

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article9116>



Fascism

Authoritarianism and Democracy in the 21st Century

- Features -

Publication date: Thursday 7 August 2025

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Enzo Traverso updates his analysis of post-fascism in light of the events of recent years. Reflecting on the rise of the new right and the global crisis of the left, he offers a diagnosis of contemporary challenges and the dangers facing emancipatory struggles in an increasingly complex world.

In a global context marked by the resurgence of far-right forces, historian Enzo Traverso offers in this interview an updated reflection on the concept of post-fascism, which he has been developing throughout his writings.

Drawing on recent events, such as Trump's second term in the United States, the rise of the far right in Europe, and the rightward shift in Latin America, the author presents a critical assessment of the global crisis of the left and the dangers facing an increasingly fragmented world order. Traverso not only delves into the characteristics of the new right, but also into the challenges the left faces in articulating a progressive response capable of countering the growing hegemony of reaction.

You wrote a highly influential book, translated into Spanish as *Las nuevas caras de la derecha*, in which you coined the term "post-fascism." Several years have passed since then, and key episodes linked to the rise of the far right have emerged that you weren't able to address at the time: the assault on the Capitol in the United States, the similar attempt in Brazil by Jair Bolsonaro, the triumph of Javier Milei in Argentina, the new rise of Trump, etc. How do you analyse the far right and the concept of post-fascism today in light of these new events?

The book you're talking about arose from an interview conducted in early 2016, during the US election campaign, even before Trump's first term. Then there was a sort of second interview, after the elections, almost ten years ago. As you say, the context changed significantly, so the logical question arises: what should be changed compared to the original edition of my book.

I wouldn't change the general framework. The concept of post-fascism that I tried to outline in that interview remains useful to me for defining this phenomenon, although I don't consider it a closed, defined phenomenon. It seems to me that this is still a transitional phenomenon, the ultimate outcome of which is still difficult to understand or describe precisely. However, there is no doubt that many things have changed, and some trends that were already identifiable and analysed ten years ago are now much clearer and, we might say, consolidated on a global scale. All the phenomena you mention confirm this, whether we are talking about Europe, the United States, Latin America, or even beyond.

The most notable change, I would say, is not just the strengthening of the radical right, but its new legitimacy. What's changed since the analysis I made ten years ago is that today the radical right has become a legitimate—and in many cases, privileged—interlocutor for the dominant elites globally. That wasn't the case a decade ago. At that time, Trump's election win came as a surprise. All the polls and analysts assumed Hillary Clinton would win, because she was the candidate of the establishment, of the elites. Trump, on the other hand, faced many obstacles within his own party, the Republican Party, and when he was elected, he was perceived as an outsider, someone who had won completely unexpectedly.

If we compare 2016 with 2025, back then Trump signed a single executive order on his inauguration day. Today, he's

signed dozens. In 2016, he wasn't entirely clear on what to do as president; today, he has very clear ideas about how to act. And, of course, he's no longer an outsider: he's the president of the United States and has a consolidated apparatus behind him. In 2016, Bolsonaro was also an outsider, and no one could even imagine someone like Milei. Giorgia Meloni was a completely marginal figure in Italian politics. During the 2017 French presidential elections, what surprised all observers was the televised debate between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen. At the time, she came across as clearly unreliable: when asked what she would do with the European Union or the euro, she couldn't answer clearly or convincingly.

In short, the radical right was not seen as a viable option by the elites. On the contrary, it was viewed with great suspicion, both in the United States and in Europe, as well as in Latin America. Even Bolsonaro didn't win as a direct candidate of Brazilian big business. He had support within the Army and some economic sectors, yes, but the winning candidate was still the Workers' Party (PT), which at the time appeared to be a much stronger option. In 2017, something happened in Europe that was experienced as something of a trauma: the entry of Alternative für Deutschland into the German parliament marked a turning point. Shortly after, Vox emerged in Spain. And the landscape changed significantly.

However, this process has not been linear. After Trump and Bolsonaro's victory, they both lost the elections four years later. In between came the pandemic and the global economic crisis it brought with it. In my book, I posed a hypothesis along these lines: what would happen if an international crisis occurred? I argued that a crisis of that magnitude could transform post-fascism into a new form of fascism. But that's not what happened. The crisis, instead of strengthening the radical right, weakened it, because it became clear that it was incapable of facing challenges of that magnitude.

I was speaking then of a double shift. On the one hand, a potentially authoritarian shift, with the implementation of extraordinary laws, a state of exception, which calls into question individual and collective freedoms, as well as spaces for public action. From this perspective, the radical right is the ideal candidate to manage this authoritarian shift. But, on the other hand, the pandemic also produced a biopolitical shift, with strong state intervention aimed at protecting citizens physically defined as bodies, at protecting populations. In this area, the radical right failed in every country. It was a moment of setback, and, by and large, they lost the following elections.

Then came a new wave, the one we're currently facing. So I insist: this isn't a linear process, but the general trend is quite clear. This doesn't mean we're facing a new fascism with a well-defined profile and clear features. I believe it's still a very heterogeneous constellation that is seeking forms of convergence. And although today this new alliance between post-fascism and global elites is undeniable, it remains marked by tensions and contradictions. We cannot yet speak of a new historical bloc, in the Gramscian sense of the term. It is more a convergence based on common interests than the constitution of a bloc.

With the rise of the new radical right, the debate on fascism has returned with force, a debate that tends to polarise between those who maintain that, if it is fascism, it must imply a change of political regime—with elements such as the single party or the corporate state, as occurred in the 1930s—and those who argue that if the formal validity of liberal democracy is maintained, it would simply be a new version of the traditional right, with a different idiosyncrasy.

The question is whether this polarisation isn't misplaced. That is, whether current authoritarian phenomena don't more closely resemble what Viktor Orbán's Hungary represents: an authoritarian regime developing within the framework of liberal democracy, while retaining at least its external forms. We'd like to know your opinion on this debate and, in particular, what place you would give to the Orbán model, which can be thought of as a kind of political utopia for the new far right, in contrast to both historical fascism and the conventional right.

Yes, this is a central feature of the new radical right, which, like many other observers, I had already pointed out ten years ago. Classical fascism established a radical dichotomy between fascism and democracy: it explicitly defined itself as anti-democratic. This was not only theorised by its ideologues, but also proudly claimed by its charismatic leaders. It's enough to recall Mussolini's famous definition, which described democracy as a *ludus cartaceus*, a simple "paper game." Fascism flaunted its contempt for democracy. Today, however, all the movements and leaders I call post-fascist adopt a democratic rhetoric. They all claim to belong to the framework of liberal democracy and even present themselves as its greatest defenders. This rhetoric has been fundamental to their legitimisation in the public eye.

Marine Le Pen, for example, not only changed the name of her party and broke with her father, but also explicitly affirmed her commitment to the institutions of the Fifth Republic and to democratic values. Italy is another illustrative case. Giorgia Meloni leads a party with clearly fascist roots. Until a few years ago, she proudly claimed that heritage. But since coming to power, she has abandoned any apology for fascism. She doesn't declare herself anti-fascist, of course, but she constantly insists on its "democratic" nature and its adherence to the current institutional framework.

In the United States, the paradox reaches its extreme: the assault on the Capitol in January 2021 was carried out in the name of democracy. The protesters claimed to be defending a democracy that had been "stolen" from them by the Democrats. In other words, they presented themselves as true democrats.

This is a fundamental transformation: the relationship of the new radical right with democracy is completely different from that of historical fascism. As you rightly point out in your question, today the line between democracy and fascism is no longer clear. Twenty-first-century fascism does not seek to abolish democratic forms, but rather to intervene from within, erode them, and transform them from within. This blurring of the boundaries between fascism and democracy renders old analytical categories like those of Poulantzas somewhat obsolete, to which I will return later.

However, we must also consider another historical difference that helps explain this change. In the interwar years, democracy was a recent achievement, a historic conquest of the subaltern classes, a product—or byproduct—of the October Revolution and the revolutionary wave that followed the collapse of the nineteenth-century liberal order after the Great War. It was a period of brutal crisis, but also of significant democratic advances: universal male suffrage was consolidated in many countries, in some, women won the right to vote, public space was transformed, and new forms of popular participation emerged. In this context, fascism clearly emerged as the enemy of democracy. This was the case in Italy from the 1920s, in Germany with the sudden destruction of the Weimar Republic in 1933, and in the Spanish Civil War, which was a direct confrontation between fascism and democracy.

Today, however, the context is completely different. Democracy no longer appears as a conquest to be defended, but rather as an empty shell. In much of the Western world—and we could say, on a global scale—democracy is perceived as a formal shell, deeply eroded by the processes of commercial reification of public space, by the hollowing out of institutions, by a structural transformation of the relationship between economy and politics. No one thinks of democracy as an emancipatory promise anymore. In the United States, Elon Musk supported Donald Trump's election campaign by giving him \$270 million and then joined his administration, taking on crucial positions. In such a context, no one can define democracy as a guarantee of equality, freedom, and justice.

But, beyond the case of the United States, it's very rare to hear people talk about fascism as a real threat. And even in the United States, the debate about "Trump's fascism" is largely confined to liberal elites. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, for example, called him a fascist during the campaign, and there are discussions in outlets like the New York Times about this topic. But even there, Trump is often portrayed as a foreign body, as an anomaly that has fallen from outside upon American democracy, the paradigm of Western democracies. In other words, he is not conceived as what he truly is: a genuine product of American society and its democratic system.

And for a large part of the popular classes, of working people, the defense of democracy is at the bottom of their list of concerns. Why would they consider Trump a threat to democracy and Biden its saviour? This opposition makes no sense to them. Of course, there's a degree of blindness there—Trump is a threat—but the problem is deeper: you can't defend democracy by equating it with what exists today. The question is what democracy we want to defend, what democracy we want to build.

Because if democracy is only these hollowed-out institutions, it will be very difficult to mobilise a large anti-fascist movement to defend them, especially when those who attack them also present themselves as democrats and say—with some justification—that these institutions don't work. What is there to defend? That's the problem.

You pointed out that one of the distinctive features of this new far right is its growing support among elites. In Trump's case, this seems especially pronounced: he now has a much stronger grip on the Republican Party than in 2016, he has the support of both chambers, the Supreme Court is aligned with his agenda, and a large part of the ruling class now seems much more in tune with him. What can we expect from this second term, both domestically and internationally?

This is a question many are asking today, but it has no easy answer. And, in part, this marks an important difference from classical fascism. Historical fascism had a clear project: a defined political regime, a strategy of power, a conception of internal and international order. Italian fascism, for example, aspired to make the Mediterranean its *mare nostrum*, its vital space. German fascism aimed to control continental Europe and, in particular, the imperial and military conquest of Eastern Europe. In Spain, Franco aimed to "crush the Reds" and establish a National Catholic dictatorship. In other words, there was a fairly coherent idea of regime and world.

With Trump, things aren't so clear. His messages are often contradictory, and it's difficult to distinguish between pure demagoguery and what could be understood as a genuine strategic direction. He says, for example, that he's going to plant the American flag on Mars, that it would be a good idea to annexe Greenland, or even that Canada should be the next American state. The truth: behind this lies a geopolitical project aimed at consolidating the continental influence of the United States, within the framework of a redefinition of its ties with China and a relative retreat from other arenas. This is a hegemonic ambition that is taking on imperial features, but which, paradoxically, is the product of a weakening: the United States has abandoned the aspiration to dominate the world, as it envisioned after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union.

But these are speculations, because there is no clearly defined project. The strategic lines of Bush's neoconservative right, almost twenty-five years ago, after September 11, 2001, were clearer. Some ideologues and strategists like Robert Kagan had defined them precisely. Behind Trump lies a rather contradictory constellation of classic fascists like Steve Bannon and radical neoliberals like Elon Musk, both of whom hate each other. Analysts struggle to understand the coherence of Trump's measures on international trade.

Even when Trump speaks in more classic terms—such as when he says, "Make America Great Again"—the content of that greatness is ambiguous. He seems to refer to a restoration of the United States' role as a global superpower, but at the same time he avoids committing to a policy of direct confrontation, for example, with China. In fact, he's rather seeking an agreement with China, and the same with Russia, which is China's ally but much weaker. Trump says a superpower must be capable of conquest but also of creating conflicts. And that's where his positions on Ukraine come in, where he proposes turning the page, or on the Middle East, where his alliance with Israel is evident but he doesn't necessarily seem inclined to continue the war indefinitely. The ultimate goal—in terms of his political camp—is likely the complete colonisation of Gaza and the West Bank, but I'm not sure Trump's strategy is to prolong the genocide in Gaza to achieve that outcome.

What we see, then, is a set of trends, but without a strong programmatic coherence. And that's also part of the

current international context. If one wants to look for analogies with the interwar years, one of the clearest lies not so much in domestic politics but in the global situation: the absence of a stable international order, in some cases a systemic one, and competition between declining and emerging powers. In this scenario, it's difficult to draw clear lines, both for the United States and for any other actor. That's why I don't think Trump today has ideas as clear and coherent as Hitler's in 1933. Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi policy followed a fairly straightforward line. In Trump's case, I don't see that coherence or the conditions for him to deploy a long-range strategic project.

You mentioned, as a possible analogy with the 1920s and 1930s, that we're not facing a mere economic or political crisis, but rather a deeper upheaval, a sort of long-term structural crisis. Back then, it was about the collapse of the 19th-century liberal order; in that context, the rise of fascism also appeared linked to the decline of certain powers, such as Germany after the First World War. Do you think this connection can also be established in the present? In other words, could what we're seeing today, with the rise of the new far right, be related to a broader process of Western decline in the face of the rise of Asia, and especially China? Do you think this geopolitical dispute is an important—albeit perhaps indirect—motivation for the rise of these right-wing movements?

No, I don't think we can speak of an analogy in that sense. Comparisons can be made, but there are fundamental differences. In the interwar years, faced with the collapse of the nineteenth-century liberal order—laissez-faire capitalism, modernised "persistent ancien régime" states (according to Arno J. Mayer), representative but hardly democratic institutions—two alternative models emerged that were, in themselves, projects of civilisation. On the one hand, socialism, with its utopia of emancipation, equality, and revolution; on the other, fascism, with its exaltation of nation, race, and domination. Both were visions of the future, comprehensive models of society that promised to radically transform people's lives.

Today, I see nothing comparable in the new right. There is no utopian horizon or project for civilisation per se. That's why I find the concept of "post-fascism" useful, because these radical right-wing movements are profoundly conservative. Their impulse is not forward but backward: what they seek is to restore a traditional order. The values they champion—sovereignty, family, nation—form a kind of red thread that connects them.

Trump, for example, claims that in the United States there are only men and women, denies the existence of other gender identities, and presents the LGBTQ+ community as threats. It's a reactionary offensive against anything that represents diversity or hard-won rights. This return to the traditional is also evident in its hostility toward environmentalism, its rejection of any global agenda on climate change, and its commitment to domestic production over international agreements. "Make America Great Again" is a slogan that fosters a certain imagination of the future, but it is a regressive imagination: a return to a time when the United States was strong, prosperous, and dominant. This isn't a new proposal, but rather an idealisation of the past.

In some cases, such as that of Javier Milei's Argentina, it may seem as if there is an attempt to build a new civilisational model. Milei presents himself as the architect of a new society inspired by extreme neoliberalism. But even there, this project isn't really new. If one reads his speeches and positions—I speak as an outside observer, I clarify, without in-depth knowledge of the Argentine situation—there is a clear correspondence with Hayek's ideas. Not so much with *The Road to Serfdom*, the best-known text, but with *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, where Hayek describes a society completely governed by the market. This is the model that seems to inspire Milei: an authoritarian neoliberalism (or a neoliberal post-fascism, if you will; it can be called by different names).

What's new, if anything, is that the state is now attempting to take this model to its ultimate consequences. In the past, neoliberalism was also influential, led by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. But in those cases, the objective was to dismantle the achievements of the welfare state—the New Deal, the postwar Keynesian model—not to establish a "pure" market society from

scratch. Moreover, they often did so from states that were still very strong, as in the Chilean case, where the Pinochet dictatorship was a hypercentralised apparatus born of a counterrevolution.

What Milei intends now is something else: to make the neoliberal model the core of a new civilisation. But, I insist, this is not a new project. It is not the "new man" of classical fascism. It is a radicalised version of an anthropological model that already dominates the global world: individualism, competition, market. To put it in Weber's words, it doesn't break with a particular *Lebensführung*, a "conduct of life" that constitutes the anthropological model of neoliberalism. Milei did not invent that ethos. What he does is push it to the extreme, and pretend that a new society will emerge from it. But it is an intensification of what already exists, not a historical alternative. And that, it seems to me, must be taken into account. This project, certainly, is profoundly anti-democratic and has authoritarian features, but it is the opposite of a strengthening of the state, as Poulantzas thought in the 1970s. Post-fascism is not statist like historical fascism. Trump is dismantling the American state, and that is a big difference.

At Jacobin, we've been working on a hypothesis about the international situation, which we developed in the previous issue and wanted to share with you for your opinion. Our idea is that at some point in the last decade—although it's difficult to date precisely—a shift in the global political cycle occurred. If we had to choose a symbolic date, it would be between 2015 and 2016, when a series of highly significant events occurred: the defeat or capitulation of Syriza in Greece, with a strong impact on the global left, and, in parallel, the triumph of Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom. It is also the moment when the crisis of Latin American progressivism begins, marked by the victory of the right in Argentina and the parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

The feeling is that from that moment on, the political direction of the discontent generated by the 2008 crisis was reversed. Until then, the left had a certain capacity to channel this discontent: the indignados in Europe, the general strikes in Greece, the progressive cycle in Latin America, the Arab Spring... But from then on, what we see is rather the failure, stagnation, or defeat of these processes: Latin American progressivism enters into crisis, the European left suffers a severe blow, the Arab Spring becomes a catastrophe, and the Anglo-Saxon left also stagnates.

The idea, then, is that what took place at that moment was a global shift: the left went on the defensive almost everywhere, and the far right went on the offensive. Do you agree?

It's a very interesting hypothesis, and I largely agree with it. I would perhaps add a nuance. It's true that we're going through a new wave—I was talking earlier about an inflection that occurred around the pandemic—but one of the conditions for this new rise of the right is precisely the crisis of the left on a global scale. All the elements you mention are important.

I would even say more: the paralysis and defeat of the Arab revolutions is a key moment, and what is happening in Gaza today is also one of its most tragic consequences.

Added to this is the crisis of the model of resistance that had emerged in Latin America in the 1990s. It wasn't a new model, but we did have here a continent that represented a form of resistance to the neoliberal offensive. Today, the actors of this resistance are in crisis or completely delegitimised, and this has profound political consequences. I won't dwell on cases like Venezuela or Bolivia, but we could also mention our defeat in Argentina, or the fact that in Brazil—the most important country in the region—the left is unable to propose any figure other than Lula. This is also a reflection of this crisis.

In Europe, as you say, there were important attempts to recompose the left with a view to testing a new model, and

Syriza and Podemos were the protagonists of that cycle. The expectations they generated were enormous... and unfortunately, so was the impact of their failure. In the United States, the situation is different. There wasn't such a resounding defeat, but the symbiotic—and ambiguous—relationship between the left and the Democratic Party creates enormous obstacles to progress.

So yes, the emergence of post-fascism rests on this political and strategic crisis of the left. But it's not just that. This crisis is part of a much longer process, a sequence of accumulated historical defeats. If we take a long-term view, we are experiencing the consequences of the closing of a historical cycle, that of the 20th-century revolutions. These are long-term defeats, the effects of which continue to shape our present. The setbacks of 2015 and 2016 are part of a particular juncture, but at the same time, they are part of a structural trend, a historic defeat from which the left—on a global scale—has been unable to emerge with new models.

Thinking about reconstruction isn't easy, not at all. But I was deeply struck by a recent intervention by Bernie Sanders, in which he warned: "Be careful, we must not remain subordinate to Trump's agenda." There's a tendency for the left to respond to every point of the far-right's discourse, but within the framework that the same right imposes. And Sanders then warns that "we have to talk about what Trump isn't saying." That should be the agenda of the left: a social agenda that is completely absent from the dominant discourse today.

Now, I don't believe that today's left can be rebuilt solely through anti-fascism, as was the case in the 1930s. First, because democracy cannot be defended in the same way today. And second, because the anti-fascist struggle must be articulated with other fundamental dimensions: social, economic, and environmental issues, and the confrontation with a neoliberal model of society that claims to be a civilisation. This articulated approach is essential.

Furthermore, the global world is no longer what it was in the first half of the 20th century. Classical fascism had its history, but the anti-fascism of that time was not a universal discourse. It lacked legitimacy outside the West. Its connection with colonialism, the fact that democracy was restricted to the Western world... all of this limited it. Something similar is happening today.

1 August 2025

Translated by David Fagan for **International Viewpoint** from [Jacobin America Latina](#).

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