by most Russians: a kind of socio-economic Darwinism. This is a hegemonic "common sense" that exhorts all to become self-governing atomized subjects – individu-

ally responsible for their success and failure in life.[2] The first "common sense" acts from above through dominant discourses and economic policies – the notorious labor code sets an example (making defending workers' rights legally almost impossible), and the paltry social protections for vulnerable groups make sure they understand their position ("the state owes you nothing"). Just as important is the response from below which internalizes and reacts – a "neoliberalism from below." People adapt and even partly mold themselves to the unwritten compact.

Sometimes in the literature on postsocialist transformation this internalization is tempered with a perspective that posits a more ameliorative "domestication." Domestication indicates both varying kinds of adaptation in new national contexts, but also that ordinary people do not lack agency in the way they allow changing economic imperatives to shape them. Neoliberal subjectivity is often thought to produce strongly individualized reactions – and Russia is no exception to this. However, researchers have increasingly explored how citizens in Eastern Europe after the end of the Soviet period became active participants in incorporating neoliberal subjectivity in a negotiated, contingent manner in their everyday lives (Smith et al. 2011: 59). What came into focus was the sphere of social reproduction and "diverse" forms of economic management of precarity. Engagement with newly marketized realities is a far cry from the template of patronal transactionalism: the idea that informal networks based on rational exchange of favors are the ultimate explanation of all political-economic reality in Russia (Baglione 2016: 599; Hale 2015). In more extreme economic and political circumstances today, the negotiation of the neoliberal compact, and what British philosopher Mark Fisher (2009) memorably called our era's "capitalist realism," is just as relevant in the Russian context (Morris 2021).

Like Ilya Matveev (2019), I argue that neoliberalism in Russia entails state involvement in supporting and maintaining highly exploitative relations. More recently, even ordinary people talk about "state capitalism" in Russia. This is a minimal and retreating state for most, and a rentier, insider division for a minority of winners. Stephen Collier (2011) adds to this perspective: rather than a focus on freeing markets per se, neoliberalism is about rethinking government according to an overdetermined form of economistic reasoning. A highly truncated social state remains, but its governance "styles" are influenced by Soviet economism and overweening security paranoia. *Khoziaistvo* literally means "management" but refers to the economic basis of any decision by the authorities. This economism is based on a narrow managerial conception of needs.

Collier elsewhere (2012: 190) reiterates Hilgers' (2012) argument about the potential synergy between activist states and marketized relations, underlining how *neo*liberalism as distinct from *classical* liberalism imagines a key

role for governments "in creating the conditions for diffusion of markets and market-like mechanisms." Tobias Rupprecht (2020) reminds us that some enthusiasm for neoliberal political reform in Russia after 1991 emerged from the experience of Soviet planning (as failure). For Rupprecht, a strong element of neoliberalism in Russia is a lack of belief in the ability of state capacity to contend with complexity. In a sense, the period since 1991 can be seen as a strongly negative turn away from almost all aspects of Soviet modernity, an example almost of social nihilism.[3]

AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM IN PRACTICE IN RUSSIA

Some observers argue that remnants of the social state remain in Russia. But increasingly benefits and protections exhibit a biopolitical character: those useful to the security functions and superficial political legitimacy and day-to-day functioning of the state get some baubles. Russian sociologists, generally allergic to a materialist analysis, see this as neofeudalism, but its logic is better served by an amalgam of Foucault and Gramsci. Hegemonic authoritarian neoliberalism.

Neoliberalization, understood as the restructuring of state-society relations, was a deliberate political process that signaled the emergence of a new system of governance and political economy. It redefined citizenship by narrowing and materializing the relationship between the state and the welfare system (Hemment 2009). This restructuring created structural conditions that shaped the emergence of neoliberal subjectivity in Russia, such as the monetization of the public sector, flexible labor regimes, and the expansion of informal economy and entrepreneurialism (Morris 2021). It is important to note, however, that this governance regime does not imply a reduction in the functions of the state or its withdrawal from the social sphere. On the contrary, non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and medical professionals are now responsible for governance, assisting the state in exceeding its own institutional boundaries, and thus acting as direct or indirect agents of the state. As a result, as Dunn demonstrates in the case of postcommunist countries, this pluralization of regulatory authority means that the "neoliberal state is not actually withdrawing from social space but that space is becoming even more 'statized' than it was in the era of modernist state projects" (Dunn 2008: 245). The reassertion of the state and the subsequent shift to statist forms of social welfare (as in the National Priority Projects or the "maternity capital" program) do not, in fact, imply an overturning or outright rejection of neoliberal policies. As Putin sought to strengthen the state, he pushed for its withdrawal from areas of the economy where it is not justified and sought to "activate" the citizenry (Hemment 2009). Putin's welfare policies can be viewed as a dynamic and complex fusion.

In 2005, perhaps the furthest reaching reform was "monetization": the conversion of sometimes in-kind social benefits (like a right to free bus rides, or kindergarten places, or housing priority) to a "cash" equivalent. This closely matches patterns of welfare residualization in more developed neoliberal states and key to "austerity politics" (Trickett 2025; Wengle and Rasell 2008: 749). Monetization also contained the logic of "choosing" deserving groups, making them "responsible" citizens (Kourachanis 2020). As Shields (2019: 657) notes in the case of Poland, family-focused welfare reform is a form of "neoliberal social innovation." It appropriates the micro-scale of social reproduction as a further space of responsibilization. It conditionally links benefits to particular forms of parenthood, upbringing, domestic work, and privatization of former entitlements such as pre-school childcare.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge the burden – which translates into real socio-economic, and political feedback effects – of knowing that if a person is in need the state is unlikely to provide even a bare safety net. Even in the current war, cases of refusal and avoidance of federal and regional payouts of Wounded-in-Action (WIA) and Killed-in-Action (KIA) compensation are rife. This is why I bundle "authoritarian neoliberalism" and social Darwinism together to characterize the way people confront this reality as "capitalist realism." While Russia is hardly an exception, it is the most dynamic Global North example: the internalization of loser status, the visibility of surplus populations and "reservations," the temporal closing of horizons for betterment are all characteristic experiences of the present global conjunction, as experienced by the newly proletarianized majorities. Whether we call them "multitude" or precariat, or in the post-Soviet case "subproletarians" (Derluguian 2005), is less important. The sense of despair that is often the result can be compared to the reduction to ontological "worthlessness" discussed by Kalb (2025: 141), necessary to the global regime of accumulation in these newly conquered spaces of the former socialist world.

Response to Covid-19 in Russia and its similarities and differences to other jurisdictions are instructive. A knee-jerk authoritarian lockdown was followed by a hurry to delegate risk back to the individual and downplay both the social costs and state responsibility. Russia, in contrast to other developed economies, offered very limited income support for livelihoods, especially among the self-employed and poor. Notably, the federal center sought to avoid almost all responsibility. This affected not only lumpenized informal workers like taxi-drivers and construction workers but also the burgeoning "freelancer" white-collar sector. "Gig" workers are an important category in urban Russia. As Shevchuk (2020) points out, labor processes that are negotiated via digital platforms emphasize tight algorithmic control and a loss of autonomy. This is because the platforms actually disguise incorporation of workers into "shadow" corporations – shells for normalizing precarious work delegated to "indepen-

dent contractors" as in the Uber model (Friedman 2015). Gig work also divides up labor into small parcels, a practice which has a wider influence via spillover into other domains of work. In other words, the remote tracking of microtasks can happen to anyone, including people in the security services. The "state-centric" model of security governance is only enhanced by neoliberalism. One of my most frazzled interlocutors was tasked with checking online platforms for anti-regime sentiment. She worked in a call center-type open-plan office and was paid a "piece rate," rather than hourly (according to sets of data "approved" or not). For the purposes of our argument, work for "shadow corporations" intensifies both punitive monitoring and self-exploitation at the point of production. It also facilitates the emergence of the control society, explored below.

The "everyday," biographical experience of economic relations in Russia fits with "capitalist realism" because of what the term says about the *internalization* of economic relations and their *externalization* in bodily practices. This is a "slowly violent" process as Vorbrugg observes (2022). Capitalist realism proposes the inevitable and inescapable internalization of economic relations typified by increasing exploitation and despair. Fisher calls the effect of this a "preemptive formatting" (2009: 9). Formatting makes exploitation feel incorporated in everyday life; imagining an alternative is nearly impossible. Indeed, this is relevant even to the context of war mobilization and recruitment. Workers, whether in former Russian monotowns, provincial call centers, or plush offices in Moscow, take seriously the necessity to become flexible subjects (even if in service to the state). At the same time, the discursive dominance of the idea of the market (however abstracted or distorted) means they struggle to imagine any structural limits or remedies. This is despite them simultaneously experiencing psychic and bodily injury: *ressentiment* and humiliation. Many times, they correctly apprise that there is no object external to their "realism" to appeal to.

"Capitalist realism" plays off a word association with Soviet-era "socialist realist" cultural ideology which perceived reality as malleable through idealist art and literature. Its projection of universalism elides a present-future distinction. Russia as a *laboratory* seems to me an equally apt metaphor. In the past, given the brutality of economic transition, other metaphors have been employed – such as Russia as a weapons-proving ground for extreme forms of exploitation (Pokrovskii and Bobylev 2003). Marianna Pavlovskaya (2018) argues that Russia is a "state of the art" laboratory for the production of poverty under neoliberal capitalism. She further argues that international organizations and domestic agencies connive to justify high levels of poverty. Not only that, the deployment of (manipulated official) statistics *normalizes* a situation where wages are below the level required for social reproduction and where genuine social protections are absent. While not necessarily "neoliberal," this is an example of capitalist realism as a form of structural and discursive violence.

The majority are then encouraged to view the minority (two-fifths) who live on subsistence incomes as "deservedly" poor.[4] Karin Knorr Cetina (1999) argues that the laboratory environment comes to be identified as a space of work on the malleability of objects, the refitting of preexisting states to new orders. The laboratory does not have to "put up with an object *as it is*." It is an authoritarian space of material throughput with much discarded, mutated waste. Just as the laboratory metaphor proposes transformation, it also implies strategic withdrawal – of empathy and care. As Tomas Matza memorably put it, Russian neoliberalism is reliant on the normalization of the state's "indifference" (Matza 2010: 29, discussed in Kruglova 2019). Capitalist realism emphasizes psychic despair and the closing off of the future.

THE DIGITALLY MEDIATED CONTROL SOCIETY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Moscow in 2025 and its ever-expanding region of governance is a global leader in smart city affordances. You can pay for coffee with a selfie, use the equivalent of Google maps (Yandex as of 2024 is now owned by loyal oligarchs and a state-owned bank) to call a taxi or view a bus location in real time. Your social security phone app allows you to book a doctor's appointment, enrol your kids in school, and pay vehicle tax – all through a single portal. It is all so convenient: unprecedented governmental focus on affordances of socio-political control over space – real and virtual. Moscow governance (as a national and international model) is instructive for its techno-deterministic aspects and a centralizing logic. "Moscow 2030," the name of the government smart city project, is envisioned as a "city *governed* by data," where aggregated biometric data are fed to artificial intelligence (AI), even via clothing, to monitor the habits of its owner that can then be used by insurance companies (Moscow 2020).[5] Automated decision-making is supposed to obviate the need for citizen involvement. But real choices were made as to which systems to expand: free Wi-Fi or face-recognition? Access or control? Covid accelerated the latter. Free city-provided Wi-Fi hotspots were abandoned in favor of expansion of surveillance. Over 150,000 security cameras and 175,000 other devices feed data to a "unified center"). In 2020, a global rating of "smartness" saw Moscow make large gains against other world cities, but only thanks to a change in weighting that emphasized digitization over livability and human development. What Rob Kitchin (2014: 11) called the coalescence of "oligopticon systems" in smart cities raises "the spectre of a Big Brother society based on a combination of surveillance (gazing at the world) and dataveillance (trawling through and interconnecting datasets), and a world in which all aspects of a citizen's life are captured." This intensified with the experience of Covid-19, when authorities attempted to emulate China's *fangkong* system of public health surveillance,

with disastrous results: a rushed buggy “self-isolation” app ended up wrongly automating fines to many tens of thousands of infected people for “violating” the geofencing of their homes (Orlova and Morris 2021).

In the Putin 2.0 years after 2011, media, already supine, became extensions of the regime. Telecommunication and internet use was brought fully into the security domain. Providers were required to store and make available unbelievable amounts of data for state perusal. Still feeling insecure, the state apparatus went after the remaining activists, finding novel ways to encourage their emigration – for example, by labeling them “foreign” or undesirable agents when they were in receipt of funding from abroad. Even individuals with a small blog audience are required to wear a digital badge of shame (Wolfe 2021). In prominent capital letters they must proclaim their Foreign Agent Status before every single public pronouncement – even a Facebook post (Meta itself being blocked and labeled an undesirable organization in Russia). Today, “liking” social media posts critical of the government or anonymously donating a small amount of money to Ukrainian causes can be punished with prison sentences. Writing critical posts is more harshly punished. However, such repression appears random and inconsistent. Some deduce that unpredictability serves effectively as deterrence and enforces self-censorship in people’s online and offline lives (including private phone-messenger services such as Telegram and WhatsApp – as of 2025 both are likely to be replaced by a state-sponsored messenger). Justified paranoia over who is listening is exacerbated by the roll-out of unprecedented numbers of security cameras capable of face recognition in the mass housing entryways of large cities and traffic cameras elsewhere. Ostensibly part of the rise of the smart city, the security services evidently place great store in the deterrent effect of these measures, regardless of the genuine accuracy of the algorithms in identifying individuals.

As a result of investment in a vast control assemblage, spatial order has hardly been punctuated since the Ukrainian invasion in 2022. Clean and quiet public squares are free of dissenting bodies or symbols. The Facebook clone VKontakte (literally meaning “in contact”) is a cosy online space, where people share harmless memes and ritually congratulate each other on changing seasons and holiday dates, or enquire about lost cats and scheduled utility maintenance. Algorithmic control sees a fusing of state and private capital’s capacities. Plutocrats close to the elite control the “platform” capitalism that, more efficiently than anywhere else in Europe, at least both exploits the dispossessed and serves the interests of the upper middle classes. Want a delivery of just one pack of chips? Sure, there’s a platform for that. Someone to paint your nails or clip your dog’s fur? No problem. The microproletarianization of workers such as food couriers and taxi-drivers is just the tip of the iceberg of patronal entrepreneurialism. “Freelancer”-precariat white-collar workers are an important category

in Russia, as elsewhere where there is high "human capital." There are possibly three times as many "gig" workers there as in comparable developed economies.

As Andrei Shevchuk argues (2020), the success and ubiquity of platform labor in Russia is a continuation of the neoliberal deregulatory drive. The worker takes the risk yet pays hefty fees to the platform owner – usually 25 percent or more. They are subject to algorithmic control for maximum extraction of surplus value within shadow corporations. This happens of their own "volition," via internalization of the demands of maximal self-exploitation and the delegation of all externalities to the individual and wider society by the platforms themselves (health costs, accidents, insurance, pollution). However, the imbrication of state (which owns bonds in such companies, allows them to operate as quasi-monopolies, and sustains anti-labor legal environments) and financial and political elites who own such companies is in contrast to the separation of tech capitalism in the West, though perhaps not for much longer. The scaling effect of microproletarianization of swathes of economic activity in Russia via concentration of market share is unprecedented outside of China, facilitated by what some observers call "hybrid surveillance capitalism" (Østbø 2021).[6] Thus, I have argued that Russia moves toward a particular type of vanguard digital "control society." However, the always imperfect arrangement of such assemblages, evidenced by failure of technocratic governance during Covid lockdowns, gives rise to rerouting of digital technology and resistance via "disassembly" (Orlova and Morris 2021). And this brings us to our conclusion: that however disheartening the Russian vision of our future might look, it is also worth looking there for signs of counter-hegemony and outright resistance.

Don Kalb (2013) argues that anthropologists examining the local effects of neoliberalism have to choose between Weber and Marx. There are echoes of this in the general debates on Russia – Simon Kordonsky's neofeudal estate hierarchies (2016) versus Matveev's state-capital alliance (2019). The "capitalization" of social relationships is visible in the cases in this chapter (the Weberian pole), but material necessity and social reproduction mean everyone in Russia is called upon to express their class positioning and engage with hegemonic neoliberalization. They do this by embracing social Darwinism as "strivers" or rejecting it. As Kalb goes on to say, what's missing from the Weberian position are "rational collectivist claims on states." In lieu of a conclusion, I end on a more positive note: that collectivist action is still possible even in a society such as Russia.

In my recent work (Morris 2025), I have highlighted how even the accelerating repression since 2022 in Russia has not prevented micropolitical resistance. Micropolitical life, especially in postcommunist societies has always been the incubator of what Agnes Gagyi calls "popular politics on the communal level" (2015: 23). This gives hope for the future in even the toughest of times. Dispersed cells of activists fight the war and the regime in any way they can – through

sabotage, through informational campaigns showing potential soldiers how to avoid military mobilization. Just as important are the small acts of political dissent and counter-hegemony: a sign graffited to show not everyone consents to the war, ingenious creative projects like replacing price labels in stores with cards showing the human costs of the war. Listening and sensitive conversations with relatives seduced by the loudspeaker or the screen. Russians are well equipped to resist because they spent the last 25 years building robust subterranean, mobile and flexible groups of activists and agitators. They did this in electoral politics through the well-known example of Alexei Navalny, whose politics might have been conservative-liberal, but whose legacy was his power to create decentered groups with the power to mobilize. In parallel, leftist activists made good progress in agitating in some of the newer factories and scored notable victories against multinational capital in the country. Not all of these people emigrated, and it is to them that we must look, if and when an opening comes – which seems more and more likely as the country endures significant stagflationary symptoms because of the simultaneous demographic squeeze, shift of resources to the military industrial complex, and increasing austerity elsewhere. More importantly though is the memory of a different kind of social unity – once possible in a future-oriented, modernizing, and equalizing project – the ideals of the Soviet experiment, regardless of its well-documented failures. Here too Russia can serve as a vanguard. While the term "socialism" remains buried beneath a discursive public space dominated by resentment and external threat, the vernacular politics of many people, including those born long after 1991, is inflected by an alternative ideal (Morris 2025). Merely by dint of its historical existence and "lay" memory of it, the Soviet project still serves as a stumbling block – a source of counter-hegemonic myths about what "could be." The point is not the actually existing reality of what the USSR was (it was, after all, quite unequal, and its welfare model quite inadequate). The point is that the ideal of the social state, dealienated and deprivatized social relations (Chukhrov 2020), and most importantly, postcapitalism, remains alive and well.

NOTES

1. This section reiterates an argument made in Kashirskikh and Morris (forthcoming 2026).
2. My choice of the term "socio-economic Darwinism" is partly inspired by Olga Shevchenko's (2015) research.
3. Part of this section reworks in less detail the coverage of neoliberalism in Morris (2021, 2025).
4. The government has long manipulated statistics to hide high levels of poverty (Pavlovskaya 2018). Unemployment benefit policy, by design and implementa-

tion, provides less support than is possible to survive on and entails humiliating conditionality.

5. The Smart City 2030 program was radically altered after media reports drew attention to its mention of the technological potential of "chipping" people.
6. The most popular search engine in Russia (Yandex) also owns the main social network and the most popular email service, and controls both the main ride-hailing app and an increasing share of the food courier business.

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7

Eastern European Reactionary Nationalism: A Ukrainian Exception?[1]

Volodymyr Ishchenko and Don Kalb

INTRODUCTION: CLASS AND NATIONALIST ILLIBERALISM

If we leave out the narrowly political accounts focused on "style," social explanations of the rise of right-wing nationalist illiberalism in the Global North have broadly taken two competing paths: a culturalist and a class-driven one. Culturalist explanations are often based on opinion-survey data and have emerged mainly from the rich West. They are therefore the most numerous and have focused on issues around immigration, xenophobia, and racism among white cross-class populations. Class-driven explanations, in contrast, emphasize deindustrialization, inequality, "lost pride," "existential insecurity," "double polarization," and "double devaluation" of working and lower middle classes in the wake of neoliberal globalizations. In this vision, broad processes of devaluation generate Polanyi-type counter-movements that express but also displace class grievances onto cross-class neo-nationalist coalitions (Kalb 2025) – "counterrevolutions," in Walden Bello's naming (Bello 2019, 2024). Or perhaps better: counterrevolutions within and against prior counterrevolutions, if we agree with David Harvey that the neoliberal project itself was a counterrevolution by capital (Harvey 2007: preface). Methodologically, the class-driven approaches tend to be more holist, ethnographic, qualitative, emplaced, and processual. They understand class in a broad relational, anthropological sense as based in the ongoing pressures of social reproduction and its dependence on money incomes in a context largely determined by global capital accumulation, articulated and signified by (counter-) hegemonic politics, a conception of class influenced by Marx, Gramsci, and Polanyi, (Kalb 2015, 2023, 2025; Kalb and Halmai 2011; Scheiring 2020; Scheiring and Szombati 2020; Scheiring et al. 2024; Szombati 2018).

This type of argument has certainly been effective in the West, in particular in its focus on old industrial heartlands and provincial spaces (Hochschild 2016, 2024; in this volume, see in particular the chapters by Engelen, Edelman, and Coquard). But its strongest area of operation seems to be postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), spaces characterized by phases of stark economic

collapse, political abandonment, and subsequent emigration rather than immigration, giving rise to neo-nationalist illiberal mobilizations with significant working-class participation, and hence potential majoritarian outcomes. Apart from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, this also includes Russia after 2012. Putin can only be explained as the increasingly nationalist-reactionary energizer of precisely such a counter-movement (while emphatically acknowledging that this process is overdetermined by Western imperialism and post-imperial anger).

Ukraine, however, appears to stand out as an intra-East European exception to this region-wide process. It presents itself as a counter-case of a seemingly broad popular and politically robust embrace of Western-style democratic liberalism (e.g., Alexseev and Dembitskyi 2024; Onuch 2022); this, despite long-run economic stagnation, impoverishment, and massive outmigration, possibly even more profoundly so than anywhere else in postsocialist Europe.

We argue, in contrast and perhaps counterintuitively, that Ukraine is no exception to the postsocialist rule as illustrated by developments in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and elsewhere. We show that, in Ukraine too, we can effectively deploy the class approach, as long as we understand that the political context and the timing are different, and hence the overt ideological significations. First, there was a general failure of postsocialist and post-Soviet class projects offered by any of the regional political elites in the 1990s and 2000s. Such projects may have acquired a superficial political dominance for a while in the late 1990s/early 2000s but did nowhere become successfully hegemonic in the sense of robust, stable popular consent. Subsequently, in the later 2000s in the Visegrad countries, there emerged neo-nationalist counter-mobilizations and public articulation of grievances, but only *after* they had become integrated into the European Union (EU). The geopolitical context was paramount for the popular acceptance of elite and Western neoliberal dictates. With the exception of the Baltic states – often more fiercely neoliberal than anywhere else in the region – the post-Soviet countries were not offered EU access. Popular mobilizations here in the 2000s were precisely aimed at securing that access that was denied to them; this, in a context of a now resurgent and increasingly anti-Western Russia. We need to put the hegemonic dynamics therefore in their correct regional geopolitical and historical contexts. We warn that we should not read the final denouement – the war – backwards in time, and project its ideological antagonisms of a willed sovereign Western-type liberal democracy that imagines itself as embodying "European civilization" versus an "Asian" colonial authoritarianism, as its prior historical social causation. The main explanation for these fervent identitarian antagonisms lies in the vicissitudes of failed elite hegemony, social decline and stagnation, class mobilizations, and class politics, as elsewhere; and in a critical contextual and temporal difference as compared to the Western parts of CEE, generating an ostensible contrast in

public signification but not, we emphasize, of the underlying "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977).

The error behind the belief in Ukrainian exceptionalism has been twofold: first, to focus solely or primarily – and in an empiricist way – on face-value ideological-identitarian expressions rather than underlying experiences and subjectivities; and second, to succumb to the presumed Western teleologies suggested by Ukraine's post-1991 formal independence and legal sovereignty.

The Ukrainian far-right nationalists, who have performed better in street politics and now in the military than in elections (Colborne 2022; Gomza 2023; Ishchenko 2014, 2018b; Katchanovski 2020; Katchanovski and Abrahms 2024; Mierzejewski-Voznyak 2018; Umland 2020), have for decades been allied with the pro-Western and avowedly anti-Russian camp. The latter primarily represented the interests of the professional urban middle class and transnational capital (to which the Ukrainian state has become ever more deeply indebted; see elaboration of this argument in Ishchenko 2024a). We argue that the apparent Ukrainian exception in fact proves the underlying rule. On the one hand, Ukrainian "oligarchic" political capitalists have failed to envision and execute a convincing post-Soviet forward-looking national development project, and have therefore never acquired the capacity to form a postsocialist hegemonic bloc with the Ukrainian working class, which was largely stuck in slowly crumbling conditions of life (Gorbach 2024; Ishchenko and Zhuravlev forthcoming; Yurchenko 2018; for a comparable analysis of other post-Soviet countries, see Antaramian and Khachaturian 2024; Artiukh 2020; Jaitner 2024; Khelaia and Chivadze 2022). On the other hand, it is spurious to assume, nor is there any reliable evidence, that the alliance of radical Ukrainian nationalists with Western and urban elites naturally turns them into authentic Western-type liberals (Golinkin 2023). Rather, this alliance simply echoes contemporary Western liberalism's tribalist-nationalist decline and its deepening alignment with forms of late fascism, a figure well-known from liberal history (Toscano 2023).

Our argument is that Ukraine is perfectly susceptible to a dynamic class reading along similar methodological lines as the Visegrad countries, except that the context is different and the outcomes are therefore mirrored and stand on their head. This requires a determined abandonment of methodological nationalism and an analysis of Ukraine in the context of the post-Soviet crisis (see especially Ishchenko and Zhuravlev forthcoming; also Jaitner et al. 2018). The fact that Russia is revising the borders inherited from the USSR should not be a reason to assume self-sufficient and teleological entities within them. This requires emphasis on class capacities and a greater sensitivity for hegemonic labeling, in particular the use of the terms West and East. Apropos the latter, the classic occidentalist vocabulary of West as civilized, urban, and sophisticated, and East as barbarous, primitive, and violent has everywhere during its

capitalist transition in Eastern Europe been deployed in order to claim, blame, and impose hierarchy. In this hierarchy, domestic East European workers, and the political forces who subscribe to "paternalism" over them, are seen as Soviet, outdated, uneducated and locked in the past (Baysha 2018; Buchowski 2006; Kalb 2009). That is, they are denounced as such by the category-producing educated urban middle classes whose interests and aspirations tend to align with the Western neoliberal globalist project. That is, these are terms that accompany, and are in fact part and parcel of, projects of "double devaluation": both material, social, and cultural (Kalb 2023, 2025). The neo-nationalist working class and the later cross-class counter-movements in the Visegrad countries must be seen as an explicit effort to confront this devaluating imposition and turn the hierarchy around. Interestingly these counter-movements originate to some extent from the "East of the East," from the most imploded and abandoned postsocialist areas and populations (this is geographically true for Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia), but far from exclusively so. Above all, they are "provincial," coming from the provinces and the small towns, but not exclusively so (Kalb 2018, 2019; Scheiring 2020; Szombati 2018). The same is true for Ukraine, both the devaluating categorical imposition by the urban educated bourgeoisie over the provincial working classes and the latter's subsequent response to that. Except, as we shall see, the latter here have *not* become a movement, and they have had in fact *very little voice*, while the former have now finally arrived in a stately position of dominance – without full hegemony – but this only after a turbulent series of *maidan* revolutions and then the war.

NO UKRAINIAN EXCEPTION

The current discussion about Ukraine is strongly pushed toward exceptionalism, especially in the aftermath of the Russian invasion. This is mostly so for political, geopolitical, and moral reasons, less so for theoretical and comparative ones (see the criticism of prolific exceptionalism and particularism in relation to the war in Ukraine in Ishchenko 2022a). The argument that the Russian invasion would for the time being preclude anti-Western political and ideological developments is probably a valid one. However, we should avoid a retrospective reading of Ukraine's post-Soviet politics through the prism of a teleological narrative that takes its starting point in the full-scale war since 2022. The supposedly "pro-Russian" camp (a problematic label in itself, a liberal imposition and an outcome of warmaking) in Ukrainian politics remained capable of gathering electoral majorities up until the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbass. Even until 2021, the Opposition Platform "For Life" – the biggest supposedly "pro-Russian" party – retained strong positions in Ukrainian politics, controlled a number of local councils and mayoral offices in southern and eastern Ukrainian regions, and came second in the 2019 national

elections that were won by Zelensky's bid for peace and against the antagonistic identarian categorical impositions of "West" and "East" (D'Anieri 2022).

In comparison to pre-Euromaidan Ukraine, anti-Russian attitudes in Polish and Hungarian society and politics used to be far stronger, not to mention the Baltic countries. For example, it was precisely the illiberal Law and Justice or PiS party which instrumentalized the anti-Russian politics of memory. It recurrently referred to the long history of Russian-Polish wars, the divisions of the *Rzecz Pospolita* or Republic of Poland, the suppression of the Polish uprisings against tsarist rule, the Battle of Warsaw against the Red Army in 1920, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn, and then the conspiracy theory of "the second Katyn" when the plane with President Lech Kaczyński and almost a hundred Polish officials crashed in 2010. Likewise, the Hungarian domination by the Soviets after the Second World War and the suppression of the 1956 uprising used to be an important point of reference for Fidesz. The Orbán government, shortly after its electoral victory in 2010, put a large statue of Ronald Reagan next to the old Soviet Army memorial on its Freedom Square (*Szabadság tér*), in an obvious challenge to the latter. The Soviet memorial itself was subsequently hidden from view by a thick line of trees.

Certainly, in the 1990s and early 2000s the threat of Russian revisionism toward the Visegrad countries was far less real than for Ukraine in the 2010s. Russia was barely capable of even securing its own borders and was initially defeated in Chechnya. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU membership was seen as the ultimate "return to civilization," and a defense against a renewed "Asian tyranny," discourses that have been resounding throughout the region. It was only *after* having secured the NATO umbrella in 1998 and EU membership in 2004 that political space opened up for the possibility of anti-EU illiberal politics in countries such as Hungary and Poland (Slovakia under Vladimir Mečiar in the 1990s was the first breach, and it is still sitting on the fence). Ukraine never had that luxury.

The Russian threat, even when real and escalating over time, does not diminish the illiberal and anti-Western framing of East European right-wing nationalist populists, as even Romania testified with its presidential elections in November 2024. Nor does it help to reverse the ongoing electoral weakness of the pro-Western Ukrainian radical nationalists, whom one would intuitively expect to be the ideological beneficiaries of Putin's war.

Let us recap the explanation for the rise of populist illiberal neo-nationalism in postsocialist Central Europe. Neoliberal capitalist transitions after 1989 produced deep deindustrialization and collapse, in particular in the provinces. The neoliberal regimes presiding over that process thus never acquired a strong hegemonic position. This was the precondition for the rise of cross-class nationalist Polanyi-type counter-movements. Neoliberal hegemony crumbled

very quickly (if it ever really existed), creating the conditions after 2004 for the appearance of national-socialist (in the strict sense of the term, Kalb 2011) and ethno-national political entrepreneurs aiming at aligning the electorally crucial postsocialist working classes with an aspiring, property-owning, provincial domestic bourgeoisie. These emergent alliances successfully beat the failing neoliberal political elites after 2004 and started new anti-EU nationalist political projects, in particular in those two Visegrad nations that had most courageously claimed sovereignty versus the declining Soviet Union in the 1980s.

If we look for a Ukrainian Orbán and Kaczyński, we are looking in the wrong direction. This happens because we start from identitarian ideology (where is a dominant Ukrainian far-right nationalism that resembles Orbán?) and we look for sameness, while we should start from political economy and class processes in an opposite geopolitical environment. Which political forces in post-Soviet Ukraine had the potential to appeal to, and channel, working-class grievances about post-Soviet decline? We get confused by the small groups of Ukrainian radical nationalists allied with middle-class neoliberals in the pro-Western and virulently anti-Russian political camp. In Ukraine, paradoxically, illiberal populism with a working-class base was certainly widespread and at the same time mostly "anti-nationalist" in appearance. Certainly, in the East it was inclined to be somewhat "pro-Russian" if it was made to choose, but the label came primarily from the pro-Western nationalist-liberal camp and it was meant as a moral disqualification. In the big industrial locations in the center of the country, working classes have never provided enthusiastic support for the identity politics of either camp. This explains the Zelensky electoral victory of 2019 (Chaisty and Whitefield 2020; Gorbach 2024; Viedrov 2022). In aggregate, in this context, the Ukrainian working class was rather "anti-political." It rejected any of the ethno-identitarian projects on offer, even after the Euromaidan of 2014 had set up the "pro-Western" project as a dominant state project, while the opposite one (stigmatized as "pro-Russian") now stood accused as a fifth column (Baysha 2018; Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020).

Our argument is that this is explained by the absence of a credible hegemonic project by the Ukrainian "political capitalist" ruling class versus a Western-type globalist neoliberalism. It is this hegemonic failure of the domestic accumulation project of what, for the sake of convenience and to avoid ethno-nationalist labeling, we will simply call the "Eastern" camp of Ukrainian politics that requires explanation above all else.

THE POST-SOVIET PATH: HEGEMONY CRISIS

In contrast to CEE and the Baltic states, most post-Soviet countries followed a transition path in which the commanding heights of the economy were not pri-

vatized largely to transnational capital but were acquired by domestic "political capitalists." We could define political capitalists as that faction of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage depends on gaining access to selective benefits from the state.[2] This divergence in the dominant factions of the post-socialist ruling classes emerged from the different ways in which state socialism collapsed in CEE and post-Soviet states: either as a result of (negotiated) democratic-national revolutions (Lawson 2005) or via centrifugal disintegration. The consequences were also different in the post-Soviet countries. This was not a transition driven by foreign investment and gradual institutional alignment with the West, as in the EU-integrated CEE (see Kalb 2001). That may not have been a probable development in the 1990s/early 2000s anyhow, given global overaccumulation, geopolitical rivalries, the rise of the Chinese workshop of the world, and the larger distances for supply chains. Whereas Central European neo-nationalists in the 2000s mobilized against the "theft" from the people by Western transnational capital and its local comprador bourgeoisies (Kalb 2009, 2011), the latter often recruited from the postsocialist left parties, it was precisely the unchecked power of *national* political capitalists that became the main issue behind the Western-supported "anti-corruption" agendas in all the post-Soviet trajectories (as well as Romania, Bulgaria, and the Balkans, initially also Slovakia).

Post-Soviet political capitalists do like to join the global elite. However, their collective interest was to integrate *en bloc,* as a sovereign state, which was essential for the survival of the political capitalist model. This structured the main lines of the post-Soviet class conflict (Ishchenko 2024a). First, there was the conflict within the emergent domestic capitalist class between their collective class interests and the interests of individual political capitalists or their factions, some of whom were aligning opportunistically with the intruding pro-Western camp and their comprador allies. Second, there was the conflict with transnational capital, interested in removing protectionist barriers and increasing "transparency" (from above), thus jeopardizing the main competitive advantage of the political capitalists. Third, an ideologically consequential line of conflict emerged with the liberal segment of the professional middle classes, whose prospects for economic, political, and ideological advancement were perceived to be allied with Western integration.[3]

The post-Soviet hegemony crisis – defined as fragmentation, disarticulation, and disorganization of the political dimension of the ruling class, making it incapable for political, moral, and intellectual leadership over subaltern classes (Gramsci 1971: 210, 1992: 156, 1996: 241–2) – developed in the global context of neoliberal upward "wealth pump" (Turchin 2023). But the crisis of hegemony in the post-Soviet countries was particularly deep and protracted because it grew out of the degeneration of the Soviet revolution, not the postwar social democratic capitalism of *Les Trente Glorieuses* (Ishchenko and Zhu-

ravlev, forthcoming). The newly-formed post-Soviet political capitalist class grappled with a significant challenge to its legitimacy from the very outset. The large-scale private property as well as institutions, ideologies, and traditions that might have legitimized such ownership had been dismantled under state socialism. Precisely because the state property was often genuinely perceived as "common," the rapid privatization of substantial portions of state assets by elite insiders has been often seen as "theft" and "corruption" (Cherkaev 2023; Denisova et al. 2012; Kalb 2009; Szelényi and Mihályi 2019: 97–8).

This was initially not different from the first years of transition in Central Europe. But there, countries, except Slovakia, switched in the course of the 1990s to a neoliberal transnational path (see, e.g., Drahokoupil 2009) after which they would be enjoying a substantial period of strong economic growth, flanked by newly arranged welfare policies. Remarkably, it was the 2008–14 Western financial crisis that brought down several key liberal governments in CEE, underlining once more the importance of economic growth and associated "popular hope and aspiration" for postsocialist political trajectories. "Popular hope and aspiration" had been decidedly more fragile and over a much longer period in some of the post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine.

Under the conditions of weak private property institutions, the accumulation and preservation of wealth of post-Soviet political capitalists depended on informal and unstable alliances with those in power. To mitigate risks, political capitalists shifted their assets abroad rather than invested domestically (Dzarasov 2013). This was one of the most important reasons, with much of the capital disappearing offshore, while public expectations continued to favor robust welfare institutions (Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021: 135–51; Kalb 2018, 2019). Instead, the vast legacy of state socialism was systematically disinvested, in particular urban housing (Gorbach 2024).

However, the dynamics of short-termist political capitalism not only undermined the potential to develop the material basis for their hegemony, but, if left unaddressed, threatened the very premises of the social reproduction of political capitalists as a group – the weakening of state sovereignty in relation to transnational capital (Milanović 2019: 128). Post-Soviet authoritarian leaders not only secured the interests of the authoritarian leaders or their cronies, but by strengthening state sovereignty they served as a Bonapartist/Caesarist solution to the political capitalists' weak ability to organize their collective interests as a class (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev forthcoming; see, e.g., Artiukh 2020; Matveev 2018 for a similar analysis). Simultaneously, Caesarist stabilization provided key segments of the working class – particularly those in heavy industry, the public sector, and pensioners – with a measure of economic security through stable wages, low unemployment, and gradually increasing state pensions. After the centrifugal collapse of the 1990s, these benefits were not trivial and provided the basis for majoritarian support for post-Soviet Caesarist leaders,

which remained, however, passive. Overall, the subaltern classes suffered from an even deeper disorganization and atomization than the new capitalist classes. There was continuity in the material arrangements of the working class, but there was little ideological support for redistribution or working-class power beyond "paternalism" (Gorbach 2024). Lacking any forward-looking ideological vision, Caesarist popular legitimacy relied primarily on the narrative of restoring stability after the turmoil of the "wild nineties" and preserving existing "paternalist" arrangements (Malinova 2021; Sharafutdinova 2020: 105–32). This was good enough to allow business as usual to continue, but not nearly enough for regaining the active hegemonic consent of the governed.

The Caesarist conservative solution to the post-Soviet hegemony crisis ultimately proved to be temporary (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev forthcoming). Internal contradictions of Caesarist rule eroded its core source of legitimacy – stability. Arbitrary redistribution of property generated discontent among elite factions (Milanović 2019: 93; Szelényi and Mihályi 2019: 174–6), while weakening political institutions undercut economic growth, a key foundation of passive support. Personalist authoritarian regimes like these are inherently prone to irregular power changes (Frye 2021: 43). However, due to the political weakness of rival elite fractions, such changes did not come as a result of coups from above but as a result of Maidan revolutions from below, such as in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014. These revolutions, like many populist uprisings globally in recent decades (Bevins 2023; Borriello and Jäger 2023), were loosely organized, lacked clear demands, and had only very weak leadership from subaltern classes. When governments were successfully overthrown, it was typically privileged groups – professional middle classes allied with transnational capital, opportunistic political capitalists, or well-organized actors like Ukrainian radical nationalists – that disproportionately capitalized on the political openings created by regime change. They were asymmetrically empowered to advance their particular interests and political agendas, which neither reflected the will of the majority nor most of the revolutions' supporters, and ultimately deepened the hegemony crisis (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2021).

It is in this context that we should look at post-Soviet Ukraine's polarized politics. Attempts to impose a Caesarist solution on the fragmented Ukrainian ruling classes have repeatedly failed, in contrast to Russia and unlike other post-Soviet societies, resulting in recurrent Maidan revolutions (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2021, forthcoming). Existing explanations tend, again, toward exceptionalism. The failures of attempts to establish a durable central regime in Ukraine are attributed either to the geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia and the specific fragile position of Ukraine between them (ignoring Belarus, which was in a similar position), or to the notorious ethnolinguistic and historical divides between the "two Ukraines" of the "Western" and

"Eastern" regions. Such arguments ignore a successful revolution in 2018 in a mono-ethnic post-Soviet country such as Armenia. But they also look away from similarly deep divisions over "Western" versus "Eastern" orientations in post-Soviet countries like Georgia and Moldova with virulent contentious politics; or even in 'successful' CEE countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania, not to speak of the Balkan countries outside the EU. We also see arguments that simply subscribe to a teleological nation-building narrative of national liberation from Russian historical imperialism (and ignore the striking similarities to the now repressed domestic political conflict in Russia itself).[4]

The weakness of these explanations of post-Soviet Ukraine is the underlying methodological nationalism, as well as the shallow, often occidentalist and pigeon-holing, understanding of dynamic contexts of politics and culture in Eastern Europe. They tend to ignore the overall legitimacy deficit of all post-socialist elites. They fail to capture the more precise political dynamics of post-Soviet (as against more generally postsocialist) class conflict between political capitalists, on the one hand, and the aspirational professional middle classes allied with transnational capital – the alliance that acquires its political manifestation, in particular, in the narrow non-governmental organization (NGO) segment, on the other. And they tend to ignore how the recurrent failures of Ukrainian Caesarism have over time boosted the political opportunities and coherence of the "pro-Western" camp in Ukrainian politics. In countries like Belarus and Russia, that pro-Western camp was simply repressed by state power; and in countries like Georgia and Moldova, whose elites had the chance to learn from the Ukraine experience, it was confronted and circumscribed by strong Western-skeptic blocs. The key point is that the hegemonic deficit in Ukrainian politics has led to a step by step intensification of identity politics, setting up an increasingly "ethnicized" polarization between the "East" and the "West," an identitarian polarization which was subsequently echoed back by the EU and NATO for their own purposes of legitimacy and geo-strategy, further magnifying Ukraine's domestic cleavages.

Even though the "Western" and "Eastern" political camps could mobilize roughly equal numbers of voters up until 2014, the camps were in fact highly asymmetrical in the class interests they represented, in their political organization, their mobilizing capacities, and their ideological dynamics. It makes sense to see Ukrainian identitarian polarization as a particular articulation of the main post-Soviet class conflict. The "Western" camp generally stood for the educated professional urban middle classes allied with globalism, and transnational capital, sometimes opportunistically joined by dissenting political capitalists. The "Eastern" camp stood for the collective interests of the big domestic political capitalists and their dependent working classes (Ishchenko 2024a). Working-class interests had no independent ideological articulation and political representation; neither had they in the Visegrad countries. Like

many Caesarist leaders in post-Soviet countries, the Ukrainian "Eastern" camp relied electorally on large sections of the working class, often employed in heavy industry and the public sector, as well as on those on state welfare such as pensioners, who valued at least some stability and protection. But these potentially majoritarian groups remained politically passive and atomized throughout. Despite scattered efforts, they found it hard to actively articulate a working-class interest vis-à-vis the industrial paternalists and the state (Gorbach 2024). On the other hand, newer sections of the working class, often oriented toward Western markets, including the fast-growing segment of outsourced IT labor in the big cities (highly educated labor with a "new middle-class" outlook) and migrant workers in the EU, actively supported the "Western" camp and easily came together in liberal NGOs and street politics.

These asymmetries in political capacities had profound implications. Ideologically, the "Western" camp had ample resources, including the overtures of the EU and other Western networks, but also the whole inscribed forward-looking imagery of liberal democratic transition, plus its basis in higher education and the big cities. It offered a hopeful but elusive vision of Ukraine's national development through Western integration – even if this vision was also delusional and would inevitably be dispossessive for large segments of Ukrainian workers (Kravchuk et al. 2016; Zhukov 2016). The "Eastern" camp, however, could only rely on the lukewarm promise of a backward-looking "stability," in other words, a protracted post-Soviet stagnation, mitigated by the promise of a certain commitment to ongoing paternalism. There was no future-oriented project here of "pro-Russian" development (Laruelle 2021). The "Western" camp, still somewhat lonely in the early 2000s, was increasingly supported by an active and vocal, educated and well-organized middle-class civil society that was growing fast after the Orange Revolution of 2004.

On the eve of the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014, and even more so after, Ukrainian far-right nationalists were smoothly integrated into the politics of this urban middle class, where they grew into a radical wing dedicated to anti-Russian and anti-communist identity politics, excelling in street violence against the "Eastern" camp (Ishchenko 2011; Katchanovski and Abrahms 2024; Marker 2021). This happened not because of their ideological appeal. Initially the far right had been playing with "social-populist" issues, which found no mercy with pro-Western neoliberals (Fedorenko 2013; Polyakova 2014). The reason for the middle-class alliance with the radical right and its hooligans was an overly opportunistic one: the latter's capacity for organized and targeted collective violence (Ishchenko 2020; Kudelia 2018). The urban middle class now had the intellectual and cultural fire power, but also the fighting capacity on the streets that mattered, in particular in Kyiv, where it turned out to be decisive indeed.

"Eastern" civil society, in comparison, was incomparably weaker, with a far thinner urban educated base and very few intellectuals involved. The political capitalists who ran the camp relied primarily on the control of TV stations and paid pundits. This was sufficient to mobilize support in elections, but entirely insufficient to articulate a credible ideological alternative to the utopian promise of a "Western" development project. Nor was it capable of putting critical masses in the streets of Kyiv. The Party of Regions – the party that united most of the biggest Ukrainian political capitalist factions before Euromaidan – was, true to its name, a party of spread-out industrial regions, anchored in widely dispersed industrial landscapes marked by a visible and declining Soviet heritage (Gorbach 2024). The radical wing of the "East," the Communist Party of Ukraine, which remained popular until at least 2004, was since then in deep decline and since 2014 under repression (Ishchenko 2023b). Except for outmigration, there quite graphically was a lot of slowly crumbling and ruined past, no future.

The "Eastern" camp, thus, was incapable of mounting a concerted mobilization against the pro-Western Maidan revolutions of 2004 and 2014. The Orange Revolution ended in an elite compromise; the second, the Euromaidan Revolution, overthrew President Viktor Yanukovych by force. The anti-Maidan protests in the southern and eastern regions neither in 2004, nor in 2014 matched Euromaidan in numbers and organization (Arel and Driscoll 2023: chapter 6; Beissinger 2022: 280, 285; Ishchenko 2015). The weakness and more "plebeian" outlook of the "Eastern" counter-mobilization made it easier to present the "Western" camp as representing the entire nation, even though the balance of passive support for Euromaidan hardly reached the majority of Ukraine and has been declining since 2014 (Baysha 2018; Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020). Another important result was that anti-Maidan protests could so easily be hijacked by Russian nationalist political entrepreneurs like Igor "Strelkov" Girkin and channeled into an irredentist war. The Party of Regions disintegrated, as some of its factions opportunistically joined the "Western" camp. The most important opportunist was Petro Poroshenko, one of the richest Ukrainian "oligarchs," a cofounder of the Party of Regions and a minister in Yanukovych's government until late 2012. He was elected president of Ukraine in 2014 as a "moderate" choice on the promise of achieving a quick peace in Donbass (Petro 2023: 108). Meanwhile the escalating war was ripping the nation apart – a war that was also a local civil war, despite Russia's undercover involvement (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Arutunyan 2022).

The Euromaidan Revolution increased the power and dominance of "pro-Western" civil society and transnational capital over the Ukrainian state, which became financially and militarily dependent on Western support. Poroshenko and allied political capitalists were able to sabotage the "anti-corruption" agenda pushed by neoliberal NGOs and rejected real change, in compensa-

tion for which they doubled down on ethnonationalist rhetoric, precisely as earlier governing groups had done after the Orange Revolution (Ishchenko 2011, 2018a).

Open criticism of the "anti-corruption" agenda came from the remnants of the "Eastern" camp, where the factions of Rinat Akhmetov, Dmytro Firtash, Viktor Medvedchuk and their partners were openly competing with each other. They articulated, as before, not so much a "pro-Russian" as a sovereigntist, illiberal, anti-Western, "anti-Soros," state-developmentalist frame (Baysha 2022; Korotaev 2023), combined with "social populism" and working-class patronage (Brik and Krymeniuk 2019; Gorbach 2024) – not without an elective affinity with PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary. The "Eastern" camp also supported the Minsk agreements – an agreement to resolve the war via reincorporation of the secessionist areas in Donbass on a special autonomy statute. Stigmatized as "capitulation" to Russia, "Minsk" was strongly opposed by the "Western" camp, which saw it as the sabotage of Ukraine's Western desires and practical options (Korotaev 2023). The problem was that the "Eastern" political capitalists, lacking any hegemonic capacity, were unable to develop their project of Ukraine's national development in a way that was compatible with the Minsk agreements – for example, a pluralistic federalized neutral Ukraine as a "bridge" between the West and Russia – so they failed to dispel the accusation of "capitulation" to Russia (Ishchenko 2023a). They also failed to support the Minsk agreements with civic mobilization.

Despite typical retrospective framing of Zelensky as democratic builder of a civic nation, ironically, his sweeping victory in 2019 reflected more the public's desire for a Ukrainian Caesarist leader (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev forthcoming). His electoral support came disproportionately from the politically "Eastern" and poorer voters (Onuch and Hale 2023: figures 5.2 and 5.3). As opposed to the mobilized "Western" civil society, which initially viewed him as "pro-Russian." Zelensky appealed primarily to depoliticized citizens yearning for a return to "normal life" after years of political turmoil and war, and tired of the polarization Zelensky blamed on the "old" political-capitalist elite (Viedrov 2022). Some of his actions, such as dissolving parliament immediately after his inauguration and increasingly governing through decrees issued via the National Security and Defense Council to target "oligarchs" and political rivals (Minakov 2023: 147–51), aligned with the hallmarks of Caesarist rule.

However, in contrast to post-Soviet Caesarist leaders, Zelensky faced significantly greater challenges in consolidating power. On the one hand, his capacity to assert state autonomy was limited by weak political resources: institutionally, he could rely only on the hastily assembled "People's Servant" party, which, despite securing a parliamentary majority, began fragmenting within a year (Matuszak 2021). On the other hand, Ukraine's state autonomy had already been heavily constrained externally, as Zelensky had to navigate a strength-

ened pro-Western and nationalist civil society alongside deepened reliance on Western support. Zelensky had the potential to build an alliance with political capitalists from the "Eastern" camp, a strategy that could have been bolstered by implementing the Minsk agreements and bringing back millions of voters from Donbass (D'Anieri 2022). Instead, he did not use the opportunity to make meaningful progress on Minsk in 2019. With Joe Biden assuming office in early 2021, Zelensky initiated a crackdown on Viktor Medvedchuk – Putin's friend and a leader of the Opposition Platform "For Life," the most popular party of the "Eastern" camp, which started to rank first in public opinion polls by that moment (Ishchenko 2024b: 140–1). This happened *not* because Zelensky was bending to public opinion. After all, he demonstrated his ability to push through highly unpopular reforms, such as the land market reform, which was strongly backed by "Western" civil society and their donors (Baysha 2021: 69–83; Viedrov 2022: 488–9). Rather, Zelensky bowed to the political capacities of the "Western" camp, which was a result of the classes it represented and the political dynamics of the intensifying hegemonic crisis (Ishchenko 2023a). Western governments, disunited in practice, failed to provide sufficient support for the Minsk implementation. The peace factions within Ukraine lacked political leverage, including for street mobilization.

ENTER PUTIN

There is evidence suggesting that two key factors shaped Putin's immediate decision to launch a rapid regime change operation in Ukraine, influencing both its timing and form (see Ishchenko 2024a for elaboration of this argument). First, Putin appeared to abandon hope of exerting internal influence over Ukrainian politics following Zelensky's crackdown on the "Eastern" camp in 2021 (Shuster 2024: chapters 13–14). Second, he likely overestimated Zelensky's vulnerability and the severity of Ukraine's political crisis (Watling et al. 2023: 12). Notably, just before the invasion, Zelensky was attempting to arrest Petro Poroshenko, the leader of the most popular opposition party in the "Western" camp, while also accusing Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's wealthiest individual, of involvement in a planned *coup d'état*.

In more general terms, the Russian invasion of 2022 can be seen as Caesarist coercion from the outside, compensating for the deficit of the hegemonic appeal of the Russian ruling class in the post-Soviet region, as reflected in the weakness of Russian soft power in Ukraine, combined with the hegemonic failure of Ukraine's domestic "Eastern" camp. Ukraine's Orbán turned out to be Putin, except that he juridically comes from abroad and is imposing himself violently.

When we move beyond a methodologically (and politically) nationalist perspective, the Russia-Ukraine war emerges as the ultimate escalation of a

class conflict between political capitalists and the professional middle class – aligned with transnational capital – transcending the borders of post-Soviet countries (see especially Ishchenko 2022b; Jaitner 2024; and discussion of different versions of the historical materialist argument in the context of other explanations of the war in Bakalov 2024). In addition to the military dimension, Western and especially NATO expansion had a crucial political-economic dimension that undermined Russian attempts to (re)establish a sovereign center of capital accumulation in the post-Soviet countries. The emphasis on state sovereignty – reflecting the long-term collective interests of political capitalists – has been a central pillar of Putin's ideology from the very beginning, predating any explicit focus on the "Ukrainian question" (Blackburn 2024).

Now, the war with Ukraine and, more precisely, the escalation of the conflict with the West is transforming Russia not only in its international position but also domestically in its political economy and ideology. The processes that began with Putin's Munich speech, the Russia-Georgia war, the conservative turn after the crackdown of the opposition protests of 2011–12, etc. have qualitatively escalated with the invasion. The neoliberal globalist monetarism characteristic of Putin's earlier policies was replaced with military Keynesianism, domestic accumulation, and escalating nationalist rhetoric (Ishchenko et al. 2023). Remaining elements of political pluralism have become farcical, while the level of repression has massively intensified (Ferraro 2023). Elements of more active and articulated national-conservative and imperial ideological agendas, forward- as well as backward-looking, are emerging over and above the depoliticized popular support for the regime (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2022; Laruelle 2022).

What about the nominal Ukrainian far-right nationalists? They have become extraordinarily normalized not only within Ukraine but also among large segments of the international elite. The normalization of the Ukrainian extreme right (including those with strong neo-Nazi elements such as Azov) coincides with the increasing acceptance of practices and ideologies that the liberal governing elites once perceived as extremist (Golinkin 2023). This is all the more disturbing because the Ukrainian far right is far more extreme than its Western counterparts both in terms of ideology (in relation to the fascist legacy of the interbellum period) and in terms of the acceptance and use of violence in politics (Colborne 2022). Was the Russian invasion a sufficient explanation for its acceptance among Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian liberals? We doubt it, and not only because Russian aggression came later in time. The far right (mainly Azov-affiliated units) is important but not indispensable for the defense against Russia (Tarasiuk et al. 2024). At the same time, its toxic ideology, symbols, and practices hardly contribute to Ukraine's internal and external legitimacy. Rather than Putin, it may be worldwide illiberal nationalist trends within and against a liberalism now in epochal decline (Toscano 2023; Traverso 2019) that provide

a better explanation for the domestic and Western elites' normalization of the Ukrainian far right. Like postsocialist Eastern Europe in general, Ukraine may be the avant-garde rather than the laggard.

Does this liberal adoption of Ukrainian fascists matter? That depends, of course, on how the war unfolds. Under currently plausible scenarios in which the state loses significant territory without necessarily joining NATO or becoming a full member of the EU – in other words, in the absence of an externally imposed and successful project of international accumulation and security – the feeling of being "stabbed in the back" by the West for throwing Ukraine under the bus would likely prepare the ground for their further rise, certainly in a context where global liberalism itself is coming apart at its seams, which is equally likely.

CONCLUSION

After 2004, in the Visegrad countries of Central Europe post-1989, the fragile and temporary hegemony of a neoliberal globalist project called "democratic transition," embraced by the educated urban middle classes, was confronted and partially dismantled by neo-nationalist illiberal counter-movements originating from among the devalued peripheries and the working classes, often in "the East of the East." Post-Soviet Ukraine has never had a similar neoliberal pro-Western interlude, was never integrated into the EU, nor did it witness a broad neo-nationalist challenge to it of the "doubly devalued." Neoliberal Western desires only appeared in the 2000s in the form of an anti-Russian middle-class identity project, passionately embraced by the old and new professional classes, and establishing itself only after successive Maidans.

However, the counter-movement in Ukraine was never a movement. It appeared only in the form of a broad passive refusal among fragmented and scattered working-class constituencies to actively support either the "Western" or (Western-produced) "Eastern" identarian labels. It combined this refusal with electoral support, albeit lukewarm, for domestic political capitalists, on which its direct social reproduction depended, including support for the "social populism" of its paternalist industrial "oligarchs." However, this oligarch-working-class alliance had no mobilizing force in the streets nor the intellectual power to offer a forward-looking project beyond a crumbling "stability." Mobilization, violence, and the future were almost exclusive properties of the urban middle-class pro-Western identity project. That project, however, only succeeded with the street violence of the anti-Russian far right, first for the overthrow of the Yanukovich government, then for the defense of its own coup against internal "Eastern" rebels and separatists, and subsequently against the covert Russian invasion. The paradox is that of all the places in the Global

North, Ukraine now seems the only instance where local radical ethno-nationalism has firmly allied with a globalist Westernizing neoliberal project and its urban cosmopolitan supporters. It may not necessarily become hegemonic, *even* in the context of a full-scale war. The initial surge of enthusiasm following the invasion – or more precisely, after the spectacular failure of Russia's original plan and the early successes of the Ukrainian army – has waned in the face of subsequent failures and setbacks over the next years. While the West might still be seen as Ukraine's main hope against Russia, the instability of Western support – due to fractures among Western nations and ruling classes – undermines the possibility of forging a truly hegemonic relationship with the Ukrainian people. International hegemony cannot be projected when it is crumbling at home. At the same time, the increasing extraction of Ukraine's social resources, particularly through harsh conscription policies, erodes the legitimacy of both the Ukrainian state and its pro-Western elites (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). Like after every Maidan revolution, Ukraine's apparent "unity" has proven fragile and temporary, giving way to even deeper fragmentation and polarization. Whether Putin's alternative, imposed by coercion, will be more robust remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. A version of this chapter was published in German as Ishchenko, V. and D. Kalb. 2025. "Vom Kopf auf die Füße: die Ukraine neomarxistisch gelesen". *Osteuropa* 75(5): 125–143.
2. Here, we build on Branko Milanović's and Ivan Szelényi's recent applications of this term, especially to postsocialist countries (Milanović 2019; Szelényi and Mihályi 2019), but we also diverge importantly in our conceptualization of "political capitalists" not as a type of capitalism (which we think is always deeply political) but as a faction of the capitalist class that possesses specific resources related to a privileged relationship with the state that gives them a competitive advantage in markets. This reading not only avoids the typical pitfalls of the "varieties of capitalism" argument but is also closer to the Weberian roots of the concept. For elaboration on the concept, see Ishchenko (2024a) and Ishchenko and Zhuravlev (forthcoming).
3. This does not preclude another segment of the middle class, especially those employed in the public sector, from often becoming loyal to illiberal leaders (Rosenfeld 2021). The same is true of many in the Hungarian and Polish educated classes after the neo-nationalist turn. However, the ability to maintain the loyal authoritarian middle class depends fundamentally on the prospects for establishing a sovereign center of capital accumulation, that is, the transformation of the political capitalists into a hegemonic national bourgeoisie.
4. See the discussion and critique of these approaches in Ishchenko (2024a).

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8

Which Fascism, Whose Counterrevolution? Unpacking the Current Political Conjuncture from the Netherlands

Ewald Engelen

INTRODUCTION

The postmortem of the US presidential election debacle of the Democratic Party is in: aloof, arrogant, the wrong talking points (democracy and abortion, rather than immigration and the economy), an elitist aesthetic and tone of voice, a failure to address concerns of masculinity, tactical blunders, and an inflationary headwind that hurts incumbents everywhere, except in the Global South. These are some of the more convincing causes and reasons brought forward by pundits for the solid defeat of Kamala Harris. And, vice versa, for the unexpectedly robust victory of Donald Trump.

A key moment in the campaign, as far as I am concerned, was the attempt of the Democratic leadership to paint their political adversary with the brush of fascism. It happened on October 23, two weeks before the actual election, when Harris gave a short stump speech in Washington where she moved from her own positive "joy" messaging to lambasting her opponent as "mentally deranged" and a "fascist."

For a brief moment it seemed as if the fascism debate of 2016 had sprung back to life, especially when the well-known expert on the history of fascism, Robert Paxton, author of the highly acclaimed 2004 classic, *Anatomy of Fascism*, two days later, in an interview with *New York Times Magazine* weighed in on the debate. Paxton, who had always been averse to lightly using the term to express distaste of political opponents, had already in 2021, after the January 6 storming of the White House, in a *Newsweek* column, changed his tack. When asked in 2024 by the *New York Times* whether he stood by his assessment, Paxton said: "It's bubbling up from below in very worrisome ways, and that's very much like the original fascisms. It's the real thing. It really is." He added, though, that it was not very useful for his political opponents to throw the term at him. As an expression of moral revulsion it merely alienates citizens who support Trump

even further. Or in the words of Paxton: "I still think it's a word that generates more heat than light. It's kind of like setting off a paint bomb" (Zerofsky 2024).

This is why, in my view, this was such a telling moment. As the election indicated, calling Trump a "fascist" did precisely what Paxton feared: it further alienated already angry voters by tarring their political choice and hence themselves with the brush of moral abuse. Calling someone a fascist (or for that matter a racist, sexist, or misogynist) is, in the words of Paxton, like throwing a paint bomb at someone. It is the opposite of treating them as fellow citizens, as equals. Moreover, as was stressed by Joan Williams in an interview with *Jacobin* two weeks after the election (Engelen 2024), there was a key difference in the aesthetics around the usage of the term by the Democrats and the Republicans. Loose, crude, and easily used by the Republicans, while serious because based on academic legitimation by the Democrats. Hence, implicitly, the Democrats used the term as if their audience consisted only of voters with a college degree or as if they all subscribed to the *New York Times* and felt themselves to be at liberty to throw the concept at Trump and his followers by the authority of science, as represented by no one less than Robert Paxton. As if Harris and team were saying that their usage of the term was warranted because it was academically sound.

These pretentions and assumptions were and are precisely the problem. And point to a completely different, more respectful and more curious, response to the rise of the right in both North America and Western Europe. Before getting there, I will first discuss some difficulties with the concept of fascism, before probing the nature of the political moment we are in, highlighting its incongruity. For as Robert Paxton in that very same *New York Times* interview acknowledged: fascism is above all a reactionary political movement. It responds rather than initiates: fascism arises if there is "an opening in the political system, which is the loss of traction by the traditional parties. There needs to be a real breakdown," in the words of Paxton. If this is such a breakdown moment, what kind of breakdown is it, is the breakdown universal or more local, and what should the left response be? I will answer these crucial questions for any progressive revival using examples from the Netherlands, the case I know best.

FASCISM: WHAT IS IT (NOT)?

There is of course a massive literature on the history and nature of fascism as a historical political phenomenon, reflecting the contentious nature of fascism as an ideology and its many mutations over time (see Toscano 2023). "Fascism" – like "populism" (Müller 2017), "neoliberalism," "democracy," or for that matter "corporatism" (Schmitter 1974) – is what philosophers have called an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie 1955). Concepts like these are contested for at

least three reasons. First, because what they denote is not singular but plural, not static but dynamic, resulting in ongoing debates on what are their key, necessary features and which features are more peripheral or contingent.

Walden Bello's contribution to the literature on fascism is a case in point (Bello 2019, and see Bello's chapter in this volume). Robert Paxton's 2004 classic *The Anatomy of Fascism* gives a partially distinct, partially overlapping definition at the end of the book:

> Fascism may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraint goals of internal cleansing and external expansion. (2004: 218)

Again, we find here the disdain for the rule of law and democratic procedures also mentioned by Bello, as well as the willingness to use violence and the political strategy of scapegoating, if that is what Paxton's "internal cleansing" and "external expansion" boil down to. Missing in Bello's definition are the obsession with social decline as well as the close collaboration of fascist leaders with established elites, which could reflect the different intellectual concerns with which the two definitions were constructed.

As an historian, Paxton based his "anatomy" on an analysis of the hightide of fascism, that is, the interbellum. German and Italian fascism serve in his book as its purest expressions and were indeed fostered by a widespread sense of decline and humiliation, spawned by the peace negotiations of Versailles which were widely perceived in Italy and Germany as humiliating, albeit it for different reasons. Similarly with regard to elite support for fascist movements. That too fits the Italian and German experiences, where conservative elites and industrial and financial capital embraced Hitler and Mussolini in an attempt to stem the tide of increasing worker radicalization, against the backdrop of the communist Russian revolution of 1917.

The anthropologist Bello, instead, following Toscano, has set his sight on contemporary articulations of fascism, in the form of Trump, Brexit, Le Pen, Modi, Wilders, Duterte, Meloni and others, which isolates the pumped up consequences of the migratory component of economic and financial globalization to mobilize voters around a nationalist agenda of border protection. Hence, his emphasis on the charismatic nature of the leading figures of these movements, a property of fascism that is strikingly absent from Paxton's definition. Hence too the absence of elite collaboration, which according to Bello (and Toscano) is less a feature of the contemporary inflection of fascism than in the inter-

bellum, as all current leaders of the fascist movement pose as anti-elitist and anti-technocratic outsiders.

Less clear is whether class-based resentment, disaffection and humiliation, is not also a feature of the current fascist movement and whether this should not have been included in Bello's definition, a topic I will return to below. For Toscano does spell out the need to perceive the current articulations of fascism as "a politics of crisis." If capitalism promises equality ("trickle down") while simultaneously requiring inequalities and racisms to function, fascism with its simulacra of equality in the form of the pure national community provides the perfect cover-up to save capitalism from itself. As Toscano powerfully concludes: "whoever is not willing to talk about anticapitalism should also keep quiet about anti-fascism" (2023: 394), suggesting that over the long history of capitalism and its endless sequence of crises, fascist formations have always served as the ideological protector of last resort.

The key takeaway so far is that one's definition of fascism and one's choice of essental properties is not only a function of the political conjuncture in which one finds oneself but also of what one perceives to be the gravest danger to the emancipatory forces with which the critics of fascism have aligned themselves. The erosion of the rule of law, individual liberties, and democratic institutions in the case of Bello, increasing racial and socio-economic inequalities by deepening neoliberal policies in the case of Toscano, and the use of illegitimate violence in the case of Paxton. Obviously, there is a political geography here. Bello's concerns are those of the Global South, where the civic and democratic rights citizens had won during the so-called "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1991) are again under autocratic pressure. Toscano's concerns, on the other hand, derive primarily from the populist political backlash in continental Europe, where the rise of fascism very much demands a class-based explanation. While Paxton's concerns are specific to the USA, where political conflict easily takes the form of a violent rejection of democratic procedures, as the world witnessed during the January 6, 2022 uprising and as seems again to be happening under the second presidency of Donald Trump with the image of the National Guards in the streets of Los Angeles and Washington DC.

A second reason why the concept of fascism is essentially contested is of a more method-based nature. Any multidimensional concept invites well-known discussions about which features are sufficient and/or necessary. It is what the social science debate on "fuzzy concepts" is all about (Goertz 2020; Sartori 1970). The more clauses (or dimensions) one adds to a concept, the greater its precision becomes, and vice versa: the less clauses a definition has, the wider its scope of application gets at the cost of becoming ever more "fuzzy."

Further questions then automatically follow. For instance: is there a hierarchy of features? Are some more important than others or do they all carry the same weight? Is fascism without, say, a political strategy of scapegoating

still fascism? Or is scapegoating central? What about the presence of a charismatic leader? And should these subcategories be understood in a classical, dichotomous sense – either in or out – or should they instead be seen as radial categories (Collier and Mahon 1993)? As crisp sets (0,1) or as fuzzy sets (Ragin 2009)? And if as fuzzy, what are the quantitative and/or qualitative cutoff points? How do we identify them? How do we know if a case with only so much of one or more of the definitional dimensions is still fascism or no longer? Does it even make sense to speak of the extent to which a political movement can be labeled fascist? Is it tenable to speak of a particular political movement as being more or less fascist or betraying more or less fascist tendencies? And if so, what are the properties that make it so? Having a charismatic leader is clearly not sufficient, as many non-fascist movements have had charismatic leaders, nor is it necessary, as some (proto-) fascist movements have had a more mainstream technocratic leadership style. Here the German outfit Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) comes to mind, which was established by a disaffected German economics professor (Bernd Lücke), who was worried about the European Central Bank (ECB) overstepping its mandate during the eurocrisis with then-president Mario Draghi's promise "to do whatever it takes."

But the most important reason for fascism (and similar concepts) to be essentially contested is that it is simultaneously a more or less neutral descriptive concept and a thick, value-laden, ethical concept (Ryle 1966; Williams 1985), with strong emotional and affective resonances. This is a characteristic that fascism shares with concepts like neoliberalism, democracy, and populism – and, surprisingly enough, not with corporatism (Schmitter 1974). Like fascism, neoliberalism and populism have similarly over time moved from being neutral, descriptive, historically circumscribed concepts to terms of abuse (for some) and badges of honor (for others), which points to the perspectival nature of each and every normative assessment, as Nietzsche already knew.

Populism is a case in point. Within mainstream political science the concept has become synonymous of political movements that oppose key tenets of liberal pluralism (Schattschneider 1960) and as such has been liberally applied to refer to political formations that are perceived as morally repugnant by those that see parliamentary majoritarianism as the epitome of sensible, serious, mature forms of policymaking. The work of Jan Werner Müller (2017) and Cas Mudde (with Kaltwasser 2017) may stand for many here.

However, as the American political commentator Thomas Frank has shown (Frank 2020), the early twentieth-century American political movement that minted the term used it to denote a belief system that campaigned against any large concentration of power, be it political, economic, religious, or financial, and, as its flip side, for the self-determination of the common man. As such, its political agenda went one better than existing forms of democratic deci-

sion-making and pushed for more participatory, local forms of democracy (see also Piven 2006).

Since the 1960s, after the populist moment in American politics had waned and was replaced by a much more technocratic style of governance, it has gradually evolved into a term of abuse that is applied to each and every political movement that is seen to question the authority of science and expertise, sees politics as antagonistic, adheres to a political style that is folksy and sets up elites as the enemy of the people. The key moment here was the publication of *The Age of Reform* by Richard Hofstadter in 1955. Since then, populism has come to stand for the same morally repugnant political formation that figures in current mainstream political science frames.

It is not hard to see that this is currently the positionality of almost all mainstream social thought, ranging from mainstream economics to mainstream political science, from social democratic parties to the liberal press, and from think tanks like the Brookings Institute to Max Rosen's *Our World in Data*. To paraphrase Nixon, "we" all seem to be liberal pluralists now, cherishing rule of law, independent central banks, free trade treaties, science and independent press much more than plebiscitarian elections, now that the "wrong" sort of political parties appear to be winning elections, as the German political scientist Philip Manow (2024) has self-critically argued.

And if we were not as yet convinced of liberal superiority, for instance. because we believe that class inequalities trump cultural inequalities, the threat which the "populists" or "fascists" pose to the *minima moralia* of our real existing democracies seems to have forced many progressives willy nilly to align themselves with precisely the sort of self-evident belief in the reasonableness of the tenets of liberal pluralism that is expressed by mainstream press and politics, resulting in the strange political configuration of today where the left is seen to defend classic neoliberal shibboleths as central bank independence and free trade agreements against Trumpian populism. Or to quote the US-based historian Adam Tooze:

> Why were Democratic administrations not as ambitious, determined, ruthless, aggressive, risk-taking, not to say brave, in pursuit of our agenda as MAGA are in pursuit of theirs? MAGA may be bonkers and foolhardy. But they are willing to take risks in a way "we" were not. "Our democracy" may have been competent, but it was also conformist. (Tooze 2025)

This progressive conformism, I will argue below, is responsible for the despair of a growing segment of voters after four decades of neoliberalism and austerity.

Calling the political opponents of placid liberal pluralism names has the unintended effect of pushing the potential forces of emancipation into politi-

cal positions, which run the danger of becoming indistinguishable from those of the "extreme centre," to borrow Tariq Ali's felicitous designation of centrist political movements (Ali 2018), which from the 1970s onward have increasingly signed up to the agenda of their former political adversaries, that is, capital.

WHICH COUNTERREVOLUTION, WHOSE REVOLT?

As noted above, Toscano frames fascism as a politics of capitalist crisis, while Paxton in the same vein sees it as a result of political breakdown. Intriguingly, Bello too perceives it as an explicitly reactionary political force when he links it to counterrevolution. What is true for fascism, namely one's positionality determines one's normative assessment of its key features, is even more true for perspectival notions like (counter)revolution. What is the original revolution that the counterrevolutionaries are reacting against? Is it a universal phenomenon and should hence developments in the Global North be seen as similar to those in the Global South or do we instead live in an incongruous world where what appears to be the same response is actually distinct and specific?

To answer those questions I will contrast two recent publications that both carry the title "counterrevolution," Walden Bello's 2019 one that carried the subtitle: *The Global Rise of the Far Right* and Melinda Cooper's book from April 2024 which is subtitled: *Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance*. Since this is not the place to do full justice to the complexities and subtleties of the two books, I here only want to tease out the analytical and political backdrops and consequences of the different usages to which the two authors have put the concept of counterrevolution.

Cooper travels the well-known territory of the neoliberal revolution since the late 1970s in US economic and fiscal policymaking in order to tease out the much less well-known observation that austerity captures only part of the story. The rejoinder to every claim that we have indeed been subject to a neoliberal experiment of less state and more market has always ever been: how come the share of public expenditure of national GDP has not declined and has in many countries even increased? Here Cooper's book really shows its mettle, for the other part of neoliberal policymaking consists of highly technical subsidies for the rich and powerful hidden in the complexities of the US tax rule book. To give a sense of the level of detail provided by Cooper: depreciation schemes play a large role here, allowing capital owners to minimize their tax contribution and shifting national tax obligations to workers instead. In more formulaic terms: neoliberalism is austerity for workers and tax subsidies and state guarantees for capital owners. Hence, the opposition in the subtitle between austerity for the poor and extravagance for the rich. This is why despite 40 years of neoliberalism public expenditure has not declined.

Adding this part of the story to the already well-known narrative of the neoliberal revolution is meant to inform the counter-movement of the emancipatory forces of what they are up against. In other words, Cooper's book is meant to disclose the undisclosed, to fire up the progressive counter-movement and help it to better understand how the average voter is being squeezed between the Charybdis of austerity and the Scylla of fiscal extravagance for, so to say, the managing partners of private equity funds. According to Cooper, it has been the absence of these insights which have led the emancipatory forces astray by merely putting their efforts into dampening the effects of neoliberal austerity for workers while simultaneously subscribing to the largesse for capital owners as they had/have fully bought into the competitiveness and trickle-down story peddled to them by neoliberal economists, think tankers, and policymakers. In other words, the implied audience of Cooper are the emancipatory forces themselves, which are appealed on to wake from their neoliberal slumber, see the populist revolt for what it is, namely, a budding counter-movement to the failed neoliberal experiment, and steer it in the right, emancipatory direction (see Kalb's Introduction to this volume).

Instead, Bello uses the notion of counterrevolution in a different way. Here, the counterrevolutionaries are the fascists of whose rise "we should be really, really worried." Covering a wide expanse of space (Latin America, Philippines, North America, and Europe) and time (from the 1920s to the 2020s), Bello shows the reader how counterrevolutionaries operate and what kind of lessons their successes in the Global South have in store for us in the Global North. Key here is what it is that the fascists respond to. While in Cooper's book the neoliberal counterrevolution responded to the progressive revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, Bello's counterrevolutionaries respond to a different revolution, namely, the progressive revolution of the 1990s and 2000s, which, in large parts of the Global South, seemed to initiate a new era of democracy, rule of law, protection of Indigenous rights, environmental protection as well as rights for identitarian minorities (see Kalb's Introduction to this volume). It is what political scientists, following Huntington, tend to call the "third wave of democracy" (Huntington 1991). The shift from Lula's Brazil to Bolsonaro's Brazil, described in the postscript to Bello's book, may serve as a vignette here (Bello 2019).

Ironically, the period in which the right-based revolution in the Global South took place was the very same period when many countries in the Global South dropped their non-aligned experiment as well as their attempt to trace an independent path to economic growth through so-called import substitution policies (Hirschman 1968) and instead fell victim to increasing indebtedness to the Global North followed by the very same austerity policies – enforced by the Bretton Woods institutes – that would later be applied at scale in the former Soviet bloc countries and, later still, during the eurocrisis, in Greece, etc. With similar results: massive impoverishment, increasing mortality, large outmigra-

tion flows, and obscene inequalities (see George 1988 for the Global South; see Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021; Kalb 2025; and Chapter 4 by Scheiring and Csathó and Chapter 7 by Ischenko and Kalb in this volume for Eastern Europe; and see Stiglitz 2016 for Greece during the eurocrisis).

So, the two authors speak to different revolutions and counterrevolutions and hence to different publics located in different political spaces, albeit in the same political time. To put it bluntly, while the counterrevolutions described by Cooper play themselves out along the economic dimension, Bello's counterrevolutions are predominantly political in nature. The consequence is not that Bello fails to address the potentially wider global economic causes for the reactionary movements he describes and fears but rather that the story of reaction in the Global South is different from the story of reaction in the Global North and, hence, the applicability of the concept of "fascism" for the rise of authoritarianism in the Global South should not be transferred without qualification to the Global North. The world indeed appears to be incongruous and the sequence of revolutions and counterrevolutions does seem to play itself out differently in the Global North than it does in the Global South, uneven and combined as Kalb writes in the Introduction to this volume; a clear indication that colonial and imperial history is still at work, although that part of the story falls outside the scope of this chapter (see Bellamy Foster 2024 for the continuing relevance of imperialism).

A further consequence should be carefully posed as a question rather than as a statement of fact. Without enforced austerity and increasing impoverishment, backed by progressives who had bought into the narrative of global competitiveness ameliorated by trickle down, would the counterrevolutions in the Global North of Orbàn, Wilders, Trump, and Le Pen have occurred in the first place? Might not the complicity of the left, broadly understood, with neoliberal competitive policies have something to do with their failure to mobilize its victims, leaving discontented voters no other choice than to throw in their lot with populist ratcatchers since that was and seems to be still the only anti-establishment option left on the menu (see Scheiring and Csathó, this volume)? These are the questions I will trace below by means of a brief description of the fate of the Dutch case in the era of neoliberalism.

THE DUTCH NEOLIBERAL EXPERIMENT AND HOW (NOT) TO DO COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

Austerity …

Over the course of 2023, covering two Dutch elections and one government collapse, I have made three short critical interventions (Engelen 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The key observation is that in the postmortem of electoral failure, the

center left initially acted surprised but subsequently started to blame voters for their lurch to the right, in the process essentializing angry voters by blaming their inherent racism, nationalism, and/or xenophobia for its own electoral defeat. A story that is very similar to the autopsy of the electoral debacle of the Democratic Party in the USA with which this chapter began.

The ensuing alienation of voters matters especially in the Dutch case, as the latest installment in the story of Dutch politics is that Wilders has withdrawn his support for the reigning coalition in which his PVV was the leading partner, over its inability to stem migration and that the Netherlands is hence heading to new elections as this book goes to press, which presents the Dutch left with a unique chance to mop up doubly disaffected voters, turning the Netherlands into a real-world laboratory for how (not) to do counterrevolutionary politics. So far (August 2025), the progressive prospects appear not good, with Wilders in the polls again leading the Green Left.

This has everything to do, I contend, with the inability to learn the lessons of class politics, or, to use Joan Williams' felicitous phrase, their "class cluelessness" (Williams 2017). There is now a wealth of research to draw upon here, which covers post-austerity Europe, and tells a story that is much more damaging to the self-image of left elites – a story that highlights economics rather than culture. The explanation provided in that literature is straightforward: austerity breeds hardship, especially for the poor, which in turn results in votes for the extremes on either side of the political spectrum as centrists become increasingly suspect (see for an early example, Kalb and Halmai 2011; for a recent one, Gabriel et al. 2023), especially when the center left has been complicit in these neoliberal austerity policies, which they were in Europe, the UK, and the USA. One of the authors of this book (Gábor Scheiring), was involved in a recent metastudy which concluded that over one-third of the rise in electoral support for radical right parties in Europe and the USA could be ascribed to increased economic hardship (see Scheiring et al. 2024).

The Dutch case fits perfectly – and that should have alarmed progressive parties. After becoming one of the hardest hit countries during the banking crisis of 2008, the Dutch government has pursued relentless austerity drives, to the tune of approximately one-fifth of the annual government budget, in effect redistributing massive amounts of taxpayers' money over time from the poor to the rich (Jacobs 2016). One illustration is the rental levy that was imposed upon renters of social housing in the aftermath of the banking crisis to plug the hole in the budget left behind by Dutch bankers making risky bets on the US subprime mortgage market (see Tooze 2018 for that sleazy part of the story), which generated 1.7 billion euros in tax revenues per year and resulted in an annual increment per unit of public housing of 480 euros, turning Dutch housing into one of the most expensive in the European Union (EU). The result of this and similar policies (ramping up higher regressive value added taxes)

was the longest recession in the history of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, longer even than in the 1930s when Dutch monetarists, then as now, controlled the treasury and the central bank and the Netherlands became the last to ditch the gold standard.

As in Germany, writing black figures (*Schwarzer Null*) became the overriding political obsession since the late 1970s, turning the Netherlands into one of the most fiscally frugal countries in the EU with historically low public debt figures (currently at 43.3 percent). Together with Germany, the Netherlands has been instrumental in transforming the European Monetary Union into an austerity zone, with dismal consequences for the European south when they got into fiscal trouble in the aftermath of the banking crisis in 2010 (see Stiglitz 2016 for a critical overview). During the Covid years, the Netherlands even became the unofficial leader of the so-called "frugal four" (Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands), which, together with Germany, tried to obstruct the emitting of so-called coronabonds by the European Commission to indemnify hard-struck countries like Italy.

Except, of course, during times of crisis when Schmittian "states of exceptions" are declared and national interests temporarily trump considerations of budgetary prudence, as occurred during the banking crisis, the Covid crisis and the currently trumped up security crisis in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demanding massive increases in defense spending. And, as always, this has hurt the poor much more than the rich, as austerity historically has always been class war by monetary proxy (Mattei 2022). Data show that in the Netherlands the poorest decile gained only 10 percent in disposable income since 1980, while the richest 10 percent gained 50 percent (Rabobank 2018), a picture that conforms to that of other countries in the Global North.

On top of a neoliberal makeover …

Moreover, these long austerity years (2010–17) came hard on the heels of one of the most thorough neoliberal makeovers on the European continent, which was ideologically prepared by elite networks involved in the Mont Pelerin Society and started to take off in the late 1980s (Mellink et al. 2022). In fact, it was the Dutch social democrats who "invented" the infamous Third Way moniker in the mid-1990s, turning the Dutch social democratic party leader, Wim Kok, into a minor celebrity among anglophone policy circles and turning the Netherlands briefly into the political economic "model" to mimic. From a welfare state with a level of public expenditure in the early 1970s of Swedish magnitude (60 percent), it was over a period of a mere 30 years transformed into a residual welfare state of Anglo-American design (40 percent) (WRR 2006). And while public expenditure has again increased since that period, it fits Cooper's American story in that most of that expenditure has either been

in the form of crisis measures or is paid out in the form of tax exemptions to capital, turning the Netherlands into one of the largest corporate tax havens in the world, as data from Gabriel Zucman (2015) indicate. Extravagance, indeed.

Less known is that the Dutch labor market has become the most flexible of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), even earning it opprobrium from the Paris-based think tank for its overzealous application of neoliberal policies (OECD 2018). Another little known fact is the extent to which Dutch housing markets have been transformed from being dominated by social rental housing in the 1970s to debt-financed home ownership in the 2000s, resulting in one of the highest levels of mortgage debt on a per capita basis in the world and one of the steepest house price increases globally (DNB 2024). Finally, nowhere on the European continent have public services become a happier hunting ground for Anglo-American finance than in the Netherlands, with Blackrock snapping up large chunks of social housing, private equity buying up childcare, dentists, veterinarians, and GP practices, and Australian infrastructure funds buying up data centers, parking lots, harbor facilities, and public utilities (Christophers 2024).

The results for what has been called the "foundational economy," that is, those goods and services that provide the basics of the livelihood of every citizen (see The Foundational Economy Collective 2022), were dismal, especially in rural areas where schools, hospitals, elderly care facilities, and bus stops were ruthlessly weeded out. Some PVV voters were heard saying after the 2023 elections that the erosion of their livelihood was crucial for their turn to the populist right.

In a country where mainstream economics dominates universities and where economic policy debates and decision-making are the exclusive domain of technocrats (Christensen 2017), cultural and identitarian issues are what the theater of politics and media thrives on. Over the course of the neoliberal era, the language of critical political economy has slowly disappeared from the collective memory of the social sciences, with Marxists and heterodox economists slowly having been weeded out from universities and hence the media, political parties, and labor unions, while independent think tanks are far and few between. Instead of heated debates on, for instance, the excessive size of the Dutch financial sector or the outsized tax haven it houses or the rapid decline of the wage share since the late 1970s, a local version of Samuel Huntington's 1996 classic *Clash of Civilizations* has been raging ever since the early 1990s, with third generation, highly integrated Turkish and Moroccan immigrants pictured in the role of a veritable fifth column sapping Dutch culture with incompatible Islamic values.

Never mind that the Netherlands has since 9/11 seen only four Islam-related terrorist victims, incomparable to the 94 victims in the UK or the 296 in France;

lacks the level of resentment among its Islamic migrants of the French banlieues, for example; and has one of the most effective integration regimes of the EU, in the sense that immigrants slowly crawl up on the education and employment ladders, increasingly buying homes and undergoing a rapid reduction in fertility levels, trending toward Dutch averages (CBS 2024).

Moreover, refugees from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and North Africa are a minority (13 percent) compared to the massive numbers of workers, expats, and international students from the EU and elsewhere, who increasingly dominate the cityscapes of the Netherlands, driving up house prices and transforming the Dutch urban landscape into something that is unrecognizable to Dutch citizens unacquainted with the feel of anglophone cities. In a world of global supply chains, economic growth is simply inseparable from precisely this type of migration, as migration scholar De Haas has emphasized (De Haas 2023).

In that context, the terrorist attacks of Hamas against Israel of October 7, 2023, just five weeks before the last parliamentary elections, were a gift from heaven for Wilders' PVV, which up until that moment was losing votes in the polls. A 24/7 news banner depicting the atrocities inflicted by Arab-speaking terrorists on a society which is perceived by a substantial part of the Dutch public as an outpost of Western white innocence while Palestinians are being framed as members of the same tribe as the Dutch citizens of Turkish and Moroccan descent, was the perfect "prime" for angry Dutch voters to cognitively reduce the complexity of their neoliberal afflictions to the presence of (Islamic) migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in their land. As Wilders had been telling them for ages, and as politicians from the center left and right had failed to effectively dispel, eager as they were to attract the angry voters that had gone over to Wilders by mimicking the so-called Danish variant, and by talking the same xenophobic language as their populist challengers. With limited success, by the way, as voters tend to prefer the original over the imitation.

And deep into 2025, we seem to be in for a replay, with the massacre in Gaza still dominating headlines, and events like the brutal murder of a 17-year-old white Dutch girl by a Syrian refugee in Amsterdam stirring up even more resentment against Islamic immigrants while elections are not far off.

Of course, I fully agree with Bello that this is a classic case of scapegoating: blaming poor migrants for neoliberal impoverishment while leaving the real perpetrators (the owners of capital) and their political mouthpieces from both the right and the left unscathed. But is this sufficient to subsequently accuse voters of being fascists, as the left in the Netherlands in response to the election results of November 22, 2023, has been doing and as they are in danger of doing all over again during the upcoming elections?

With progressive complicity …

It is here that the glaring absence of any convincing, consistent left alternative becomes germane. For the cascade of path-dependent decisions to construct a neoliberal utopia, albeit with social democratic cushions, as well as to pursue mindless austerity, were not only those of the conservatives but were backed by every centrist party, left as well as right. The neoliberal makeover of the Netherlands that started in the mid-1980s was backed by both the Christian democrats and the social democrats (Mellink et al. 2022). Over the course of the 1970s both had increasingly become parties of, from, and for members of the rapidly expanding Professional-Managerial Classes, who found employ in the expanding public services as well as in the commercial professions of media, accountancy, law, finance, and consultancy (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977a, 1977b). The same was true for the phase of deepening neoliberalism in the 1990s, the era of the social democratic Third Way. This time it was the liberal-conservatives of the center right together with the parties from the center left that were responsible.

Similarly, the disastrous austerity drive of the 2010s that followed the banking crisis of 2008. The first government of Mark Rutte, the longest serving prime minister of the Netherlands and current secretary-general of NATO, consisted of a minority coalition of his own conservative party and the Christian democrats, backed by Wilders' PVV. When Wilders pulled the plug in 2012 because he wouldn't stomach further austerity (!), the parties from the center left, social-liberals from D66 as well as the Greens, willingly plugged the gap. In exchange for some symbolic progressive wins (more subsidies for e-cars, more on which below; more development aid; less cutbacks on the arts) they proved willing to back a further 12 billion euros in cutbacks, which mostly fell on the shoulders of low-income earners, including the young who faced steeply rising costs for higher education because the government was unwilling to stomach cuts in the very generous tax deductions of mortgage loans with which the "extreme center" had bought the loyalty of the well-to-do since the 1970s (full tax deductibility of interest payments::a massive state subsidy to private banking and private enrichment). Social renters in contrast, as indicated above, had to pay a renting levy to compensate for the losses caused by incompetent and overpaid Dutch bankers.

The *coup de grâce* came later that year when after fresh elections that had pitted Rutte's neoliberals against the social democrats, who had campaigned on a Keynesian stimulus program and hence a break with austerity, Rutte unexpectedly joined forces with Labour and began cutting back further on state expenditure while ramping up taxes, especially regressive consumption taxes, to the tune of almost 40 billion euros. While the social democratic minister of finance, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, gained Europe-wide recognition as the "butcher

of Greece" during his stint as chair of the Eurogroup (see Varoufakis 2017 for a no holds-barred account), four years later the social democrats were punished for their electoral betrayal by being virtually wiped out at the voting box (from 38 seats (of 150) in 2012 to 9 in 2017).

In other words, all were involved, all were responsible. And all were thus not to be trusted with the fate of the poor, vulnerable, and angry. And the poor, vulnerable, and angry knew it.

Mixed with a backlash over "green privilege" …

On top of that, successive Dutch governments had put the onus of reducing the excessive historical ecological footprint of Dutch energy and food producers (Evans and Viisainen 2023) squarely on the shoulders of households rather than big polluters. Multi-billion euros in ongoing indirect and implicit subsidies for peak polluters and emitters – Shell, Schiphol Airport, KLM, Tata Steel Ijmuiden, Dow Chemical Terneuzen, as well as the outsized livestock industry that had turned the Netherlands into one of the largest food exporters in the world, second only to the USA (!) – were matched by increasingly shrill moral appeals on citizens to reduce their consumer footprint, especially from the side of the Greens who proposed meat taxes and halving of the livestock numbers in the Netherlands. Access to green technologies (e-cars, solar panels, heat pumps), however, was put behind subsidy schemes that required sizable upfront savings to apply for them and were hence only available to the well off.

It was a striking case of "reverse solidarity" in a tax landscape that on paper looked progressive but in fact boiled down to a flat tax rate: the financial burdens were for the poor while the rich got away with the gains – squarely in line with Cooper's tale of neoliberalism in the USA. The legitimating story was a typical neoliberal one: by helping so-called "early adopters" to buy into new, expensive e-technology, the prices per unit over time would fall, making it accessible to poorer consumers too. The subsidies were framed as a reward for the trickle-down "services" the rich were providing to the "poor."

However, when energy prices shot up after the EU imposed badly thought through sanctions on Russia – the third largest energy producer in the world after the USA and Saudi Arabia, sending massive amounts of oil and natural gas to Europe – this all proved to be politically disastrous. It was another glaring instance of "class cluelessness." As poor households faced a huge cost of living crisis while the rich came away scot-free – and happily informed the world of their good luck through posts on social media – the energy transition was perceived as a form of "green privilege," which increasingly became subject to the same kind of polarized identity dynamics as migration and wokeness: virtue signaling by the rich to denigrate the poor (Al Gharbi 2024). It added class insult to class injury and further fueled the populist backlash.

If you add this all up, it becomes much easier to fathom why voters massively rejected the political propositions of the center left as soon as the temporary blanket on political contestation of the two long Covid years was lifted. On March 15, 2023, the established center left and center right political parties were beaten by a new outfit, the so-called Farmer-Citizen Movement, which rejected the green technocracy of the Dutch Professional-Managerial Classes that targeted the highly industrialized Dutch livestock farmers in the rural parts of the Netherlands for their excessive emissions and effluences that were choking the remaining Dutch nature reserves (Engelen 2023d).

Nine months later, on November 22, 2023, angry voters again rejected the propositions of the ruling coalition parties, who lost almost half of their earlier electoral support, while the united left, a merger of the Greens and the social democrats led by Timmermans, still campaigning under the shadow of its earlier neoliberal complicity, failed to mop up disaffected voters. Instead, the "fascists" chose Wilders, who then, in the summer of 2025, pulled the plug on "his" cabinet for failing to make good on his promise to stem immigration – as related above. New elections are scheduled when this book goes to press with surveys indicating that electoral trust in politicians is at an all-time low, raising questions about the consequences of this "double disappointment" for voter turnout and democracy more generally.

While a unique chance for the left to learn the lessons from its earlier complicity and reinvent itself as an outfit that knows how to play the game of the class struggle, it appears that the center left is predominantly occupied with organizational solutions to its ideological failures in the form of a planned merger between the social democrats and the Greens. Adding to the uncertainties is the new budgetary reality introduced by the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) norm of 5 percent of GDP defense spending, agreed by the members of the alliance during the June 2025 meeting in The Hague, which is sure to initiate a new era of "permanent austerity," limiting even further the budgetary space for progressive policies to repair the damage done to public services by four decades of neoliberalism. The leader of the Green left, Frans Timmermans, is currently dancing around this issue by using a "safe pair of hands" with the skills, experience, and authority to steer the nation safely through the choppy waters of geopolitical turbulence. Left communitarianism ("solidarity" with our Ukrainian allies) rather than socialism is the name of the game of the Dutch Green left (Engelen 2025). Time will tell whether this will carry electoral heft.

CONCLUSION: WHAT (NOT) TO DO?

I conclude with the age-old Leninist question: What to do? The answer depends of course on the lessons one draws from the recent political history of the Dutch

case just described. Does the Dutch story signal increasing racism, xenophobia or, even worse, fascist tendencies among an increasing share of the Dutch electorate? The older political science rule of thumb that in every electorate there is approximately a fifth with "fascist" leanings at first sight no longer seems to hold, as parties associated with the far right in many democracies have over the last electoral cycle often captured more than one-third of the electorate, including in the Netherlands. While this may suggest a hesitant affirmation of the rising fascism thesis, inconsistencies in the survey data suggest something else – at least for the Netherlands and probably elsewhere too. While surveys conducted on the election day itself indeed hinted at increasing xenophobia, longer-term surveys suggest that issues of livelihood, cost of living, and climate change rather than migration have consistently been the most important issues for Dutch citizens (SCP 2023). The poetry of elections may whip up different, more fleeting political emotions than the prose of everyday politics. To be more precise, the 2023 electoral outcome appeared to be strongly influenced by what could be called the Gaza effect, while the underlying, more stable political attitudes were determined by a much less clearly articulated sense of disappointment over the material bases of everyday life. The shock of November 22, 2023 was the outcome of a "conjuncture" of contingent and structural variables (Hall 2017). So was the shock of November 6, 2024 in the USA. And so will be the elections of the fall of 2025.

The lessons for any successful attempt by the forces of emancipation to reconquer their natural, class-based electorate have to address both, the contingent as well as the structural. However, both in the USA and the Netherlands the postmortem of the failures of the left to mobilize sufficient numbers of voters suffers from being mostly about the contingent: the messaging, the aesthetics, the wording, the ground game; this is mainly what comes in for critique and improvement. Infamous is the Dutch social democratic party for concluding after each lost election that there was nothing wrong with the political platform as such, only with the messaging: "we need to better explain to the voters what we stand for" has become a political cliché in the Netherlands. The paternalist assumption that the party leadership knows best is what has caused the increasing irrelevance of the left. And the same appears to be the case in the USA, where rich donors of the Democratic Party are now bankrolling a new ecosystem of progressive podcast makers and influencers to match the Joe Rogan's and Tucker Carlson's from the other side.

While important, improving the messaging will get the left only so far. More important is thinking deep and hard about the current conjuncture, to see events in an historical light, to address both the specificity of the present and the universality of its causes, in short: to "get the analysis right," to cite Stuart Hall's famous injunction (2017). Only by doing the hard ideological work of identifying and addressing the underlying, structural causes of voters' dissent

will the left be able to inoculate them against the scapegoating policies of the extreme right. This requires the political leadership to work its way through from electoral complaints to their institutional and political root causes. This does not mean taking complaints at face value, for the root causes may well be unknown to the average voter, but it does mean taking the complaints seriously. A good starting point is a sincere engagement with the sort of exercises developed by legal scholar Joan Williams in her recent *Outclassed*, carrying the informative subtitle: *How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back* (2025).

In order to do so in a systematic way, the party leadership will have to dump the facile, superficial and at heart individualizing problem definitions and solutions of behavioral economics and social psychology and replace them by the much more context-sensitive, historically rooted, and critical realist approaches developed in anthropology, geography, regional studies, and comparative political economy. New liaisons with the critical social sciences are desperately needed to feed the forces of emancipation with new cognitions about what is ailing their potential voters. Less polling, fewer consultants and focus groups, more genuine conversation and engagement.

From that literature I derive the following set of prescriptions as pointers toward the kind of structural rethink required on the side of the forces of emancipation to become relevant again. I am fully aware that there is not much original about my prescriptions, that they resonate with the kind of left political program that is projected, for instance, by the Real Utopias project as initiated by the Erik Olin Wright, and that, hence, strongly overlap with those of Bello.

- Redesign public services around the real needs of citizens and kick new public management and financialized agents out of public services (The Foundational Economy Collective 2022).
- Start green policies with heavy investments in the housing of the poor and electrified public transportation (Bolet et al. 2024; Edenhofer and Genevose 2024).
- Stop insulting culturally conservative voters over their unwillingness to adopt the latest linguistic fashions at Ivy League universities and become more class sensitive (Al Gharbi 2024; Hochschild 2016, 2024; Williams 2017, 2025).
- Stop the financial extravaganzas for Big Capital and use those income flows to plug the gaps caused by austerity, in other words: end reverse solidarity and practice real solidarity (Cooper 2024; Piketty 2020).
- Stop the technocratic obsession with redistribution and start thinking about predistribution by changing the legal code of capital where it matters (and hurts) (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Pistor 2019).

- Start experimenting with direct democratic modes of collective decision-making (referendums, citizens' councils, mini-publics) around wicked problems such as the nitrogen crisis, the energy transition or the protein transition, since general elections do not provide governments with sufficient legitimacy to embark on the type of large-scale interventions needed to address these problems (Bader and Maussen 2023; Fung and Wright 2001).

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9

Turning Points and Undertows: German Authoritarianism and History's Long Reach

Petra Rethmann

INTRODUCTION

First, one victory. Then a second one. And finally, a third one. Within the span of three weeks, in September 2024 in the three East German states of Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) garnered staggering victories at the ballot box. In his messages to me, Mr. K., a Russian German migrant from Kazakhstan whom I have known for a long time, was happy.[1] Might this finally be the beginning of the end of Germany's liberal government? Would German military aid to Ukraine now end, immigration be curbed, and the unloved *Gendersternchen* (gender star) be eradicated? Would it finally be the case that conservatism – traditional family values, preferential treatment for those who belonged to an imagined German community of national-natural kin (*Volksgemeinschaft*), and the moral codes of Christian values – triumph over other political ideas? In his communication with me, Mr. K. made no secret out of the fact that he certainly hoped so.

While Mr. K. unabashedly delighted in the AfD's electoral victories, liberal and left commentators publishing in Germany's major newspapers and speaking on TV were besides themselves. What had gone wrong and why? Here were the usual suspects, all of them certainly playing a role: rising economic inequities and the decline of real-life wages, the erosion of Germany as an industrial nation and continuous bleak prognoses over its future prosperity, a general decline of liberalism and an attachment to the idea of a strong state, and – especially in Eastern Germany – deep-seated feelings of political distrust and alienation (Mau 2024). In search of answers, commentators have also habitually framed 1989 as the historical turning or inflection point (*Wende*) that, owing to dashed political aspirations and hopes, contributed to the rise of right-wing nationalism in Germany and beyond (Applebaum 2024; Krastev and Holmes 2020). I do not wish to squabble with arguments that point out the significance of turning points – dramatic events that create temporal caesuras that also constitute an origin point for significant and often unpredictable change – as explanatory moments for the intensification of right-wing nationalism, illiberalism, or

autocracy. The year 1989, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the second Iraq War, the 2008 financial crisis, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, the 2014 Brexit referendum and 2015 so-called migration crisis, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president and then his 2025 return in the same function have certainly played a significant role in the rise and support of autocratic-illiberal regimes. And yet. Although I hold that turning points need to be taken seriously, I am also suspicious of them as an almost habitual explanatory framework to which many markers of our times – increasing authoritarianism, political, regression, and the eerie return of national myths and pasts – come down to. Rather, what I want to do here is to illuminate the point that deeper nativist-revisionist trajectories and lines have hummed for a longer time under the democratic radar (see also Hochschild 2018). I hold that these trajectories provide the emotional and narrative grooves that right-wing subjects tap to explain their own national politics and electoral choices. If we fixate on or obsess about inflection points too much, then we simply risk overlooking those undertows, risking in turn our ability to produce reductive analyses of historical forgetting and amnesia.

I want to be clear here. I am not making this argument to dismiss the material and structural conditions of economic poverty, immigration, and cultural resentment, or the hard-to-pin-down forces of charismatic authority that several authors in this volume mention and that were so central to Max Weber's work that he considered charismatic authority as one of three types of authority – legal authority, as in republics and democracies, and traditional authority, as in feudalism or monarchy – electorates perceive as legitimate. Rather, through my relationship with Mr. K. I have come to understand that emotions and feelings – perceived erosions of dignity, humiliation, and shame, destructive attachments to absolutist *us versus them* thinking, political bitterness, and resentment – matter just as much as the material conditions that give rise to them. I consider this argument neither politically soft or analytically naive. I have a long-standing history in anti-fascist organizing, and have come to the conclusion that to combat the autocratic, right-wing nationalist, and fascist horrors of our time, we need to understand what drives authoritarianism and fascism's ideologies, movements, and moments. All kinds of approaches are needed.

Stylistically and analytically, this chapter moves on more quiet footing than some of the manifesto-like style of writing offered in this volume. I hope that it is not to my argument's detriment that here I do not focus on political taxonomies or labels of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or fascism. Somebody like Mr. K. does not think in those terms, but rather in registers of suffering and victimization. I recognize the power of these categories for Mr. K., but I also find them problematic, because they easily feed into unreflective political assumptions about national identity and its supposed contents. My point, then,

in telling Mr. K.'s story is not to portray him as an especially heinous example of a right-wing nationalist or extremist, put on his shoulders the burden of blame, or even to take a particular group of people – self-identified Russian Germans – politically and analytically hostage. Rather, my goal is to point out how the intertwinement of ferocious nineteenth- and twenty-century nation-making has created the emotional grooves that run through contemporary right-wing sentiments, and how these emotional grooves are currently inhabited by contemporary-democratic parties.

The rise of right-wing nationalism is often analyzed from within the borders of a nation. I too write from within the nationalized space of the German Federal Republic, but I also point out how nation worked as a powerful paradigm across diverse ideological polities. Indeed, the fact that nation has turned into a politically standardizing convention, I hold, makes it possible to think of the rise of a global right – just think about the connections between European parties, the USA, India, China – as nationalism's particular inheritance. Nation itself may always be associated with particular times and places, yet it simultaneously also marks a supralocal, transnational cultural form. The paradoxical irony here is that what seemingly separates the right – a focus on national interiority and unity – is also what unites it (Rethmann 2018; Shekhovtsov 2017). By initially putting the nationally intertwined ruts of right-wing nationalism at the forefront of this discussion, I emphasize nation not as a disparate and localized pattern of life but formulaic, uniform, and universal political formation.

By then drawing the analysis into the parochial German discourse of *Heimat* – a flexible term habitually translated as home, homeland, and belonging – I show how form works to create and uphold imaginations of national taxonomies. These taxonomies are not innocent, but – with their power to name and decide who can be included and excluded – have politics and people in their grip. Mr. K. may have grown up in a Soviet space in the grip of national taxonomies applied by centralizing state-builders, but in Germany he also entered a space in which national identities were something to be embraced and not defied. By not simply cataloging economic and social registers – disappointment, betrayal, innocence, and resentment – associated with right-wing nationalism, but in seeking to illuminate them from within, I hope to elucidate how power and culture are not abstractions but help to explain the politics of social fracturing and disastrous electoral choices.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Mr. K and I have known each other since 2010 when we met in North Rhine-Westphalia, in the small town of Dülmen, under rather tenuous circumstances. Mr. K. was – and still is – in what Walter Benjamin might have called the rag-picking habit of taking books out of paper collection bins, although

he explains this not as a romantic notion but as a hangover of the Soviet thrift economy marked by continuous lack. I do not tend to be in the habit of picking out books from paper bins, but my father – for whom books constituted a luxury that for much of his life he could not afford – was. Mr. K. and I got talking, and other connections emerged. In 1990, Mr. K. had traveled in Russia to the southern Volga region to see what was left of the place where his parents had once lived and considered home. In 1990, I too had traveled through the southern Volga region to visit friends who worked on archaeological digs. Mr. K. and I talked about how then at Sheremetevo II, Moscow's international airport, Russian German women, children, and men, squished between heavy suitcases and chicken cages, waited for German-bound flights. I mentioned that I remembered an old woman sharing a meal of green onions, sausage, and bread with younger men. Mr. K. joked that he could have been one of them. Since 1991, Germany has awarded nearly 2.5 million persons of German heritage from the former Soviet Union refugee status, followed by citizenship based on German naturalization laws, which granted citizenship upon proof of German blood, not place of birth.[2] Mr. K. says that he and his wife were lucky because their Soviet internal passport inscribed their nationality as German, and because they still spoke the language in a rudimentary way.[3] Others, including some of his neighbors who were claiming German heritage in Kazakhstan, were frantically studying German, often taught by German-speaking Kazakhs employed by the German government. When then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev began to speak of the desirable return of Kazakhstan's German, Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian communities to their historic homelands, Mr. K. began to increasingly understand what he did not have: stability, security, and all the national accoutrements that define it. It was then that Mr. K. and his wife packed their bags and left.

In 1991, Mr. K. arrived in Germany full of certainties that he would arrive in a place steeped in the all-powerful paradigm and standardizing convention of the nation: clean, German, pure. Nothing, though, was how he had imagined it or been told in Kazakhstan how it might be. In Soviet Kazakhstan, he had been trained as an engineer, but in Germany nobody would consider his certificate. His wife, who had worked as a teacher in Rudny, started cleaning houses. In Germany, he was not considered German but an *Aussiedler* (variously translated as migrant, refugee, or resettled person), a term that between 1951 and 1992 was used by the German Federal Republic to signify ethnic Germans from largely Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He found the term insulting. He may have received automatic German citizenship, but everybody thought he was Russian, and sometimes people commented on how well he spoke German, like the woman who had hired him as a handyman to mow her lawn and help her clear away debris from her garden. He was angry that she knew nothing about Russian German history, and that his accent, no matter how hard he

tried, gave him away as Russian. Although he explained his history to her on a number of occasions, her stubborn belief that he is Russian seemed unshakable.

Today, Mr. K. feels betrayed by the country's liberal, federal parties, but most of all by the Christian Democratic Union. In August and September 2015, the year when Angela Merkel opened German borders to Syrian refugees, he watched TV coverage of the arrivals of trains full of refugees in Munich, and how they were greeted with flowers and food by German women, children, and men. Nobody, he says, has ever rolled out the red carpet to welcome him. Then he watched more reports that showed Germans who made their home available to refugees and spoke about how wonderful these immigrants were. He could not understand why these refugees were given free German lessons, when the son of his Russian German neighbors had recently been chastened by a German neighbor because he barely spoke German. Mr. K. then walked over to this neighbor and said that if the Nazi army had not invaded Soviet Russia, German schools in the Volga region would still exist and the son of the Russian German neighbor would speak German. That, he said, made his German neighbor shut up.

NATION-NESS AS INNOCENCE

Whenever you ask Mr. K. about his family's life in Engels, the capital of the Soviet Autonomous and Socialist Republic for Volga Germans (*Avtonomnaia Sovetskaia Sotsialistecheskaia Respublika Nemtzev Povolzh'ia*) in Western Russia, like a traditional ethnographer he begins with an inventory. Engels, he says, must have been a lively place, bustling with German libraries, newspapers, radio programs, choirs, theater groups, and cultural centers for the region's Russian German population. There were vegetable gardens, small farmsteads, respectable streets, and churches with spires in the sky. People, he continues, were diligent, assiduous, religious, and tastefully dressed. His mother's apron was always clean. As if to reinforce his belief in national forms, Mr. K. describes Engels and the Republic in terms of Russian German uniformity and sameness. When I ask him about others – Kalmycks, Cossacks, Ukrainians, Jews, Russians – who also lived in the region, Mr. K. brushes away local nuances and complexities in one verbal sweep. The fact that life in the southern Volga region was spatialized into the Soviet Autonomous and Socialist Republic for Volga Germans made it possible to think that Russian German-ness – imagined as cleanliness, schooling, territory, domesticity, and education – was the region's external and quintessential sign.

It is easy to blame Mr. K.'s culturally monolithic vision on his chauvinism, but here I have to step back and briefly follow Soviet modernizing and nationalizing efforts. As historians have pointed out, at the beginning of the 1920s Soviet theorists came up with the contradictory notion of organizing

the internal borders of the first socialist state not in terms of efficiency or production, as one would expect of a modernizing internationalist regime, but around national borders and ethnic identity (Brown 2003; Martin 2001). It was a peculiar and not widely known experiment. Instead of ruling like most modern governments have done since Napoleon – by dividing territory into viable economic units for efficient tax collection and administration – socialist reformers took villages with mixed populations – people of different religions, dialects, and national heritage – and gerrymandered national borders around them. In the early 1920s, the Soviet Union's Russian Germans, like all officially recognized ethnic groups in Soviet Russia, were granted cultural autonomy as part of the Soviet nationality policy. For Mr. K. it has never been hard to think of the Soviet Autonomous and Socialist Republic for Volga Germans as a tiny island of Russian German self-rule.

Initially imagined as one of the most progressive experiments in nation-making, and welcomed by Russian Germans, these territories exposed their flipside when in 1941 the Nazi army invaded the Soviet Union. Russian German communities that had resided for over two hundred years in the southern Volga region and elsewhere were branded as communities of potential traitors, saboteurs, and spies in potential collaboration with the invading army. In September 1941, NKVD (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del* or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) agents told Mr. K's parents to gather up their belongings because they would be moved to the northern steppe of Kazakhstan. Livestock and grains were left behind, as was linen, lace curtains on windows, feather comforters on beds, benches, chairs, and tables. Mr. K. says that for his parents it was hard to realize that nobody intervened. He describes how Russian neighbors with whom his parents had always got along stood along fences and peeked across walls to watch their German neighbors leave, not exactly cheering but seemingly waiting to take what was left behind in those houses. Envy and greed that seemed not to have existed before ricocheted from walls and spilled over into the streets. When I mention to Mr. K. that the stories he tells of his Russian neighbors remind me, in their own uncanny way, of the stories that Jewish women and men tell about their German neighbors, he is quick to dismiss this association. For him, the deportations of ethnic Germans places them on top of a pinnacle of suffering generated by the Second World War.

Within the context of a few months (September–December 1941), people were shipped, Mr. K. says, "like cargo" to exile settlements in either Siberia or Kazakhstan. He describes how his parents sat in slow-moving, frequently shunted trains, living for up to a month in the airless embrace of a cattle car. They stayed alive by eating warm water with turnips. When they arrived in northern Kazakhstan, close to Rudny, they thought that the place looked like death: inevitable and sure. Lacking tools, furniture, winter clothes, medicine, cooking utensils, and food, his parents were dependent on the goodwill and

compassion of neighbors who had been taught to look upon them as enemies. They were called on weekly to register with the police. Without a passport, their lives were reduced to a small terrain. Mr. K. describes how his mother, who had trained to become a teacher but then worked in a local collective farm, told him to always be careful, always work harder than everyone else, and to always be on guard. He describes how his father was put in the *trudarmee* (labor army), a punitive military netherworld run by the NKVD that had been especially created for Russian Germans. It was all personal. No longer exempt from forced labor or conscription, Russian Germans were stripped of their privileges and consigned to the other side of cleanliness, culture, and even virtue.[4]

Ironically, the deportations produced what Soviet officials feared most: a community of people joined by nationality and united by resentment and discontent. Although in Kazakhstan Russian German communities gradually began to fuse into Soviet identities as they integrated into Russian-Soviet culture, the memory of the injustice of the deportations never faded. In 1957, in Rudny, Russian German deportees began to publish *Neues Leben*, a four-page weekly designed in Kazakhstan, published in Moscow, and controlled by *Pravda*. Building on the relaxation of Soviet censorship and repression that marked the Soviet Union's mid-1950s *thaw*, in the following decades Russian German delegations also periodically traveled to Moscow to lobby for compensation for their suffering and their *Heimkehr* (return home) to the southern Volga region, only to see themselves rebuffed again and again. Mr. K. described how his father grew envious of Russian war veterans, who in post-Second World War Soviet Russia received certain *l'goty* (habitually translated as advantages) that ushered in preferential treatment. He too had put in his time, but received nothing. There was some hope in the mid-1980s with perestroika, when Russian German delegations, haunted by unclosed wounds of the past, were allowed to travel to the Volga region. It was an uncanny return. Men and women, and their children who had never known the region, hoped to see former churches and school buildings known from old photographs, and the memories and stories of their parents. What they mostly saw were ruined churches and school buildings, but also abandoned cast-iron grave markers and destroyed brick houses on which patchy shingles still rattled the roof. They spoke of half-whispered rumors in the region that said that Germany would use Russian Germans to kill Russians. In 1989, Mr. K.'s father participated in *Wiedergeburt* (Rebirth), an organization with the explicit goal to fully rehabilitate all Russian Germans. They even sought to petition Gorbachev, but were never received. Then, at the beginning of the 1990s, there was another half-whispered rumor that said that Russian President Yeltsin would offer Russian German communities resettlement location close to the Soviet missile site by Kapustin-Iar. Nobody in Rudny wanted to go.

BETRAYAL

On September 14, 2017, 16 years after Mr. K.'s arrival in Germany and two weeks before the German federal election, in which the AfD would win 12.6 percent of the national vote, Mr. K. and I attended the opening ceremony of the annual festivities of one of Dülmen's *Schützenverein*, loosely translated as gun association. In Dülmen, as in so many other German places, *Schützenfeste* mark communal festivities that hark back to the *Bürgwerwehren*, medieval paramilitary organizations whose purpose it was to defend kingdoms, castles, and towns. I grew up with the concept and practice, and I abhor the military and patriarchal paraphernalia of it all. By contrast, for Mr. K. this was exactly the kind of folk tradition to which an ethnographer should attend. Here it finally was: the celebration of German communities rooted in long-standing traditions.

Together Mr. K. and I walked to Dülmen's open market square, where people had already assembled. Two brass bands were playing, large flags with emblems were waved, everybody was waiting for the association's president to speak. When he stepped into the square's center, he did not speak – as Mr. K. had thought – about the lures of *Heimat*, but about what he had seen on his recent trip to Auschwitz. The crematories and gas chambers, heaps of suitcases, shoes, and human hair. The president spoke about the horrors that had been committed in Germany's name, and how the Federal Republic carried a special responsibility to collectively ameliorate the suffering of Syrian refugees and the suffering of those caused by other wars. There was no way around it: ameliorating the suffering of refugees was what Germany owed to the world.

Both Mr. K. and I were surprised to hear references to the Holocaust at the *Schützenfest,* albeit for different reasons. I was surprised because in his speech the *Verein*'s president picked up on an idea of *Vergangenheitsbetwältigung* (coming to terms with the past) that I associate with a more progressive memory culture, rather than the neoconservative approach of mythical spiritualism, historical relativization, and *Heimat*. Mr. K. fulminated because in the president's speech he found further evidence of the denial of *his* history and, as he said, *his people*. It's always the same. Nobody knows his history, and nobody seems to care. First, he says, there has been the murder of Germany's Jewish citizens and the Holocaust, and now it is all about the plight of migrants and refugees. Barely anybody, Mr. K. says, talks about the suffering that Germans had endured in the East, and that is also the suffering that most occupies him.

MNEMONIC RUIN

One of Mr. K.'s most valuable possessions is a book entitled *Auf der Suche nach Heimat: Die Rußlanddeutschen* (In Search of a Home: The Germans from Russia), published in 1991 by Richard H. Walth with the Laumann publishing

house in Dülmen. As if it were a rare ethnographic item, Mr. K. keeps the book in his living room in a cupboard behind glass. When I expressed interest in the title of the book, Mr. K. was happy to hand it to me. *Auf der Suche nach Heimat* offers an inventory of German life in Neu-Glückstal, a village in the Ukrainian heartland in the Black Sea region. Page after page it lists the names of German residents in rows, while columns record date of birth, church registration, and religion. *Auf der Suche nach Heimat* charts their farmsteads and maps their alignments, but offers no insights into Neu-Glückstal's social and cultural life. The document boils down the complexity of one region to one monolithic simplified statistical classification. There are no traces of Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish, or Russian neighbors.

The book invites no questions about (fictive) ideas of national cohesion, but rather packs a zone of cultural interdependence and contingency into a standardized notion of the nation. In *Auf der Suche nach Heimat,* Neu-Glückstal appears as a world of German-ness unto itself.

Along with the German tanks that in 1941 rolled into west-central and southern Ukraine came a class of German professionals and scholars who arrived to set up the new regime. Richard H. Walth was one of a number of historically and ethnographically trained scholars who between 1941 and 1944 assembled so-called *Dorfberichte* (village reports; documents requested by the Nazis to seek out and identify ethnic Germans in the East) for the Ethnic German Liaison Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*, or VoMi). Under the guidance of Professor Karl Stumpp, head of "special unit" (*Sonderkommando*), Walth produced ethnographic documents to respond to Nazi interests and secure "living space" (*Lebensraum*) for Germans. He was a member of the Nazi Party, and saw himself as a fitting documenter for Russian Germans because he was one himself. Born in 1924 in Neu-Glückstal, Walth had studied at Russian German institutes in Odessa and Lutbrandau/Wartheland, and worried that "because of a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy," Russian German life would be quickly disappearing and that, if no action were taken, not many German families would be left. In 1944, he expressed relief when German troops stepped up the transfer of ethnic German families from hamlets in southern Ukraine to the *Reichsgau Wartheland* (also called *Warthegau*), part of Polish territory annexed in 1939 and site of the Chelmno extermination camp. For Walth, though, it constituted a heaven of German-ness.

The back of *Auf der Suche nach Heimat* features a black and white photograph, taken on October 20, 1981, that shows how Lothar Spaeth, then CDU minister-president of Baden Württemberg, honors Karl Götz, *Sturmbannführer* (equivalent to a major) in the SS and the person to whom Walth has dedicated the book, with the Order of Merit of the German Federal Republic (*Bundesverdienstkreuz*). It stands to reason that Spaeth, who belonged to the right wing of the CDU, knew that both Götz and Walth had collected information for the

Nazis, and may have been aware that the award itself recast Walth and Götz's actions of documenting and collecting themselves as humanitarian action. Spaeth's awarding of the Federal Republic's Order of Merit does not simply facilitate silence about these aspects of Germany's past, but also sidesteps any critical reflection about the fact that the two actions – the promotion of ethnic Germans and the eradication of Slavs and Jews, and the dualism of sub- and superhuman (*Unter/Übermensch*) – were inseparable. The history that appears to be remembered is one of a racially purified future.

COUNTERREVOLUTION

Contemporary liberal-political hand-wringing can make it sound as if the rise and political attachments of the far right come out of nowhere, but here I want to direct attention to the fact that the narrative and emotional grooves for Mr. K's disappointment and resentment were consistently forged earlier – in the nation-making that I delineated above, but also contemporary German mnemonic and cultural politics (Frei 2002; Wicke 2015). In particular, I am thinking here of the 1982 election of CDU politician Helmut Kohl as chancellor, and his project of a moral-spiritual *Tendenzwende*, by which Kohl meant a renewed reorientation to the domestically interior and parochial values of *Heimat*, myths of national purity, and dreams of a nativist revival. Actively, Kohl sought to symbolize *Heimat* by walking through the idyllic forests and across rolling fields of his "homely" region of origin, Rhineland-Palatinate, and the excessive indulgence of eating *Saumagen* – pig's stomach stuffed with well-spiced pork, carrots, and potatoes, cooked in hot water, and then sliced, pan-fried, and served with sauerkraut and local wine – and serving it to foreign politicians. You may put this down to spectacle, or even a rather innocent celebration and preservation of local traditions, but it undergirded a path to conservative or reactionary politics in which the nation becomes the site of innocence and preservation.

Possibly more than any other politician, Kohl also locates Heimat in the redemptive power of memory. For example, Olick (2016) has charted the trajectory of nation memory in the post-Second World War German Federal Republic that, at least since the beginning of the 1980s, has culminated in the normalization of the German nation. What Olick means by normalization is the way in which the history of an atrocious, specifically Nazi, past was relativized and normalized. Kohl has often cited the 1950 Stuttgart Charter of the Association of German Expellees – mostly ethnic Germans who were either expelled or fled after the Second World War from parts of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Soviet Union, and other areas of Eastern Europe – to praise the Association's continued focus on these lands. In 1985, Kohl met with the *Landsmannschaft* of Sudeten Germans, ethnic Germans from today's

Czech Republic and Slovakia, acknowledging the importance of these voters and agreeing with them on the significance of the loss of the "German East." The problem here is not that Kohl wants to remember the culture of ethnic Germans from the East as an intertwined history beyond national borders, but that he wants to do so in the exclusive keys of injustice, suffering, and loss.

One could think of this as a not-so-important instance of historical revisionism, but illustrations of how such an understanding of history plays out reach further. Olick's most salient example here is what in Germany is known as the Bitburg affair – a term that refers to the place at which in 1985 Kohl, together with US President Ronald Reagan, lay a wreath at a cemetery where SS (*Schutzstaffel*; the organization most responsible for organizing the Holocaust) soldiers were buried. The ceremony was significant for conservative, neoconservative, and right-wing supporters of then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl who then advocated hard for the deployment of American midrange nuclear missiles in Germany, and who also needed to demonstrate that Americans and Germans had overcome a difficult past to move toward a strong alliance. Wasn't it the case, he argued, that the Federal Republic had achieved decades-long stability, and thus earned the right to honor its war dead like other democratic nations? Wasn't it the case that those who had fought in the Second World War had always been only this: ordinary fathers, brothers, and sons? Normal patriotic soldiers? Here it was: the Nazi past as just one other period in German history. In a 1987 address to the German parliament, Kohl spoke of the need for a "re-awakening of Heimat, the need for clarity [*Überschaubarkeit*], and [cultural] intimacy" (Olick 2016: 373). In other words, Kohl made culture a crucial element of his conservative political vision.

During Kohl's tenure as chancellor, *Heimat* gained a renewed relevance, and this relevance gained new heights when in 2018 Christian Social Union (CSU) politician Horst Seehofer insisted that the German Ministry of the Interior be renamed the Ministry of the Interior, Construction, and Heimat.[5]

Seehofer felt rattled enough by the win of the AfD in which the party garnered 12.5 percent – a win that he read as further proof that Merkel's *Willkommenskultur* (culture of welcome, associated with compassion for people fleeing and seeking to build a new life) had failed and was effectively destroying *Heimat* and its imagined stability.[6] The AfD had won its seats by running the slogan, "Our Country, Our Heimat," capitalizing on anti-refugee sentiments to win more than 5 million votes. Another poster then urged people to "save" or "preserve" the *Heimat* (*Heimat bewahren*)." And yet another AfD politician proclaimed, "Our Volk is German, our culture is German, and that's how it should stay."[7]

One would think that a German memory politics that emphasizes *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) as part of a critical negation of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) politics would have deflated such concepts.

One would also think that conservative-liberal parties, having seen the havoc an affinity toward an uncritically nativist politics wreaks, would stay away from a militant language based in unapologetic re-nationalization. Au contraire. A few days before Germany's February 2025 elections, Germany's next chancellor, Friedrich Merz, accepted votes from the AfD to pass a non-binding motion to change immigration laws, especially curbing immigration numbers and family reunion rights.[8] Merz justified this move as a necessity, but Germany's so-called *Brandmauer* or firewall – a term that stipulates that democratic parties shall not work with the AfD in the German parliament – fell. Mass demonstrations followed, Merz backtracked, but it was there for everybody to see: the boundaries between conservative and right-wing parties turned out to be more porous than anticipated. Since then, *Heimat* has become a *Kampfbegriff*, a tendentious concept, one that it is being fought over by various actors and one which those same actors use to present their visions not just for a past but a future for Germany.

CHARISMA

The right-wing label has been attached to the AfD for years, and in 2019 a German court ruled that Björn Höcke, leader of the party in the state of Thuringia and one of its most extreme figures, could be called a fascist. Höcke opposes Holocaust remembrance and calls the Holocaust memorial in Berlin *ein Denkmal der Schande* (monument of shame) because it portrays German history as *mies und lächerlich* (rotten and ridiculous), politically paralyzes the country, and prevents Germans from forming "healthy" German identities. He uses German-banned Nazi rhetoric – *Alles für Deutschland!* (Everything for Germany!) – in his speeches, and "The EU must die for the true Europe to live" is one of his mottos.[9] When a few months ago, just before the September 2024 elections, I pressed Mr. K. on the point that Björn Höcke can be called a fascist, he told me that he is not worried about Höcke being a fascist or allowed to be called a fascist. After all, wasn't that exactly the label wrongfully applied to those Germans in the Soviet Union who were then persecuted and deported? It does not matter to Mr. K. that German courts consistently fine him for using such phrases. Truth be told, in Mr. K.'s eyes the fact that German courts fine him, and that Höcke simply continues to use those phrases only add to the latter's allure, a promise that if you're a man like them, you too can dominate and get away with it.[10]

That's charismatic authority, the hard-to-pin down quality that Max Weber saw as so central to politics that he considered it as one of three types of authority – legal authority, as in republics and democracies, and traditional authority, as in feudalism or monarchy – that an electorate sees as legitimate.

Weber thought that charisma is the quality that people turn to when times are troubled, and what's troubled in Mr. K.'s view is not just the economy, or that there are too many migrants, or the Russian-Ukrainian war, or that people no longer trust mainstream parties, but that so many political candidates are bland – Germany's bland Chancellor Olaf Scholz and equally bland Friedrich Merz. Compared with them, Höcke oozes charisma. He projects daring at the expense of liberal rule: strength, an ends-justify-the-means leadership style, and an I-alone-can-fix-this power. What's then the harm in Höcke's bits of rhetorical overreach here, his trampling of laws there – especially when you can't really tell any more if it is all true because fractured information sources pump out different messages?

At the end of January 2025, a few weeks before the elections, Mr. K. wrote to ask if I had seen the video that showed how on January 25 Elon Musk had made a surprise appearance at the AfD's election campaign event in Halle. By then, the video had circulated through cyberspace – and, yes, I had. The video shows Musk addressing a hall of more than 4000 people alongside AfD party leader Alice Weidel. You can see how Musk speaks live via video link to a crowd of AfD members and fans about protecting German culture, preserving the German people, and how – one day before January 27, the day Auschwitz was officially liberated by the Allies – it is necessary for Germany to get rid of its historical guilt so that the country can become great again. He just loved the video and watched it many times because it made him feel good about his own misgivings over immigrants and German memory culture. But where Mr. K. had seen an avenger and savior, I had seen the projection of an über-masculinity, a return to the "great man" theory of politics unrestrained by rules. The fact that Musk's head appeared to be floating above a sea of smaller figures only added to my impression. I felt like watching a dystopian movie.

I have colleagues who shrug off Musk's appearance as provocation and attention-seeking, and hope that all of this will simply go away. I am not so sanguine. Musk is clearly engaged with Germany's politics, but his fixation is also part of an always-already-there narrative to do away with historical complexities and shame. I am convinced that he will pursue that agenda with aggression, and he will not only pursue it in the USA but overseas. There is no subtlety here, just blatant politicking via social media platforms, egregious displays of money and wealth – simple formulas for winning. The vibe of Musk is the vibe of a Terminator coming to hunt. Unfortunately, this Terminator also donates handsomely to people in power and undermines efforts to address the challenges of addressing political trust and even fixing the system — which would inevitably be tumultuous and cause at least a short-term backlash. This isn't a political situation where the usual political responses, including diplomacy, may always shine.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Recently, one of the biggest issues for the left has been the question of how to tackle the force of right-wing nationalism. Responses include the creation of a populism from the left, build up one's own charismatic leader, and tap into the power of excitable speech. These proposals find much resonance because it is clear that the right does not play by established rules and that the rule of law alone will not be enough to save democracy. I am not always comfortable with these proposals because I fundamentally distrust the power of attractiveness, charm, and devotion. Mass protests constitute another answer, but now they often seem to draw diminishing returns – still drawing big crowds but rarely getting proportionally big results. In fact, leaders now ignore mass demonstrations, as if demonstrators were just one focus group. Another answer is to create stronger, better social movements. Usually, this has meant to enhance digital and social connectivity through email networks, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp; to find new ways to leverage the power of social media without surrendering to its destructive effects. I do not consider these answers pointless – and I also know that there are no easy answers – but good answers, I think, will need to include new understandings of power and impact that move beyond populist virality and self-expression.

In other words, I believe that the left and other progressive forces need to become more resilient. To date, progressive international fora and networks serving to develop shared strategies and mobilize people have been few and far between. The rules of the game have changed and the game itself may be long. Here is a term that I would not necessarily have used a year ago, and that is capacity-building.

Capacity-building sounds like a technocratic word and does not immediately include rousing visions, but it includes something that I consider valuable for the left: getting together, getting to know each other, coordinate, prepare, organize, and work together over sustained periods of time. Building, in other words, organizational capacity which then can help us to navigate treacherous phases of politics and inevitable pushbacks. We need to offer not just morally right but politically strong analyses, and avoid the conflation of what we collectively want to see with an examination of how things really are.

In thinking about Mr. K., Russian German history, and the corollaries of suffering and victimhood that follow from it, one such form of capacity-building could mean to orient political and historical stories away from resentment to perhaps possibilities. The point, I think, is not just to point out that right-wing nationalism is set in a determinate present but to assert that narratives of the past should be interventions in the present, strategic interrogations of our present's thinking and norms as a way of helping us glimpse possibilities for alternative futures.

Since non-authoritarian presents and futures depend on how the historical past is constructed in relation to them, we need to narrate the relation of the past to the present differently in order to highlight different aspects. This is not easy. It takes patience, work, and time. But it may be one possibility to capture more clearly what this present is, and develop paths out of our contemporary morass.

It can be tedious for activists on the left to think about the long reach of history because history plays the long game. History does not offer easy solutions or the disruptive capacity – interruptions of the regular operations of authority in the form of civil and peaceful protests toward more militant actions – that activists tend to seek. Neither does it directly produce the electoral and institutional capacity – let's say, the ability to get progressive politicians nominated and elected, and to keep them reelected – that also tends to be on a movement's agenda. At best, what history may be able to do is to produce a narrative capacity in reorienting political stories away from an always-already-there suffering to cast light on how narratives of the past have contributed to our autocratic present – and thus hopefully to create abilities for left organizing and movements to frame endurance, opposition, and resistance on their own terms.

Today, it seems a long way away from a nativist nationalism to bring us back toward a world less marked by the impulse to divide people by bloodline, to draw physical and legal boundaries, and to place some people within and others out. The authoritarianism and rise of nativism we experience in our times may just be a song for a bygone past, but as long as people like Mr. K. continue to chant it, we live in a time overdetermined by requiems that do not offer measures of hope or reorientations toward something more justly aspiring and buoyant.

NOTES

1. The term "Russian German" is not easily understood and marks a complex identity that stretches across at least four distinct political entities: Imperial Germany, Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and the Federal Republic of Germany. To condense a complex history into a nutshell: at the end of the eighteenth century, Russian Empress Catherine II invited settlers from largely southern Germany to settle along the lands close to the southern Volga and near the Black Sea. Equipped with the promise that they would not have to participate in military service, German peasants arrived as self-identified colonists. In this chapter, I put post-1945 Russian German history at the forefront of the discussion.
2. Until 1998, this was a right denied to the majority of German-born, German-speaking persons of non-German ancestry living in Germany.
3. Since 1932, Soviet administration sorted the population via internal passports into nationality, with nationality inscribed as the passport's *piaty punkt* (fifth point).

4. One day I visited with Mr. K. the Museum of Russian German Cultural History in the small city of Detmold. There he kept pointing out over and over again the atrocities depicted in the museum's large mural of the *trudarmee*.
5. "Geschichte des Ministeriums." Bundesministerium für Inneres, Bau, und Heimat. www.bmi.bund.de/DE/ministerium/unsere-geschichte/geschichte-ministerium-artikel.html (accessed January 26, 2025).
6. See, for example, this 2018 speech from AfD domestic spokesman Gottfried Curio: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvG4DCiMQTk (accessed November 16, 2025).
7. Andreas Mrosek, campaign speech, Dessau, Germany, April 17, 2021.
8. Merz has made headlines with insults to minority groups, including Ukrainian refugees and Muslim children, resulting in more than one public apology. His sometimes absurd, baseless comments – claiming, for example, that rejected asylum seekers were taking all of the country's dental appointments, leaving none for Germans – suggest someone happy to play into right-wing talking points.
9. *Alles für Deutschland* was a Nazi stormtrooper slogan.
10. Politicians projecting strength at the expense of the rules of liberal democracy is not a new phenomenon in Germany, the USA, or so many other places in the world. It stands in stark contrast to what Mishra (2024) has called the blandness of liberalism, by which he not only means ideas and dispositions that appear to promote democratic government, constitutionalism, the rule of law, a minimal state, property rights, self-regulating markets, and the empowerment of the autonomous rational individual but also ingratiating – and thus empty – moral values.

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10

“Learning the Value of Things”: Why Working People Consent to the Far-Right Government in Argentina

Julia Soul

INTRODUCTION[1]

On November 23, after the triumph of the self-described “liberal-libertarian” economist Javier Milei in the presidential elections, Argentina joined the ranks of countries ruled by far-right governments. Milei defeated the Peronist candidate – the economy minister Sergio Massa – by campaigning against “outrageous” social justice and promising profound structural adjustment to end inflation and the privileges of the “caste” – a category of people loosely defined: it refers to the political elites and certain groups of “privileged” workers, as well as all those allegedly taking advantage of the efforts of “decent people.”

Judging by the electoral results, approval for these policies seems firmly rooted among working people: survey data indicate he won the vote over half of informal and formal workers and almost 64 percent of the self-employed. Yet Milei is not the first right-wing candidate to have won a presidential election in recent years: Mauricio Macri, the leader of “Cambiemos,” a right-wing coalition formed by the traditional *Union Civica Radical* and the post-2001 *Propuesta Republicana*, was elected in 2015. Macri attracted a substantial share of working people’s votes in that election. However, the electoral support that Javier Milei garnered was even larger. In between these governments, the Peronist candidate Alberto Fernández, with the former president Cristina F. de Kirchner as his vice-president, won the 2019 election with the promise of restoring redistributive policies and a pro-worker agenda. Rather than a picture of steadily growing support for right-wing candidates, the results of presidential elections since 2011 show working people’s changing choices.

This chapter raises the question about the political and economic dynamics underlying these shifting voting patterns and aims to develop a nuanced assessment of working people’s endorsement of far-right policies, especially in the unstable global context since the 2008 financial breakdown. I aim to contribute to those debates through the theoretical and political lens of the antagonistic making and remaking of the working class (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014).

In exploring the contours of working people's support for the government of Javier Milei, I draw on current scholarship (Bernstein 2021; Kalb 2023, among others) that traces the connections between the political and economic forces and dynamics that shape the social reproduction of the "broad working class," as well as the cultural and affective dispositions that its political behaviors are rooted in. Exploring these connections, I am interested in the historical correlation between "crises" and the social and political empowerment of the far right. Focusing on "dislocations" allows us to take an approach to the all-encompassing experience of crises for working people in which political economy, affective, and moral aspects are intertwined (Harvey and Khron-Hansen 2018). I argue that we need to pay attention to the restructuring dynamics of crisis in order to understand the kind of dislocations shaping working people's daily lives.

Based on my own anthropological research among industrial workers and communities, I trace the ebbs and flows of far-right sensibilities through the shifting dynamics of working people's reproduction during two historical contexts of profound change. First, the steelworkers' experience of "change" that resulted from the "privatization crisis" preceding the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony between 1989 and 1992 (Soul 2010, 2015). Second, my current fieldwork with agro-industrial workers in the oilseed industry, and some records I took while coordinating a series of educational activities with labor activists and cooperative workers.[2] Both sets of data enabled me to identify common social meanings, affects and moral values of labor, money, progress, and livelihood (among other topics) that give birth to a structure of feelings, weaving together the need for change, the desire for order, and the legitimacy of sacrifice. "Structure of feelings" (Williams 1977) is an analytical bridge that connects the tensions in working people's everyday lives with the ongoing dynamics of political economy, and the further mobilization of affect and moral values into a political articulation envisioning "solutions" for "crises." In analyzing the popular consent for Milei's government, I explore the manifold dislocations that crises provoke in working people's daily lives. By inquiring into the structure of feelings, we can trace the blurred limits between politics and economy during crises, and the ways in which working people's ability to "make a life worth living" is squeezed. This approach aims to understand the political articulations of the popular experience of crisis as an open terrain of contestation rather than as a series of fixed ideological constellations, while enabling us to envision a possible alternative, left-wing consensus in the *emergent* (Williams 1977) political and cultural articulations arising from "broad working-class" activity.

CRISES AND FAR-RIGHT POLITICAL FORMATIONS IN ARGENTINA

Accounts of the emergence of the far right foreground the context of "crisis" within which popular support for these political alternatives arises. The deep

and enduring capitalist crisis throughout the 1920s and 1930s is often referred to as the breeding ground for fascism (Fergusson 1975; Gordon and Webber 2024; Stefanoni 2021), while the 2008–09 financial crisis and the weak economic recovery that put an end to the promises of 40 years of neoliberal globalization, are presented as the backdrop for the current rise of the far right (Chapter 1 in this volume; Cammelli 2024; Edelman 2021; Kalb 2023). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been widely highlighted for its role in accelerating ongoing global contradictions (López et al. 2021) that dramatically changed working people's social reproduction (Narotzky 2022). In the Southern Cone, the global crises hastened the failure of the so-called Pink Tide governments, which reflected the hopes of the cycle of rebellions that challenged neoliberal hegemony from the end of the 1990s (Ouviña and Thwaites Rey 2019).

Relatively little attention has been paid to the right-wing common sense forged during the crisis of the 1980s that preceded the consolidation of neoliberal globalization, framed by the "Washington Consensus." As I found among steelworkers, the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony in Argentina rested on enduring popular support for pro-market, pro-private property policies, and the consequent criminalization of political activism resisting those policies. Of course, that doesn't amount to fascist or illiberal consent, but it does entail authoritarian and conservative inclinations.

Each of the above-mentioned periods were turbulent processes that ended in definite global transformations. The long-cycle theory of crisis asserts that "restructuring crises" are periods when the entire dynamic of global accumulation changes (Astarita 2006; Mandel 1975). Needless to say, restructuring is neither harmonious nor consensual; it unfolds unevenly through varied and multi-scaled struggles. Their outcomes include renewed technological and spatial arrangements, and new configurations of the exploitation and subsumption of labor and the working class as well as the consequent changes in their patterns of social reproduction. During restructuring crises, the institutional dynamics of government, as well as political parties and coalitions, become disorganized: leaderships change, individual loyalties shift between different parties, and otherwise clear political and ideological cleavages become blurred. In contemporary Argentina, this dynamic encompasses all political forces capable of governing, and includes the disarticulation of the leadership, programs and actions of the Peronist *Partido Justicialista*, which has traditionally sought to reflect the interests and political sensibilities of the working class, framed in a national-popular multi-class alliance.

Working people experience these disruptions as long-lasting pressures on their daily reproduction which are reflected in the shifts (and the attempt to defend) what I call the *tacit effort-reward equation* – an equation underlying people's valuation of the practices involved in their daily social reproduction. The nature of these shifts gives rise to increasing tensions between *making a*

living and *making a life worth living* (Harvey and Khron-Hansen 2018) framed by the redefinition of the boundaries between "economy" and "politics" (Meiksins Wood 2000).[3]

The general correlation between restructuring crises and the "turn to the far right" by working people raises the question about the sources and content of popular support in each specific context. As in the 1990s, the current far-right formation in Argentina combines radical economic liberalism, social conservatism – in the framework of transnational "anti-globalism" as well as more recent "anti-woke" discourse – and political authoritarianism, which has not yet affected the institutional mechanisms of governance as the executive has been able to pass its proposed bills through congress. In contrast to the combination of economic protectionism and cultural "nativism" promoted by ethno- and neo-nationalist far right groups in Europe or North America (Chapter 1 in this volume; Edelman 2021; Kalb 2023), in Argentina, social conservatism and political authoritarianism are rooted in a free market, pro-private ownership, and meritocratic background. This is why, at the core of the "liberal libertarian" narrative, the moral glorification of the radical marketization of social relations and the behavior associated with it converge with violent attacks against "gender ideology" – which include denying gender gaps in the labor markets, calling abortion "murder," among other impugnations on feminist advances – (along with) the denial of the climate crisis. This is not a minor peculiarity. Milei's radical liberalism extends far beyond the "economic" sphere to offer an overarching utopian vision of society as a terrain of mutual competition, individual goals, and success conceived as the ability to act as a "market" agent. Rather than the protection of particular groups and communities, Milei's discourse rests on the universal and natural character of "marketized relationships," the oppressive character of collectives, and the corrupt character of their leaders (Baca 2024).

In sum, in comparing the structure of feelings forged throughout the experience of two restructuring crises in Argentina I explore how these articulations grasp and make sense of the dislocations underlying working people's daily reproduction. As I mentioned, the three main affective articulations I have identified involve: *need for change, desire for order*, and *legitimacy of sacrifice.*

CHANGES ARE "NECESSARY AND UNAVOIDABLE"

It is the winter of 2000 in San Nicolás de los Arroyos, Argentina's "Steel City." I am drinking mate with Lewis and Conrad, two steelworkers who managed to keep their jobs after restructuring. They worked in the steel mill for more than 30 years, first in subcontracted companies, then as direct employees of the steel company. Both joined the steel company in their twenties. Since then, they have been the household breadwinners, built their houses, and funded their

children's university education. When talking about the "privatization crisis" – between 1989 and 1992 – they remember the steel mill barely worked, and gossip and rumors about its future abounded. Their memories of this chaotic period are marked by hyperinflation.

> That was just the reality, that was the way things were. There was no other alternative. We couldn't take any more. We didn't know what was coming next … it was crazy. Things couldn't go on the way they were.

I repeatedly recorded these sorts of statements when talking about the "privatization crisis" with anyone employed in the former state-owned steel company and the surrounding community. I was surprised by how convinced they were about the need for change – regardless of their own experience, moral values, and political opinions about it. These feelings arose from the perceived powerlessness they felt in the face of chaos: not only hyperinflation but also a disorganized labor process contributed to a resigned trust in politicians' and technicians' claims about the need for profound change.

This feeling parallels those that emerge nowadays in conversations with different groups of workers. It is September 2023. I met Franck at a family party in one of the poorest districts of the southern Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. He is a metalworker, a father of two in his thirties. He has been working for twelve years in a small workshop manufacturing pieces for antennas of cell companies – one of the precarious links in the telecommunication global value chains. He lives with his wife and children in a small house he built with the help of his family and friends on an inherited piece of land. When we talked, in between the first round and the ballotage of the 2023 presidential election, he bitterly complained in frustration about his working conditions.

> They say they are going to take away our rights … I don't know … half of my workday is off the books, over-time is not paid and holidays or aguinaldo[4] are paid in instalments … It's a constant juggling act to manage to eat every day or buy things that your children need. It gets worse and worse. Things can't get any worse, can they? We should try something new. Things have to change, I work the whole day and can't even eat an asado.[5]

These statements show different anxieties about the necessary "change." In the 1990s, this feeling was driven by the frantic hyperinflationary rhythm and the experience was of "madness" and "disorientation" (inflation rates between 1989 and 1991 were between 2000 and 3000 percent). Instead, the "upcoming change" in the 2020s reflected a weary discontent resulting from the increasing difficulties of making a living in the context of decreasing purchasing power.

The 2023 presidential election took place in a context of accelerating inflation after a decade of GDP stagnation. Since the "Kirchnerists" had been in power for 16 years, public voices ranging from opposition politicians, renowned businessmen, disillusioned union and social leaders, to the press had been increasingly pointing to them as the main culprits for the frustration and suffering of working people. These voices directed the "need for change" against the "political style," and the "authoritarianism" entailed by the economic policies pursued by Kirchnerism. Appeals for this type of "change" had proliferated since 2008, reaching the ears of a larger audience in the following years. Moreover, they were the keystone of Mauricio Macri's discourse. However, it was not until after the Covid-19 pandemic – when disruptions seriously disorganized the dynamics of daily reproduction – that the felt "need for change" in government and politics gained massive support among working people. The type of frustration Franck expressed – the dislocation between efforts and expected rewards – had spread across different sections of the working class.

In inquiring into the sources of that frustration, I found inflation (and its consequences) to be the common "disorganizing" agent of working families' everyday lives. The feeling that "change is necessary and unavoidable" is rooted in the everyday difficulties attributed to this impersonal and abstract force seemingly beyond the control of politicians, technocrats, and other supposedly "powerful" agents. Since the financial crash in 2008–09, inflation has been a recurrent topic in the world economy. In Argentina, the government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner considered inflation as a phenomenon mainly caused by speculative price setters, and the so-called "external restriction" – a historical bottleneck between import and export incomes. Therefore, the government attempted to deal with it through "political" means, such as price controls and restrictions on currency trading, as well as with expanding social benefits aimed against poverty. The fact is that, since 2012, the number of formal waged jobs has been frozen, investment rates and the GDP are stagnant, the purchasing power of the national currency has fallen, and inflation continues to grow.

The liberal-conservative notion is the mirror image of this "political" understanding of inflation: the liberals assume inflation is the outcome of irresponsible monetary politics that distort and aim to subordinate natural "economic" dynamics to the needs of "corrupt politicians" and bloated state institutions. These views, voiced on TV shows by Javier Milei, among other liberal economists, gained popular support during the government of Alberto Fernández, when inflation accelerated, social frustration increased, and many workers viewed the government's intervention as an obstacle to achieving "a life worth living."

The centrality of inflation as a disorganizing general force is a relevant piece of ethnographic data: since it makes accurately assessing the value of money (and of all commodities) difficult, it dislocates the relationship between labor/

effort, earnings, and the everyday dynamics of reproduction. As such, it has been considered to be one of the factors underpinning the social discontent that paved the way to Javier Milei's libertarian government. Its impact is twofold: on the one hand, its immediate outcome has been regressive income redistribution, reflected by a generalized need for (more) money. On the other hand, inflation is a powerful mechanism of labor (de)valuation that has been all too familiar in Argentina. In fact, the 1990s crisis was the first time that democratic governments survived an inflationary crisis, and "restored" the economic order. Therefore, inflation is not merely about price movements and instability, but also involves the experience of the devaluation and revaluation of people's own labor, not only in relation to other commodities but also to the labor of other workers and social groups – for example, those receiving social benefits, or those earning dollars. These movements affect how people perceive their social position, and produce a sense of powerlessness and social disorientation. Ultimately, these seemingly chaotic and uncontrolled transformations connect with the restructuring of production. As such, it is at the core of the nexus between "politics" and "economy." While most national-popular and progressive governments aim to control "economic dynamics" through political mechanisms, liberal conservative forces argue that "political mechanisms" have to give way to unfettered "economic dynamics."

Arising from dislocations provoked by inflation and labor devaluation, the "necessary change" is predicted as much as expected. It articulates present frustration and resignation with optimism, hope, and trust that "things" will get better. This connects "the need for change" with two other aspects that compound the structure of feelings underlying the social consent for the radical liberal governments: on the one hand, the *restorative* character of the changes envisioned; on the other hand, the feeling that *making sacrifices* is necessary to resolve the tensions between making a living and making a life worth living.

THE DESIRE FOR (MARKET) ORDER RESTORATION

Osvald is a retired steelworker and a former union delegate, living with his wife in a neighborhood built through a public housing program managed by the union and the provincial government during the 1980s. Last year, when talking about the changes that retirement had brought about in his life, he complained about his pension, but proudly told me he was on his own, with no help from his children or "the government."

> I buy what I can afford; nobody gives me anything. You have to learn the value of things … we are not used to that here.

This sort of statement is repeated nearly word-for-word by many people – especially those interviewed in vox pops on TV news in crowded train stations whenever fares are increased. Most statements reflect pride about self-sufficiency and for their ability to do the belt-tightening that is necessary to cope with the chaotic situation.

The basic assumption is that people don't know the real value of things because it is distorted by economic policies causing inflation: either protectionist regulations that enabled obsolete (many state-owned) companies to avoid competition or by "populist" governments providing goods and services as "gifts" in exchange for electoral support. Consequently, people become "lazy" and "devious" and don't make any effort to improve themselves. Thus, alongside the feeling of "necessary upcoming changes," people express an enduring discontent stemming from the contrast between payment and gift as two antagonistic ways of obtaining goods and services. The first is connected to "truth," and "fairness"; while the latter to "fiction" or "theft."

When translated into economic policies, the idea of access to certain goods being *fictitious* simultaneously delimits the contours of *real* consumer goods along class lines. Some years ago, a former member of Macri's cabinet stated that the governments between 2003 and 2015 "made the average employee believe that his salary was enough to buy mobile phones, plasma TVs, cars, motorbikes, and holidays abroad."[6] This redefinition of what is real and what is fictitious occurs on a very counterintuitive basis: the material conditions that shaped the social reproduction dynamics for working people turned out to be founded on a lie. In a *true* society, working people are not able to enjoy such conditions of reproduction. This liberal-conservative assumption has been historically contested by working people in Argentina and crystallized in the enduring social meanings of labor rights and social justice linked to dignity. Such an underlying sentiment structure fuels a broad working-class tradition of calling on governments to redress the inherent imbalance between workers and employers. Traditionally represented by "working-class Peronism," but also by a wide range of left organizations, such traditions provide a starting point for challenging radical marketization policies.

The terrain of contestation is, to a greater or lesser extent, the "bundle of means of subsistence" that the working class needs for its social reproduction – not on the basis of social needs, but on the basis of *value*. The chaotic dynamics of market prices – allegedly the real and truthful measure of the value of things – structures daily dislocations. Right now, the connection between (non-manipulated) market prices and "the true value" of things contributes to the legitimization of deregulation policies that seriously hit working people's pockets. In this connection, (market) values are viewed through a moral and normative lens, linking truth and fairness with "the natural order of things." This is because valuation of one's own efforts in market terms is imposed even

on those trying to oppose its rationale. In an educational activity with cooperative workers, organized by a left-wing political movement, the discussion was about the decreasing purchasing power of the "plans"[7] and their pessimistic expectations for the future.[8] Then, the coordinators of one of the social "enterprises" told us they were anticipating the possible elimination of those programs and therefore started to calculate the price they should set for each hour, and the number of hours they would need to add to their workday. In doing so, they were compelled to discuss the value of their labor constrained by "market" dynamics (competitors, production costs, inputs, and so on) rather than by the political criteria of fairness and need emerging from self-management and the democratic dynamics that the political movement promoted. These activists perceived inflation and competition as the forces that narrowed the scope for the setting of both "fair" and "cheap" prices they advocate, since it required them to be willing to lose money – worsening their own reproduction conditions. Therefore, cooperative producers find it very difficult to comply with the "fair trade" principles they promote.

In times of crisis and inflation, competition among workers – whatever labor relations they are engaged in, whether they are formal or informally waged, self-employed, or cooperative – intensifies. The real value of their efforts is subjected to market pressures, so they have to compete to stay afloat. In this context, working people envision the restoration of market "normality" – that is, the stable value of their effort – at the same time as the restoration of "fair" and "natural" social relationships. As collective or solidarity-based practices seem useful to control (hyper)inflationary dynamics, stagnation, or currency devaluation, they are considered obstacles to the "true" valuation of one's own efforts. Therefore, restoration of the (believed) smooth market harmony involves individualization, and a negative assessment of collective organization and community practices.

In advocating for radical marketization, Menem and Milei proposed a path that promises private fulfillment, well-being, and happiness. In doing so, Milei asserts private property and market relationships as natural attributes of the human condition. In his narrative, private property and capitalism are more than part of a stable social order: they are the natural attributes that must not be deviated from or neglected by politics. Neoliberal and libertarian politics have intensified this claim and its centrality for social order. In claiming that state regulations create a social fiction that devalues some peoples' efforts in favor of "lazy" groups, Milei argues that their removal is necessary to restore the "true" value of individual effort. Therefore, the president sets a viable path to overcome the tensions between *making a living* and *making a life worth living*, envisioned as an act of restoring the real value of effort – even if it involves authoritarian measures. Again, the differentiation between politics and the

economy is blurred: political authoritarianism is presented as the way to restore market order, the alleged locus of freedom.

MAKING A LIFE WORTH LIVING: ENDURING SACRIFICE

Both Milei's and Menem's governments asked the population to *make sacrifices* to remedy a terminal national crisis. When he took office, Milei asserted that it would "take two years of sacrifice to leave behind decline and embark on the road to prosperity." On Christmas Day 2023, the minister of economy posted a message on X, thanking the population for their sacrifice and support for austerity measures. By "sacrifice" he referred to the impact on people's pockets of the dramatic devaluation of the Argentine peso, the deregulation of prices for basic goods, and the cutting of food assistance to community organizations. These public messages echoed a common assumption among working people: the need for sacrifice, understood as a period of suffering before the achievement of certain goals – in this case, the definitive solution to historical economic problems: the end of suffering provoked by 70 years of populism, the end of robbery and corruption by the "caste," and so on. While some analysts argued that working people wouldn't consent to making a sacrifice to halt inflation, the fact is that the government met a broad – although not enthusiastic – support for the austerity measures it implemented. Far from being alien to working people, including myself, the notion and rationale of sacrifice lie at the heart of narratives connecting "making a living" with "making a life worth living." Ethnographic data shed light on sacrifice as a persistent moment in the effort-reward equation.[9] Among workers and their families, the meaning of sacrifice is quite precise: the renunciation of immediate pleasure, well-being, and fun to allow for future material, social, and affective fulfillment.[10]

When the steelworkers and their families gave me an account of their life stories, they commonly picked out periods such as building or buying their own house, earning more money (or saving it) to accomplish other goals (holidays, children's education or special medical treatments, and so on) as times of sacrifice. For steelworkers' families, sacrifice also involves the embodied consequences of work – chronic kidney diseases, amputated fingers, permanent heart damage, and so on – as well as the affective and social ones derived from a 24/7 productive process. Rudolf, a former mechanical engineer remembered that the "sacrifice" entailed working overtime in the steel mill on some days, while on other days it meant learning to construct walls.

> I used to work double shift for two weeks to buy building materials. The next fortnight, I built my house with the help of my brother and some colleagues. Of course, then I had to help them build their houses too. I got my house in this way … we built the whole neighborhood … I also worked double shifts

> to buy the stove or the refrigerator … Mind you, I missed my children's birthdays, Christmas dinners, or seeing them at school … I missed a lot of things … That's the sacrifice you make for your family.

The concrete practices of "sacrifice" change from generation to generation and between different labor situations. They usually involve more and harder work affecting both production and reproduction dynamics, and demand commitment from all the members of the family. Many workers have mentioned the "loss of social life" that sacrifice entails, not just in relation to leisure time but also their involvement in "public" organizations, such as clubs, neighborhood associations, or the union.

Yesterday and today, making sacrifices remains a household decision, sustained by the desire for progress and success through personal efforts. Sacrifice is inherent to the experience of "ascendant social mobility" mainly referred to as a private/domestic process. "Rewards" are related to that social sphere: raising a family, having a good time (*pasarla bien*), and improving living conditions. In talking about the "ends" that they believe should be achieved through their own effort, most working families mention owning a house, buying a car, being able to provide for their children, and so on. The basic assumption is that your effort and your sacrifice should enable you to "do the things you like to do: eat an asado, go on holidays, buy something you like, for instance, a motorcycle or a car" – as Marty, an agribusiness worker in his late twenties, responded to the question "what do you mean by having a good time?" In a similar vein, Karen, the first woman working as an engineering technician in a global agro-industrial firm and the leader of the union's gender committee, stated that she applied for a job in this firm because she wanted to increase her household income so she could "live more comfortably, not scrambling to pay bills, and enjoy holidays with my daughter and my husband." Among industrial workers' families, sacrifice is embedded in the moral obligation of breadwinners and in the "household" as the realm that makes sense of the effort of making a living.

The consolidation of neoliberal hegemony reconfigured the former effort-reward equation as different aspects of the social reproduction of working people – such as healthcare, pension funds, and public services – were commodified and privatized, and varied ways of "making a living" detached from social welfare and collective institutions (from self-employment to informal waged labor, and multiple combinations) have proliferated.[11] Over the last few years, the effort-reward equation has been cracking under the pressure of steady stagnation, public spending cutbacks, decreasing purchasing power, and increasing uncertainty and precariousness. Cooperative, self-employed, and waged (formal and precarious) workers describe the kind of tensions between making a living and making a life worth living – that Franck summarizes as the frustration of working the whole day and not being able to eat an *asado* –

through feelings like frustration and hopelessness. In the reconfiguration of the effort-reward equation, the experience is that their labor is devalued. These sorts of tensions underlie an all-encompassing valuation of daily lives, visions of the future, and the possible paths to well-being. In this context, the moral justification of self-sufficiency in the private sphere is reinforced.

The governments of Menem and Milei promised the restoration of the effort-reward equation after a period of collective sacrifice marked by austerity policies. Far from rejecting this appeal as unfair and manipulative, working people in Argentina feel it is an understandable appeal for collective dispositions required in order to restore the real value of their efforts. Sacrifice is at the same time an affective willingness to support change, and the necessary moral attitude to restore the failed effort-reward equation. It offers the tantalizing promise of overcoming the tensions between making a living and making a life worth living as a distinctive aspect of crises.

CONCLUSION: AUTHORITARIANISM AND SACRIFICE IN THE DISORGANIZATION OF THE WORKING CLASS

The narrative comparing the "hyperinflationary" or "privatization" crisis at the beginning of the 1990s with the current crisis has the purpose of shedding light on the common *structure of feelings* susceptible to being channeled toward radical right sensibilities that underlie working people's social experience of the last two restructuring crises in Argentina. I argue that the structures of feeling connecting the desire for a change that enables the restoration of the (market) social order with personal (and collective) sacrifices are the emotional and affective dimensions of unsolved tensions between *making a living* and *making a life worth living* that intensify over the course of restructuring crises. The assumption is that the disarticulation of the effort-reward equation throughout "restructuring crises" forms the background of the historical correlation between "crises" and popular consent to radical right-wing interventions.

During crises, the ability of working people to address their own reproduction is weakened, which produces a daily experience of powerlessness and devaluation. The moral connection between (the value of) daily effort and pride in sacrifice and self-sufficiency reinforces the sense of empowerment through individualistic behavior. In both contexts, far-right political sensibilities have been able to articulate these feelings with the vision of a future world organized according to the "natural" laws of humankind: private property, and full marketization.

Notwithstanding these commonalities, the historical development of both crises presents meaningful differences. While consent for radical neoliberal reforms by the Peronist Carlos Menem was rooted in *monetary violence* (Bonnet 2008; Piva 2012),[12] the 2020s consensus rests on the tensions accu-

mulated since 2011, and on the labor dislocations that occurred at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kasmir and Gill 2022). In the first case, dislocations arose from the "economic" sphere, while nowadays they seem rooted in the failure of "politics" to control and drive "economic" forces. This difference might weaken this comparison. After all, the advent of neoliberal globalization – that involved the transition to democratic regimes in Latin America, the end of the apartheid in South Africa, and above all, the collapse of the Soviet Union – is vaunted as the era of "liberal democratic regimes." Still, the strong resemblances between both "structures of feelings" are useful insights to reflect on the swinging dynamics between political authoritarianism and economic compulsion underlying the experience of restructuring crises by working people.

In highlighting inflation as a mechanism of class struggle and labor devaluation in Argentina, I mean to call attention to the relevance of the *economic dimension of power* (Bonefeld 2023; Mau 2023) as a disorganizing force acting on the working class. During the crisis of the 1990s, hyperinflation paved the way for the "passive" consent for a sweeping program of reforms, and the further reconfiguration of the state. The idea of "passive" consent doesn't mean "empty" or "de-ideologized" consent but rather points out that the "desire for change" was articulated through monetary discipline, which in turn involved the complete reshaping of the effort-reward equation, and of the working class.[13] The profound reconfiguration of the national productive structure and of the working class following the hyperinflationary crisis unfolded through the convergence between the passive consensus produced by monetary violence, and the expansion of pro-market common sense. Working people's *sacrifice* – experienced through the "economic" effects of mass layoffs, rising unemployment, the commodification of social benefits, and frozen wages – was the price of Argentina "becoming part of the world."

Nowadays, the market-driven restoration of the social order remains a political issue. The "desire for order" is articulated through illiberal conservatism: public policies oriented toward gender equity or other social goals are seen as diverting the "natural" relationships between "effort" and "rewards." The libertarian "war" rhetoric connects the felt need for change with confrontation and violence, projecting the frustration and resentment arising from uncontrolled economic forces, onto the social and cultural terrain.

In sum, by placing the advance of the far right in the broader dynamics of "restructuring crises" our attention is redirected to the all-encompassing pressures, and tensions, dislocating working people's daily lives. In the case of Argentina, (hyper)inflation reflects the economic dimension of this reconfiguration, as it has been a recurrent way to devalue labor, enabling "conservative consent" to gain social momentum and fueling the political, social, and cultural disorganization of the broad working class.

Reversing this disorganizing dynamic depends on resistance to and rejection of moral conservatism and authoritarianism *and* of economic compulsion, the two dimensions of labor devaluation (Kalb 2023). Eroding the consent for far-right politics depends on our ability to envision "lives worth living" on a renewed basis. The long-lasting legacy of egalitarian struggles in Argentina – represented by *peronismo obrero* and left-wing political and ideological traditions – fuels the (for now) disorganized and disarticulated unrest.

NOTES

1. Acknowledgement: to Suzanna Wylie, whose editorial advice and sharp political observations have considerably improved this chapter.
2. The three groups of workers, their families and communities reflect the main sections of labor in two historical contexts. Both groups of industrial workers were at the heart of strategic production networks in different accumulation cycles. While the state-owned steel mill was the star of import substitution until the 1990s, the edible oil plants are the last link of the agro-export corporations since the commodity "boom" at the turn of the twenty-first century. The former represents the industrial working class that went through neoliberal globalization, while the latter is a section of the "agrobusiness proletariat" that emerged from the convergent dynamics of former "manufacture" and "agricultural" jobs. In small agrarian towns throughout the *pampa* – the core zone of oilseed crops – permanent jobs are concentrated in the heart of agricultural and industrial labor processes, while temporary harvesting or seed drilling jobs alternate with temporary jobs in the mills. Cooperative workers are a section of labor formed within the social struggle against the consequences of neoliberal restructuring. They reflect the shift in surplus population politics – unemployed organizations turned into "popular entrepreneurs" in poor neighborhoods.
3. The reconfiguration of the capital-labor relationship is, allegedly, the core of restructuring crises. Susana Narotzky (2022) pointed out the current reconfiguration of "necessary labour," while Moishe Postone (1993) identified the "reshaping of the labour-hour." Other scholars pay attention to the reconfiguration of labor processes and the division of labor – both technical and social – as the outcome of restructuring crises.
4. The *aguinaldo*, also known as the "13th wage" amounts to an extra monthly wage. Its payment, and calculation are established by legal provisions. It is received by formal waged workers.
5. *Asado* (barbecue) is a popular meal (consisting of meat cooked on a barbecue) in Argentina, traditionally cooked by men at gatherings of family, colleagues, comrades, and friends. "To eat an *asado*" means to be able to gather beloved people around a table, prepare the barbecue for them, and have a good time together. People eat *asado* to celebrate good news (a birth, a new job, a new house, wedding anniversaries, and so on). It condenses popular ideals of masculinity.

6. www.infobae.com/2016/05/27/1814472-gonzalez-fraga-le-hicieron-creer-un-empleado-medio-que-podia-comprarse-celulares-e-irse-al-exterior/ (accessed November 14, 2025).
7. "Plans" is the popular term to refer to the government cash-transfer programs providing compensation for labor in either "productive" or "community" projects.
8. Significantly, they were anticipating this possibility *before* the presidential elections took place.
9. The effort-reward equation is a concept from the field of occupational health. It refers to the perceived relationship between demands and satisfaction at work, and is used to signal "psychical suffering" as well as a set of practices of "effort bargaining" impacting the labor process on a daily basis. Despite its "behaviorist" bias, I find the term useful to indicate the valuation rationality underlying material, affective, and moral connections between the activities providing earnings and the structuring of daily lives.
10. A common thread of these social meanings detaches sacrifice from social mobility, and connects it to a natural condition of working people, compelled to hard work and deprived of the pleasures and joys the rich enjoy. There is also a thread of social meanings connecting sacrifice to collective goals (such as "social emancipation," "socialist revolution," "working-class dignity," or "social justice"). Both threads can be traced in popular songs and literature, or in political and activist narratives. Nevertheless, they are not the dominant components of the notion of sacrifice I have recorded.
11. The Fiscal Agency created two employment/tax categories: "monotributo" and "monotributo social" (the latter in 2007) to grant healthcare and pensions to workers who are self-employed, non-registered, or members of cooperatives and "productive projects" led by organizations of former unemployed workers. Workers must register and pay a monthly contribution according to their incomes. Many employers – even the governments – take advantage of them, compelling workers to register as "service suppliers."
12. Bonnet and Piva point out that hyperinflationary violence relates to the connections between the role of money and the dynamics of reproduction of the society as a whole – and of the working people as part of it. They draw on Marx's theory of money as a specific social relation of abstraction (Brunhoff 1973) to describe the consequences of inflation and hyperinflation in terms of the disarticulation of value relationships underlying social reproduction. The main difference between these two moments is that in the latter, the capitalist reproduction dynamic is fully disarticulated, and the whole social reproduction is under threat (Bonnet 2008: 190).
13. Three general trends shaping working people's reproduction since the 1990s reveal the devaluation of labor entailed by neoliberal hegemony: first, the increasing number of "breadwinners"/average incomes needed for household reproduction (Kennedy and Aguila 2021); second, the multiple ways of making a living including the creation of cooperative and community "businesses" based on public policies, the expansion of self-employment, and the growing share of "off the books" jobs; third, the role that debt and credit play in the reproduction of working people's

households, regardless of the labor relations they are involved in (Saiag 2020; Wilkis 2021).

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11

Fascism USA: Class and Identity Politics in the Age of Trump

Marc Edelman

It is an honor and a thrill to comment on Walden Bello's brilliant chapter on fascism. I have long learned from Bello's work, and I continue to do so with his provocative chapter in this collection. Following his lead, I'll say a few personal words about growing up in the shadow of fascism and then address the worrisome contemporary situation in my own country, the USA. Trump's triumph in the 2024 presidential contest represents the consolidation of an oligarchical authoritarian project, backed by a multi-class and (surprisingly, for some) multi-racial electorate. It brought intensified state and freelance attacks on immigrants, labor unions, women, LGBTQ+ people, journalists, civil servants, assorted "political enemies," and other groups that the MAGA movement targets. It is institutionalizing authoritarian governance structures in ways that will be exceedingly difficult to undo.

Bello's chapter highlights the volatility of the middle strata in the rise of fascism and of counterrevolution. The class character of Trump's 2024 electoral coalition and the reasons for its victory are complex, though following November 5 media pundits and remorseful Democrats never tired in issuing monocausal pseudo-explanations. Inflation and incumbency are surely important, but so is the rise of a formidable far-right media apparatus and a widespread hatred of tone-deaf elites and high-profile celebrities associated with the status quo and the Democratic Party and their perceived disrespect for Trump supporters. In the discussion below, I unpack some of these forces. I also challenge both the "middle-class narrative" and the "working-class narrative" that are common tropes in US political discourse. I am less interested in examining the horrors of the first Trump administration. The mainstreaming of the far right that occurred then – along with the Muslim ban, the squalid camps for migrant children, the cozying up to authoritarians, the bungled response to COVID-19, the nonstop threats, insults and Big Lies, the "racial hygiene" rhetoric, and the violent January 6, 2021, coup – are all well documented elsewhere and are clear indicators of Trump's fascist proclivities. Trump 2.0 is unfolding at a rapid clip as I write and, like Trump 1.0, would require a separate and longer chapter. The main question I raise in the conclusion is whether the language of "fascism" still has resonance in the historically amnesiac atmosphere of today's USA.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROLEGOMENON

I was born seven years after the war in Europe ended, and during my childhood my father was still processing the combat traumas of his early adulthood. Unlike many American veterans who buried their wartime experiences in stoic silence, my father frequently told my brother and me stories about the Second World War. We heard how, as his unit fought its way east through Germany, they liberated slave labor camps in many of the towns. These were not the well-known giant death camps, but fenced barracks attached to large and small factories, peopled by emaciated survivors, and littered with the bodies of those who didn't survive. His younger brother at age 19 was in the Battle of the Bulge and later participated in the liberation of Buchenwald. His older brother's wife lost numerous family members in the Holocaust. We didn't see them much – they were more working class and religiously observant than my upwardly mobile, militantly atheist parents – but we knew about my aunt's tragedy, even if we never spoke about it. Occasionally, my mother and her sister would converse in hushed tones about their cousin and childhood playmate, Private Danny Green, who at age 20 went missing in action when his patrol boat capsized in the Roer River as he returned from a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines in the first days of the Battle of the Bulge; several years later, the army determined that his remains were "unrecoverable" (Salvador 1949). In the late 1950s, my grandmother visited Poland to try and find out what had happened to her relatives who had never left. There was no trace of the tiny settlement near Zielen (in Plock Guberniya) where she was born or of the people who lived there. My father's hatred of fascists remained so intense that he sometimes remarked that he wished he had been five years older so he could have joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and fought against Franco – and Hitler and Mussolini – in the Spanish Civil War. And my mother, whose lingering anxiety about McCarthy-era repression made her tight-lipped about her youthful radicalism, once let slip that as a teenager she collected funds for the Spanish Republic on the streets of New York. All of which is to say that I knew what Nazism and fascism were at a very tender age.

Chile also figured in my education about fascism, so Bello's chapter has special meaning for me. In 1972, I dropped out of the University of Chicago and hitched a ride to Mexico City, with a vague plan of going overland and working in Allende's Chile. With some meager savings from summers of construction labor, I made it as far south as the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca and then, with money fast running out and afflicted with various tropical diseases, had enough sense to turn around and head north and eventually home. Travelers I met coming from Chile warned against going to a situation that they described as chaotic and dangerous. The one contact I had there was an American I had met at the Chicago Area Group on Latin America (CAGLA), where I had vol-

unteered, mainly out of interest, but also to fulfill the requirements of a course I was taking with Bill Zimmerman, a radical sociologist at the University of Chicago. I'm not a believer in destiny, but it's almost certainly a good thing that I never made it to Chile to reconnect with my acquaintance Frank Teruggi, who had been doing international work for the MIR, a far-left group that backed farm and factory occupations and hoped to push Allende's Popular Unity coalition in a more radical direction. Frank was one of two US citizens that the Pinochet fascists murdered shortly after the 1973 coup. I was militant, brash, and impulsive and would have liked nothing better than to translate MIR communiqués into English or otherwise spread the word. That would not have ended well.

TRUMP'S RISE

Native New Yorkers like me watched Trump's rise with disgust and incredulity. We knew him as a poseur and charlatan decades before the rest of the country. I first heard of him in the mid-1970s when a professor of mine who lived in a middle-income Mitchell-Lama apartment building near Lincoln Center lamented that there was an upstart developer who was planning giant luxury towers that would block his view of the Hudson River. Folksinger Woody Guthrie, who resided in one of the "whites only" apartments that Trump's father built in outlying boroughs for working- and lower-middle-class New Yorkers, memorialized "Old Man Trump" in a scathing ballad, written in 1954. Fred Trump illegally passed much of his wealth to his progeny, in one case by paying inflated invoices from "All County Building Supply & Maintenance," a company Donny and siblings founded to supply the Old Man's housing complexes with intentionally overpriced stoves, refrigerators, and cleaning products (Barstow et al. 2018). When Donny struck out on his own, he centered his "development" activities on the Manhattan luxury market and aspired to join the borough's elite, but his garish design tastes and boorish behavior limited his access to the old wealth, high society crowd. Several analyses point to his rejection by the more refined upper-crust Manhattanites as a central aspect of his wounded narcissism and sociopathy (Lee 2019; Nichols 2023; Spiers 2024; Trump 2020: 59, 88).

I was appalled by Trump ever since he descended the Trump Tower escalator and launched his 2016 presidential campaign with a racist, anti-immigrant tirade that broke with all norms of mainstream US political discourse. I regret that I didn't take him seriously then and that I reassured colleagues abroad that he probably didn't have much chance of becoming president. My efforts to understand Trumpism began in earnest in 2017 when a small group of comrades/colleagues from the UK, South Africa, the Philippines, the USA, and elsewhere began to launch an international network to study and combat authoritarian

populism, especially in rural zones. We called it the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI). In one early discussion – after reviewing the rogues gallery of Duterte, Orbán, Erdoğan, Modi, Bolsonaro, and Trump – a colleague turned to me, one of two Americans in the group, and remarked, "Why don't you study your own damn country for once?" A student of Latin America and transnational activism for most of my career, I took up the challenge and authored a few blog pieces and articles that tried to make sense of the emerging threat (Edelman 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021; Roman-Alcalá et al. 2021).

As the ERPI gathered steam, my family and I moved out of New York City to Trump Country, first a nearby rural county in Pennsylvania and more recently a much more rural zone of upstate New York. Part of this was motivated by a modest process of late-career embourgeoisement and acquiring a cabin next to a lake rimmed by forests, but two months later the Covid-19 lockdown occurred and the move to the countryside became permanent, though punctuated by forays into the city. Living in Pike County, Pennsylvania, I had many conversations with Trumpist neighbors. Mostly, they talked about how the economy was better under Trump, which wasn't accurate, but occasionally I had to endure unapologetic racism, antisemitism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-immigrant hatred, and demented conspiracy rants. This did not mean that I gave up on understanding them, only that I increasingly sought to do so indirectly, with less adversarial face-to-face contact, prioritizing my family's safety, and keeping my head down in a remote area where everybody has lots of firearms. So, my discussion below is interspersed with ethnographic vignettes, but unfortunately of the kind with which anthropologists are most enamored, that is, anecdotal, unsystematic, and with a small N.

TRUMP'S RETURN

On November 5, 2024, Donald Trump triumphed in the US presidential election – the first time a Republican had won the popular vote in 20 years and only the second time since 1988.[1] Republicans captured slim majorities in the Senate and the House of Representatives, permitting the administration to enact much of its legislative agenda. Trump received 49.8 percent of the popular vote – a plurality, but not a majority – to Kamala Harris' 48.3 percent, the fifth smallest edge of a winning candidate since 1960. His small margins in the seven "battleground" states tipped the Electoral College in his favor (Jacobson 2024). Three million more people voted for Trump in 2024 than in 2020 and 6 million fewer voted for Kamala Harris in 2024 than had voted for Joe Biden in 2020. The outcome reflected a modest move in Trump's direction and a larger desertion of Harris and the Democrats.

Following the election, Democratic politicians and the punditry went into overdrive trying to explain what some termed a massive "realignment" in

which the Republicans supposedly had become the party of the "working class" and the Democrats the party of the "college educated." While there were some notable changes in the composition of the electorate, data suggest that this was less a genuine "realignment" than a combination of minor swings that taken together reflected a significant rejection of the status quo. The small shifts in Trump's direction among different constituencies likely indicate distress among "low information" voters, white and non-white, as well as the bankruptcy of the Democrats' consultant- and "dark money"-driven strategy of foregrounding dissident Republican and flashy celebrity endorsements, spending on TV ads to the exclusion of other media, courting chimerical Republican "crossover" voters, and throwing small bones to different racial, gender, generational, and regional identity groups.

There is no one reason for the Trump vote. Some voters were surely motivated by misogyny, racism, anti-immigrant hatred, far-right ideologies, Christian nationalism, Zionism, anti-Zionism and the Gaza genocide, "owning the libs," or promises of lower taxes and less regulation. An estimated 13 percent of Trump supporters had previously voted at least once – and often twice – for Barack Obama, the first African American president. In 2024, abortion rights referendums won in seven (out of ten) states, including some that Trump carried. Trump received surprising support in congressional districts that elected high-profile left-wing Democrats, such as Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, suggesting significant anti-systemic leanings (Heer 2025).

Incumbency and inflation were key factors that sunk Kamala Harris' presidential campaign.[2] Trump's victory was part of a near-total worldwide rout of incumbents in the wake of pandemic-induced inflation (Beauchamp 2024). The exceptions to the trend are revealing – places like Mexico, Turkey, and Hungary – lite or full-blown authoritarian systems where, as Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way put it 15 years ago, incumbents enjoy outsized advantages "in the form of patronage jobs, pork-barrel spending, clientelist social policies, and privileged access to media and finance" (2010: 24–5).

It is essential to understand the emotional and political impact of higher prices in relation to (1) the subjective experience of inflation-related angst, which the right-wing media relentlessly exacerbated; (2) the high levels of indebtedness of low-, middle-, and upper-middle-income households; and (3) the end of temporary, pandemic-era safety net measures. In the lead-up to the 2024 election, inflation fell to an annual rate of 2.1 percent, very near the Federal Reserve's target of 2.0 percent. But over the preceding five years, rents rose 19 percent and food prices skyrocketed 28 percent, reaching a 41-year high in 2022 (Phaneuf 2024; Taylor 2024) (see Figure 11.1). The high price of eggs became an emblematic talking point for conservative media and politicians and among everyday shoppers in supermarket aisles. Gasoline prices fell sharply during the

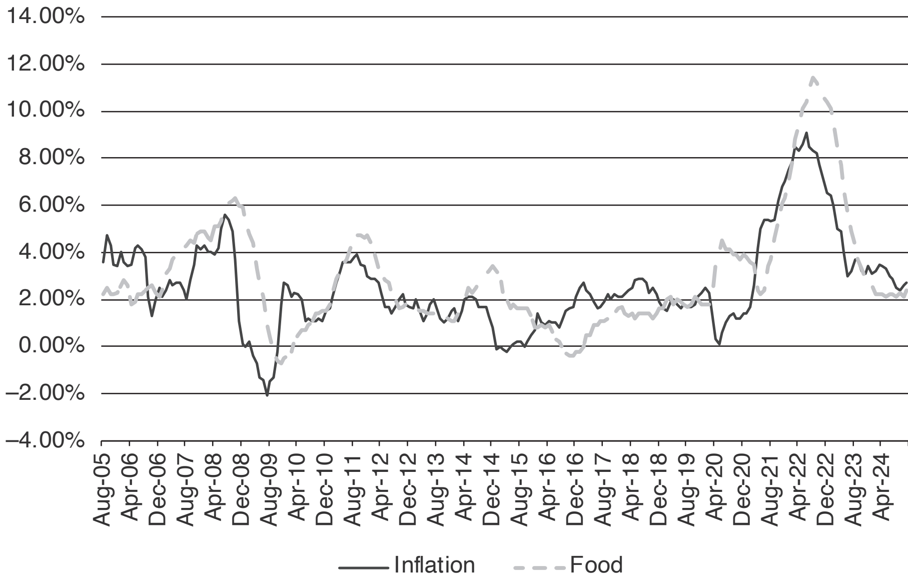

Figure 11.1 Overall inflation and food prices, 2005–24
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Covid-19 lockdowns because nobody was driving anywhere, but they spiked in 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, straining household budgets in a society where most people use automobiles to commute.

In the last year of the Biden administration, the macroeconomic health of the US economy appeared extraordinary. The country had weathered pandemic-era disruptions while bringing inflation and unemployment down to levels not seen in years. Reports pointed to GDP growth higher than in other developed countries and real wage growth that was highest among the lowest income deciles (Lowrey 2024). Jennifer Harris, the administration's architect of "Bidenomics," declared in a since-deleted July tweet that

> The US economy is currently near perfect. As we navigate the hardest political moment for dems in my lifetime, just a PSA to not forget that this Administration has delivered a new brand of economics. It is working wonders, and whatever happens, it shouldn't go anywhere. (Quoted in Barker 2024)[3]

Democratic politicians' celebratory tone, combined with the liberal punditry's hectoring directed at the benighted masses who obstinately refused to recognize how "perfect" the economy was, did not sit well with shoppers pacing in front of the supermarket egg case. Right-wing media – cable TV, talk radio, blogs, YouTube videos, and "manosphere" podcasts, as well as Trump's

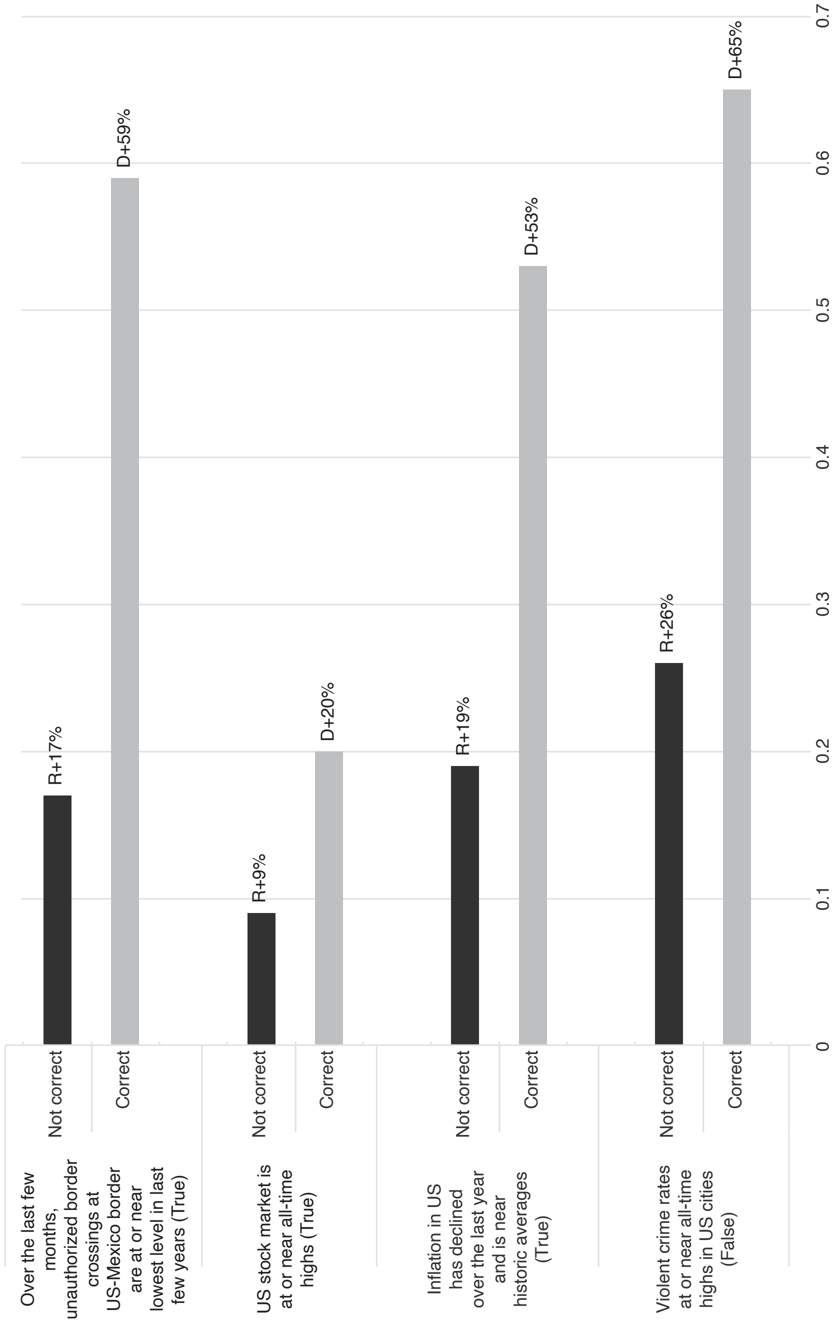

Figure 11.2 Misinformed views on immigration, crime, economy correlated with ballot choice

Source: Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted October 11–13, 2024. Americans 18+, N = 938.

"Truth Social," Elon Musk's "X," and a plethora of Telegram, Discord, and similar channels – amplified inflation anxiety and castigated every clueless, tone-deaf declaration about the wonderful economy from Democratic leaders or liberal pundits. The right-wing media – with its histrionic personalities, clever memes, bald-faced lies, and half-truths – now systematically misinforms voters and "sets the news agenda in" the USA (see Figure 11.2). The legacy (erstwhile mainstream) media – *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the traditional TV channels (ABC, CBS, and NBC) no longer do this (Green 2024; Stocking et al. 2024; Tomasky 2024b; West 2024). In terms of media consumption, Americans are deeply siloed, with 21 percent of Trump supporters and 70 percent of Biden (and presumably Harris) supporters getting news from newspapers (Waldman 2024). It's not just that the right-wing media ecosystem is bigger (see Figure 11.3), but as Michael Tomasky points out, "it speaks with one voice." Its content is not "understood as one side's view of things. It's simply 'the news.' This is what people – white people, chiefly – watch in about two-thirds of the country" (Tomasky 2024b). Affluent, highly educated, urban liberals in the legacy media bubble are oblivious to the news diets of the rest of the country and tend to assume that positive macroeconomic indicators reflect or ought to reflect people's subjective experience (e.g., Krugman 2024).

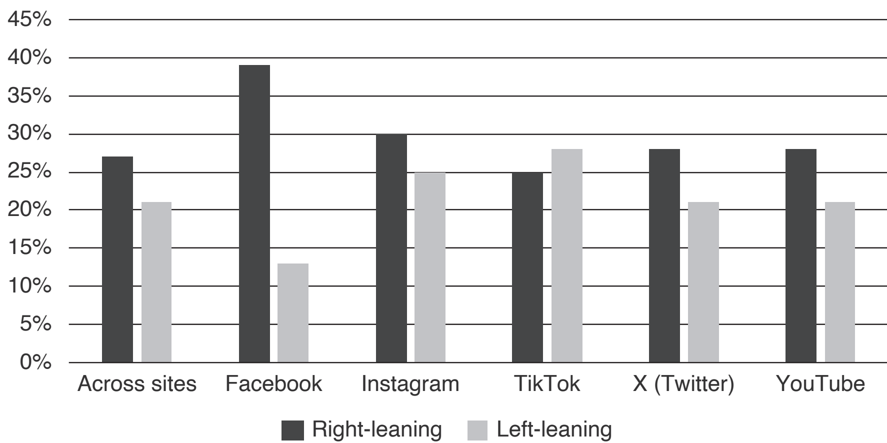

Figure 11.3 Social media news influencers who lean right and left

Source: Pew Research Center.

The successful penetration of the right-wing media goes hand in hand with the systematic defunding and undermining of public education since the 1970s (Brown 2024) and the Federal Communications Commission's 1987 repeal of its "fairness doctrine," which required holders of broadcast licenses to discuss issues of public concern on the air and to offer differing views. It does not help

that many US adults have very low literacy levels (Haynes 2024; OECD 2024). Authoritarian movements and conservatives more broadly, as Jason Stanley (2024) emphasizes, have long sought to destroy public education, which they view as a redoubt of combative unionism, egalitarianism, multiculturalism and inconvenient historical memory, as well as a potential or actual obstacle to their influence and power.

Political divisions over inflation arose not only from siloing in distinct media bubbles but also from distinct social class positions. The highly indebted household suffers when rates on credit card loans and variable mortgages soar. An affluent household with cash in interest-bearing savings accounts or the bond market benefits in a high-rate environment. But by the summer of 2023, the pace at which Americans were saving plummeted to the lows reached during the mid-2000s (Taylor 2024). Consumer spending now accounts for 70 percent of GDP (Mena 2024) and some 11 percent of this consumption – and probably more in lower-income deciles – relies on debt (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2024). Every category of consumer debt except student loans grew in 2022–23, with high-interest credit card balances rising the most at 17.4 percent (Experian 2024).

"Increasingly," as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor notes, "the fragility of working-class life is held together with unsustainable levels of personal debt" (2024). Credit card debt, medical debt, car loans, education debt, and housing debt provoke deep anxieties for people who must juggle competing exigencies and are painfully aware of their economic precarity. The better-off are not necessarily immune to this either, since small business debt, combined with competition from online providers and brick-and-mortar chain stores, frequently heightens stress levels among the volatile middle sectors. Economic anxiety, as I have noted elsewhere and discuss briefly in the conclusion below, is an important predictor of acceptance of authoritarianism and hatred of stigmatized Others (Edelman 2021, 2025). Trump's 2024 campaign – with its promises of "retribution" against enemies and its racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-trans rhetoric – played into this dynamic. As Joel Suarez observes, "The post-pandemic recovery was 'a story of two cohorts.'"

> One group owes money and has been crushed by high interest rates; the other owns assets and has never been better off financially. For the latter, inflation was a nuisance at worst; it was hard to believe anything was fundamentally wrong. (Suarez 2024)

Suarez underlines that the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes, intended to tame inflation, "might not have spurred mass unemployment, but they helped crush low-wage workers nonetheless" by jacking up payments on accumulated credit card debt, variable rate mortgages, and other loans. Not surprisingly,

credit card delinquency rates surged during the Biden years (Lowrey 2024). Importantly, the seemingly favorable 2023–24 annual inflation rate decline was misleading for another reason: in 1983, the Bureau of Labor Statistics removed mortgage interest rates from the price indices and credit card interest rates are not in these indices either (Tankus 2024).

The third reason why "the economy under Biden looked good but felt bad" (Lowrey 2024), in addition to right-wing media spin and household debt burdens, has to do with the end of pandemic-era safety net measures (Tankus 2024). During and after the Covid-19 lockdowns, households received "economic impact" or stimulus payments and extended and supplemental unemployment insurance. The SNAP (food stamp) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) nutrition programs provided extra benefits. The expanded child tax credit lifted tens of millions of children out of poverty. Small and large businesses benefited from Paycheck Protection Program loans, many of which were eventually forgiven. These and other supports buoyed low- and middle-income families in a time of severe crisis (see Figure 11.4). But as Nathan Tankus (2024) observed,

> The expiration of these numerous programs ripped away the insulation from the post-pandemic labor market, which Americans had just in time for energy, food and rent increases to significantly worsen the situation, especially for the bottom 50 percent of the labor market.

The "vibe-cession" also reflected the quotidian and pervasive nature of economic predation in US society. When people every day receive texts and emails seeking to rip them off, when they are in frequent disputes with health insurance companies and large corporations' "customer service" hotlines, when employer wage theft is at shocking levels (Isser 2023), and when – as small contractors – clients stiff them and refuse to pay, exhaustion and cynicism are logical outcomes. The resulting sense of unfairness and powerlessness provides an entrée for a movement or a demagogue that promises to make everything "great again."

Trump's return is the culmination of a decades-long process in which conservative and corporate donors, activists and strategists built institutions and inserted themselves in local-level governance and civil society groups – school boards, county election boards, town councils, churches, student organizations, and so on – in an almost Gramscian "war of position" aimed at cementing far-right political and cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1972; Hardisty 1999). Right-wing philanthropists lavished copious core budgetary funding on the Federalist Society, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and myriad smaller lobbies and "think tanks," while progressive funders emphasized more modest, short-term project-based support for their partners,

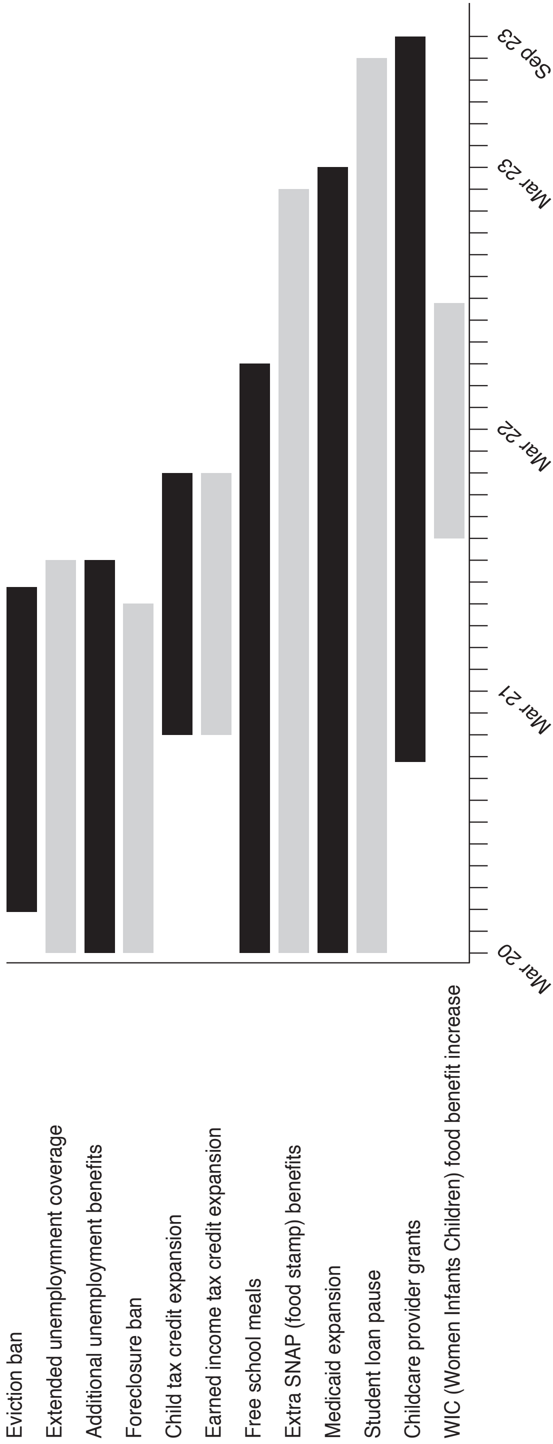

Figure 11.4 Duration of pandemic-era anti-poverty measures, March 2020–September 2023

Source: Based on Tankus (2024) and additional data.

none of which attained similar influence or a comparable degree of economic security (Covington 2005). The 2024 electoral campaign was, in effect, waged in these spaces and in the right-wing media bubble over at least the preceding three decades. The Democrats' chickens came home to roost some 30 years after President Bill Clinton deregulated banking, "reformed" cash assistance, signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, and guided the USA into the World Trade Organization. This mirrors long-term rightward popular reactions elsewhere, especially in Europe, to social democrats' embrace of neo-liberalism and the consequent rise of precarity and loss of social protections (see Scheiring and Csathó's chapter in this volume). As Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders remarked after the 2024 presidential election, "It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working-class people would find that the working class has abandoned them" (Heer 2024).

CLASS ANALYSIS AND THE MIDDLE SECTORS

One of Bello's signal contributions to the theorization of fascism is his emphasis on the *volatility* of the middle sectors that often constitute the core support of fascist movements, regimes, and demagogues. Many others of varying stripes (Dimitroff 1935; Lipset 1960; Reich 1993; Trotsky 1944) have also pointed to the "petty-bourgeois masses" or the "middle class" as key elements of the fascist base. Few, however, emphasize sufficiently their political fluidity and the way they in one moment back democratization and in the next embrace authoritarianism. In *Counterrevolution*, Bello points out that the foot soldiers of Mussolini's movement came from "the déclassé middle class" and its mass base included "professionals, tradespeople, students, rich peasants, demobilized soldiers, [and] government personnel" (Bello 2019: 13, 19). Similarly, in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, the bloodbath that accompanied Suharto's rise to power had support from "much of the middle class" (Bello 2019: 31). In Chile in the early 1970s, the middle classes harbored "deep-seated fears … that the gains of workers and the lower classes would come at their expense" (Bello 2019: 41). The Thai and Philippine middle classes, which went from being pro-democratization to pro-reaction, epitomize this sector's volatility (Bello 2019: 64, 106, 143).

Mussolini (1935) penned a soporific 300-page tome on fascist doctrine and institutions, but he acknowledged that the ideology whose name he coined was less about any set of coherent ideas than about seizing and maintaining power through redemptive, spectacular violence, heroic action, and force of will. Mussolini's glorification of the corporate state might be anathema to today's wannabe fascists, who frequently mix extreme economic liberalism with authoritarian governance and kleptocracy (Hendrikse 2018). But it also serves as a reminder that recent analyses that construct taxonomies of contemporary

fascism in relation to classic tracts or relatively remote historical contexts are often barking up the wrong tree.

In the USA, where media pundits and political elites systematically mystify and obfuscate the concept of social class, the notion of "class" as a relation to the means of production has largely vanished, to be replaced by two misleading narratives. The first is the myth of the all-inclusive middle class. The second is "the working-class narrative."

The "middle-class narrative" is a staple of the US political mainstream and imaginary. President Joe Biden, in his 2024 State of the Union address, for example, introduced Shawn Fain, the combative leader of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, recently emerged from a largely successful labor action. How did this leading representative of the US political elite frame that encounter?

> Here tonight is UAW President, Shawn Fain, a great friend, and a great labor leader … Shawn, I was proud to be the first President in American history to walk a picket line. Showing once again, Wall Street didn't build this country! The middle class built this country! And unions built the middle class! (Biden 2024)

Shawn Fain might have been rolling his eyes, since during the UAW strike, he insistently referred to "the working class" and avoided the analytical and political dead end of the "middle-class" narrative. But the key point is that the wide acceptance of the trope of the capacious "middle class" obscures a more precise understanding of US class composition and dynamics.

"The working-class narrative" is hardly any better. Pundits and scholars use this phrase to refer to explanations of Trump's support that emphasize "the working class" – and especially its rural, male, and white components – as the rock-solid constituency. This isn't entirely wrong, but it's glaringly incomplete. The 74 million Americans who voted for Trump in 2020 (and the 77 million in 2024) were diverse in terms of class and other variables. In 2020, voters who reported having a 2019 income of $100,000 or more, 54 percent voted for Trump and 42 percent for Biden (New York Times 2020). In 2016, Trump voters were on average more affluent than Democratic voters (Carnes and Lupu 2017). This is hard to square with the "working-class narrative," but in 2024 the pattern flipped and a slight majority of households with incomes over $100,000 voted for Harris. Republicans have done worse with white voters in every election that Trump has been on the ballot, from 2016 to 2024 (which is hard to square with the "racism explains it" narrative).

The Democrats' gains with whites, however, were more than offset by losses among non-whites (al-Gharbi 2024). In 2024, Trump made major gains with Latinos which, given his anti-immigrant diatribes, raised eyebrows among

pundits but was hardly surprising considering the Catholic and Evangelical religiosity, the cultural conservatism, and the sizable small business sector in this group (and that many Latinos are "white-adjacent" and from families that have been in the USA for generations – in the Southwest, since before it was the USA – and are as distant from the immigrant experience as most other Americans). The identity politics central to the Democratic campaign strategy foundered in the face of a more complicated and multi-racial morass of class-based stresses and resentments.

The overhyped "diploma divide" – college-educated voters supporting Democrats and those without a college degree backing Republicans — became in the media a proxy for social class. It's not that the college educated were uniformly well-off and those with a high school diploma or less were not. To some extent, social class position parallels educational categories, but often it does not, as with the affluent non-college-educated small business sector or economically precarious but highly educated contingent university faculty. It's that less educated voters came to perceive the liberal, technocratic worldview of the legacy media, the Democratic elites and the well educated as a threat to traditional values and to their social reproduction and this provided opportunities for Trump, the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement and far-right media to stoke anger and fear around "cultural issues." The pronatalist declarations – as well as the anxieties about child predators (a central preoccupation of Q-Anon conspiracy enthusiasts), immigrant caravans, supposed crime waves, trans people on school sports teams or in bathrooms, dangerous books, and the suspicion of educational institutions – reflect an inchoate sense that social reproduction is imperiled.

While "the working-class narrative" may be deficient from a social scientific perspective, Republicans doubled down on it in 2024. The president of the Teamsters Union addressed the Republican convention, the first time a labor leader had done so. Other speakers excoriated Democratic politicians, past and present, for supporting a free trade agenda that outsourced jobs and deindustrialized the "heartland." Nowhere was this appeal to "the working class" more evident than in the acceptance speech of vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance, a Yale-educated lawyer and Silicon Valley venture capitalist who grew up in a depressed Ohio steel town, raised by a grandmother from Appalachian Kentucky who was the key protagonist in his maudlin, blaming-the-victim autobiography, *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016). In his speech accepting the nomination, Vance repeatedly deployed tropes earlier associated with left-wing populists and socialists:

> We need a leader who's not in the pocket of big business, but answers to the working man, union and nonunion alike. A leader who won't sell out to multinational corporations … [Trump] created the greatest economy

> in history for workers. It really was amazing. There's this chart that shows worker wages. And they stagnated for pretty much my entire life, until President Donald J. Trump came along. Workers' wages went through the roof. Wall Street barons crashed the economy and American builders went out of business … President Trump's vision is so simple and yet so powerful. We're done, ladies and gentlemen, catering to Wall Street. We'll commit to the working man. (Vance 2024)

This changed Republican posturing had resonance on the ground. According to 2024 exit polls, 45 percent of labor union households voted for Trump, a five-point gain over 2020.

The "working class" that Vance and Republicans invoked was essentially an identity politics category, marked as white, rural, male, and Christian, and linked to "cultural" preferences for rigid and hierarchical gender relations, Carhartt brand workwear, abortion, firearms, and music (e.g., country singer Jason Aldean (2023) and his boastful hit single "Try That in a Small Town"). In 2024, significant numbers of "non-white people of color" – a category in the classless progressive taxonomy of social groups previously assumed to be its members' most salient and deeply felt identity feature – shocked the liberal media by taking on Republicans' vision of the "working class" and voting for Trump. Surprisingly, one of the most perceptive election postmortems of the Democrats' failed identity politics strategy comes from a quintessentially elite figure, who is often oblivious to how the other half lives, *New York Times* center-right columnist David Brooks:

> This identity politics mind-set is psychologically and morally compelling. In an individualistic age, it gives people a sense of membership in a group. It helps them organize their lives around a noble cause, fighting oppression. But this mind-set has just crashed against the rocks of reality. This model assumes that people are primarily motivated by identity group solidarity … It turns out a lot of people don't behave like ambassadors from this or that group. They think for themselves in unexpected ways … They are concerned with all kinds of issues that don't fit into the good-versus-evil mind-set of oppressor versus oppressed … Plenty of people are exhausted by the crude generalizations that are so common today. (Brooks 2024)

Identity politics failed the Democrats in 2024, even as the Republicans consolidated a mostly but not entirely white "working-class" identity politics only partially linked to an actual working class and conspicuously and grotesquely performed by oligarchs and elites.

It is true, however, that the deindustrialization that Vance highlighted hit the USA hard, generating social tensions that fueled downward mobility, economic

precarity, resentment, drug addiction, deaths of despair, and authoritarianism. The mid-1990s, following the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the 2008 financial crisis are milestones in this longer and ongoing process. While a growing genre of often sensational and alarmist journalistic and popular social scientific works describes the ensuing anomie and purports to explain it to well-off urbanites, very few analyses delve sufficiently into either the financial actors behind this social collapse or the lopsided geographical distribution of deindustrialization, which disproportionately affected rural and smalltown areas (e.g., Alexander 2017; Carnevale et al. 2024; Conn 2023; Edelman 2021; Gagliardi et al. 2023; Garin and Rothbaum 2024; Martin 2021; Orejel 2017).

SURVIVAL PRACTICES

How are people coping? In the cold months, drive down any rural road in the Poconos or the Catskills, the squat "mountains" in Pennsylvania and upstate New York at the northern end of the Appalachians, and it won't take long before you see blue-grey smoke billowing from a chimney on a modest wood-frame house. Firewood costs much less than fuel oil or electricity, especially if you cut up whatever trees die on your few acres of land and, even more so, if you have a wood furnace that heats water as well as your home.[4] It's practically a free good, one way of isolating yourself from the cash economy and preserving the meager dollars you earn in the service sector or doing odd jobs. Go down to the basement or into the garage of that modest house and you're likely to find a giant freezer full of venison or, if there's poultry in the yard, several dozen plucked chickens or ducks. Costly feed concentrates aren't essential, since the birds can thrive on kitchen scraps, bugs, worms, and whatever greens are in the yard. More almost free goods and fewer expensive trips to the supermarket for meat and eggs. One neighbor slaughters 50 chickens each year to feed his family. Another sprays canned doe urine in the fields behind my property and attracts and kills bucks whose meat he eats all year long. Sometimes when hunting season is over, I hear shots coming from those back fields where "rogue" hunters are illegally poaching more deer. One of my dogs sometimes drags deer carcasses out of the woods, where the wounded animals have gone to die.

Rural (and poor urban) areas of the USA also have robust barter, second-hand, and gift economies, with lightly used or new goods channeled through community organizations, food pantries, thrift shops, "swap meets," churches, email listservs, and social media groups. These activities at the margins or outside the cash economy free up household income for essential expenses even as they call participants' attention to and heighten anxieties about the "double devaluation" of their wages and income, on the one hand, and their cultural dignity and exclusion, on the other, and – more broadly – the fragility of their social

reproduction (Kalb 2023). Media and academic analyses, with few exceptions, pay scant attention to the centrality of these survival mechanisms or their emotional-political impacts (Meisenholder 2024; Strube 2022).

By the side of those rural roads with the wood-burning stoves and chickens there are occasional rusty yard signs that say "plumbing – heat – electrical," "carpentry," or "stump grinding." Does anybody ever call the phone numbers on the signs and hire a plumber that way? It's possible, but I read these signs as indicators of the déclassé character of the supposedly working-class men who are central to the "working-class narrative." They're not "working-class" in any meaningful sense of the term, although their fathers and uncles may have labored in rural industries and even been union members, and as much as they might like, they're not "middle class" either. They're essentially micro-entrepreneurs – guys with a pickup and some tools – who scramble constantly for intermittent, poorly remunerated work. Some, particularly those with substance abuse disorders, are almost classically lumpenproletarian, operating at the edge of or on the other side of legality. Some have one foot in the formal labor market, but even then, they're economically precarious and many wear their status anxiety on their sleeves. As David Bond points out, in one of the few analyses that really "gets it,"

> The categorical certainty of the white working class distorts far more than it clarifies. While the white working class advances a potent political anthropology of the present, it is one detached almost entirely from the lived realities of the working poor. (Bond 2021: 38)

Sometimes fiction captures better than scholarly research the essence of a social group. Jonathan Stone's *The Prison Minyan* describes a smalltown upstate New York prison guard drinking with his high school buddies on a Saturday night:

> He and his pals were hunters, grew up physical, did everything with their hands. They could set traps – deer, turkey, beaver; you name it. They could all of them plumb-set toilets, do electrical wiring, sheetrock, could nail-gun studs. Some of them were better at it than others, but they could all do it. Practically from childhood, learning it from their fathers and uncles and older brothers, and even though most of their fathers and uncles and older brothers rarely said a word of instruction about any of it, the knowledge was simply somehow in their hands. (Stone 2021: 89)

My evidence is anecdotal and small N, but I can confidently claim that this huge sector of guys with pickups and tools who can nail-gun studs consists largely of Trump supporters.[5] Becoming déclassé involves a blurring of the

line between wage labor and self-employment and an erosion of solidarity that impacts self-esteem and generates anger. The "rural rage" or "resentment" that US ethnographers describe has roots in downward mobility and a sense – incessantly promoted in right-wing media – that politics is a zero-sum game in which my loss derives from an Other's gain (Cramer 2016; Schaller and Waldman 2024; Wuthnow 2018). The zero-sum assumption also underlies what Timothy Snyder (2018) calls "sadopopulism," in which people welcome policies that will harm them, such as diminished social protections resulting from tax giveaways for the rich, because they know that these will hurt stigmatized Others even more.

As Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb observed more than 50 years ago in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, "In cultures with still-strong working-class traditions, or a sense of working-class solidarity the respect as equals that working men may not get from those who command them they can get from each other" (Sennett and Cobb 1973: 28–9).[6] Now, as microentrepreneurs competing *with* each other under cutthroat capitalism, that sense of solidarity is harder to maintain and the ideology of self-sufficiency, hard work, and rugged individualism that is central to Trumpism finds fertile ground.

Another sector of Trump voters – present in rural, but also suburban and urban settings – consists of affluent small businesspeople, typically, though not always, with limited university education. These owners of tire and muffler shops, roofing businesses, hardware stores and lumber yards typically enjoy high incomes and live in large and well-appointed houses. They nonetheless suffer, in many cases, from anxieties related to business debt and to competition from giant big box stores in nearby malls and from Amazon.com. They are allergic to the idea of taxes and frequently offer sizable discounts to customers who pay cash. Few are aware or acknowledge that flows of federal funds to rural areas greatly exceed the taxes that those areas pay (Fikri et al. 2024; Rockefeller Institute of Government 2024). This obliviousness to the invisible subsidies that they and their communities receive reinforces the ideologies of self-sufficiency and individualism that so many rural people embrace and to which Trump deftly panders.

Many Trump supporters are famously and justifiably furious that urban cosmopolitans and coastal elites look down on them, the second dimension of that "double devaluation" mentioned above. If any of them read *White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy*, a much-discussed screed that recently rocketed to bestseller status, they're likely to be doubly enraged (Schaller and Waldman 2024). Emblematic of that alarmist genre I referred to earlier, this demonization of (all or almost all) rural whites as violent racist authoritarians largely fails to discuss in any but the most general terms either the ethnic and political diversity present in rural zones or the financial actors and often invisible forces that have siphoned wealth from these places and produced so

much deep angst. Reviewers have accused the book's authors of "academic malpractice" for misinterpreting and distorting others' research (Jacobs and Munis 2024). *White Rural Rage* is "blaming the victim" redux, reinvented for low-income white people.

Among many other things, *White Rural Rage* asserts that rural whites are significantly more "insurrectionist" than those living elsewhere. I have already mentioned that among Trump voters are significant numbers of affluent people, and his funders include self-interested billionaires eager for tax cuts and favors (Lauter 2024). Empirical data on those who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 do not support the claim that rural whites are more "insurrectionist." On the contrary, of those arrested,

> Two-thirds are 35 or older, and 40 percent are business owners or hold white-collar jobs. Unlike the stereotypical extremist, many of the alleged participants in the Capitol riot have a lot to lose. They work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants. Strikingly, court documents indicate that only 9 percent are unemployed … Most of the insurrectionists do not come from deep-red strongholds. People familiar with America's political geography might imagine the Capitol rioters as having marinated in places where they are unlikely to encounter anyone from the opposite side of the political spectrum. Yet of those arrested for their role in the Capitol riot, more than half came from counties that Biden won; one-sixth came from counties that Trump won with less than 60 percent of the vote. (Pape and Ruby 2021)

Paralleling this analysis, Abel Sterling (2021) described the insurrectionists as a "bizarrely dressed and dangerously radicalized mob of marketing executives, real estate brokers, portfolio managers, live-streamers, veterans, bartenders, and others." These findings are not surprising given the infrequently remarked fact that less than 20 percent of the 74 million who voted for Trump in 2020 resided in rural areas (Van Dam 2020). Most were urbanites and suburbanites. "Contrary to many understandings," Gurminder Bhambra (2017: S216) points out, "the swing to Trump [in 2016] was carried not so much by the white working-class vote, but the vote of the white middle class, including college educated white people." In 2024, even though media representation of shifts in the Trump vote once more pointed to "the working class," the Trump vote again included massive numbers of affluent and college-educated people (and non-whites, especially Latinos and Asian Americans).

CONCLUSION

It is refreshing to hear Bello affirm that the "distinction between 'far right' and 'fascist' is academic … [and] that a 'far-rightist' is a fascist who has not yet

seized power" (Bello 2024). Federico Finchelstein, one of today's most insightful scholars on the historical and contemporary extreme right, uses the term "wannabe fascists," leaders who are "helping to take contemporary far-right populism back to its fascist roots" (Finchelstein 2024: 3). He argues that a key distinction between these "aspirational" or "vocational" fascists and authoritarian populists is that the latter seek legitimacy through the ballot box while the former deny the validity of elections and seek to undermine democracy from within by stoking fear and hatred and propagating big lies. As soon as Trump won in 2024, all talk of a "rigged" election evaporated. His supposed "mandate" from the voters became a rationale for a legally dubious push to skirt balance-of-power norms and to concentrate power in the executive branch, among a handful of unelected billionaire advisors, and in his own person.

Academics sometimes spend considerable time splitting terminological hairs and revisiting arcane taxonomies of yesteryear when they might instead have been building those coalitions and "united electoral fronts" that Bello correctly sees as essential for stopping the extreme right from coming to power. In the lead-up to the 2024 election, the editor of *The New Republic*, in a commentary headlined with Nazi-style Fraktur font, suggests, "We can spend [this election year] debating whether Trump meets the 9 or 17 points that define fascism. Or we can spend it saying, 'He's damn close enough, and we'd better fight'" (Tomasky 2024a: 11). The rise of fascism in the USA, however, suggests that the "Long New Right," as Schlozman and Rosenfeld (2024) call it, has been dramatically more successful than its opponents in waging that Gramscian "war of position" and consolidating its hegemony in civil society, in all levels of the political system, and in American culture.

In 2020, I suggested that Americans better get comfortable with using the "F-word" and concluded by noting that "In the aftermath of World War II, almost all Americans were unequivocally anti-fascist. Now, for those in power, 'anti-fascist' has become a term of opprobrium. That might be because fascism applies to them too" (Edelman 2020a). At the time, this assertion received considerable pushback, though in subsequent years others with larger megaphones than mine made similar arguments (Nichols 2023; Perlstein 2024; Reich 2023, 2024; Sterling 2021; Weisman 2024). In the weeks before the 2024 election, as I describe below, numerous prominent figures – including Trump's former chief of staff General John Kelly, former chairman of the military's joint chiefs of staff General Mark Milley, and Democratic candidate Vice President Kamala Harris – chimed in and finally called Trump a fascist. Less than two weeks before the election an ABC/Ipsos poll of registered voters found that fully 49 percent considered Trump a "fascist" (Langer and Sparks 2024). Eight percent of those who believed Trump was a fascist told pollsters that they would vote for him anyway (Chang 2024), a figure that likely underestimates the proportion of those willing to vote for a fascist.

I concur with Bello's checklist of fascist characteristics – disdain for democracy, promoting violence, a heated mass base, scapegoating Others, and charismatic leadership – although I might place more emphasis on three elements (Bello 2023, 2024). First, how today's fascist demagogues invoke extreme and exclusionary visions of nationalism and the nation; second, the construction via big lies of widely believed alternative realities; and third, the dynamics of that "heated mass base." The "heat" and paranoid imaginings of the mass base derive in no small measure from the messianic boss's big lies and repeated insistence that his supporters' anger is justified. This generates a gratifying feeling of wallowing in long-held resentments, of group belonging and of personal connection to the demagogue. It further reinforces followers' imagined superiority to the stigmatized Others that he maligns and who are purportedly responsible for the decline from "America's" mythical past "greatness." Forensic psychiatrist Bandy Lee points to a "narcissistic symbiosis" in which

> developmental wounds … make the leader-follower relationship magnetically attractive. The leader, hungry for adulation to compensate for an inner lack of self-worth, projects grandiose omnipotence – while the followers, rendered needy by societal stress or developmental injury, yearn for a parental figure. When such wounded individuals are given positions of power, they arouse similar pathology in the population that creates a "lock and key" relationship. (Quoted in Lewis 2021)

For Claudia Leeb, people's deep anxieties and feeling of incompleteness under "precarity capitalism" are rooted in the "threat of declassing, the impossibility of 'up-classing,' exploitation, alienation, and isolation" in a society where there is an unreachable and "unchallenged fetish of 'success' on the economic, interpersonal, and bodily levels" (2024: 222–3). Far-right demagogues prey on that sense of incompleteness and salve its psychic wounds with the euphoria of crowds, hallucinatory promises of identity group belonging and of being made whole and "great," and a space to release repressed aggressive and libidinal drives (Leeb 2024). Joshua Branciforte and Ramsey McGlazer similarly describe Trump as a political figure "with a subversive style who embraced a persona at once libidinous and seductively brutal, perfectly calibrated for viral self-replication in the digital attention economy" (2024: 2).

Trump and his MAGA movement check all of the fascist boxes on Bello's list, though it's not the classic "revolution from above" of Georgi Dimitroff (1935) or Barrington Moore (1966). It is coming to resemble a "revolution from above," however, as the second Trump administration implements Plan 2025, the Presidential Transition Project that the Heritage Foundation and a consortium of some 100 right-wing think tanks and lobbies launched to recruit conservative ideologues to radically downsize the government and to replace

civil service personnel with political loyalists in every agency of the supposed "deep state" (Baker 2024; Project 2025 2023). During the campaign, Trump distanced himself from Project 2025, but within days of the election key advisors indicated that this actually was the blueprint for the new administration. The America First Policy Institute, another far-right think tank, produced a similar, if less detailed, plan for destroying civil service protections and reshaping the "deep state" that mostly passed under the media's radar (Bensinger and Fahrenthold 2024). Its director, Linda McMahon, a billionaire former World Wrestling Entertainment executive, is tasked with heading and possibly shuttering the federal government's Department of Education. Seventeen of Trump's proposed top-level political appointees have ties to Project 2025 or the America First Policy Institute (Yourish et al. 2024).

Even more worrisome are recent warnings from scholars of genocide and white supremacism that the USA today presents all of the risk factors identified in the United Nations' "Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes" (Hinton 2021; Rubaii et al. 2021; United Nations 2014). Genocidal violence, as Alexander Hinton, points out "can happen here," even if it is smaller scale and less well organized than, say, Hitler's Einsatzgruppen (Hinton 2021).

The main question I have at this point, several months into Trump 2.0, has less to do with impending dangers, proper taxonomies, historical antecedents, commensurable cases, or mass psychology than with the language we use. Is the term "fascist" meaningful any more in the USA? Trump, Rudy Giuliani, Marjorie Taylor Greene and right-wing podcasters such as Ben Shapiro all took to calling Biden – and later, Kamala Harris – a "fascist" (Jones 2024; Kilander and Bedigan 2024; Perry 2023; Shapiro 2023).[7] Some concocted specious, convoluted arguments to tar all Democrats as "Nazis" (McCann 2024). In 2024, Trump repeatedly condemned opponents as "left-wing fascists." Weeks before the US presidential election, the Democrats belatedly retaliated, spurred by revelations that former chair of the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff under Trump, General Mark Milley, had declared to journalist Bob Woodward that his former boss was "fascist to the core." Following this, leading Democrats and a handful of dissident Republicans retaliated, pointing out that Trump's frequent repetition of big lies and Nazi language about "vermin" and his plans – among many other things – for mass deportations, siccing the military on his domestic political opponents, and jailing critics were unmistakably "fascist" (Weisman 2024).

I mentioned above how in 2020 I speculated that the hysteria about "antifa" or anti-fascists was partly a Trumpist effort to deflect the accusation that they themselves were fascists. Federico Finchelstein advanced a more developed version of this idea:

> Why do populist leaders want to forgive, distort, or displace the actual history of Nazism and fascism? Because, as these leaders draw from the well of fascist

> ideology, rhetoric, and tactics, they have to neuter the history of fascism to normalize their politics. Revising the history of fascism renders it mythical rather than historical, suggesting that the fascism of the past was not that bad – or not even fascism at all. (Finchelstein 2020: 98)

Five years later, I think that the explanation for why Trump et al. call Biden, Harris or Democrats "fascists" is less about deliberately "neutering history" than about manifesting and/or taking advantage of the severe historical amnesia that already afflicts much of the US population. After all, nearly two-thirds of young American adults do not know that the Nazis murdered 6 million Jews and nearly one-quarter believe that the Holocaust was a myth, had been exaggerated, or they weren't sure (Sherwood 2020). Some 80 to 85 percent of Americans follow politics casually or not at all and just 15 to 20 percent follow it closely (Krupnikov and Ryan 2020).

New York Times' Roger Cohen recently pointed out that "Historical lessons … fade after three generations … Europe's collective cataclysm between 1914 and 1945 seems like ancient history to many people." He quotes Italian political scientist Nathalie Tocci, who declares, "You can no longer rely on saying, 'This is evil, because look what happened in the fascist past'… You have to have an argument for why those ideas are bad today" (Cohen 2024).

Samuel Perry and Joshua Grubbs' recent survey research confirms an impression that I've had from conversations with Trump supporters – and indeed with young undergraduates who are not Trump supporters. For many Americans, the term "fascism" does not ring alarm bells in the twenty-first century to the extent that it did in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, very large numbers of Americans (especially but not only Republicans) consider fascists and Nazis on the left of the political spectrum. It seems that

> For Republicans (and Democrats), admitting that fascists and Nazis are on their side of the ideological spectrum – that they have any overlapping worldviews, values, or tactics with "us" – is a tribal psychology no-no. Fascists and Nazis, the exemplars of political evil, *must* share space with our partisan opponents. It works like a syllogism. Leftists are the bad guys. Fascists and Nazis are also bad guys. So fascists and Nazis are leftists. (Perry 2023)

So, does the descriptor or epithet "fascist" still carry force as an accusation in today's USA? As Robert Kuttner asks, "Does anyone under 50 have much sense of what the term 'fascist' even means?" (2024). It is possible that in Europe and especially in Italy, as Maddalena Cammelli (2024) suggests, "silencing the word fascism (using populism, far-right, extreme-right, etc. instead), … risk[s] overlooking the central place historical Fascism plays today as a 'mythological machine' … and meaning-producer." In the USA, however,

where historical amnesia is more salient than historical fascism, I cannot help but wonder about the communicative usefulness of the F-word (Bessner and Steinmetz-Jenkins 2024).

"Fascist" as a descriptor, analytical category, or heuristic tool no doubt remains important and useful. But to pry MAGA supporters out of their media silos and crowd-induced delirium, identifying Trump with Mussolini and Hitler, however justified the comparison may be, is less likely to be effective than to point to Trump's attacks on the Constitution and government or the near certainty that his economic policies and mass deportations will reignite inflation, balloon the deficit, further enrich the mega-wealthy, and decimate what's left of the tattered US social safety net. Other potential vulnerabilities include his habit of stiffing contractors – guys with pickups and tools – his vile behaviour toward women and attacks on reproductive rights, and a roster of political appointees that includes serial sexual abusers, quack "health" conmen, pardoned criminals, quid pro quo beneficiaries, in-laws, and billionaires with glaring conflicts of interest. Among these was fictive "Uncle" Elon Musk who, while propounding grandiose plans of sending astronauts to Mars at taxpayer expense, had his "DOGE boys" eviscerate oversight bodies and government agencies and slash federal safety net programs, such as Medicaid, that much of the population depends on. Following Elon's falling out with the Boss, Project 2025 architect and Office of Management and Budget head Russel Vought intensified the destruction Musk initiated, illegally impounding funds that Congress had already appropriated for programs and regions that the regime disliked.

When I wrote in 2020 that Americans needed to get comfortable with the F-word, I assumed that some combination of greater historical knowledge and regime behavior would lead them to recognize the fascist danger and that the specter of "fascism" alone would generate widespread outrage. Now that half the electorate has welcomed a wannabe fascist back to the presidency, I am not so sure. We now face an abrupt concentration of power in the executive branch and in the figure of the leader, mass deportations, accelerated efforts to stoke the anger of the "heated base," and physical and other attacks on labor, on various Others, and on "enemies of the people," such as journalists, educators, and cultural workers. These are surely features of fascism, but in the long struggle to survive and resist, we probably need to find other language for talking about them.

NOTES

1. Because of the Electoral College system, Republicans won office in half of the eight presidential periods since 1988, even though they won the popular vote only twice, in 2004 and 2024.

2. Racism and misogyny were doubtless part of the explanation too, although not in the reductive way that pundits pushing the "it's all racism and misogyny" explanation implied. Trump voters who didn't strongly embrace racism or misogyny had to stomach, downplay, overlook, or deny both to justify their choice to themselves and others. This includes the Black men who voted for Trump in larger numbers in 2024.
3. PSA stands for public service announcement.
4. "Wood is the fuel that heats twice," an upstate New York neighbor commented. "Once when you're sweating to cut it up and once when you burn it."
5. Pickup ownership by Trumpists is a hackneyed stereotype (see, e.g., Schaller and Waldman 2024), but the association apparently stands up under more rigorous scrutiny (Gebru et al. 2017).
6. One limitation of Sennett and Cobb's analysis, which they acknowledge, is that as male researchers they had greater access to male interlocutors and ended up focusing mainly on men.
7. The pseudo-academic roots of conservatives' claim that fascism is a left-wing ideology go back at least as far as Goldberg (2009).

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12

The Trumpist Movement: A Class-Based CounterRevolution against Those Who Would Strand the Assets of Capital?

Don Nonini

INTRODUCTION

Walden Bello's book *Counterrevolution* (2019) is a deeply insightful, generative analysis into fascism, or as Bello puts it counterrevolution. In this chapter, I build on his claim that

> the class-driven counterrevolution can best be understood by a paradigm in which the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic is a centerpiece. The perceived revolutionary threat may not however be a takeover by an armed insurgency, but a progressive movement that is able to use the law and established institutions to promote social reform. (Bello 2019: 143, emphasis added)

As his claim implies, Bello's (2018: 142–3) distinction between a "majoritarian counterrevolution" made up of multiple classes, on the one hand, and the "class-driven counterrevolutions" characteristic of Italy, independent Indonesia, Chile, and Thailand, on the other, may be too sharply drawn.

Bello (2018: 135–8) is correct in saying that "cultural narratives" characteristic of majoritarian counterrevolutions play an important role in the Trumpist movement. These are central to a nostalgia for a mythical age of a "Great America" in which Muslims, African Americans, and Latinx immigrants either do not exist, or since they do, should be "kept in their place." Nonetheless, this does not mean, as Bello (2018: 138–9) contends, that the Trumpist counterrevolution does not "primarily stem from classical class conflict." As I contend below, since the 1970s, a long-standing class project of the wealthiest fraction of the US capitalist class to preserve its dominant position has not only brought on the preconditions that made the emergence of the Trump counterrevolution possible but also then allied itself with Trump's movement in a campaign to harness "the people's" narratives of resentment and rage against racialized and

otherwise vulnerable domestic groups and foreign nations and define them as "enemies of the people." This chapter takes full cognizance of the fascist potential of the Trumpist Make America Great Again (MAGA) base, whose emergence over the last decade has multiple explanations, the most cogent being "disaster nationalism" (Seymour 2024), but asserts that it must be situated within a class analysis. Only in this way can its current and future dangers be assessed.

In what follows, I reconstruct the processes by which a large-capitalist class project to maintain profits led by fossil fuel and finance capitalists from the 1970s has recently been expanded to incorporate information platform capitalism and its "disruptive" technologies, including social media (Facebook, Twitter). These social media have been instrumental in the emergence of the Trumpist movement as a class-driven counterrevolution arising from the social devastation of the USA by neoliberalization that began not in 2016 with Trump's first presidency, but in the early 1980s. Second, I tie this process to the operation of racial capitalism, and to racialization within the US population. Third, I briefly set out an alternative to the view that the Trumpist counterrevolution can be exhaustively defined by cultural narratives of racial and gendered resentment by seeing these narratives as necessary but not sufficient for understanding the Trumpist movement, because the class project of the dominant US capitalist class is left out of the account. I conclude by arguing that the project of Big Capital to bolster accumulation has since 2015 been allied with MAGA and Trump in order to attack and defeat what both see as a formidable "enemy" – the new environmentalist movement.

All data collected for this chapter dates prior to Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2025, and thus its main body reconstructs the period before he took office. The epilogue considers the actions of the Trump administration since then

CAPITALISM AND ACCUMULATION, 1980–2024: CLASS WARFARE BY NO OTHER NAME

Following Harvey (2005: 14–25), I contend that a long-term capitalist project to ensure capital accumulation began with the systemic profit crises of the 1970s, and led to the advent of neoliberalization in the 1980s, dated from the first years of the Reagan administration. Neoliberalization has subsequently been a project of the US capitalist class that has persistently sought to reverse the falling rate of profit: "we can … interpret neoliberalization … as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites … [it] has succeeded remarkably well …" (Harvey 2005: 19).

I argue, however, that this upper-class project is not over, has repeatedly undergone setbacks and recoveries, and most recently has shifted shape since

Trump's election in 2015. The strategies advanced by large capitalists over the liberal state have shifted within a dialectic since the 1980s in which these strategies led to new social crises accompanied by structural and physical violence to working people, which in turn generated failures requiring further fixes, which again brought on new downstream crises. These crises eventually led to the emergence of the MAGA movement itself, and led indirectly to Big Capital's alignment with it.

The 1990s–2000 US trade agreements (North American Free Trade Organization (NAFTA), World Trade Organization (WTO), etc.) pushed by large-scale US capital combined with outright military adventurism by the USA and its proxies have led to social, economic, and political crises, which have ramified in further pressures to create new foreign trade wars and military entanglements. These have traumatized the US working class, but restored high rates of capitalist profit for almost two decades. Trade agreements facilitated US capital flight and led to widespread deindustrialization, decline in labor unions, regional economic ruin, and pauperization of large numbers of workers. The post-Vietnam US "volunteer army" based on economic conscription of the working class led not only to millions of Afghan and Iraqi casualties but also to the nasty combination of militarized and traumatized working-class war veterans – fodder for MAGA xenophobia.

The 2001 global War on Terror undertaken by American neocons spearheaded by US fossil capitalists (e.g., Bush, Cheney) against Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion, occupation, and looting of Iraq ended in US defeat and thousands of US soldiers killed, injured, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and often abandoned once they returned "home." More than 1.8 million veterans of these two wars have some degree of officially recognized disability as a result of these wars (Costs of War 2024). All this made for highly profitable business for the US weapons, fossil fuels, and surveillance industries.

Profits of US corporations have remained high, except when the excesses of finance have led to recessions and capital has required state bailouts, in turn engendering renewed conditions for enhanced capitalist accumulation. One need only be reminded of the economic and social destructiveness of the global financial crisis of 2007–08 when more than 2 million families, disproportionately African American, defaulted on fraudulently issued "subprime mortgages" and were dispossessed from their homes (Darity and Mullen 2020: 220–6). This massive fraud erased the economic security of millions of people in the USA and overseas, and pushed large numbers out of the class of petty-property owners without shelter. It ended with no criminal convictions of the Wall Street fraudsters, while Bush's Troubled Asset Relief Program of $700 billion "made good" the losses of American finance capitalists responsible for

this crisis by issuing cheap money that allowed banks, hedge funds, insurance companies, etc. to sell off their toxic assets and return to solvency.

This sector then boomed as part of quantitative easing (QE) from 2008 to 2022, when easy Fed money came across deeply devalued real estate allowing financiers to buy up hundreds of thousands of empty distressed properties at fire sale prices (Gottesdiener 2013), to be profitably sold for conversion to corporate-owned rental housing, or "renovation" for sale on upscale housing markets. QE combined with supply chain disruptions from the Covid pandemic by 2022 brought on steep inflation in basic commodity prices (in food, energy, housing), while allowing corporations to boost their profit margins. As a result, the Federal Reserve Bank increased interest rates, inflicting widespread suffering and discontent in the US working population, by 2024 strung out by huge credit card debt due to stagnant or falling wages and rising prices, which attained a record-high of $1.21 trillion (ABC News 2025). During the periods of "recovery" from each crisis, sectors of US merchant, rentier, and finance capital have intervened successfully to expropriate large amounts of surplus value from newly vulnerable devalued groups.

SOCIAL MEDIA, A TRAUMATIZED WORKING CLASS, AND THE EMERGENCE OF MAGA

The collective injuries to the US working class of this history of expropriation, warmaking, and pauperization have been incalculable, and have ramified throughout it since the 1980s. For those in the MAGA movement, their experiences of fractured social relations, personal isolation, and economic and psychological traumas, including their relative loss of social status as whites and men over five decades of "progressive neoliberalism's" individualist "struggle for survival," have attracted them to Trump's racist, xenophobic, and sexist scapegoating (Seymour 2024: 27–78) deployed to further his "muscular national capitalism" (Seymour 2024: 47) to destroy its domestic and foreign "enemies."

The economic and social crises wrought by US capitalism (e.g., deindustrialization, devastating attacks on labor unions, and working-class pauperization) have brought about real class-based injuries inflicted on these populations, for example, material suffering from job loss, loss of status, compensatory drug addictions and "deaths of despair" (Case and Deaton 2020). These are injuries for which the US liberal capitalist state is responsible, for instance, Clinton's 1992 push for NAFTA and China's accession to the WTO, while purveying the cynical view that all the US working population lacked was "retraining" in order to be fully employed at the top of the new globalized labor force. The fears and anxieties prevailing in this population created by deep economic loss and social trauma – Don Kalb's "double devaluation" (2023) – should not be lightly dismissed as "fascist" delusions (even when they have xenophobic and

misogynist dimensions), while such loss and injury can instead be understood as material preconditions for the radical cultural changes overwhelming these populations and converting them to the MAGA base.

According to Seymour (2024), the process of radical conversion to MAGA occurs when working-class and petit-bourgeois people are interpellated by social media platforms such as Facebook, X/Twitter, and Instagram as users, brought into imagined (digital) contact with like-minded others, and then experience resubjectification when demagogues seductively incorporate their fears into xenophobic and misogynist narratives of resentment and revenge that are recursively amplified by social media algorithms to draw in yet more platform users, cynically called "a community." Attracting thousands or millions of "likes" in these social media, these narratives define, focus, and mobilize MAGA followers' animosities against the "people's enemies." Occasionally, tweets by arch-demagogue Trump and his cronies incite followers to digitally harass, dox, and threaten individuals scapegoated as enemies, and to attack them physically (Seymour 2024: 27–78).

Seymour's theoretical argument (2024: 48–78) about the relevance of information platform social media for the rise of counterrevolutionary movements has important implications. It contains the key insight that contemporary information "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017) has become the crucial crucible for transforming the toxic mix of grievances from systemic violence into popular racist, misogynist, and xenophobic narratives central to the recent counterrevolutionary movements emerging in many different settings. For this chapter, what is most relevant are what Srnicek (2017: 49–60) refers to as "advertising platforms," more accurately called "social media-based data extraction platforms" such as Facebook, X/Twitter, and Instagram, that facilitate the conversion of their users into MAGA followers sharing conspiracist paranoias and rage against "enemies" who can be attacked and injured or humiliated for real in the "meat world." At the same time, these platforms' algorithms enable platforms to appropriate MAGA followers' personal data, aggregate them in massive digital arrays, and sell these at enormous profit to data brokers, corporations, and state governments (Leetaru 2018; Zuboff 2019).

As Seymour (2024: 27–47) makes clear, it is "class, not the economy, stupid" (p. 27) that matters. Thus, this chapter points to what many cultural analyses of "white working-class racism" leave out, that the Trumpist movement is now formidable because Trump and his MAGA elites have allied it with the institutional resources, material wealth, and political power of the dominant US capitalist class intent on, when needed, supporting and perpetrating violence to maintain its own economic and political attacks on enemies, both domestic and foreign. The potential of extreme scaled-up violence against the people's "enemies" once the Trumpist counterrevolutionary movement gains state

power and is able to harness the violent power of the judicial and surveillance systems to its objectives is extremely high.

"VALUE IN MOTION": A SHORT NOTE ON RACIAL CAPITALISM

Much of the liberal culturalist uproar about the racism and misogyny of MAGA needs penetrating to clarify that what pass as merely "cultural" clashes over race, nation, and gender between MAGA and its liberal opponents obscure formative processes of class conflict in which class, racial, national, and gender divisions are inextricably enmeshed. In a recent essay on Eric Wolf's theorization of capitalism and its relationship to race and racialization (Nonini 2026, forthcoming), I conclude that a major shortcoming of his approach arose from an inadequate view of what Marx referred to capital as "value in motion" transformed by the different "moments" in the capitalist process of capital accumulation (Harvey 2018: 4–23). In addition to appropriating surplus value in the industrial labor process, capitalists have many different ways of seizing surplus value from workers, and particularly from workers who have been historically demarcated as essentially inferior and racially marked in contrast to a dominant majority, in the USA known as "white."[1]

Through these different moments in the flow of value, the history of US capitalism displays several modes of expropriating surplus value as moments of value in motion, beyond exploitation of the laborers. Bankers and payday lenders "realize" surplus value in its money form by offering credit cards and loans to poor people at high, even extortionate interest rates; merchant and rentier capitalists realize surplus value by taking advantage of inflation and monopoly pricing of goods and rents to jack up rents and prices on workers.

Private corporations and local governments confiscate the use values (bodies, labor, and property) of vulnerable groups, and convert these use values into commodities that can be sold and "converted" into new surplus values. These include discriminatory incarceration of African Americans and their forced labor in private prisons (Wang 2018: 12–98); court fees and fines and jail expense costs imposed on poor people who cannot afford bail (Wang 2018: 152–92); and the taking of Indigenous lands and waters for private pipeline development via dubious public domain laws (Wikipedia 2025).

At this point in time in the USA these modes of taking surplus value have come increasingly to be focused on "the environment" seen as the fundamental conditions for capitalist production (O'Connor 1991). The moments of capital as "value in motion" described above represent simultaneously disguised classed as well as raced (and gendered and nationalized) conflicts between capitalists and those they appropriate surplus value from. Struggles over the environment, including the current struggle over climate change and climate justice, are manifestations of class struggle which are not situated directly in the

capitalist workplace, but in other domains of everyday life, that is, within the "environment" in its broadest sense as the complex of use values defining the possibilities for a class's social reproduction under current socially necessary material conditions. It is class struggle in its manifold manifestations outside the workplace, not some "postmaterialist" zeitgeist, that the new environmental movement is concerned with.

SHIFTS IN THE PROJECT OF BIG CAPITAL, 2015–24

With large US capital having cycled through periods of falling profits arising from accumulation and liquidity crises, alleviated only by episodes of renewed profitability generated from widespread confiscations of surplus value, in turn supported by widely unpopular state bailouts and failed overseas wars, since 2015 this upper-class project has condensed its animus and resources on defeating new enemies, both domestic and foreign. Domestically, a relatively new progressive environmental movement threatens US capital's capacity for appropriating and expropriating surplus value in a fundamental way: this movement seeks to limit or even terminate capital's consumption of fossil fuels via political means. Since 2015, the wealthiest capitalists co-implicated in key industries – fossil fuels, information technology and finance – have allied themselves with the Trumpist movement to attack what both see as this common enemy.

The new climate justice movement I describe in this chapter has strategic objectives that the leaders of this capitalist project find so damaging to their class interests that to defeat it they are willing to chance an otherwise inconceivable alliance with the MAGA counterrevolution that thrives on xenophobic narratives of resentment. One might ask: What kind of progressive popular movement could have objectives so dangerous to capitalism that it provokes this kind of response?[2]

EMERGENCE OF THE NEW ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT: FORESTS VERSUS POLICE FORCE

In the Weelaunee Forest on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, during the night of January 18–19, 2023, Atlanta police raided the forest encampment of environmental protesters, shot and killed one activist, Tortuguita, and arrested 19 others who had camped in and occupied the forest for several weeks on charges of "domestic terrorism" under a 2017 Georgia law. Police officers tore down 25 campsites. Timothy Murphy was one of the last arrested that night. If convicted for this "domestic terrorism crime," Murphy faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 5 –35 years in prison for what is commonly "known as a tree sit – a common tactic among environmentalists" (Brown 2023; see also Chappell 2023).

Adding to their domestic terrorism charges under Georgia's law, on November 6, 2023, an Atlanta court indicted 61 protesters who occupied Weelaunee Forest, including those arrested on January 18–19, for having engaged in a criminal conspiracy of racketeering in connection with their occupation of the forest and resistance to the building of a police training center including damages to construction equipment in the forest. In addition to the already severe domestic terrorism charges, these RICO charges[3] carry an additional sentence of 5–20 years in prison for anyone convicted of having conspired with others to perpetrate such terrorism. Georgia's Republican Attorney General, in obtaining their indictment in August 2023, called them "militant anarchists" (Associated Press 2023).

This has a history. In 2017, the Atlanta City Council made a commitment to the largely African American neighborhoods abutting the 380-acre Weelaunee Forest area to preserve it as a park, given Atlanta's scarce green space. In an about-face, Atlanta's mayor and city council under the urging of the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF), a corporate-dominated supporter of the Atlanta police, approved the building of the so-called Public Safety Training Facility quickly deemed "Cop City" by its opponents (Chappell 2023). Construction was to be financed by $60 million contributed by the APF with another $30 million donated by the City of Atlanta to construct Cop City on 85 acres within the forest (Chappell 2023). Cop City is to offer space for Atlanta police to hone their urban warfare and riot control skills. Despite widespread community protests by African American residents, the city administration pressed on with its plans for Cop City by the APF. Local activists got the word out widely, and the "defense of Atlanta's forests" not only received support from mainstream environmental organizations like the Atlanta Sierra Club (Webber and Sierra Club Georgia Chapter 2023) but also drew in environmental activists from across the southeastern USA who occupied the forest to support the demands of the local Black population.

This conflict culminating in Tortuguita's killing and arrests of 61 environmentalists indicted under Georgia's draconian Domestic Terrorism and RICO laws points to a ratcheting-up in criminalization of non-violent environmentalists' protest. This process coincides with the fact that a growing proportion of environmental activists are committed to environmental justice and climate justice. These attacks by the state legal and police apparatus constitute a new assault not only on people of color, targeting their right to vote and peacefully assemble, but also on the environmental movement (which increasingly includes people of color), and more broadly on democratic rights to vote, to assemble and to engage in non-violent protest.

Recent solidarity between the predominantly white environmental movement and community organizations of African Americans, Latinx, and American Indians has come about due to a complex set of new circumstances.

Some major environmental organizations (e.g., Sierra Club, 350.org) consist of large numbers of middle-class whites, who have moved steadily to the left as they have developed insights into connections between environmental injustices toward poor people of color and climate-driven catastrophes. Often these middle-class whites manifest other stigmatized social vulnerabilities, for example, disability, old age, and sexuality that crosscut and increasingly bridge and potentially override preexisting racial divisions. The Standing Rock protests led by the Sioux nation against the Dakota Access Pipeline from 2015 to 2018, followed by the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 during the Covid pandemic, have made the Black Lives Matter (BLM) slogan "I can't breathe!" resonant for increasing numbers of people of color and their white political allies. This has coincided with the mounting evidence of climate change moving beyond abstract Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports to be manifested in visceral personal experiences among whites living through drought, floodings, hurricanes, and forest fires, punctuated by the hottest last five years in recorded history.

These events have awakened many in the US working population to the new realities of combined ecological and political instability, and profoundly disrupted the anodyne hegemony of individualist competitive consumerism associated with neoliberalism's (heretofore) cheap imported commodities. On the one hand, environmentalist and social justice movements of largely subaltern groups have come together to encompass activists' discourses and practices that connect climate chaos to climate injustice, leading to a broadening *movement for ecological freedom* in the face of felt and physically encoded threats to the social reproduction of large numbers of subaltern people.

On the other hand, the challenge that the rapid emergence of this inchoate multi-racial movement poses to large-capitalist class domination has brought about a violent reaction by leading elements of upper-class fossil, information platform and finance capitalists to ensure a rising rate of profit. Despite their many successes before 2015, their alliance with the Trumpist movement only got underway with Trump's 2015 promotion of fracked gas and extreme petroleum extraction once in office, and has been strongly reaffirmed since his 2024 reelection. Thus, large capitalists' growing flirtation with Trump and MAGA since 2016 has coincided in time with the rise of the new environmental movement.

To be sure, although the destruction of this movement is a key objective of fossil fuel, information platform and financial industries, its leading capitalists have additional goals that point to a comprehensive reactionary program leading to extended oligarchic or political capitalist rule, like that set out in Project 2025. Most recently, with Trump's election in 2024, corporate elites have sought to maximize their profits by seeking to co-opt Trump, his movement and his upper clique in further nets of corporate influence. The joint aspiration

by fossil, information and finance capitalists is to use Trump in state power as an instrument to realize a capitalist wet dream that extends far beyond "liberal" neoliberalism. Specific interests among large fossil, information platform and finance capitalists differ. Even among large information capitalists there are differences between classic liberals whose platforms profit from wholesale commercial sales of data they collect from the population and then aggregate (e.g., Zuckerberg of Meta), those opportunists (e.g., Bezos of Amazon) who seek to algorithmically transform the data they acquire into algorithmic "scores" that can govern and surveil (domestic and foreign) populations that they can sell to corporations and states, and right-wing libertarians (Musk of SpaceX, Thiel of Palantir, etc.) with faith in new "disruptive innovations" they hope will destroy the liberal state altogether via absorbing it into the sovereignty of corporate algorithms (Brock 2025).

Nonetheless, these large capitalists share aspirations for ensuring capital accumulation for Big Capital as a whole. In addition to extending his first-term massive tax cuts for large corporations and their owners, they seek to have Trump bring about a two-part selective extreme deregulation of specific industries combined with his extreme, selective re-regulation of these industries. On the one hand, for those in the fossil fuel sector, there is the promise that Trump will deregulate totally fossil fuels extraction (unconditionally approve oil and gas exploration and infrastructure buildouts, eliminate all environmental regulations); for finance capitalists, to have Trump deregulate finance (e.g., eliminate the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, remove banks' "leverage" requirements, support crypto); and for information capitalists, to have Trump deregulate their social media platform contents – strike laws to moderate and fact-check content and to prohibit hateful speech and pornography – not only in the USA, but also in the European Union (EU) and the UK.[4] Among large information capitalists, its right-wing libertarian faction (Musk, Thiel, Balaji Srinivasan) aspires to adopt Trump's nihilistic vision of "hollowing out" the liberal state by substituting artificial intelligence (AI) governance in its place, including the substitution of cryptocurrencies for the US dollar (Brock 2025).

In addition, large capitalists hope that Trump will re-regulate capitalist activity in specific areas. Virtually all large capitalists seek to have Trump and MAGA Republicans institute a "balanced budget" to scale down or eliminate "wasteful entitlement" programs (Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security) that cost them so much in taxes. For fossil fuel capitalists, Trump should institute policies to choke off green energy production and consumption by repealing or nullifying the Inflation Reduction Act, and eradicate any research on climate change, or even mention of it, from state agencies. Large financial speculators led by Musk, Thiel, and Srinivasan seek Trump's order to the Federal Reserve Bank to backstop unregulated cryptocurrencies.

These shifts as they protect capital accumulation among favored industries and their top capitalists appear to now be the dominant capitalist class's objective in seeking to form cozy alliances with Trump's MAGA and new governing regime. Cravenly opportunistic visits to Trump's Mar-A-Lago by fossil fuel CEOs, investment bankers and other Wall Street capitalists, and most recently by information platform billionaires (Musk as early adopter of MAGA, but also Zuckerberg, Thiel, etc.) demonstrate the new direction of the project. These ultra-wealthy men must consider the few million dollars they donated to his 2024 election and his inaugural ball, and their obsequious performance of rituals of fealty to him (Schleifer and Yaffe-Bellany 2024) to be a small price to pay in return.

THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE FIF CAPITALIST COMPLEX AND MAGA

It is worth examining this dominant capitalist class complex in more detail. Following earlier investigations such as Domhoff's network analyses (Domhoff 1967, 2022: 37–110), Faber (2023) sets out a useful if incomplete analysis of the assault by what he (perhaps infelicitously) calls the "Polluter-Industrial Complex" on the voting rights of poor people and people of color over the last two decades. It is crucial for Faber's argument that the dominant node of this complex has been the fossil fuel industry, closely supported by its financial and infrastructure backers in investment banks, pension funds, and institutional Wall Street investors, the insurance industry and railroads (Faber 2023; Faber et al. 2022).

Over the same period, private conservative family foundations (e.g., fossil fuelers Charles Koch and ExxonMobil Foundations and "dark money" Donors Fund and Donors Capital Fund) have funneled funds to the conservative think tanks they support, for example, the American Enterprise Institute and to allied business groups (e.g., American Chamber of Commerce) (Faber 2023; Faber and Vestergaard 2022).

What Faber (2023) failed to note has been the joining of the Silicon Valley information platform capitalists with fossil and finance capitalists in this dominant capitalist class project. Above, I noted the functional interdependency between the accumulation of data capital by social media platforms and the Trumpist movement. Other new connections among these three capitalist class factions and Trumpism are becoming evident. Given Trump's love affair with the fossil fuel industry, the vast majority of new projects to power the data centers of information capital will come from fossil fuels, evident when Trump's "energy czar" claimed that the "US will lose the 'AI arms race' [against China] without fossil fuels" (Smyth and Chu 2025). Also, Silicon Valley information and technology companies like (Musk's) Space X, Palantir, and Anduril hope to extract political favors from Trump support of their new alliance of

AI-related surveillance and space ventures with smaller AI firms (e.g., Smart AI) to develop new "smart," more "agile" military technologies to replace lucrative defense contracts previously monopolized by "prime" defense contractors like Boeing and Lockheed Martin (Kinder and Hammond 2024).

Thus, in the course of accession of Trump and his movement to state power, this class project is becoming consolidated, and it makes sense to term this complex as the "Fossil, Information, and Finance" (FIF) complex. This amassing of institutionalized corporate and political power is closely associated with the current MAGA-dominated Republican Party, although a haze of secrecy obscures the flow of funding and influence. Huge donations by ultra-conservative billionaires and corporations in fossil fuel, information platform, and finance industries have flowed into the 2024 electoral campaign of Trump and other MAGA politicians, although Harris' campaign also benefited to a far lesser extent (Owram and Allison 2024). It is diagnostic that the FIF network of fossil capitalists, their finance capitalist backers, and their paid ideologists has been the institutional epicenter of the climate denialism/delayism industry, amply assisted by information platform social media corporations (Brulle 2021).

The most influential corporate-supported think tanks in the FIF complex are the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Heritage Foundation (HF), which put forward "model laws" that favor corporate interests, with a recent special proclivity for protecting extractive/fossil and finance capital, and then pressure pliable MAGA-dominated state legislatures to adopt these bills (Earthjustice 2024; Greenpeace 2023). ALEC has spearheaded the new institutionalized legal and political assault on voting rights and legal rights to engage in non-violent protest against corporate incursions on the living space and environments of local communities of working-class residents and people of color – an assault backed up by police violence, such as that perpetrated by the Atlanta police against the "forest protectors," and abetted by the APF.

Not only was Georgia's 2017 law against domestic terrorism part of the reaction by this corporate alliance against the growing environmental movement, but so also were ALEC's model laws criminalizing non-violent protests by environmentalists against so-called "critical infrastructure" with long prison sentences that it has proposed and disseminated. ALEC's influence on conservative state legislators has led to 19 states passing such laws since 2017 (Greenpeace 2023: 2).

It is also worth noting that ALEC has put forward its own model "Anti-ESG bills" which when passed into law prohibit divestment of fossil fuels from government employees' pension funds, and has successfully lobbied conservative state legislative majorities to pass them into law in twelve states, at the last count (Siegel et al. 2024: 7, 12, 14–25, 41).[5]

Core members of the FIF complex also provide major financial support for one of the most reactionary occupations in the USA: local police. Undertaking a network analysis of police funding, Armstrong and Seidman (2020) find that "Oil and gas companies, private utilities, and financial institutions that bankroll fossil fuels are all big backers of police foundations, which privately raise money to buy weapons, equipment and surveillance technology for police departments."

The FIF complex has thus joined the MAGA movement in the latter's campaign to suppress the environmentalist movement. What about MAGA's resentments against other "enemies of the people"? Big Capital is largely (with important exceptions) either indifferent or outrightly antagonistic to other groups that MAGA extremists deem enemies of "the people," such as independent women, "liberals" (e.g., "woke" climate scientists and academics), poor people of color, LGBTQ people, the disabled, and other supposedly undeserving social "inferiors" whose actions (or very existence) pose existential dangers to white and male heterosexual supremacies.

The MAGA movement's attacks against this movement and its allies take the form of veiled racist, sexist, and xenophobic threats as well as physical and legal violence aimed at "hoodlums in the street," "antifa," "anarchists," "woke capitalists," environmentalists seen as perpetrators of "domestic terrorism," and at "vote-stealers" engaged in "massive voter fraud." My argument is that this particular set of discursive targets for venom is not accidental, but constitutes the monstrous figures in the Trumpist fantasized bestiary of "the enemies of the people." It remains to be seen how the real people fantasized in this bestiary will be targeted once Trump becomes president.

Why, then, has the FIF complex allied itself so avidly and closely with the Trumpist counterrevolution?

AN EXISTENTIAL BET: WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR CAPITAL? FOR EVERYONE ELSE?

Consider a thought experiment: an existential bet is placed by collective actors based on a coin toss whose outcome – head or tails – will only be known in 2050, when most nation-states have pledged to be at "net-zero" in terms of their fossil fuel emissions.

Heads up: The US extraction/fossil industry continues to extract oil, methane, and coal from the ground and deep underseas, and to sell these commodities at a profit to utilities, national energy companies and ultimately consumers with the industry's financing backed by US investment banks, hedge funds, and pension funds. These efforts at "business as usual" are supported by MAGA abetted by the pro-fossil rants of MAGA's house intellectuals (paid climate denialist influencers, Fox News pundits, and bots) excoriating "woke environ-

mentalists" and "domestic terrorists" for being "threats to the American way of life." Trump's and Vance's aggressive "drill, baby, drill" policies open up new subsurface frontiers for extraction, while MAGA rants against the enemy are magnified millions of times over by "likes" and algorithmic "engagements" on Facebook, X/Twitter, TruthSocial, and other platforms.

Increased fossil fuel extractions are accelerated by huge increases in fossil fuel consumption, for example, huge energetic wastage from US imperial wars and from fossil energy-driven AI server farms owned by information platforms (Jafari et al. 2024). In consequence, greenhouse gas emissions continue to drastically rise. This leads rapidly to increasingly catastrophic climate change beyond an average 2°C increase in global average temperatures (IPCC 2018) to 3°C or higher. This has major financial and legal implications, and leads to massive human suffering.

Biodiversity, currently already in decline, crashes. Droughts and floods take tolls on food provisioning, and regions too hot to be livable for humans expand (IPCC 2018). Deaths of millions through starvation, heat, and epidemic diseases (e.g., cholera) brought on by climate disasters become increasingly likely with every passing decade. However, fossil fuel corporations maintain their profits, amped even higher by the carbon-intensive weaponry (jet aircraft, armaments) expended against US enemies in new imperial wars or proxy wars fought over land, food, and water. Banks and hedge funds backstopping the industry continue to profit. Social media platform corporations rake in revenues and promote more anxieties and hatred toward national enemies, while their affiliated weapons and surveillance holdings flourish.

Within two to three decades, with climate catastrophe too prevalent for even capital to ignore, phantasmic schemes of phony carbon-offset markets, unworkable Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCAS) technologies, and destabilizing geoengineering schemes (e.g., "Stratospheric Aerosol Injection") are trotted out, tried experimentally, and kept in place long after it is clear they are failures; yet much will be made of them by the industry because "Exxon," too, "is working to curb climate change." All these useless (and probably harmful) schemes buy time to implement ever more radical extraction technologies to recover yet more oil, gas, and coal from new subsurface terrestrial and oceanic frontiers, and to increase the rate of extraction, before extraction closes down. Messages pushing new corporate geo-engineered techno-fixes proliferate on social media platforms. Old and new "enemies of the people" including more environmentalists are blamed for sabotaging these grand climate experiments that endanger the lives of millions. Accelerated capital accumulation continues for the social media platforms that fuel the conspiracy theorists, for fossil fuel corporations' extreme extraction projects, and for the US investment banks underwriting and lending speculative capital to back up these risky projects.

Eventually, however, after political pressures and climatic catastrophes mount, state political systems (domestic and international) step in, "call the bet," and fossil fuel extraction stops. After an immense drawdown of oil, gas, and coal deposits, "reserves" left untapped "in the ground" are drastically devalued and "written off" by markets, leading to immensely large state subsidies to fossil, finance and allied industries that might forestall a burgeoning global liquidity crisis – or might not.

Nonetheless, in this "heads up" scenario, new capitalist enterprises emerge to take advantage of global warming. Tourism across the new Arctic Northern Passage free of winter ice between Copenhagen and Murmansk flourishes. Nickel and other mining corporations strike a bonanza opening up virgin mineral deposits in a deglaciered Greenland. Private corporate chains of fire services for the elites caught up in California wildfires become a growing industry (Funk 2015). The private real-estate property insurance industry experiences a shake-out, and concentrates its underwriting exclusively on the property of the ultra-wealthy, while the re-insurance industry centered in the City of London and Switzerland drastically restructures, a process already underway (Frank and E & E News 2023).

Considerably downsized, capitalism survives, and a far more austere and selective definition of modernity, and of which locales in the global economy have access to it, prevails. Yet year-over-year, greenhouse gas emissions rise, global air and ocean temperatures increase, and climate disasters mount up in intensity and frequency, with massive economic damages to arable land, infrastructure, personal property, and capitalist enterprises. This confluence of changes would scale up leading to many deaths and endangering the survival of hundreds of millions, and even billions, of the global vulnerable population.

Tails up: Given that renewable energy production combined with battery backup have proven to be a technologically and financially viable alternative to fossil fuels, the US fossil fuel industry is required – by markets or politics – to stop its fossil extractions. What remains in the ground as proprietary corporate "reserves" immediately becomes "stranded assets" – losses that have to be written off completely in fossil corporations' bottom lines. The write-off of these assets would mean their owners' rapid insolvency and complete loss of future profits. This implies the sudden end of the industry. Because so much of the profits for the finance industry depend upon fossil extraction, this cessation of fossil fuel extraction would also imply a crash in the economic value of the banks, hedge funds and pension funds which have invested in these corporations. The enormous fossil energy demands imposed by AI and social media platforms would also not be met, and these operations would rapidly shut down.

Devaluation would extend beyond that of the stranded assets of fossil reserves as a severe financial shock to agribusiness, as this industry's universal addiction

to fossil-based fertilizers would have to end, and there would be a desperate search for substitutes. Major food shortages within agro-industry would occur during the period of adjustment, leading to acute hunger and starvation for millions of people. The loss of fossil fuel-intensive production of cement and steel as building materials would lead to major disruptions in the construction sector. The possibility of a deep global crisis of capitalist profitability, perhaps insoluble, cannot be ruled out.

Still, in this "tails up" outcome of the coin flip, crucially, stopping fossil emissions would at first slow the rate of climate change, then after "the next several decades" (NASA Earth Observatory 2007), average global temperatures would stop rising, then begin to decline. With Earth surface temperatures at this inflection point at their highest in recorded history, climate disasters (e.g., droughts, floods) would continue at high levels but gradually decrease in frequency and intensity.

Lost fossil energy use would be made up through a sudden surge in development of renewable energy industries, and rapid deployment of known technologies of climate adaptation like building weatherization. There would be an urgent shift toward agroecological farming to substitute for the wrenching loss of fossil-based fertilizers to agriculture. Although climate-related disasters would continue, an eventual stable equilibrium between human energy consumption and planetary requirements for life would be reached. What matters most, Earth's climate would stabilize, and processes of ecological recuperation dependent on it (e.g., afforestation) would eventually resume. How soon this transition might and could occur then depends on two factors, and then there is also the stinger in the scorpion's tail.

First, the current global economic reality. The alternative financial and technical arrangements for the production and trade in renewable energy already exist, with its per-unit production costs projected to go down even further (currently already below fossil fuels cost) as the quantity of production scales up. China has become the world-shaping major exporter of solar panels at falling prices so low that even the least developed global Southern states are now able to finance and install them, as, for example, Pakistan is presently doing with large imports of cheap Chinese solar panels, having thereby increased its energy-generating capacity in 2024 alone by 30 percent (Shield 2024). Short of a catastrophic US war against China, there is no reason why this process will not continue, and accelerate.

Second, the current US domestic real trend. The political movement around climate justice is expanding in its number of participants, their capacities and strategies, and the movement's public presence has increasingly penetrated domestic politics in the USA (and the EU and much of the rest of the world). More of the US population is receptive to its messages. Even given the dominant conservative ideology riddled with climate denialism and "delayism,"

social mediatized resentments and fears, and MAGA bravado, 54 percent of the US population agree that anthropogenic climate change is occurring, while 62 percent of the US population believe that corporations have the most responsibility to act on climate change, followed by 59 percent who believe that the US government does (Energy Policy Institute 2024). Short of this movement being actively repressed by the MAGA movement in power, anti-capitalist sentiments in the USA are crystallizing around this movement.

Finally, the scorpion's stinger aimed at the capitalist body politic. The fixed sunken costs of extracting energy from the sun and wind using renewable technologies are low, and there are no additional marginal costs to the energy supplier which can rationally be passed on to the energy consumer. In political economy terms, there are no additional increments in labor time (or in surplus value) required to produce additional energy units beyond the initial labor of building infrastructure (solar arrays, for example). Unlike for fossil fuels, the renewable energy industry is not profitable over the long term for investment by any capitalist, that is, by any member of a class dependent upon the accumulation of surplus value and therefore of capital (Malm and Carton 2024: 101–44).

However, the low cost of renewable energy installation, and its status as a "free gift from nature" once the solar panels and wind turbines are installed and battery backups are in place makes it highly attractive to anyone who is not a capitalist or an egoistic individualist in thrall to fossil fuel modernity. Democratically controlled public/state ownership of an industry that shows no profit, thus no wealth accumulation, and is unattractive to capital, would be essential, and widely popular, thus threatening to the capitalist class as a whole.

THE PARANOID BESTIARY OF THE TRUMPIST COUNTERREVOLUTION

Returning to the existential bet, it should be clear that the fossil fuel industry, the finance industry, and the information platforms' social media have already, consistently, placed their bets on "heads up" – accumulation of fossil capital pell-mell through extractions until the wells run dry. The problem is, however. that the outcome of the toss of the coin is not completely up to these industries' capitalists, despite their enormous wealth. An increasingly large number of the US population is "betting" on "tails up" renewables, have no vested economic interest in the fossil industry, while an increasing number are hostile to its confiscation of their own land, water, and air. And they have begun mobilizing in that direction.

To the Trumpists, this sounds the alarm about the evils they see being perpetrated by the monstrous creatures in their bestiary of national "enemies" – phantasms they themselves have brought to life. First, there are "government bureaucrats" of the "deep state" engaged in "corruption" and "wasteful

spending" for "special interests," like vaccine manufacturers (e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scientists); Black women in need of prenatal healthcare (e.g., Center for Medicaid Services), or "environmentalist crazies" and the "climate change industry" in need of research on climate or pandemics (e.g., CDC, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) scientists). All these "bureaucrats" have to go, so that the government deficit can be lowered, the government can "live within its budget like any business," and further tax breaks can be targeted toward large capitalist "entrepreneurs."

Then there is the monster, "woke liberals." Given the new economics of renewables, these are an increasing number of people in the middle classes who are buying renewable energy systems (e.g., rooftop solar) for homes and small businesses, advocating for their installation on government buildings, and getting rid of fossil fuel appliances and vehicles. Their consumption must be neutralized.

Then for Trumpists, there are the violent monsters, "domestic terrorists" and "militant anarchists": the environmentalists who are actively organizing against increased fossil fuel adoption and seeking to close it down. Elderly climate activists are targeting banks investing in fossil fuels and getting arrested in non-violent sit-ins in bank headquarters, and writing "nasty" mass emails to fossil CEOs (Third Act 2024). White environmentalists are working with American Indian tribes to challenge pipeline construction through tribal lands and chaining themselves to pipeline construction equipment and valves in West Virginia and elsewhere (Lahkani and Beaumont 2024).

Other figures in the bestiary imagined by Trump and his leading demagogues (e.g., on Fox News) arise in sensationalized narratives that proliferate in the social media of MAGA followers. These take the form of threatening, shape-changing, debased creatures: Black "street hoodlums" in the BLM movement and their violent white antifa allies. In these fantasies, environmentalist "tree huggers" in Atlanta mysteriously morph into antifa, starting forest fires against righteous white evangelicals in rural Oregon (Seymour 2024: 54–7), even as they imaginatively reappear as Trump's "radical left people," violently allied with BLM "criminals" threatening peaceful whites and local police in cities across the USA (Goff and McCarthy 2022).

Alarming also to the Trumpists, the fossil fuel industry and its allies, are "woke capitalist" chimeras: those large- and small-scale investors who divest from fossil fuels. Pension fund managers managing billions of dollars are divesting from fossil fuels – not only on environmental but also on financial and legal grounds.[6] Government workers are demanding their retirement contributions be in fossil-free ("ESG") pension funds. Trumpists in majority Republican states attack these woke capitalists and government workers with

anti-ESG bills passed by the legislatures they control, and in Congress publicly target and humiliate Wall Street woke capitalists like BlackRock, pushing them successfully to repudiate ESG investing (Kerber 2025).

But woke capitalists have already run wild! So far a divestment movement of 1500 liberal philanthropic, faith-based, and educational institutions, pension funds, and governments have committed to divesting $39 trillion in fossil fuel holdings (Pope 2022). Worse yet, the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022 provides generous US government funding for renewable energy buildout and other climate-amelioration measures by corporations and organized communities (e.g., Indigenous tribes) in predominantly conservative red states in the USA. While neither the philanthropic movement nor corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking advantage of IRA funding are part of the new environmental movement, their activities nonetheless alarm the Trumpist movement and the FIF complex.

While this divestment has happened, however, in the past seven years (2016–22), four US investment banks (Citibank, JP Morgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Bank of America) have underwritten almost $1.4 trillion in fossil fuel investments (Rainforest Alliance et al. 2023). Ergo, we know something big is unraveling.

CONCLUSION: THE SPECTER HAUNTING BIG CAPITAL

This thought experiment makes a strong case for why the long-term upper-class project since the 1970s to maintain and enhance capitalist accumulation has shifted itself to ally with and integrated with the Trumpist movement. Given the focus in this chapter on fossil capital, the attractions for it mobilizing its state connections to become one of several forms of political capitalism have become vulgarly obvious, judging from the public quid pro quo by Trump to fossil fuel CEOs he assembled in Mar-A-Lago in May 2024, in effect: "pay your $1 billion donation to my campaign fund, and my executive orders and political appointees will allow you to 'drill baby drill!'" (Dawsey and Joselow 2024).

Even for large fossil capitalists and allied capitalists, politics are dangerous, especially when they play out – as the politics of renewable energy do – throughout a differentiated global economic system shaped by US neoliberalism but now largely beyond their direct control. While the production of solar energy panels has been monopolized by the US national enemy – China – the adoption of renewable energy is increasing rapidly across domestic and foreign spaces, despite the fossil industry's efforts to stifle its development.

As a competitor to the fossil fuel industry, the renewable energy industry would strand the subsurface assets of the US fossil fuel industry, thus destroying it, and massively devalue the US finance industry, information technology industries, agro-industry, and much of the construction industry, at a minimum. This is a nightmarish future for capitalism, because while renewable energy

cannot be easily commodified in ways that render it profitable for the capitalist, it still has enormous use value, indeed survival value, for everyone else. And it is its astounding new use value that the new environmental movement is seeking to democratically gain access to and direct in new forms of economy outside the control of FIF capital.

To choke off this process, this movement and its allies have to be suppressed by the state, as the domestic terrorism, critical infrastructure, and anti-ESG laws enacted in many US states seek to do. In addition to these laws, MAGA and its capitalist allies must neutralize the domestic enemies ganging up on them (environmentalists, Black urban activists, Latinx immigrants, Muslims, American Indians, etc.) as vote-stealers, whose threat can be curtailed by voter ID laws, gerrymandering, and MAGA-based lawsuits accusing antagonists of perpetrating massive voter fraud.

Ultimately, state violence must "enforce the law" – hence local police forces subsidized by fossil fuel and finance industries are to be mobilized to enforce these laws against the congeries of dangerous enemies. But in the Trumpist dystopia even local police may be insufficient to "teach these people a lesson." Here is, I submit, another motive for the new alliance between the FIF capitalist complex and the Trumpist movement. If a widespread reign of terror over these radicals – to disperse them, to cow them – proves necessary to preserve the fossil fuel economy, then so be it. Large FIF capitalists are content to ally with Trump in his campaign to keep the MAGA base worked up in its rage against the "enemies of the people," while holding this rage in reserve. It can always be let loose, and Trump is the man to do so. After all, as he said of the thuggish Proud Boys: "Stand back, and stand by."

EPILOGUE: THE DIALECTIC OF TWO KINDS OF ACCUMULATION

This chapter reconstructs the five-decade-long project of class warfare by dominant US finance, fossil and information capitalist classes to sustain their capital accumulation against the working classes of the USA, and against the rival foreign capitalist formations arising from the massive neoliberal-based proletarianizations of Eurasian and global Southern rural populations (Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, South African, etc.). This project to maintain US capitalism's rate of profit after the 1960s, in addition to its domestic strategies (deindustrialization, attacks on organized labor) both initiated and reacted to US and foreign fossil capital's forays into new natural frontiers in which fossil and mineral extraction operations "processed" peripheral ecological systems into commoditized fossil fuels and industrial minerals, on the one hand, and into massive concentrations of toxins, on the other. Above all, deposits of these toxins lead to another kind of accumulation – that of the greenhouse gases that are rendering the Earth increasingly unlivable to the human population and to

non-human species on which it depends. The most pertinent proposition of this epilogue eight months after Trump's ascent to power is that the dialectical process that sets the accelerated accumulation of fossil and finance capital against the accelerated accumulation of greenhouse gases continues, and the contradictions it engenders will become increasingly catastrophic.

This chapter began by recounting the waning of US industrial capital's profits in the late 1970s, and presented a historical analysis of that accumulation project that culminated in the integration of FIF large capital into MAGA that led up to Trump's win and inauguration in late January 2025. Throughout the life of this project from the 1980s to 2024, it was defined by its economic, physical, and symbolic violence toward workers. Since its alliance with MAGA ensconced in the US state since early 2025, this project has scaled up its physical and economic violence against national "enemies" and their performative humiliation by cruelty – as in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Los Angeles neighborhoods, and mass firings of government workers. No FIF capitalists have opposed it.

Domestically, while this project in its new alliance with Trump insinuates AI algorithms into the workplace to supplant and dispossess US skilled workers, it deploys a racialized, xenophobic, and misogynist violence against the US working class to expropriate surplus value from it. It works with Trump to destroy organized labor (e.g., 1 million government workers have lost collective bargaining rights so far in 2025). It terrorizes immigrant workers with seizures, imprisonment, and torture to disrupt the most militant sectors of organized labor (e.g., healthcare). It converts their use values as tens of thousands of "undocumented" workers into surplus value as "detainees" for the booming private prison industry. It decreases federal minimum wages for federal contract workers. It imposes labor discipline by cuts in SNAP (food stamp) payments and Medicaid health for millions of workers – large proportions of whom are people of color, women, and elderly. It deprives millions of working women of reproductive care and abortions to drive them back "home" into childbearing.

With respect to the rest of the world, the MAGA state with its billionaire FIF capitalists in tow now shows extraordinary aggression as Trump imposes, withdraws, then reimposes tariffs that threaten the destruction of national industries of perceived "foreign enemies" and the widescale pauperization of their workers, while his tariff dithering intervenes in the national sovereignties of US rivals (such as the EU for its Digital Services Act applied to Meta and X). He threatens to annex Greenland, Canada, Mexico, and Panama by force. The Trump entourage enriches his corporate allies in the fossil, finance, information, armament, and surveillance industries by government contracts that provision Israel in its genocide against Palestinians, while the US military

assists Israel Defense Forces (IDF) targeting of Palestine and domination of the Middle East.

Most of this is not new. The Biden administration also fattened information, armament, and surveillance corporates with billions for weapons and intelligence aid for the IDF that helped it pulverize Gaza, kill tens of thousands of Palestinians, and make the rest of Gaza unlivable for its residents from 2023 to 2025. Biden from 2021 to 2023 supported extreme oil and gas extraction projects under political pressure from FIF capitalists, and Trump has only made the transactional basis for their support more explicit. Gifts and political contributions flow in one direction; permits and subsidies for liquefied natural gas refineries flow in the other.

As in the thought experiment described above, FIF capitalists have used their political influence to gain Trump's support for the "Heads up" option to accelerate indefinite fossil extraction on a finite planet – much as they did with Obama and Biden. The violence is now merely being more publicly perpetrated and celebrated with performative cruelties that attract more "eyeballs" than it did previously.

"Juice up the profits, triage the planet!" appears to be the call of the age.

NOTES

1. Similar arguments apply about the seizure of surplus value from workers who are women, or who are not US legal citizens, but cannot be explored here.
2. Large fossil, information, and finance capitalists have also identified new foreign adversaries for Trump's aggressive foreign policy to target. Since 2015 and Obama's "turn toward Asia" (viz. the failed Trans-Pacific Partnership), leading large capitalists and their clientele "policy planning groups" (e.g., Council of Foreign Relations) (Domhoff 2022) have aggressively targeted new foreign enemies in China and the European Union, the first accused of "unfair competition" and "theft of American intellectual property," the second of too rigorously restricting US exports and intellectual property rights (e.g., those of US genetically modified organisms (GMO) agro-input firms and information platforms like X and Facebook).
3. Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO).
4. In the EU and the UK, unlike the USA, information platforms like Facebook and X/Twitter face stringent regulations around content moderation, fact-checking, and elimination of harmful expression (e.g., hateful speech, death threats, doxing) – a major incentive for Silicon Valley billionaires (Musk, Zuckerberg, etc.) to get Trump to put aggressive pressure on EU and UK states to eliminate these regulations for US-based social media platforms (Espinoza and Foy 2025).
5. "ESG" stands for funds in which investments are filtered by "environmental" criteria, for example, being fossil-free; "social" criteria such as not investing in private prisons; and "governance" criteria, such as making sure that corporations that discriminate against women in hiring and promotion are excluded from the

fund. “Anti-ESG” laws prohibit such investments in state government-controlled pension funds.

6. Financial: Pension fund managers have found that funds with stocks only in fossil fuels have lower long-term returns than funds that exclude fossil fuel stocks (Herzfeld 2023: 6, 13–14). Legal: there are thousands of lawsuits in the USA suing the fossil fuel industry for liability for climate-related damages, and for deceiving the public for decades about its reality (Herzfeld 2023: 7).

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Notes on Contributors

Walden Bello is a senior research fellow and former Professor at the Sociology Department of SUNY Binghamton, USA, and a founding editor of *Focus on the Global South*. Designated "my favorite no-nonsense revolutionary" by Naomi Klein, he is also the recipient of the 2003 Right Livelihood Award (aka Alternative Nobel Prize); named Outstanding Public Scholar by the International Studies Association (2008); conferred the title of "Most Distinguished Defender of Human Rights" by Amnesty International Philippines (2023); author or co-author of 26 books, including *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right* (Fernwood, 2019).

Benoît Coquard is a sociology researcher at INRAE, France. He conducts ethnographic surveys in the deindustrialized countryside, studying class relations and the collective consciousness of the rural working classes in France. He recently published *Ceux qui restent. Faire sa vie dans les campagnes en déclin* (Ed. La Découverte, 2022).

Ábel Csathó is a sociologist and economist at TARKI Social Research Institute in Budapest, Hungary. His research interests include social stratification and mobility and health inequalities. As a member of the European Social Policy Analyst Network, he also works on the evaluation of specific policy areas, such as healthcare, poverty, and disabilities, while as national team member of Euromod, he participates in tax-benefit microsimulations. He also lectures in Statistics and Social Stratification at the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest.

Marc Edelman is Professor in Cultural Anthropology at CUNY Graduate Center and Hunter College, USA. He has worked for more than three decades on rural development issues, agrarian history, and peasant and farmer movements, mostly but not only in Latin America. He has also published extensively on the rise of the right in the USA. Edelman has taught or been a visiting researcher at Yale, Fordham, Princeton, Columbia, the Institute for Advanced Study, and the universities of Illinois, Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and Costa Rica, and for briefer periods at Wageningen (the Netherlands), Roskilde (Denmark), and the Universidad del Cauca (Colombia), among others. His last book, *Peasant Politics of the 21st Century: Transnational Social Movements and Agrarian Change*, was published by Cornell University Press (2024).

Ewald Engelen is Professor of Financial Geography at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He has published on economic democracy, the political economy of pension funds, financialization and banking reform. He doubles

as a public intellectual, with interventions on current affairs in both Dutch and English. His last book (in Dutch) is on European farmer protests, *Boze burgers en boeren: autopsie van een tijdperk, Bot uitgevers* (Leiden, 2023).

Volodymyr Ishchenko taught sociology at several Kiev universities and was active in the Ukrainian new left before being forced to leave the country. Currently, he is a researcher at the Free University in Berlin. His writing has appeared in the *Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *Jacobin*, and *New Left Review*. His book *Towards the Abyss: From Maidan to War* was published by Verso in 2024.

Don Kalb is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Norway, formerly at Central European University, Budapest; and director of the GRIP program on global inequality (UiB/International Science Council, Paris). His book *Value and Worthlessness: The Rise of the Populist Right and Other Disruptions in the Anthropology of Capitalism* was published by Berghahn in 2025. Kalb has published widely on capital, class, and reactionary populism. He has been a visiting Professor at the European University Institute, Florence; CUNY Graduate Center, New York; the Max Planck Institute for social anthropology, Halle; the Fudan Center of Advanced Studies, Shanghai; the University of Melbourne; and the University of Vienna. He is the founding editor of *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology.*

Jeremy Morris is a political anthropologist and Professor in Russian and Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. Formerly he was Co-director of the Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies at the University of Birmingham. His latest book, *Everyday Politics in Russia: From Resentment to Resistance* was published by Bloomsbury in 2025.

Don Nonini is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA. His research areas are in the political economy of Chinese diasporas of Southeast Asia and of racial and class politics in the southern United States. In these areas, he is the author or co-author of four books, the editor or co-editor of four other books, and the author of numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. His most recent book is *Food Activism Today: Sustainability, Climate Change, and Social Justice*, with Dorothy Holland (New York University Press, 2024). He is currently writing a new book on racial capitalism and its eco-politics.

Petra Rethmann is Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University, Toronto, Canada. She is currently working on a book on the future of liberalism that asks about its supposed collapse and decline, and what could possibly be done about it. Petra has held visiting professorships at the University of Chicago, University of St. Petersburg, University of Helsinki, University of Cape Town, University of Tokyo, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies.

Gábor Scheiring is Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics at Georgetown University, Qatar. He was recently a visiting Fellow at Harvard University's Center for European Studies and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge and at Bocconi University, Milan. His research explores the political economy and lived experiences of contemporary economic transformations through quantitative, qualitative, and comparative methods. His book, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy* (Palgrave, 2020), won the BASEES 2021 Book Award. As a member of the Hungarian Parliament (2010–14), he advocated for a socially just transition to sustainability.

Svati Shah is Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass). USA. They also serve as a Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Development at the University of Pretoria, and as an affiliated researcher in the Centre for Gender Studies (SKOK) and the Global Research Program on Inequality (GRIP) at the University of Bergen. Their work examines questions of sexuality and gender in relation to class, racialization, caste, and political economy in India. Their first monograph, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (Duke University Press, 2014) was an ethnography of sex work, migration, and urban informal economies in India. Their upcoming second monograph is based on long-term ethnography of radical social movements in India, including left, queer, transgender, and autonomous feminist movements.

Julia Soul is a researcher at the Labor Research Center in the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research in Argentina. She has focused on labor anthropology and conducted research on industrial communities, labor organizing, and transnationalization. She has published *SOMISEROS*: *La constitución y el devenir de un grupo obrero desde una perspectiva socioantropológica* (Editorial Prohistoria, 2015) as well as contributions in edited books and international journals, such as *Dialectical Anthropology*, *Nueva Antropología*, *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología del Trabajo*, and *Sociologia del Lavoro*.

Christi van der Westhuizen is a Professor of Sociology at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and recently a visiting Professor at Leipzig University, Germany. Her monographs are *White Power & the Rise and Fall of the National Party* (Zebra Press, 2007) and *Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in Postapartheid South Africa* (University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2017). Her books as co-editor are *The D-Word: Perspectives on Democracy in Tumultuous Times* (Mandela University Press, 2023) and the *Routledge Handbook of Critical Studies in Whiteness* (2022).

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