

Twenty-First-Century Fascism: Where We Are

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Over the past decade, the world experienced a surge in far-right movements. The ghosts of the 1930s seemed to be reawakening and a neo- or post-fascist wave extending its shadow over multiple continents. It reached its peak between 2016 and 2018, with the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in the United States and Brazil and, in between, the clash between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron in France. Many far-right parties entered EU governments, and some “exceptions” came to an end, with the appearance of Alternative für Deutschland and Vox on the stage of German and Spanish politics, and the expansion of Italy’s Lega Nord under Matteo Salvini. Authoritarian, nationalist, and xenophobic governments emerged everywhere, from Vladimir Putin’s Russia to Narendra Modi’s India and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey. The world was turning dark: neofascism, post-fascism, right-wing populism? The debate over what to call it remained open, but everyone understood that fascism was now more than a realm of historical scholarship; it was once again a question on the contemporary agenda.

Most observers, including me, thought that a new economic crisis would dramatically accelerate this general tendency, and that we should be prepared for a horrible new scenario. The crisis took place: since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the planet into a global recession. But at the same time—thankfully—our calamitous diagnostic did not prevail. Of course, we remain in the middle of a global crisis, far-right movements have not disappeared, and several outcomes are still possible. Nonetheless, it is now clear that the seemingly inexorable dynamic of fascization has experienced a significant setback. The most evident sign of this change came with Trump’s defeat in November 2020.

If we look at this heterogeneous and contradictory landscape from a general perspective, not limited to a single country, the pandemic appears as the matrix of two global tendencies: a biopolitical turn and a potentially authoritarian turn. While speaking of a matrix is probably inappropriate, since these tendencies certainly preexisted, there is no doubt that the pandemic powerfully increased and accelerated them. The biopolitical turn is quite evident to everyone: governments enormously developed their control on populations, taking care of our lives—literally our physical bodies—as biological objects to be managed and protected. The future of the global economy depends on the effectiveness of these health policies, first among them a quick, large, and effective vaccination campaign. We support or criticize our governments according to their capacity to implement these health policies. But there is a second dimension of the problem, one that affects us no longer as biopolitical objects but rather as juridical and political subjects, as citizens.

This second dimension is a potentially authoritarian turn that lies in the transformation of our governments into “states of exception,” into political powers that radically limit our public and individual liberties. Of course, we accept lockdowns and restrictions ordered in the name of collective safety, but we gradually realize that these policies are changing our lifestyles, our ways of working, our forms of socialization and interaction, and that they are dramatically increasing the class differences of our societies. It is not true that we are equal in the face of the virus, since we are selectively exposed to it according to our social and economic status, and also according to our national belonging. There is no doubt that the global South is much more affected by the pandemic. This means growing inequalities at every level, and more inequalities, in turn, mean more authoritarian powers. In China, the pandemic was neutralized through despotic measures worthy of Orwellian rule. In several European countries, lockdowns and restrictions were introduced by applying anti-terrorist laws and corresponded with a significant increase in police violence.

In such a context, far-right movements may appear as good candidates to lead the authoritarian turn toward the state of exception. But, crucially, they do not offer any serious credentials to manage the biopolitical turn. As “good shepherds,” Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Le Pen and Salvini are not credible at all. In the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s terms, one could say that nobody looks at them as the embodiment of an effective “pastoral power.” This is a significant difference between the current far-right movements and classical fascism, and this goes far beyond many other cleavages related to our different historical contexts. In the 1930s, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Francisco Franco promised a future and appeared as an effective answer to the economic depression against exhausted liberal democracies that embodied, in the eyes of many people, the vestiges of a collapsed political order. Of course, this was a dangerous illusion—the effort to end unemployment by rearming and waging war led to catastrophe—but until the Second World War, their propaganda worked well enough.

This is not the case of their heirs. Trump’s, Bolsonaro’s, Modi’s, Le Pen’s, and Salvini’s answers to the pandemic consisted simply of denial, incomprehension, incompetence, and inefficiency. The first year of pandemic expanded the awareness that we are facing a global emergency requiring global answers. The traditional far-right recipes—nationalism, a return to conservative values and to national sovereignty, and the search for scapegoats—did not work at all. In Italy, Salvini, the charismatic leader of the nationalist and xenophobic Lega, had become used to organizing mass meetings at which he denounced the terrible diseases afflicting his country: immigrants, refugees, and of course Islam. Preaching hate had proven quite a popular exercise, and he topped the polls. A few months into the pandemic, however, when the country was the epicenter of the European outbreak and hospitals were overwhelmed, people heaped praise on the Albanian, Tunisian, and Chinese doctors and nurses who came to help their Italian colleagues.

This is the sign of a setback, not of a defeat or an irreversible decline. We are in the middle of a transitional process whose outcomes are still unknown and remain open: either a twenty-first century New Deal able to face climate change and to reverse the transformations produced by forty years of neoliberalism, or a far-right turn that will throw our planet toward predicted catastrophe. In the present context, both outcomes are perfectly possible.

In the twentieth century, fascism was a project of “regenerating” the nation, which it viewed as a homogeneous ethnic and racial community. If this is the core of fascism, it would not be wrong to define the current far-right movements, despite so many obvious differences, as the inheritors of classical fascism. Of course, the fascist lexicon has changed, and its “imagined community” possesses new features, or rather new myths. It designates a supposedly original purity to be defended or reestablished against its enemies: immigration (“the great replacement”), anti-white racial invasions, feminist and LGBTQI corruption of traditional values, Islam and its agents (terrorism and “Islamic leftism”), and so on. The premises for the emergence of this neofascist wave

lie in the crisis of hegemony of the global elites, whose ruling tools, inherited from the old nation-states, appear obsolete and increasingly ineffective. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explained, revisiting Niccolò Machiavelli, domination is a combination of repressive apparatuses and cultural hegemony that allows a political regime to appear as legitimate and beneficial, rather than tyrannical and oppressive. After several decades of neoliberal policies, the ruling classes have enormously developed their wealth and power, but they have also undergone a significant loss of legitimacy and cultural hegemony. These are the premises for the rise of neo- or post-fascism: on the one hand, the growing “descent into savagery” of the ruling classes and, on the other, the general authoritarian tendencies that their domination engenders.

A definition of fascism as a project of “regenerating” the nation grasps a fundamental element of historical continuity, but it is probably insufficient. Viewed through historical lenses, fascism was more than a form of radical nationalism and a racist idea of the nation. It was also a practice of political violence, a militant anti-communism, and a complete destruction of democracy. Violence, especially directed against the left and communism, was the privileged form of its political action, and wherever it came to power—either legally, as in Italy and Germany, or through a military putsch, as in Spain—it destroyed democracy. From this point of view, the new movements on the radical right have a different relationship with both violence and democracy. If they pretend to defend “the people” against the elites and to reestablish order, they do not wish to create a new political order. In Europe, they are more interested in implementing authoritarian and nationalist tendencies within the EU than they are in destroying its institutions. This is the posture of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland, as well as of Le Pen and Salvini in France and Italy—two leaders who ultimately accepted the euro. The Italian Lega recently entered a coalition government led by former European Central Bank director Mario Draghi, a figurehead of neoliberalism and the financial elites. In India, Brazil, and the United States, extreme-right leaders came to power and developed authoritarian and xenophobic tendencies without calling into question the institutional framework of their states. Not only were Bolsonaro and Trump unable to dissolve parliament; they finished (or are finishing) their mandates facing several impeachment procedures.

The case of Trump, the most widely discussed in recent months, is particularly instructive. His fascist trajectory appeared clearly at the end of his presidency, when he refused to admit defeat and tried to invalidate the election result. But the folkloric “insurrection” of his partisans who invaded the Capitol was not a failed fascist coup; it was instead a desperate attempt to invalidate an election by a leader who had certainly broken with the most elementary rules of democracy—which makes it possible to depict him as a fascist—but was unable to indicate a political alternative. No doubt, Franco and Pinochet would have considered the “uprising” of January 6 as the undertaking of pitiful amateurs. The Capitol events incontestably revealed the existence of a mass fascist movement in the United States—and further, a fascist movement organized through a network of armed militias. Nonetheless, this movement remains a long way from conquering power, and its immediate consequence was putting the Republican Party into a deep crisis. Trump had won the elections in 2016 as a candidate for that party: a coalition of economic elites, upper-middle classes interested in tax cuts, defenders of conservative values, Christian fundamentalists, and impoverished white popular classes attracted by a protest vote. This coalition can certainly be re-created.

As the fascist leader of a movement of white supremacists and reactionary nationalists, however, Trump does not stand much chance of being reelected. Moreover, the fascist movement behind him should be understood in its proper context. As opposed to the fascist militia in Italy (the Blackshirts) in 1920–25 or the Nazi SA in 1930–33, which expressed the fall of the state monopoly over violence in postwar Italy and Germany respectively, the Trump militias are a poisoned legacy of American history, the history of a country in which individual weapons are considered as a feature of political freedom. As frightening as it can be, this is not the sign of a collapsing state. In the 1930s, the

European industrial, financial, and military elites supported fascism as a solution to endemic political crises, institutional paralysis, and, above all, as a defense against Bolshevism. Today, they support neoliberalism. In the United States, the “establishment” can support the Republican Party as a customary alternative to the Democratic Party, but the Pentagon would never endorse a putsch of white supremacists to impede Joe Biden’s election to the executive. In Europe, the establishment is embodied by the EU and firmly opposes all those populist, nationalist, and post-fascist movements that claim a return to “national sovereignties.”

Classical fascism was born on a continent devastated by total war and grew up in a climate of civil wars, within states deeply unsettled and institutionally paralyzed by sharp political conflicts. Its radicalism came out of a confrontation with Bolshevism, which gave it its “revolutionary” character. Fascism was a utopian ideology and imaginary, which created the myth of the “new man” and national greatness. The new far-right movements lack all these premises: they come out of a crisis of hegemony that cannot be compared with the European collapse of the 1930s; their radicalism contains nothing “revolutionary”; and their conservatism—a defense of traditional values, traditional cultures, threatened “national identities,” and a bourgeois respectability opposed to sexual “deviancies”—does not possess the idea of futurity that so deeply shaped fascist ideologies and utopias. This is why it seems to me more appropriate to depict them as post-fascist rather than neofascist.

Does this mean that there is no fascist danger? Not at all. Indeed, looking at the present with a historical lens, this possibility cannot be excluded. The dramatic rise of far-right movements, parties, and governments clearly shows that fascism can become an alternative. But while the possibility of a new post-fascist age certainly remains, it is important to note that the economic crisis engendered by the pandemic did not reinforce it. The far-right pretension to embody an “anti-systemic” alternative, therefore, probably appears less convincing today than it did five years ago. In the last analysis, however, the future of the radical right movements will not depend exclusively on their own internal evolution, ideological orientation, and strategic choices; nor will it depend on the support they could get from the global elites. In the end, it will depend on the capacity of the left to sketch an alternative.