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Far right

# The imperial engine of fascism

- Features -

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**The far right is on the rise all over the world. Faced with this dynamic, the left is particularly at loggerheads over the right way to describe it: some fringes use the term fascism, while others consider that such a characterisation lacks lucidity. In a number of countries, the far right is now installed in government – at its head or in a coalition. When it has not formally acceded to power, its ideological hegemony over public debate pulls (even more) to the right a ruling class radicalized by the generalized crisis of capitalism. On the left, a lively debate has then opened up concerning the right way to characterise this dynamic: is it relevant to speak of fascisation, or even fascism?**

The debate could seem to be only theoretical, or even semantic. In reality, the use of the term fascism, as well as its rejection, outlines political perspectives. Reducing disagreement to its sole historical-theoretical dimension masks the affective and mobilizing dimension of the concept of fascism itself for part of our camp.

## Weakness of analogical approaches

To determine the fascist (or otherwise) character of the contemporary far right, history is often invoked to serve as a reference. The approach is then analogical: it is a question of identifying the continuities and discontinuities between historical fascism and contemporary forms of the far right. The fulfilment of a certain number of historically determined criteria would thus be necessary for it to appear relevant to characterise contemporary political forces as fascist. Studying the history of fascism is obviously necessary, but its generally analogical character immediately undermines any debate on the potential existence of a fascism of our time. No consensus can actually be found in the establishment of "criteria" of fascism – their number and the way in which they are fulfilled can be endlessly debated.

Thinking about fascism, in the past as well as in the present, requires rather considering the dynamics in which it is inscribed, that is to say relating it to its context rather than freezing it in its historical forms. The society of the 1920s and 1930s being radically different from today's society, the impossibility of an identical reproduction of fascism is an obvious fact that it is not possible to be satisfied with.

## New context, new fascism

The materialistic character of an analysis always lies in the adjustment of its categories rather than in their fetishization. The case of fascism is no exception to the rule: in order to think of it in its context, it is necessary to highlight its characteristics. While it is impossible to offer a global panorama of contemporary society here, two salient elements deserve to be mentioned in order to think about the "new" fascism – beyond a certain ideological continuity on national regeneration, whether formulated in racial or cultural terms.

The Marxist analysis of fascism as a product of capitalism allows us to characterize its dynamics: in the last century as today, it is rooted in a deep economic crisis. However, capitalism has undergone profound changes in the hundred years that separate the two situations.

On the one hand, the world economy has been the subject of a process of transnationalisation over the last forty years: the nation-state appears less as the main framework for organising the economy, with capitalists now collaborating directly in markets that exceed the national regulatory power – which today appears to be weakened in the face of the power of capital, thus fuelling a certain nationalist tension.

On the other hand, the class structure itself has been radically transformed. The historical antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has not disappeared, but it has become more complex objectively – with the notable development of a "management class" composed of subordinate agents of the domination of capital – and subjectively – by the critique of the working-class, male and white identity promoted by the traditional workers' movement. Capitalist society thus appears to be particularly atomized, thus making the "nation" one of the only identity markers to which to cling.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the workers' movement was the main opponent of the fascist movement in the political arena. The latter was then built on the organizational level against the specter of revolution and socialism that still haunted Europe. The retraction of the workers' movement and the advent of neoliberalism since the 1980s radically changed the political coordinates of the period. Their main rival in the political arena was now neoliberalism, and it was above all the ideological and discursive elements of the latter that the fascist forces sought to digest and reformulate in the light of their project of national regeneration.

This new political context prohibits any fetishization of the historical forms of fascist regimes, which were only the historically situated materialization of a certain specific balance of power that no longer exists. It is therefore more a question of looking at the type of political reaction that fascism represents.

## Fascism and imperialism

Following Alberto Toscano's work on "late fascism", a long-term analysis is perhaps preferable to historical analogies. Like others, the Italian theorist certainly characterizes the rise of fascism as a product of the crisis of capitalism, but he goes further by showing that this crisis itself stems from a form of imperial downgrading.

Then as now, Western capital would indeed see its world hegemony challenged, threatening increased profits. On the side of the fascist social base, the imperial way of life – which is structurally based on unequal exchange on a global scale, i.e. on the asymmetrical exploitation of natural resources, labour and the ecological regenerative capacities of the rest of the world – would also be threatened. It is not a question of identifying a continuity between historical and contemporary fascisms, but rather of insisting on the fact that they are rooted in a common history, that of Western imperialism.

This gesture makes it possible to de-singularize certain specific forms of historical fascism. To refute the existence of contemporary fascism, the absence of organized militias is often highlighted. An analogical approach effectively considers such a criterion to be essential, while apprehending it in a fixed way. On the contrary, the inclusion of fascism in the long history of imperialism shows that the very form of the party-militia finds its source in the European colonial violence of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was also opposed to the power of the traditional workers' movement, which was itself based on paramilitary fringes.

Today, the fascist exercise of racial violence is part of another imperial context, marked by globalized capitalism – as well as the weakness of an organized proletarian movement. Its sources are therefore more to be found in police repression (whose technical means have greatly increased over the last century), border violence and mass incarceration.

Yesterday as today, fascist violence is therefore not characterized by a change in nature, but rather by a change of scale and an even more important institutionalization of pre-existing forms of state violence.

# Global fascism or fascisation of the world?

The crisis of the imperial hegemony of the Western powers has thus fuelled the rise of fascistic, even fascist, movements within their liberal regimes. Beyond national specificities, this dynamic can appear to be a real steamroller. Within a part of the left, the spectre of "global fascism" thus maintains legitimate but misleading concerns about the true nature of the enemy we face. This formula effectively suggests that a transnational regime is being formed on a global scale, through the collaboration of the far right beyond the national borders within which they traditionally operate.

Despite certain appearances, no "world fascism" is on the horizon. The common identification of a "fascist international" contributes in particular to the confusion. A number of far-right leaders, whether or not they have risen to power, do seem to support each other in the conquest of power – as evidenced, for example, by Elon Musk's involvement in the recent German federal elections. However, this collaboration is by no means definitive: fascistic, even fascist, governments keep the defence of the supreme interests of the nation as their *raison d'être*.

Looking at the imperial policy of fascistic governments allows us to see a little more clearly. As soon as he returned to power, Donald Trump radically reoriented US imperialism by returning to a particularly strict form of unilateralism. The withdrawal of the United States from a number of international frameworks of collaboration is effectively done in the name of the slogan "America first," which testifies to the primacy of American interests over any other political rationality. The seizure of power by the far right within European states therefore appears to be a relatively secondary factor, which will not influence the vassalization of the Old Continent that Donald Trump and his government are aiming for. Their U-turns on the issue of tariffs are part of the same imperialist strategy aimed at strengthening the power of American capital in the world economy, in a trade war against China. The trampling of Ukraine must also be read in this light: the fate of the Ukrainian people is only secondary for the American government, which favors negotiation with the Kremlin to benefit from Russian aggression. These examples are facets of one and the same unilateralism with fascist overtones.

The risk we face today is not that of "global fascism" but rather that of a fascisation of the world: the fascistic far right supports each other in the conquest of power, but their ideological affinities will not necessarily lead them to collaborate in the same political direction. Unsurprisingly, their team therefore appears profoundly unstable, ossified by the capitalist-imperial competition of which fascist movements and regimes are the product.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Solidarités](#).

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