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The New Extreme Right

Fascism: a Theory with a History

- Features -

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In 2026, no one can seriously view fascism as a purely historiographical matter. We cannot ask "What is fascism?" without considering the reality that surrounds us. This question does not refer exclusively to the past, but also, and above all, to the present—a present marked by the strong rise of the far right. The new wave of authoritarian governments around the world has reignited this debate, but this word, which springs to mind when we think of Donald Trump, Javier Milei, Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán, or Marine Le Pen, is clearly inadequate to describe them. If, as many historians explain, fascism in the 21st century is so different from its predecessors, we may need new concepts to define it.

This is true with respect to many other phenomena of our time. The old concept of war is equally problematic and fails to encompass the novelty of conflicts fought with drones and artificial intelligence (AI). The revolutions of the last decade—particularly the Arab revolutions—abandoned all reference to socialism and shared little with those of the previous century. According to the mainstream media and most Western statesmen, antisemitism is rampant, but they no longer use this label to define prejudices against Jewish people, but rather to indiscriminately discredit anyone who criticises Israel. We could continue in this way with many other concepts.

So we live in a kind of interregnum, as Gramsci wrote in the 1930s in his Prison Notebooks: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new has not yet been born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Although it has often been overused, this phrase reflects our present quite well: we are not facing a repetition of history, a return to the past; we face new problems and new threats, but we only have concepts inherited from the past to analyse and interpret them. Of course, this is frustrating: these words do not adequately describe the uncertainty of our time, which seems to herald a terrible storm.

In my opinion, we are dealing with a kind of post-fascism, a concept that reflects both a historical distance from classical fascism and a significant change in its ideological, social, and political positions. This new, heterogeneous far right is a constellation of movements and parties of diverse origins and ideological leanings, most of which claim to accept the institutional framework of liberal democracy. Their aim is to destroy democracy from within, not from without. They pose a threat to democracy, but they do not operate in the same way as the forces of historical fascism; they challenge the traditional dichotomy between fascism and democracy at a time when democracy itself appears worn out, discredited, hollowed out, and deprived of its original virtues.

J.D. Vance goes to Munich to equate freedom with Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany or AfD); Giorgia Meloni defends Italian democracy against a threat embodied by antifascism; all Western governments support Israel as a democratic island surrounded by obscurantist barbarians; far-right movements in Europe and the Americas propose racist and xenophobic measures to defend democracy against Islamic fundamentalism. All this while deporting hundreds of thousands of immigrants living and working in the US, with the Trump administration saying it is defending human rights when it grants refugee status to South African supporters of white supremacy. Words have changed their meaning through a kind of Orwellian metamorphosis. Ten years ago these trends were still embryonic. In the last two or three years, they have experienced a sharp acceleration.

The most frequently cited difference between fascism and post-fascism is violence. While this diagnosis seems accurate, I believe it needs some qualification. Of course, today most radical right-wing leaders are accustomed to appearing on our television screens, and their entourage doesn't wear uniforms. After seventy years of peace and economic stability, liberal democracy seemed to constitute a solid institutional framework in Western countries. Violence—consider the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, or the attack on the Brazilian Congress two years later—appears to be the exception, not the rule, although things are changing.

Donald Trump's second term is characterised by a clear tendency to criminalise politics: he has sent federal troops to many large cities to restore order and has transformed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) into a paramilitary force that already appears as a kind of praetorian guard. These are the most striking features of the shift toward authoritarianism. ICE is creating a climate of terror in which the rule of law is undermined, and everyone, not just undocumented immigrants, feels threatened.

Of course, post-fascist violence is not comparable to that of classical fascism on a continent devastated by total war, but the signs of change are clearly perceptible. Authoritarianism is also on the rise in Europe. Let's think about France and Italy: ten years ago, union strikes and demonstrations were monitored by police officers, who might have marginal clashes with some radical sectors of strikers. Today, legal demonstrations organised by labour unions and the left are met with military force. Systemic racism prevails in police stations.

This return to displays of force has extended beyond borders. The West has exported violence to other places, primarily the Middle East, where it has carried out occupations, wars, and, more recently, a genocide through its Israeli ally. Now, the Trump administration has bombed Iran, kidnapped Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and threatened its neighbours, particularly Greenland, putting NATO in jeopardy and warning its most loyal European allies. Paradoxically, this is more a symptom of weakness than strength. The US yearns to seize Canada and Greenland to maintain and reinforce its status as a continental superpower, but it has abandoned its traditional hegemonic ambitions on a global scale. The Cold War ambition to establish an American world order has become obsolete. China will not succumb as did the USSR more than thirty years ago.

A second difference is equally paradoxical: the novelty of this emerging far right is its conservatism. At the end of the First World War, fascism had a powerful utopian dimension. It was conceived as a revolution, spoke of the New Man, the Thousand-Year Reich, and so on. It said the world was in complete collapse and proposed an alternative for the future. In other words, it had a utopian vision.

Today, post-fascism is purely conservative. It speaks of a great replacement that poses a threat to Western civilisation and claims to defend traditional values: family, sovereignty, national cultures, Judeo-Christian civilisation, and so on. It calls into question all advances in minority rights and cruelly attacks the most vulnerable people: undocumented immigrants, queer and transgender people. In general, these movements have lost their ability to inspire people to dream of a different future; they aspire to restore order and security (economic, political, cultural, and psychological). Even Donald Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," the one most favoured by his followers, is not a slogan of conquest; it refers to the dream of recapturing a lost golden age, a time when the US was a powerful and prosperous nation.

What is new—and reminiscent of the 1930s—is the capacity of post-fascism to forge organic links with economic elites, as was spectacularly demonstrated at Trump's inauguration. Perhaps the most likely outcome in the coming years is the establishment of an authoritarian form of neoliberalism. Until now, post-fascist leaders and movements appeared as upstarts who questioned the political class and proposed a conservative alternative to neoliberalism; today they have become reliable interlocutors of economic elites in the EU, the US and also in many Latin American countries.

Of course, it is difficult to predict how long this alliance between post-fascism and neoliberalism will last. In the EU, we are still far from the oligarchic power now emerging with Trump, but a similar trend exists. What seems clear is that neoliberal elites do not want the establishment of a totalitarian state like Mussolini's Italy or Hitler's Germany; their goal is a state of exception that suspends democracy by establishing their own power—a political power based on the principle of the autonomy of capital, which is different from the autonomy of the political. Carl Schmitt has not been completely forgotten—post-fascist leaders are decisionists in the sense that they despise parliaments and govern by executive orders, calling into question many constitutional norms—but this has been reviewed and

corrected by Friedrich von Hayek.

When he was elected in 2023, Javier Milei appeared as a kind of Argentine anomaly: excessive, exotic and exceptional; today he has become a paradigmatic figure of libertarianism, and his austerity prescriptions have been surpassed by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The only historical precedent for this coexistence between authoritarian political power (Schmitt's idea of sovereignty) and neoliberal capitalism, in which the state is completely subservient to capital and transformed into a tool of market society (Hayek's idea of liberalism), is Pinochet's Chile. And Pinochet's Chile was not a mere repetition of interwar fascism. This is the historical backdrop of today's post-fascism.

This change in strategy was clearly not inevitable. Economic elites have only recently begun to trust and support radical right-wing movements, movements that previously did not seem to be reliable interlocutors. In the past, far-right leaders have gained influence by denouncing neoliberal globalisation (as when Marine Le Pen labeled Macron a representative of globalist elites, or when Giorgia Meloni stigmatised banker Mario Draghi on similar grounds). Sometimes they have come to power despite the preferences of the ruling classes, as with Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in 2016, when they were not the establishment candidates.

Today, the alliance between far-right populist movements and global elites prevails everywhere. The facts on which this assertion is based are far from anecdotal. Here is a strange coalition of the poorest and richest strata of society. This has probably been the greatest achievement of post-fascism: to gain both the support of broad sectors of the working classes and the trust of the powerful, yet very few, global elites.

The radical right is based on the classic populist paradigm of good people as opposed to corrupt elites, but it has been significantly reformulated. Unlike in the past, when the “true” people were understood to be an ethnically homogeneous community (white, nationalist people, supposedly with deep roots in the territory), opposed to the poor and marginalised urban inhabitants, a source of disorder and insecurity, today the white working class can be accepted as a national component if it has broken with its socialist, communist and leftist traditions. External enemies are immigrants, racialised minorities, and Muslims; internal enemies are representatives of all kinds of "wokism," from feminists and LGBTQ people to environmentalists and those who denounce the Palestinian genocide.

As Michel Feherhas has aptly suggested, the continuity between old nationalism, fascism, and post-fascism lies in a persistent imaginary dichotomy of producers and parasites; the former, virtuous men and women who work, are shamefully exploited by the latter, a heterogeneous group that includes financial elites and immigrants who benefit from social security and welfare benefits in host countries. During the first half of the 20th century, these parasitic sectors presented the attributes of Jews in the nationalist and fascist imagination: a strange coalition of Wall Street bankers and Jewish Bolsheviks; today they are the globalist elites and Muslim immigrants.

However, the post-fascist imagination—especially its view of sexuality—is more complex than the stigmatisation of counter-models and the search for scapegoats might suggest. Despite its neoconservative character, post-fascism should not be interpreted as a simple return to bourgeois normality and Victorian stereotypes. Emerging from the institutional framework of liberal democracy in market societies forged by possessive individualism, post-fascism has broken with the fascist ideal and in many cases reclaims the legacy of the Enlightenment. In the post-totalitarian age of human rights, this lends it respectability.

Post-fascism does not justify its war against Islam with the old, spurious arguments of imperial expansionism and doctrinal racialism, but rather with its own interpretation of the Enlightenment legacy. Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Viktor Orbán claim to defend European peoples from migrants crossing the Mediterranean, but they also claim to defend women against Islamic obscurantism. Homophobia and homonationalism coexist within this shifting radical right. In the Netherlands, feminism and gay rights have been used as a banner in a violent xenophobic campaign

against immigrants and Muslim populations, spearheaded first by Pim Fortuyn, who was openly gay, and later by his successor, Gert Wilders, a gay rights advocate. Alice Weidel, the national leader of the AfD, is a lesbian who professes her commitment to the traditional family and opposes same-sex marriage.

Today, the legacy of the Enlightenment is often framed within a new version of Orientalism, based on a dichotomous worldview that contrasts civilisation, rationalism, progress, and freedom with barbarism, fanaticism, and obscurantism. Far-right movements participate in this progressive neo-Orientalist vision without abandoning their traditional racist, misogynistic, and homophobic identity. They have indeed abandoned a traditional racialist and colonialist discourse, which is no longer acceptable in the 21st century (despite some notable exceptions, such as Zionist colonialism), but they continue to speak of an ontological cultural discrepancy between the West and the rest of the world.

A significant difference between fascism and post-fascism lies in their vision of the state. Fascism emerged after the Great War, in the age of the totalitarian state, the end of laissez-faire capitalism, and the rise of state intervention into the economy: Keynesianism, the New Deal, fascism, and the Soviet five-year plans all belong to the same era of statism. Post-fascism has emerged in a completely different period, the era of free-market messianism and neoliberal capitalism. Its authoritarian characteristics coexist with the cult of the market society.

In this context, the support of economic elites comes at a high price: the abandonment of state intervention. Today, Trump is no longer seen as an outsider who has seized control of the Republican Party, one of the pillars of the American establishment. Similarly, European nationalist and post-fascist movements no longer appear as subversive and dangerous enemies of the EU. Meloni is not an outcast, but rather an influential figure within the EU. Before coming to power, neither Mussolini nor Hitler enjoyed such explicit support from the financial and industrial elites of their countries; their situation was nothing like the support Trump has received from numerous billionaires or that Le Pen gets from the media empire controlled by Vincent Bolloré. In many ways, global elites are reminiscent of the sleepwalkers of 1914 [1], the champions of the European concert who fell off the tree without understanding what was happening.

In the interwar period, liberal democracies viewed the rise of fascism with a mixture of incomprehension and complacency, the main expressions of which were the deliberate non-intervention of France and the United Kingdom in the Spanish Civil War and their concessions to Hitler at the Munich Conference in 1938. A similar ambiguity persists today. As Wolfgang Streck aptly points out, the economic and cultural cosmopolitanism of global elites has, in reaction, generated “a form of anti-elitist nationalism from below,” based on Feher’s dichotomy between producers and parasites. Post-fascism provides political expression for this resentment while gaining respectability and credibility in the eyes of the financial and industrial elites themselves.

It is difficult to predict how long these contradictory trends can be reconciled. Milei, Meloni, Orbán, and Trump are skillful acrobats who maintain both antinomic poles, but in the long run, this exercise could prove dangerous: on the one hand, this convergence between the elites and the most disadvantaged social strata can never constitute a true historical bloc in the Gramscian sense, but only a provisional form of Bonapartism; on the other hand, the condition for implementing this strategy is the progressive destruction of the institutional framework of the rule of law and liberal democracy.

Since the 1990s, that is, since the end of the Cold War, government forces, both left and right, have adhered to neoliberalism as a kind of monolithic ideology. This is the main premise behind the spectacular rise of the far right, which has finally emerged as an alternative. According to Wendy Brown, the radical right is the undemocratic response to the dismantling of democracy driven by neoliberal logic. In a famous aphorism from 1939, Max Horkheimer wrote that “if you don’t want to talk about capitalism, then you must be silent about fascism.” Today we might say that “if you don’t want to talk about neoliberalism, then you must remain silent about post-fascism.”

Although neoliberalism and post-fascism are not synonymous, they are currently precarious allies. The only key to counteracting this trend and dissolving these “morbid symptoms” is the rebirth of the left, a social and political response from below that, instead of being abandoned, is capable of finding a project, new symbols, and a new vision for the future.

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Translated by David Fagan for ***International Viewpoint*** from **Vientosur**.

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[1] *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* is a book by Australian historian Christopher Clark, first published in 2012. In his book, Clark argues that no sole country is to blame for starting the First World War, rather, each country unwittingly stumbled into it with participants aware of the risks but blind to the reality of the impending catastrophe. DF

