

Can Twenty-First Century Fascism Resolve the Crisis of Global Capitalism?

William I. Robinson,

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“I can tell you that I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump,” warned U.S. president Donald Trump this past March, in defending his contrived declaration of a national emergency along the U.S.-Mexico border. “I have the tough people, but they don’t play it tough – until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad.”

The threat to use state violence against opponents should be lost on no one. The increasing influence around the world of neo-fascist, authoritarian, and rightwing populist parties and movements, symbolized above all by Trumpism in the United States, has sparked a flurry of debate on whether fascism is again on the rise.

Fascism, whether in its classical twentieth century form or possible variants of 21st century neo-fascism, is *a particular response to capitalist crisis*, such as that of the 1930s and the one that began with the financial meltdown of 2008.

Global capitalism is facing an organic crisis, involving an intractable structural dimension, that of overaccumulation, and a political dimension, that of legitimacy or hegemony that is approaching a general crisis of capitalist rule.

This unprecedented crisis of global capitalism has resulted in a sharp polarization around the world between insurgent left and popular forces, on the one hand, and an insurgent far right, on the other, at whose fringe are openly fascist tendencies. The class character of fascism remains the same in the 21st century as it was in the 20th – a project to rescue capital from this organic crisis – but the particular historical character of world capitalism and of its crisis is substantially different at this time than in the previous century.

The Crisis of Global Capitalism and Global Police State

Capital responded to the structural crisis of the 1970s by going global, which paved the way for a qualitatively new transnational or global phase of world capitalism characterized by the rise of truly transnational capital and a globally integrated production and financial system.

By going global, an emerging transnational capitalist class (TCC) sought to break free of nation-state constraints to profit making and to shift the correlation of class and social forces worldwide in its favor.

Globalization may have resolved the crisis of the 1970s but it generated the conditions for a new, and deeper, crisis of overaccumulation in the new century. By freeing capital from nation-state regulation and redistribution, globalization resulted in unprecedented social polarization worldwide. According to OXFAM, in 2015 just one percent of humanity owned

over half of the world's wealth and the top 20 percent own 94.5 of that wealth, while the remaining 80 percent must make due with just 4.5 percent.

This extreme concentration of the planet's wealth in the hands of the few and the accelerated impoverishment and dispossession of the majority means that the TCC cannot find productive outlets to unload enormous amounts of surplus it has accumulated. The Great Recession marked the onset of a deep structural crisis of overaccumulation, which refers to accumulated capital that cannot find outlets for profitable reinvestment.

Neo-liberal states have turned to several interrelated mechanisms in recent years to sustain accumulation in the face of stagnation. One is debt-driven growth. A second, closely related, is the reconfiguration of public finance through austerity, bailouts, corporate subsidies, and deficit spending as governments transfer wealth directly and indirectly from working people to the TCC. A third is an escalation of financial speculation. A fourth has been ongoing waves of investment in the over-valued tech sector, which is now at the cutting edge of capitalist globalization and is driving the digitalization of the entire global economy.

But none of these mechanisms can resolve the crisis of overaccumulation – and of legitimacy – in the long run. Many among the TCC and their political agents fear that the crisis will lead to an uncontrollable revolt from below. Unprecedented global inequalities can only be sustained by ever more repressive and ubiquitous systems of social control and repression. There is a convergence around the system's political need for social control and its economic need to perpetuate accumulation.

The TCC has acquired a vested interest in war, conflict, and repression as means of accumulation. The global police state refers to the ever more omnipresent systems of mass social control, repression and warfare promoted by the ruling groups to contain the real and the potential rebellion of the global working class and surplus humanity. But it also refers to how the global economy is itself based more and more on the development and deployment of these systems of warfare, social control, and repression simply as a means of making profit and continuing to accumulate capital in the face of stagnation – what I term *militarized accumulation*, or *accumulation by repression*.

The bogus wars on drugs and terrorism, the undeclared wars on immigrants, refugees and gangs (and poor, dark-skinned, and working-class youth more generally), the construction of border walls and immigrant detention centers, the spread of prison-industrial complexes, deportation regimes, and the expansion of police, military, and other security apparatuses, are major sources of state-organized profit making.

The TCC and state apparatuses at its disposal attempt to resolve both the economic crisis of overaccumulation *and* to manage the political conditions of that crisis, that is, the spread of global revolt and the potential – not yet realized – of that global revolt to overthrow the system. Hence there is a built-in war drive to the current course of capitalist globalization. Historically wars have pulled the capitalist system out of crisis while they have also served to deflect attention from political tensions and problems of legitimacy.

The global police state and 21st century fascism are interwoven. The global police state generates conditions propitious to the ascendance of fascist projects.

Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Fascism

Fascism in the 20th century involved the fusion of reactionary political power with *national* capital. By contrast, 21st century fascism involves the fusion of *transnational* capital with reactionary and repressive political power in the state – an expression of the dictatorship of transnational capital.

In addition, the fascist projects that came to power in the 1930s in Germany, Italy, and Spain, as well as those that vied unsuccessfully to win power elsewhere, had as a fundamental objective crushing powerful working class and socialist movements. But in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, the left and the organized working class are now at a historically weak point. In these cases, twentieth century fascism appears to be a *preemptive* strike at working classes and at the spread of mass resistance through the expansion of a global police state.

Moreover, the global police state is centrally aimed at *coercive exclusion* of surplus humanity. The mechanisms of coercive exclusion include mass incarceration and the spread of prison-industrial complexes, pervasive policing, anti-immigrant legislation and deportation regimes, gated communities and ghettos controlled by armies of private security guards and technologically advanced surveillance systems, ubiquitous, often paramilitarized policing, “non-lethal” crowd control methods, and mobilization of the culture industries and state ideological apparatuses to dehumanize victims of global capitalism as dangerous, depraved, and culturally degenerate.

The Social Bases of 21st Century Fascism

The core social base of twentieth century fascism was the middle classes and the petty-bourgeoisie, a significant portion of the population that was experiencing a destabilization of their status and the threat of downward mobility into the ranks of the proletariat.

These strata were reduced in the cores of world capitalism to small pockets as proletarianization accelerated in the latter half of the 20th century and especially in the age of globalization. Twenty-first century fascist projects seek to organize a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class, such as white workers in the Global North and urban middle layers in the Global South, that are experiencing heightened insecurity and the specter of downward mobility and socioeconomic destabilization.

As with its 20th century predecessor, the project hinges on the psychosocial mechanism of displacing mass fear and anxiety at a time of acute capitalist crisis towards scapegoated communities, such as immigrant workers, Muslims and refugees in the United States and Europe, southern African immigrants in South Africa, Muslims and lower castes in India, Palestinians in Palestine/Israel, or the darker skinned and disproportionately impoverished population in Brazil.

Far-right forces do so through a discursive repertoire of xenophobia, mystifying ideologies, an idealized and mythical past, millennialism, a militaristic and masculinist culture that normalizes, even glamorizes war, social violence and domination, and a contempt rather than empathy for those most vulnerable. The key to this neo-fascist appeal is the promise to avert

or reverse downward mobility and social destabilization; to restore some sense of stability and security.

Twenty-first century fascism, like its 20th century predecessor, is a violently toxic mix of reactionary nationalism and racism. Yet there is a critical distinction to be made between the conjuncture of fascist projects in the last century and this century. Fascism in Germany and Italy arose at the height of nation-state capitalism and it did offer some material benefits – employment and social wages – to a portion of the working class through corporatist arrangements even as it unleashed genocide on those outside the chosen group. In this age of globalized capitalism there is little possibility in the United States or elsewhere of providing such benefits, so that the “wages of fascism” now appear to be entirely psychological.

In the regard, the ideology of 21st century fascism rests on irrationality – a promise to deliver security and restore stability that is emotive, not rational. It is a project that does not and need not distinguish between the truth and the lie. The Trump regime’s public discourse of populism and nationalism, for example, bore no relation to its actual policies. In its first year, Trumponomics involved deregulation – the virtual smashing of the regularly state – slashing social spending, dismantling what remained of the welfare state, privatizations, tax breaks to corporations and the rich, and an expansion of state subsidies to capital – in short, neo-liberalism on steroids.

In sharp distinction to this fusion of German *national* capital with the fascist state, Trumpism has sought to open up vast new opportunities for profit making inside the United States (and around the world) for *transnational* capital. The Trump White House has called for transnational investors from around the world to invest in the United States, enticed by a regressive tax reform, unprecedented deregulation, and some limited tariff walls that would benefit groups from anywhere in the world that establish operations behind them.

Finally, an essential condition for 20th and now for any 21st century fascism is the spread of fascist movements in civil society, as we are seeing around the world, and their fusion at some point with reactionary political power in the state. Twenty-first century fascism and global police state involve a triangulation of far-right, authoritarian, and neo-fascist forces in civil society, reactionary and repressive political power in the state, and transnational corporate capital.

Trumpism and Twenty-First Century Fascism

In the United States, fascist movements expanded rapidly since the turn of the century in civil society and in the political system through the right wing of the Republican Party. Trump proved to be a charismatic figure able to galvanize and embolden disparate neo-fascist forces, from white supremacists, white nationalists, militia, and neo-Nazis and Klans, to the Oath Keepers, the Patriot Movement, Christian fundamentalists, and anti-immigrant vigilante groups.

These groups began to cross-pollinate to a degree not seen in decades as they gained a toehold in the Trump White House and in state and local governments around the country. Paramilitarism spread within many of these organizations and overlapped with state repressive agencies.

Trumpism and other far-right responses to the crisis of global capitalism are a contradictory attempt to re-found state legitimacy under the destabilizing conditions of capitalist globalization.

Nation-states face a contradiction between the need to promote transnational capital accumulation in their territories and their need to achieve political legitimacy. As a result, states around the world have been experiencing spiraling crises of legitimacy that generate a bewildering and seemingly contradictory politics of crisis management that appears as schizophrenic in the literal sense of conflicting or inconsistent elements.

This schizophrenic crisis management also helps explain the resurgence of far-right and neo-fascist forces that espouse rhetoric of nationalism and protectionism even as they promote neo-liberalism. In the United States, the TCC is delighted with Trump's neo-liberal policies but divided over his brash, buffoon-like conduct and his neo-fascist political inclinations.

To paraphrase the great Prussian military strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, who famously said that "war is the extension of politics by other means," Trumpism, and to varying degrees other far-right movements around the world, were the extension of capitalist globalization by other means, namely by an expanding global police state and a neo-fascist mobilization.

Yet Trump's populism and protectionism has no policy substance; it is almost entirely symbolic – hence the significance of his fanatical "build the wall" rhetoric, symbolically essential to sustain a social base for which the state can provide little or no material bribe.

There is indeed a mounting backlash against capitalist globalization among the popular and working classes and more nationally-oriented sectors of the elite, as well as from right-wing populists, as evidenced in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the rise of right-wing populist movements throughout Europe that call for a withdrawal from globalization processes. But neo-fascist groups in civil society by themselves do not amount to fascism as a system. For fascism to emerge, these groups must fuse with capital and the state, yet the TCC has no interest in economic nationalism.

A fascist outcome to the crisis of global capitalism is not inevitable. Whether or not a fascist project manages to congeal is contingent on how the struggle among social and political forces unfolds in the coming years. To fight back against the global police state and 21st century fascism to be successful, we need to build a united front against fascism. But any strategy of broad anti-fascist alliances must foreground a revitalized Marxist critique of global capitalism and its crisis as a guide to an emancipatory working-class politics that can win over the would-be social bases of 21st century fascism.