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Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype*

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ABSTRACT: Global capitalism faces an organic crisis involving a structural dimension, that of overaccumulation and a political dimension of legitimacy or hegemony that is approaching a general crisis of capitalist rule. Fascism, whether in 20th-century or 21st-century forms, is *a particular response to capitalist crisis*. Trumpism in the US, BREXIT in the UK, the increasing influence of neo-fascist and authoritarian parties and movements throughout Europe and around the world, represent far-right responses to the crisis of global capitalism. There are similarities but also important differences between fascist projects of the 20th and 21st centuries. The former involved the fusion of reactionary political power with *national capital*, whereas the latter involves the fusion of *transnational capital* with reactionary and repressive political power — an expression of the dictatorship of transnational capital. A fightback against the global police state and 21st-century fascism must involve broad anti-fascist alliances led by popular and working-class forces.

KEYWORDS: global capitalism, 21st century fascism, police state, Gramsci, transnational capitalist class

The modern crisis . . . is related to what is called the “crisis of authority.” If the ruling class has lost its consensus, *i.e.*, is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The

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crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old way is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

— ANTONIO GRAMSCI (1973, 275–276)

THE INCREASING INFLUENCE around the world of neo-fascist, authoritarian, and right-wing 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.¹ Those who oppose the idea of an emerging project of 21st-century fascism typically describe the 20th-century variant and then point to the dissimilarities between it and far right movements in the new century. Part of the problem is the confounding practice in the post–World War II period among leftist intellectuals and activists to rhetorically cry fascism in the face of any authoritarianism or right-wing aggression. While there are important distinctions as well as similarities between classical fascism and currents of neo-fascism in the new century, it is not clear to me what legitimate social scientific reason we have to assume that fascist projects in the new century must be made in the image of those in the 20th century. If historically grounded and theoretically informed analysis helps to call out the danger that far-right insurgencies today *may* develop into outright fascism, then this analysis becomes part of the political and ideological struggle to prevent such an outcome.

Fascism, whether in its classical 20th-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. The class character of fascism remains the same in the 21st century — 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 it was in the previous century. As I will discuss below, the transnationalization of the leading capitalist sectors around the world takes place within the political framework of a nation-state-based

1 See, for example, the response of 14 academics, researchers, political thinkers and activists, myself included, to the question “is fascism making a comeback?” (*State of Nature*, 2017).

system of political authority, which generates a set of political and ideological contradictions that the system has been unable to manage and that helps us to understand the specter of 21st-century fascism.

I have been writing about the rise of 21st-century fascist projects since 2008 (see, *i.a.*, Robinson, 2008; 2011; 2014; Robinson and Barera, 2012) and have never suggested that there are countries in the world that have at this time plunged into fascism. Rather, the unprecedented crisis of global capitalism has resulted in a sharp polarization 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. A project of 21st-century fascism is on the ascent in the civil societies of many countries around the world. The project has made significant advances in recent years in its competition to win state power, and in some cases, it has gained a foothold in the capitalist state. A fascist outcome to the crisis of global capitalism is not inevitable. Whether or not a fascist project manages to congeal is entirely contingent on how the struggle among social and political forces unfolds in the coming years.

In this article I want to explore the link between the crisis of global capitalism, 21st-century fascist tendencies evident in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere, and the rise of a global police state. I will stress that at the core of 21st-century fascism is the triangulation of transnational capital with reactionary political power in the state and neo-fascist forces in civil society. In the next section, I summarize what I have discussed elsewhere in greater detail on the crisis of global capitalism and the rise of a global police state (see, *i.a.*, Robinson, 2014; 2018a; 2018b).

The Crisis of Global Capitalism and Global Police State

Each major episode of crisis in the world capitalist system has involved the breakdown of state legitimacy, escalating class and social struggles, and military conflicts, leading to a restructuring of the system, including new institutional arrangements, class relations, and accumulation activities that eventually result in a restabilization of the system and renewed capitalist expansion. Structural crisis, so called because the only way out of crisis is to restructure the system, occur approximately every 40–50 years. A new wave of colonialism and imperialism resolved the first recorded structural crisis of the 1870s and

1880s. The next, the Great Depression of the 1930s, was resolved through a new type of redistributive capitalism, referred to as the “class compromise” of Fordism–Keynesianism, social democracy, New Deal capitalism, and so on.

Capital responded to the next structural crisis, that 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 accumulation and to shift the correlation of class and social forces worldwide in its favor. Transnational capital experienced a major expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, involving hyper-accumulation through new technologies such as computers and informatics, through neoliberal policies, and through new modalities of mobilizing and exploiting the global labor force — including a massive new round of primitive accumulation that uprooted and displaced hundreds of millions of people. The TCC has accumulated an extraordinary amount of transnational power and control over global resources, institutions, political systems, the media and culture industries (on the TCC see Robinson, 2004; 2014; Robinson and Sprague, 2018).

Capitalist globalization has resulted in unprecedented social polarization worldwide. According to the development agency Oxfam (2018), in 2015 just one percent of humanity owned over half of the world’s wealth and the top 20% owned 94.5% of that wealth, while the remaining 80% must make due with just 4.5%. 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. A series of lesser jolts to the global economy were preludes to the 2008 collapse of the global financial system. The Great Recession — the worst crisis since the 1930s — marked the onset of a deep structural crisis of overaccumulation, which refers to accumulated capital that cannot find outlets for profitable reinvestment. Corporate profits surged after the 2008 crisis and have reached near record highs at the same time that corporate investment has declined (*The Economist*, 2016, 11). As uninvested capital accumulates, enormous pressures build up to find outlets for unloading the surplus. Capitalist groups pressure states to

create new opportunities for profit-making. Neoliberal states have turned to several interrelated mechanisms in recent years to sustain accumulation in the face of stagnation.

One is debt-driven growth. In the United States, which has long been the “market of last resort” for the global economy, household debt was higher in 2017 than it has been for almost all of postwar history (Oyedele, 2017). In just about every OECD country the ratio of household debt to income remains historically high and has steadily worsened since 2008 (OECD, 2018; André, 2016). The global bond market — an indicator of total government debt worldwide — has escalated since 2008 and now surpasses \$100 trillion (O’Byrne, 2015). U. S. government debt surpassed \$20 trillion in 2017, while total global debt reached a staggering \$215 trillion that year (Federal Reserve Bank 2018; Scutt, 2017).

A second mechanism, closely related to this debt-driven growth, 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. Governments issue bonds to investors in order to close government budget deficits and also to subsidize private accumulation so as to keep the economy going. They then have to pay back these bonds, with interest, by extracting taxes from current and future wages of the working class. A third mechanism is escalation of financial speculation, widening the gap between the productive economy and “fictitious capital.” Deregulation of the financial industry and creation of a globally integrated financial system in recent decades have allowed the TCC to unload trillions of dollars into speculation. Gross world product or the total value of goods and services produced worldwide, stood at some \$75 trillion in 2017 (World Bank, 2017, 1), whereas currency speculation alone amounted to \$5.3 trillion a day (McLeod, 2018) that year and the global derivatives market was estimated at a mind-boggling \$1.2 quadrillion (Maverick, 2018).

A fourth mechanism 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. Institutional investors, especially speculative hedge and mutual funds, have poured billions of dollars into the tech sector since the 2008 Great Recession, turning it into a major new outlet for uninvested capital in the face of stagnation. Investment in the IT

sector jumped from \$17 billion in 1970s to \$175 billion in 1990, to \$496 billion in 2000, and then surpassed \$700 billion as 2017 drew to a close (Federal Reserve Bank, 2017). While digitalization may spur growth, certain platforms, as intermediaries, tend to intercede in the circuits of production and circulation of values so as to cream off major chunks of this value. The enormous cash reserves and profits accumulated in the tech sector do not represent the production of new value so much as the appropriation by digital capitalists of the lion's share of surplus value through rents (for excellent discussion, see Srnicek, 2017). At the same time, we are set for the digital decimation of major sectors of the global economy. Anything can be digitalized, and this is increasingly almost everything. Automation is now spreading from industry and finance to all branches of services, even to fast food and agriculture, as members of the TCC seeks to lower wages and out-compete one another.

Ultimately, digitalization — to the extent that it replaces labor with technology — pushes costs down toward zero. All of the contradictions of capitalism become intensified. The rate of profit decreases. The realization problem is aggravated. Absent major state intervention in labor markets and to promote redistributive policies, the emerging digital economy cannot resolve the problem of overaccumulation. In addition, there is every reason to believe that digitalization will only further undermine the ability of states to impose any sort of regulation on transnationally mobile capital, in particular, transnational finance capital, which is the hegemonic fraction of capital globally. It will therefore aggravate problems of state legitimacy. The outcome is an ever-greater underlying instability in the global economy.

Transnational elites are deeply divided on how to respond to the crisis. Many among the TCC and their political agents fear that the crisis will lead to an uncontrollable revolt from below. One billionaire, the owner of the luxury jeweler company Cartier, Johann Rupert, confessed that he cannot sleep at night at the thought of social upheavals among the poor (Roberts and Mulier, 2015). Unprecedented global inequalities can only be sustained by ever more repressive and ubiquitous systems of social control. 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 a means of accumulation. As war and state-sponsored repression become increasingly privatized, the

interests of a broad array of capitalist groups shift the political, social, and ideological climate towards generating and sustaining social conflict — such as in the Middle East — and in expanding systems of warfare, repression, surveillance and social control.

The term “global police state” refers to three interrelated developments. First is 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. Second is 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*. And third is the increasing move towards political systems that can be characterized as 21st-century fascism, or in an even broader sense, as totalitarian (for detailed discussion on the “global police state” concept, see Robinson, 2018a; 2018b).

The events of September 11, 2001 in the United States were a turning point in the construction of a global police state. The U. S. state took advantage of the attacks to expand militarization of the global economy, while it and other states around the world passed draconian “anti-terrorist” security legislation and escalated military (“defense”) spending. The Pentagon budget increased 91% in real terms between 1998 and 2011, while military industry profits nearly quadrupled. Worldwide, total defense outlays (military, intelligence agencies, Homeland Security/ Defense) grew by 50% from 2006 to 2015, from \$1.4 trillion to \$2.03 trillion (Project on Defense Alternatives, 2011; Robinson, 2017; Fahey, 2011). 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 — all are major sources of state-organized profit-making.

The circuits of militarized accumulation coercively open up opportunities for capital accumulation worldwide, either on the heels of military force or through states’ contracting out to transnational corporate capital the production and execution of social control and warfare. Hence the generation of conflicts and the repression of social

movements and vulnerable populations around the world becomes an accumulation strategy beyond political objectives (for discussion, see Robinson, 2014, esp. chapter 5; 2018a; 2018b). As spin-off effects of military spending flow through the open veins of the global economy — that is, the integrated network structures of the global production, services, and financial system — it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between military and non-military dimensions of a global war economy. In this regard and crucial to a global police state is the development of new technologies associated with digitalization and what is now referred to as the fourth industrial revolution. These new technologies have revolutionized warfare, social control and the modalities of state and private violence in the new century, including the military application of these technologies and the further fusion of private accumulation with state militarization (see, *i.a.*, Levine, 2018).

Digitalization thus makes possible the creation of a global police state. 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. As digitalization concentrates capital, heightens polarization, and swells the ranks of surplus labor, dominant groups turn to applying the new technologies to mass social control and repression in the face of real and potential resistance. The new systems of warfare, social control and repression made possible by more advanced digitalization include global electronic surveillance that allows for the tracking and control of every movement. These systems are now expanding theaters of conflict from active war zones to militarized cities and rural localities around the world (see, *i.a.*, Graham, 2011). These combine with a restructuring of space that allow for new forms of spatial containment and control of the marginalized. The result is permanent low-intensity warfare against communities in rebellion, especially the racially oppressed and ethnically persecuted, religious minorities, immigrants, refugees, and other vulnerable communities.

The more the global economy comes to depend on militarization and conflict, the greater the drive to war and the higher the stakes for humanity. There is a built-in war drive in 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. Now this drive

towards war is moving towards a deadly combination with a new round of world capitalist restructuring through digitalization. As private accumulation fuses with state militarization the fate of Silicon Valley and Wall Street become tied to that of warfare and repression. The global police state and 21st-century fascism are interwoven. The global police state generates conditions propitious to the ascendance of fascist projects. The three dimensions of global policing identified above form a unity; 21st-century fascism must, in turn, be analyzed in relation to the global police state.

20th- and 21st-Century Fascism

Fascism, whether in its classical 20th-century form or possible variants of 21st-century neo-fascism, is *a particular response to capitalist crisis*. Trumpism in the United States, BREXIT in the United Kingdom, the increasing influence of neo-fascist and authoritarian parties and movements throughout Europe (including Poland, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Holland, Great Britain, Denmark, France, Belgium, and Greece)² and around the world, such as in Israel, Turkey, the Philippines, Brazil, and India, represent a far-right response to the crisis of global capitalism. They are symptomatic of the general crisis of capitalist rule. Organic crises of capitalism involve objective and subjective dimensions. The particular conditions in any one nation are always linked to more general conditions in the global system. In this case, those general conditions are the rise of a truly integrated global economy and society and the deep structural and cultural crisis of the new global capitalism. The structural dimension of overaccumulation and stagnation discussed above has become aggravated in conjunction with a crisis of state legitimacy and of capitalist hegemony.

Here we must turn to Gramsci, for whom hegemony refers to a particular relation of social domination in which subordinate groups

2 On the rise of neo-fascist movements in many of these countries at the turn of the century in Europe, see, *i.a.*, Paxon, 2004. In the second decade of the 21st century and especially concurrent with Trump's election in the United States, these and new far-right and neo-fascist movements experienced an upsurge, often winning seats in national legislatures. These include the Freedom Party in Austria, the National Front in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, Alternative for Germany in Germany, the Jobbik Party (Movement for a Better Hungary) and also the Fidesz party of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary, Slovakia's People's Party—Our Slovakia, Holland's Party for Freedom, *Forza Nuova* in Italy (the Northern League is far-right but could not, I believe, be characterized as extreme right/neo-fascist [see, *e.g.*, Marini, 2017]).

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

Beyond this, for Gramsci a class or class fraction achieves hegemony to the extent that it is able to present its own interests as the general interest, and insofar as “the interests of the dominant group prevail, *but only up to a certain point, i.e., stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interests*” (Gramsci, 1971, 182, my emphasis). As I have discussed at some length elsewhere (see, *i.a.*, Robinson, 2004), emergent transnational elites set about in the 1980s and 1990s to construct a global capitalist historic bloc. A historic bloc is a social ensemble involving dominant strata and a social base beyond the ruling group, in which one group exercises leadership and imposes its project through the consent of those drawn into the bloc. To be successful in constructing a historic bloc, the ruling group must be able to present its class project as in the general interest and gain the active support of those brought into the bloc through the combination of material reward and ideological leadership, thus achieving what Gramsci referred to as *expansive hegemony*.

It appeared for a time in the 1990s that transnational elites would be able to establish this historic bloc, as globalization, neoliberalism and the “TINA” (“there is no alternative”) syndrome seemed to become “common sense.” But efforts to cement the bloc proved elusive. The TCC has turned to naked pursuit of its own corporate interests, unrestrained from national regulatory control and seemingly impervious to mass pressure from below. It can no longer even pretend to represent a “general interest,” much less assure the social reproduction of the global working class to secure its hegemony, as global capitalism becomes ever more predatory, a veritable gangster

capitalism. Under these conditions, coercive domination and violent exclusion appear to prevail over consensual incorporation. By the turn of century counter-hegemonic forces began to accumulate into a transnational movement against the depredations of neoliberalism and for global justice, followed by a global revolt in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse.

When a crisis of political authority or hegemony does not find an organic solution, “it means that a static equilibrium exists (whose factors may be disparate, but in which the decisive one is the immaturity of the progressive forces),” wrote Gramsci. “It means that no group, neither the conservatives nor the progressives, has the strength for victory, and that even the conservative group needs a master” (Gramsci, 1971, 221). In these moments, notes Gramsci, “the crisis creates situations which are dangerous in the short run since the various strata of the population are not all capable of orienting themselves equally swiftly, or of reorganizing with the same rhythm” (*ibid.*, 210). Gramsci’s analysis goes far in identifying the current conjuncture, that of a sharp political polarization between left/progressive and far-right responses to the crisis (and indeed the “immaturity of the progressive forces”); yet he was writing in reference to the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.

What, then, does 21st-century fascism share with its 20th-century predecessor, and what is distinct? Above all, fascism in the 20th century involved the fusion of reactionary political power with *national* capital. It was, in part, the inability of German and Italian national capital to out-compete the national capitals of other European powers in the imperialist conquests of the turn of the 19th century and following the German defeat in World War I that led to a fascist response in the 1930s, once the crisis hit full force. In distinction, 21st-century fascism involves the fusion of *transnational capital* with reactionary and repressive political power — 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 in many European countries (see, *i.a.*, Paxon, 2004; Eco, 1995), in the United States, and in some South American countries, 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, 21st-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. The fourth industrial revolution promises to increase the ranks of surplus humanity and also impose greater competitive pressures on the TCC, thus heightening its need to impose more oppressive and authoritarian forms of labor discipline on the global working class.

Moreover, a global police state is centrally aimed at *coercive exclusion* of surplus humanity. The restructuring of world capitalism through globalization has greatly expanded the ranks of the surplus labor population. The processes by which surplus labor is generated have accelerated under globalization. Spatial reorganization has helped transnational capital to break the territorially bound power of organized labor and impose new capital–labor relations based on fragmentation, flexibilization, and the cheapening of labor. Crises provide capital with the opportunity to accelerate the process of forcing greater productivity out of fewer workers. These developments, combined with a massive new round of primitive accumulation and displacement of hundreds of millions, have given rise to a new global army of superfluous labor that goes well beyond the traditional reserve army of labor that Marx discussed.

Global capitalism has no direct use for surplus humanity. But indirectly, it holds wages down everywhere and makes new systems of 21st-century slavery possible (on the new slavery, see, *i.a.*, Patel and Moore, 2017, 30). Surplus humanity cannot consume and so does not provide transnational capital with a significant market. Dominant groups face the challenge of how to contain both the real and potential rebellion of surplus humanity. As world capitalism reaches the limits of its extensive expansion, new spaces have to be violently cracked open and the peoples in these spaces must be repressed by a global police state. The mechanisms of coercive exclusion include mass incarceration and the spread of prison-industrial complexes, pervasive policing, anti-immigrant legislation and deportation regimes, and the manipulation of space in new ways so that both gated communities and ghettos are 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, deprived, and culturally

degenerate. States abandon efforts to secure legitimacy among this surplus population, and instead turn to criminalizing the poor and the dispossessed, with tendencies towards genocide in some cases.

But these mechanisms also involve ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity among those locked out. The newfound ability of transnational capital to achieve political domination through control over the means of intellectual production, the mass media, the educational system, and the culture industries allows it to achieve a much more profound and complete penetration into the spheres of culture and community, indeed, into the life world itself. Corporate marketing strategies depoliticize through the manipulation of desire and of libido, so that the grievances and frustrated aspirations of the excluded become channeled into petty consumption and flight into fantasy rather than into placing political demands on the system through collective mobilization.

In this regard, I observed in my earlier work that the heightened role of political and ideological domination in this digital age through control over media and the flow of images and symbols would make any project of 21st-century fascism more sophisticated and, together with new panoptical surveillance and social control technologies, probably allow it to rely more on selective than generalized repression — unless a revolt from below comes to actually threaten the rule of the TCC. These new modalities of social control and ideological domination blur boundaries, so that there may be a constitutional and normalized neo-fascism (with formal representative institutions, a constitution, political parties and elections), all while the political system is tightly controlled by transnational capital and its representatives and any dissent that actually threatens the system is neutralized if not liquidated (see Robinson and Barrera, 2012). We may see a “withering away” of constitutional order rather than a rupture, if a global police state and the impulse towards 21st-century fascism are not contained.

The Social Bases of 21st-Century Fascism

Twentieth-century fascism took root in an earlier stage of capitalist development, when middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie that represented a significant portion of the population were experiencing a destabilization of their status and the threat of downward mobility

into the ranks of the proletariat. Fascist movements offered the ruling groups the ability to successfully compete with mass working-class parties for the allegiance of the middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie, although these movements did recruit among the working class as well. These strata came to be seen as the core social base of the fascist movements — instruments in the hands of national capitalist classes attempting to resolve the crisis of capitalism (Rosengarten, 2014). The middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie are strata that own their own means of livelihood and therefore do not have to sell their labor to capital; among them, small shopkeepers, business people, independent artisans and professionals, family farmers, and other small commodity producers. These strata were reduced to small pockets in the cores of world capitalism as proletarianization accelerated in the latter half of the 20th century, and especially in the age of globalization. While analysis of the petty bourgeoisie remains important in assessing current political processes, this class is not numerous enough to form a critical mass that could provide a viable social base for 21st-century fascism to triumph.

Today that role is played in the cores of world capitalism by certain sectors of the working class. 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 pursue this project through a discursive repertoire of xenophobia, mystifying ideologies that involve race/culture supremacy, an idealized and mythical past, millennialism, a militaristic and masculinist culture that normalizes, even glamorizes war, social violence and domination, and contempt toward 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.

This discursive repertoire of 21st-century fascism, of course, shares many features with classical 20th-century fascism, including what Umberto Eco has characterized as a “cult of tradition,” “fear of diversity,” a siege mentality, a sense of deprivation of a clear social identity, “selective populism,” and Orwellian “newspeak” (Eco, 1995). However, as I have emphasized, these discursive and emotive elements take place under very different circumstances, a distinct historical moment in world capitalism. With regard to extreme masculinization, although here is not the place for full discussion, the denigration of women in general and the sexual predation of Trump (and of Duterte in the Philippines, among others), almost seems to be a point in his favor among his diehard base. This phenomenon may be a sexual sublimation of what are fears of social and economic emasculation. On the matter of contempt rather than empathy, witness Trump’s notorious comments on poor countries being “shithole countries,” his mocking of a disabled reporter, and so on. It is not too much of an analytical stretch to associate such public displays of contempt with the process whereby policies of aggression and repression of these vulnerable groups achieve discursive or psycho-social legitimation in the commonsense consciousness of those who would provide the mass social base for a neo-fascist project.

There is a heavy overlap with ideologies of national regeneration, national/race purity, and a mystique of heroism that characterized 20th-century fascism (although in the particular case of Trump, the latter resembles an extreme narcissistic mystique of his self). Twenty-first-century fascism, like its 20th-century predecessor, is a violently toxic mix of reactionary nationalism and racism. The nation, argued Benedict Anderson, is an “imagined political community,” in which “the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship” regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that exists (Anderson, 1983, 15–16). In conjunction, argues Callinicos (1983, 38), racism offers workers from the dominant racial or ethnic group an imaginary solution to real contradictions; recognition of the existence of suffering and oppression, even though its solution is a false one. Neo-fascist projects on the rise at this time offer precisely this mix of nationalism and racism in attempting to organize better-off sectors of the working class experiencing social and economic destabilization in the face of capitalist globalization. The parties and movements associated with such projects have put forth a racist discourse, less coded and less

mediated than that of mainstream politicians, targeting the racially oppressed, ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants and refugees in particular as scapegoats.

It is crucial to note that deteriorating socioeconomic conditions do not automatically lead to racist backlash. A racist/fascist interpretation of these conditions must be mediated by political agents and state agencies. Trumpism, for instance, represents just such a mediation. Here there is a great deal of insight to be had from the fact that the presidential campaigns of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the 2016 U. S. presidential elections appealed to the same social base of disaffected workers, one with a left interpretation of the crisis and the other with a far-right populist and openly racist interpretation.³ While there is nothing inevitable about a fascist outcome to the current lurch to the far-right, the more the current racist mobilization becomes entrenched the greater the danger of such an outcome.

In the United States, the far right and neo-fascists are attempting to reconstruct the white racist historic bloc that to one extent or another reigned supreme from the end of post-Civil War reconstruction to the late 20th century, but has become destabilized through capitalist globalization. In Europe the far-right and neo-fascist movements are following a very similar path as Trump's, in terms of recruiting formerly privileged sectors among the working classes who are suffering under the crisis by scapegoating Muslims, immigrants, and other vulnerable sectors. Similarly to Trump, they are promising to stabilize the situation for these precariatized sectors. "National" identity becomes a stand-in (that is, a code) for racist mobilization against scapegoats.

Yet the discourse of national regeneration is in sharp contradiction with the transnational integration of capital and a globally integrated production and financial system upon which hinge the class and status interests of the major capitalist groups and state elites. Here there is a critical distinction to be made between the conjuncture of fascist projects in the last century and those of the 21st 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

3 While I cannot take up these issues here, only part of the story of the Trump electoral triumph was the racist mobilization of white workers and petty bourgeoisie. The flip side of this mobilization was widespread voter suppression and disenfranchisement of voters from racially oppressed communities.

— 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, bears no relation to its actual policies. In its first year, Trumponomics involved deregulation — the virtual smashing of the regulatory state — slashing social spending, dismantling what remained of the welfare state, privatizations, tax breaks to corporations and the rich, and an expansion of state subsidies to capital — in short, neoliberalism on steroids.

This is a distinction lost on many commentators. German monopoly capitalists turned to the Nazis to crush the powerful trade unions, socialist and communist movements. But they also turned to the Nazi state to open up vast new opportunities for accumulation and to compete, including through territorial expansion, against capitalist groups from other countries. 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. “America is open for business,” Trump declared at the 2018 meeting of the global elite gathered for the 2018 annual conclave of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. “Now is the perfect time to bring your business, your jobs and your investments to the United States” (Bierman, 2018, A3).

Fascism and the Extended State

An essential condition for 20th- and now for any 21st-century fascism is the spread of fascist movements in civil society and their fusion at some point with reactionary political power in the state.

Let us recall that civil and political society are a unity; there can be no stable or hegemonic project without a correspondence between the two. “Today, there are two repressive and punitive apparatuses in Italy,” observed Gramsci on the eve of the fascist takeover, “fascism and the bourgeois state. A simple calculus of utility induces us to expect the dominant class to combine these two apparatuses at some point” (cited in Santucci, 2010, 85). Gramsci referred to the locus of social processes as the extended state, comprised of political society, or the state proper, plus civil society. In fact, no state exhibits clear-cut boundaries between its institutions and others in a social formation; the boundary between state and civil society is an artificial conceptual line.

The distinction between and unity of political and civil society allows us to distinguish between right-wing authoritarianism and neo-fascism. Bill Fletcher Jr. (2018) has argued that “the growth of authoritarianism is not the same thing as fascism” and that Trumpism and other emerging far-right regimes should be characterized as “authoritarian statism.” On the one hand, it is *precisely because* they are not the same that we must distinguish between the two. Authoritarianism refers for our purposes to rule by an expanding repressive apparatus of the state that strives to close off space through legal and extra-legal repression of popular mobilization from below in civil society. In Latin America, perhaps most emblematic of this authoritarianism, far-right repressive and authoritarian regimes have in recent years returned with a vengeance, starting with the 2009 *coup d'état* in Honduras, followed by the 2016 “parliamentary coup” in Brazil against the governing Workers Party as well as an escalation of repression throughout the region and a mobilization of far-right parties and business groups. Central to this far-right turn in the region has been a racist, authoritarian, and militaristic retrenchment to consolidate and expand transnational corporate power (see, *i.a.*, Hale, Calla and Mullings, 2017). In Mexico and Argentina, for instance, constitutions have been amended to allow the armed forces to carry out police functions, while U. S. special operations forces training missions tripled between 2007 and 2014 (Germanos, 2016). In 2017, private military and security companies employed some 2.4 million people and often collaborated with state forces in repressing social movements (Asmann, 2018).

Latin America is becoming a cauldron of state and private violence, fused together for the purpose of repressing political revolt and opening up the continent to further corporate plunder. It is *emblematic of a global police state*. “The current dictatorships present a civil image of respect for constitutional precepts, holding regular elections with the participation of political parties and other features of democratic regimes,” notes Beinstein. “Political prisoners are almost always brought before judges who issue arbitrary verdicts but with an appearance of legality, the assassination of opposition figures goes unreported by the corporate media, and state repression of political dissent is often blended with police violence against the poor, against popular protests, and against common delinquents” (Beinstein, 2018). Yet here is the critical distinction between repressive authoritarianism and neo-fascism: in Latin America, with the possible exception of Brazil and Colombia, we do *not* see in the same way as we do in the United States, in Europe, or in India, the spread throughout civil society of neo-fascist movements and ideologies. In short, the region is being swept up into a global police state but in a way that is more appropriately viewed as right-wing authoritarianism than as neo-fascism.

By conflating authoritarianism and fascism we lose the ability to distinguish between the two. Moreover, capitalist globalization and a global police state are decidedly *not* “statism.” Its whole thrust is dismantling state intervention in the market and the liberation of capital from state controls. The state is reduced to a repressive apparatus to control popular forces from below and an instrument for opening up opportunities for transnational accumulation, including opportunities for militarized accumulation and accumulation by repression. In this regard, 21st-century fascism and a global police state involve a triangulation of far-right, authoritarian, and neo-fascist forces in civil society, reactionary political power in the state, and transnational corporate capital, especially speculative finance capital, the military–industrial–security complex, and the extractive industries, all three of which are in turn dependent on and interwoven with high-tech or digital capital. The extractive and energy complexes must dislodge communities and appropriate their resources, which make them most prone to supporting or even promoting repressive and neo-fascist political arrangements. Capital accumulation in the military–industrial–security complex depends on never-ending wars

and on systems of repression. Financial accumulation requires ever greater austerity that is hard, if not impossible, to impose through consensual mechanisms.

How these three sectors of capital came together in the United States with state and paramilitary forces was abundantly demonstrated in 2016 in a military-style counterinsurgency against indigenous activists and their allies who were peacefully protesting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in lands near their Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota. Bankrolled by a consortium of banks that included Wells Fargo and Bank of America, the private Fortune 500 oil and gas company building the pipeline, Energy Transfer Partners, hired a mercenary and security firm known as TigerSwan, which originated as a Pentagon and State Department contractor for the Middle East wars. TigerSwan was charged with organizing a counterinsurgency campaign against the protesters in coordination with the company and with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, including National Guard troops. “Aggressive intelligence preparation of the battlefield and active coordination between intelligence and security elements are now a proven method of defeating pipeline insurgents,” stated TigerSwan, in calling the anti-pipeline protesters “jihadist fighters” and the protest area a “battlefield.” The “less than lethal” arsenal unleashed by the public–private counterinsurgency apparatus included rubber bullets, bean bag pellets, LRAD sound devices, water cannons, attack dogs, predator drones, metadata imaging, counterintelligence and psyops (Brown, 2017). While the Standing Rock ordeal is a chilling case study in paramilitarization of the global police state, such operations carried out against social justice movements are now routine around the world (see, *i.a.*, Graham, 2011).

Classical and current discussions on fascism also stress *national* military expansionism. We are indeed seeing an escalating militarization that involves the increasingly autonomy and power of the military, in the United States and in many countries around the world. But I believe the concept of *global police state* has more analytical purchase and is more robust in discussing the nature of the current global militarization. The global order as a unity is increasingly repressive and authoritarian and particular *forms* of exceptional national states or national polities, including 21st-century fascism, develop on the basis of particular national and regional histories, social and class

forces, political conditions and conjunctures. Yet the militarization of cities, politics and culture in such countries as the United States and Israel, the spread of neo-fascist movements in North America and Europe, the rise of authoritarian regimes in Turkey, the Philippines, and Honduras, are inseparable from these countries' entanglement in webs of global wars and militarized transnational accumulation, or global war economy.

Trumpism and Twenty-First-Century Fascism

Let us reiterate that civil and political society are a unity; there can be no stable or hegemonic project without a correspondence between the two. In the United States, a neo-fascist insurgency can be traced back to the far-right mobilization that began in the wake of the crisis of hegemony brought about by the mass struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the Black and Chicano liberation struggles and other militant movements by third-world peoples, the feminist, gay liberation, anti-war, counter-cultural, and militant working-class struggles.⁴ 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. Encouraged by Trump's imperial bravado, his populist and nationalist rhetoric, and his openly racist discourse, predicated in part on whipping up anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-black, and xenophobic sentiment, they 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. In Oregon, for instance, the state Republican Party tapped armed right-wing militia to provide security for its events (Southern Poverty Law Center, undated). The Southern Poverty Law Center reported a total of 954 hate groups in 2017, up from 917 the

4 To be sure, fascist movements go back to the 1930s, and before that in a very different historical context, to the post-Reconstruction terror unleashed on the black population.

year before, and 689 “extreme antigovernment groups.” According to the Center, “a spate of protests in liberal cities following the election allowed the militia movement, part of the larger antigovernment sector, to thrust itself into the spotlight of urban America in a significant way for the first time since the Oath Keepers deployed militants to protect mostly white-owned businesses in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2015” (Buchanan, 2017).

Yet Trumpism is but a *dramatic* (in the literal sense, as in drama, theatrics) intensification of — rather than a departure from — the far-right agenda of repressive capitalist globalization that dates back to the rise of the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the United States and the United Kingdom. Trumpism and other far-right responses to the crisis of global capitalism now seek to create a new balance of political forces in the face of the breakdown of the short-lived global capitalist historic bloc. We may be seeing the rise of Caesarism, as discussed by Gramsci, in which a charismatic figure steps in to resolve an unstable stalemate in the balance of social and political forces or in a conjuncture of hegemonic breakdown. Gramsci noted that a Caesarist solution can arise without a Caesar, without any great “heroic” and representative personality, and in the absence of immediate mass repression. Instead, it may involve more authoritarian forms of parliamentary government, that may or may not involve a rupture with constitutional order further on.

Trumpism and other such movements are a contradictory attempt to refound 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 rhetorics of nationalism and protectionism, even as they promote neoliberalism. Trumpism and similar movements in Europe and elsewhere were not departures from but incarnations of an emerging dictatorship of the TCC. In the United States, the TCC is delighted with Trump’s neoliberal policies but divided over his brash, buffoon-like conduct

and his neo-fascist political inclinations.⁵ 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.

Its nationalist discourse notwithstanding, the Trump regime was not opposed to capitalist globalization (he is himself a member of the TCC) but in fact pursued a program of neoliberalism on steroids and “globalization by other means” (see Robinson, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c) involving an intensification of neoliberalism in the United States, together with a heightened role for the state in subsidizing transnational capital accumulation in the face of stagnation and overaccumulation. 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. Such “symbolic capital,” as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would call it, is necessary under these conditions to reproduce the material rule of the TCC and its agents. There is indeed a mounting backlash against capitalist globalization among the popular and working classes and the 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. These developments underscore the highly conflictual nature of global capitalism and uncertainty as to further globalization in the face of the explosive contradictions and the widespread opposition that it generates.

When Trump did impose tariffs on imported steel and aluminum in March 2018, and then further tariffs a few months later, for instance, he was opposed by much of the TCC and the political elite in the United States, including much of the Republican Party and even sectors of the steel industry that relied on cheaper imported steel for the production of intermediate and finished steel products. In fact, the far-right billionaire Koch brothers, launched a multimillion dollar campaign against the tariffs (Schwarz, 2018). Instead, support for

⁵ Witness, anecdotally, the cover page of the May 26, 2018 edition of *The Economist*: “The Affair: Why Corporate America Loves Donald Trump.”

the tariffs came principally from trade union bureaucrats; Trump's move was really about appeasing his restless working-class social base. Recall, as well, that his predecessors, from Clinton, to Bush, and then to Obama, all closely identified with neoliberal globalization, also imposed tariffs at one point or another in their administrations. More generally, the tendency underway towards an expanding global police state, neo-fascist mobilization, and schizophrenic crisis management, were quite evident well before Trumpism and are not tied to it — not to mention that Trump has deep support within the Pentagon, the Homeland Security apparatuses, and the corporate investors in a global police state (although there are clearly infighting and divisions as well, within the national security establishment, which is nothing peculiar to the Trump government).

Twenty-first-century fascism cannot be understood as a nation-state project in this age of global capitalism. This is important because much recent discussion on neo-fascism frames it in just such terms and emphasizes nationalism as an immanent feature of fascism. Yet as I have emphasized above, and in contradistinction to the 20th century, the current nationalist discourse among far-right groups is entirely political-ideological, insofar as the programmatic content of far-right forces such as Trumpism and others seeking to win the state is decidedly not national but global, albeit under the changing conditions of crisis and the breakdown of hegemony. Neo-fascist groups in civil society such as the white nationalists in the United States may promote an inward national program, but these civil society groups by themselves do not amount to fascism as a system. For fascism to emerge, as I have already discussed, these groups must fuse with capital and the state; yet the TCC has no interest in economic nationalism.

*Concluding Comments: Beyond Identitarian Politics
in an Anti-Fascist Struggle*

The TCC is delineated structurally by its grounding in global as distinct from national markets and circuits of accumulation, and to this extent its members share a common class interest and outlook in advancing capitalist globalization and in competition with local, national and regional fractions of capital. Beyond this common class interest, it has never been an internally unified or politically united group. Reformists among the transnational elite, concerned over the

fragility of the global economy, have called for mildly redistributive measures and transnational regulation of the global financial system (for detailed discussion, see Robinson, 2018c). They have expressed alarm over the prospects of a 21st-century fascism. Yet these reformists seem to be losing ground as the crisis intensifies. Splits and infighting within the ruling groups are escalating as the global capitalist historic bloc unravels, splits that may present opportunities for the subaltern classes to build political alliances in the struggle against fascism.

In my view, for a fightback against a 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 clear and sharp analysis of global capitalism and of its crisis, with the fightback led by popular and working-class forces. This raises the matter of the liberal and reformist political elite that has so far opposed the more far-right responses to the crisis. It should be observed that the failure of elite reformism and the unwillingness of the transnational elite to challenge the predation and rapaciousness of global capital has opened the way for the far-right response to the crisis.

There is a broader discussion on why the left response to crisis has been so weak relative to that of the far-right that I cannot explore here. Suffice it to note that, in my view, an important part of the story is that the political class that has been in power in recent decades as an agent of the TCC is more than bankrupt — it is feeding the turn to the far right. As the corporate, political, and cultural elite came to embrace “multiculturalism” and “diversity,” their strategy aimed to neuter through a politics of cooptation the demands for social justice and anti-capitalist transformation. The strategy has served to eclipse the language of the working and popular classes and of anti-capitalism. It helps to derail ongoing revolts from below, has helped push white workers into an “identity” of white nationalism and helped the neo-fascist right organize them politically (among the extensive literature on these matters, see, *i.a.*, Haider, 2018; *Historical Materialism*, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Michaels, 2016; Reed, 2001; Kelley, 2016; Darder and Torres, 2004; Street, 2017).

And what about the academy? Any counter-hegemony requires organic intellectuals committed to emancipatory projects that challenge the power of global capital. Much of the intellectual elite, certainly in the West, turned to a post-modernism in the late 20th century that

celebrated a world of “differences” and endless fragmentation, out of which came the new identity politics in which capitalism became “just another” among the multiplicity of oppressive systems. This postmodern identity politics should *not be confused* with struggles against particular forms of exploitation and oppression that different groups face. Ethnic, racial, gender and sexual oppression are not tangential but constitutive of capitalism. There can be no general emancipation without liberation from these forms of oppression. It is equally true that all the particular forms of oppression are grounded in the larger social order of global capitalism that perpetually regenerates these oppressions. While any united front has as its target the proto-fascist right, we cannot triumph against this right under the hegemony of a liberal elite and their organic intellectuals, who are hostile to a radical critique of capitalism.

Postmodern narratives and identitarian politics alienated a whole generation of young people in the late 20th and early 21st centuries from embracing a desperately needed Marxist critique of capitalism at the moment of its globalization. The best identitarian politics can aspire to are symbolic vindication, diversity (often meaning diversity in the ruling bloc), non-discrimination in the dominant social institutions and equitable inclusion and representation *within* global capitalism. The transnational elite was all too willing to embrace such a politics of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” as a strategy that proved effective in channeling mass struggles into non-threatening demands for inclusion, if not into outright cooptation. Lest the point be misunderstood, identitarian politics, as I and others cited above understand them, have their origins in a strategy of dominant groups from above to tame radical movements from below and to coopt emerging elites from oppressed communities. Yet those communities cannot be contained. Vital rebellion is breaking out everywhere; in order to move beyond the multiplicity of fragmented struggles and spontaneity, to beat back the descent into a global police state and to establish working-class hegemony over such resistance, we must put forward 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.

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