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International

World Politics after Trump and Brexit

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The vote in Britain for leaving the European Union and the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election are part of the same process and not coincidental events. What we are witnessing is a worldwide shift to the right, represented by Trump, the rise of the so-called ‘populist’ right in Europe, by Modi in India, by the decline and semi-collapse of ‘socialism for the 21st century’ in Latin America and by morbid phenomena like the rise of Isis and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, an openly death squad government.

As in all periods of intense crisis there is a political polarisation and the emergence also of significant forces to the left, represented in Europe by the Corbyn trend in the Labour Party, Podemos in Spain, the continued strength of the Portuguese Left Bloc and Communist Party, Syriza in Greece and in a different way Bernie Sanders in the United States.

Beyond those forces organised in political parties of the left, we have also seen the emergence of significant social movements fighting on particular themes. Probably the most important of these internationally is the environmental movement – focused particularly on opposition to climate change. This has different manifestations in different parts of the globe – often with strong links to indigenous movements traditionally in Latin America and Asia, but increasingly so in North America.

We have also seen the massive regrowth of mobilisations in defence of migrants – with Greece and Italy playing central roles and against state racism; with the explosion of the Black Lives matter movement in the USA.

The women’s liberation movement internationally has seen a massive boost and consolidation as a result of the vast mobilisations against Trump over recent weeks. And given that attacks on women’s rights are at the centre of Trump’s agenda – and indeed of other right wing leaders across the globe, this is likely to continue as re-strengthened movement rather than merely a moment.

We are clearly in favour of the parties of the left, of which we spoke earlier, intervening into these movements and championing their demands. We are not in favour however of subordinating the movements to the electoral or tactical needs of those parties.

And polarisation doesn’t necessarily mean equivalence. Today the polarisation is heavily to the right and poses major threats to the working class and oppressed.

In Europe there is virtually a simultaneous rise of the reactionary right across the board. The Theresa May government represents a right-wing coup inside the Conservative Party and the victory of the Eurosceptics. In Austria, Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party narrowly missed winning the presidency; Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party in The Netherlands is strongly in the ascendancy; the Alternative for Germany is making strong headway and there are already right wing authoritarian governments in Poland and Hungary.

Francois Fillon, Catholic reactionary candidate for the Republican right in France says “France has never been so right wing”. Even if he or Emmanuel Macron wind up winning the French presidentials in May, it is likely that Marine Le Pen will put up an extremely strong showing and come close to winning.

Some sections of the left and the labour movement recognised these dangers. The launch of Another Europe is

Possible was an important and positive step. Corbyn and McDonnell, Momentum, Left Unity and Ken Loach, most Greens and especially Caroline Lucas worked hard to stem the racist bile. The majority of trade union leaders took the correct view – both UNITE and UNISON put out important material against racism and defending migrant workers. Matt Wrack of the FBU and Manuel Cortez of TSSA played particularly important roles. That is to their profound credit. However the relationship of forces made it extremely difficult for this campaign to reach a mass audience,

Most of the radical left, however, supported an exit vote and the so-called Lexit campaign – which had zero influence on the entire referendum. It peddled the illusion that a left exit was on offer when it was not, and falsely claimed that were Cameron to be forced out it would open up opportunities for the left. Even after a victory for Farage and the Tory right, those in Lexit such as the SWP claimed that it was a “revolt against the rich and powerful” and that the danger from racism “is far from inevitable”.

They failed to recognise the dangers that the mainstream exit campaigns, led by right-wing xenophobes, represented. They were oblivious the racism and hatred that would be generated by them, the reactionary impact this would have on the political situation and the balance of class forces, and dangers involved of being in any way associated with them – particularly in the case of an exit vote.

Drift to the right over last 15 years

An ascendant right and a besieged left is in sharp contrast to the situation just 15 years ago, at the time of the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. Then Chris Nineham could write of the forum’s closing demonstration:

“More than anything else Saturday in Florence showed what is possible. The closing demonstration was extraordinary. Florentines lined the route clapping and in some blocks of flats in working class areas it seemed like the majority of families were waving and cheering. An amazing number of households had prepared banners saluting the demo.... It was as if the movement was merging with the working class of Florence. All of a sudden we who were chanting against war, against neo-liberalism and against racism felt like the majority.” [\[1\]](#)

We are a long way away from that kind of situation, that kind of left enthusiasm today, not least in Italy itself where the promise of Rifondazione has been blown away and replaced by the populist but not really radical Five Star movement. This is despite periodic insurgent protest movements like Occupy, the indignados and Nuit Debout, which are discussed below.

How has this seeming worldwide phenomenon come about? What does it represent about the fundamentals of politics and economics?

There are of course many different factors in each national situation, but as Trotsky pointed out “The situation in each country is an uneven combination of the elements of the world process”. The overarching factors internationally stem from the economic collapse in 2007-2008, which was not foreseen by the ideologues of neoliberal globalisation and neoliberal governments.

The effects of that crash were born most harshly by the working class and poorer sections of the petty bourgeoisie in all the imperialist countries and beyond. For example the sub-prime mortgage crisis (the start of the whole process) and the consequent repossession of tens of thousands of home in the US, was the biggest single economic setback

that the US Afro-American community had ever suffered (a usually fact forgotten in the wall to wall coverage of industrial decline in the white mining and manufacturing heartlands).

The post-crisis recession was compounded by the effects of globalisation which shunted jobs out of former industrial areas, often to low-pay regions of Asia and Latin America. At the same time neoliberal capitalism, faced with the crisis of financialisation and the negative effects of globalism, was unable to forge a new post-neoliberal capitalism consensus. Speculation in the mid noughties about the possibility of a resurgence of Keynesianism proved unfounded. All that the political leaders of the world capitalist class could do was organise a monster bail-out of the banks and hammer down on the working class through tight wage controls and a deepening of neoliberal work regimes like zero hour contracts.

As Thomas Picketty pointed out [2], in this era there is a massive shift of reward towards the ownership of wealth rather than income. And this results in ever-increasing polarisation between the rich and the poor, especially in former industrialised areas where manufacturing decline has left little alternative work and hugely 'hollowed out' communities with collapsing infrastructure, ageing populations and poor or non-existent social services.

The pumping of unprecedented amounts of state capital into private banks stabilised the global financial system Profits remained private, but losses were 'nationalised'. Speculators continued to sweep up the winning chips, but taxpayers had to cover the bad bets.

This has not solved the crisis. The 2008 Crash, unprecedented in scale, has shrunk the financial reserves of states, corporations, and households, and pitched the world economy into another looming recession.

The state funds shovelled into the banks have simply disappeared into a black hole of bad debt. Since 2008, moreover, the rich have been getting richer even faster than before. The casino-economy is again in full swing. The next bubble is inflating fast and the world is on the brink of another crash. The real economy is mired in long-term stagnation. Instead of investment for human need and a green transition, we have an economy based on debt, speculation, and the further enrichment of the 1%.

Yet the entire political establishment – from traditional conservatives to social-democrats – continues to mouth neoliberal mantras and impose the austerity demanded by the bankers. No-one has the vision or the courage to propose an alternative economy strategy appropriate to the scale and character of the crisis. Everyone collaborates to prop up a bankrupt system by bailing out the rich and dumping on the poor.

It should be noted that after 2011 there were a series of defeats which dealt hammer blows to the anti-austerity resistance. First and foremost was the derailing of the Arab Spring, by a combination of reactionary Islamism, repression and imperialist intervention [3]. Also the defeat of anti-austerity insurgency in Greece was a major blow: even if we think that the leadership of Syriza adopted a false strategy, the main factor was the absolute determination of the EU leaders not to allow an anti-austerity government to win major concessions, which could have propelled force like Podemos into power elsewhere on the continent. And the Occupy movement, despite its élan and geographical spread was eventually faced with the strategic question – how do you now go beyond protest towards building an overarching political alternative, a question that was not successfully answered by the radical independence forces in Scotland.

It is this process that created the basis for Trump's victory and for Brexit. But how was this achieved? How is it that in countries like the US, France and Britain economic decline and falling working class living standards have mainly favoured the right?

Constructing reactionary alliances

Rising authoritarian right-wing movements have often initially been based inside right-wing sections of the petty bourgeoisie or even the bourgeoisie itself (cf Aaron Banks and UKIP). However UKIP, Trump and the Front National all show the line of march for the building of really national movements – putting together a coalition of the more traditional right reactionaries from the comfortable petty bourgeoisie with sections of the dispossessed working class. How is that done? Through shifting the ideological discourse of the radical right away from purely economic or cultural nationalism, towards a sharp xenophobic, anti-foreigner, anti-immigrant, racism. It was UKIP's turn in 2009-11 to prioritising anti-immigrant racism rather than just anti-EUism that made it a contender in formerly rock solid Labour areas.

Some of the 'new' right-wing forces are fascist or have a fascist component, the majority of them are not, or at least not yet. But they have strong similarities in their anti-foreigner, anti-ethnic minority racism, and their class alliances with fascist and semi-fascist movements in the 1930s.

In addition most of the new right-wing authoritarian parties and movements have an anti-establishment discourse, posing as champions of the people (at least the white people) against liberal, metropolitan elites. Of course this is just demagogy, as Trumps almost exclusively billionaire cabinet shows. But it does play to the feeling among sections of the working class that the traditional parties of both left and right have abandoned them. Once again this is a feature that the new right 'populism' shares with the fascism of the 1930s.

We have to note here that there is unfortunately a symbiotic relationship between the reactionary right and terrorist groups like Isis. Each terrorist act killing hundreds of civilians in France, Germany and Spain especially in the last 10 years, drives more people into the arms of the right and facilitates the deepening of Islamophobia, the main ideological cutting edge of racism today, with strong parallels to anti-Semitism in the 1930s. We know of course that the number of civilians in the imperialist countries killed or maimed by terrorists is tiny in relation to the near-genocidal carnage in Iraq, Syria and Libya. But the anti-migrant ideological message presented by the mass media is fantastically facilitated by dead bodies in Paris, Nice and Berlin. Coming at the same time as the refugee crisis presents reactionary politicians and the right-wing media with untold opportunities to push the racist, xenophobic line.

We should never stop pointing out that the refugee crisis has been caused by the imperialist states themselves, through their economic policies and especially wars that have occurred in the last 15 years. Focal points for the refugee exodus have been Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, all countries torn to shreds by the direct and indirect effects of Western invasion and aerial bombardment. In the light of this, the utterly cruel attitude to the refugees, allowing what is now tens of thousands to drown in the Mediterranean, is one of the biggest moral failures by Europe since the Holocaust. Socialists should never allow themselves or the workers' movement in general to be pressurised by the anti-immigrant right.

But it is unlikely that the authoritarian right could have had such success were it not for the defeats suffered by the working class and its organisations from the 1980s onwards. In retrospect the most important of these defeats was the miners' strike in the UK of 1984-5. Britain and the US were the two key countries in imposing neoliberalism and a defeat of Thatcher over the miners could have brought down her government and changed things Europe-wide and even world-wide.

But it is also the major ideological crisis of the labour movement, in particular the utter prostration of social democracy that has left the field open for the radical right.

The austerity and stagnation of a busted economic model are fuelling a wider crisis of the global system as a whole. Inequality and injustice are tearing apart the social fabric. The international order is breaking down. War has engulfed entire societies and displaced tens of millions. Democracy is being hollowed out and civil liberties eroded. Global warming threatens the planet and the whole of humanity with climate catastrophe.

In the face of all this international social democracy has little to say. It is an appalling collapse, lightened only by the emergence of the Corbyn trend in Britain, although that much better fits in analytically with the new Podemos-type left than contemporary social democracy.

Trump's Project – Post-Neoliberalism?

The 2007-8 crash showed the bankruptcy of neoliberalism, the new regime of accumulations that emerged (gradually) out of the crisis of Keynesianism in the mid-1970s. Many people speculated in the mid-noughties that there might be a return to Keynesianism, but this was blocked, especially by the financial bourgeoisie, which awash with 'quantitative easing' cash had no intention of killing the golden goose for the sake of the masses. So they decreed just more austerity, deepening neoliberalism that resulted in impoverishing millions, as the succeeding years showed, especially in Greece, Spain and amongst the black population in the US.

The question that now arises is whether Trump does indeed have a new political-economic project, name a return to 1930s protectionism – something that would certainly lead to a slowdown in world trade and disaster for many working class communities. Although Trump declared in favour of 'protection' at his inauguration, opposition to any substantial repudiation of neoliberal globalisation would be ferocious among major sections of the American capitalist class. For corporations like Apple, Amazon, Microsoft and Nike – among the most profitable in the world – access to cheap Asian and Latin American labour is an absolutely crucial part of their business models. The same is true for hundreds of US, European, Japanese – and of course Chinese – companies.

But here we come to something crucial to understanding the rise of the radical right. You cannot read off directly from Trump, Marine Le Pen or the Alternative for Germany the direct interests of their own national capitals, let alone the world bourgeoisie as a whole. These hard right forces are in many ways the eruption of irrationality into politics, which always has its own dynamic far removed from formal logic.

If a reversion to all out protectionism worldwide should be doubted, there is no doubt that Trump intends to push forward strong elements of protection and 'America First' for some industries. Going along with economic protectionism is strident nationalism, which in the present situation presents itself as in particular anti-Chinese rhetoric. Probably the most dangerous thing that any of Trump's nominees for his cabinet have said, is Rex Tillerson's remark that Chinese access to the Spratly islands will be 'not allowed' by the incoming government. Probably this was bombast, but any such attempt could easily lead to a military clash with China. They will not accept being ejected from the South China Sea, despite the fact that most of their territorial claims are far-fetched.

What Tillerson's remark shows is that strident economic and political nationalism usually goes together with rising militarism. Trump's inauguration speech repeated his pledge to build up the military. Defence spending in 2010/11 reached nearly \$700 billion, but is now languishing at an estimated measly \$587 billion for 2016. It is extremely unlikely that a beefed up military is not going to be used, and immediately on taking office Trump has asked the Joint Chiefs to draw up a plan to rapidly smash Isis. This means probably a massive USD intervention in Iraq and maybe Syria. This especially is very bad news for the Kurdish liberated areas of Rojava in northern Syria. Far from US forces co-operating with Kurdish fighters, the US is now likely to facilitate Turkey's attack on them.

Internationally Trump's victory is seen as a victory for reactionary forces everywhere, and he is most likely to support all of them. In addition to strong backing for Erdogan in Turkey, we know already he intends to strengthen the US support for Israel, symbolically move the US embassy to Jerusalem and ditching US opposition to new Israeli settlements on the West Bank. It is likely that Obama's new opening towards Cuba will be reversed. In addition the US is likely to be even more active in supporting reactionary forces elsewhere in Latin America, especially in Venezuela and Bolivia, and developing warm relations with the new right-wing government in Brazil.

To stop this text becoming too long here we are just summarising the likely plans of the first stage of the Trump presidency, which are now well-known.

- First on the Trump menu is the wall with Mexico and a harsh clampdown on 'illegal' immigrants. Already under Obama huge number so deportations occurred. Between 2009 and 2015 his administration removed more than 2.5 million people through immigration orders, which doesn't include the number of people who "self-deported" or were turned away and/or returned to their home country at the border by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Now Trump claims he will deport another 3 million. Whatever the precise number is will most likely fuel and witch hunt and constant harassment of Latino communities. Most likely the new administration will abolish the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme that enables people who arrived as undocumented children to get renewable two-year residency and work permit. Around 1.7 million people have claimed this status, and are now very vulnerable to deportation if DACA is abolished.
- Trump intends a huge turn towards fossil fuels, and this means rebuilding the coal industry and coal-fired power stations, as well as pressing ahead with the Dakota Access pipeline and the Keystone XL pipeline that aims to bring shale oil from Canada to refineries on the Gulf coast. At the same time the US is likely to play an obstructive role in international climate change negotiations.
- The new administration will proceed to try to limit abortion and reproductive rights access, already very limited in some states. Trump will replace some of the outgoing Supreme Court judges with more right-wing anti-abortion replacements. Ideologically the Trump administration is bad news for women's rights across the board. Women's push for equality and equal rights will be broadly resisted. And the ideological effects of having a self-advertised abuser of women in the presidency will be immensely negative.
- Trump plans a major cut in taxes for corporations and the rich, which can only result in cutbacks in state spending on social services. Part of that will of course be the replacement of Obamacare, itself a very limited health insurance plan for the poor.
- The advent of Trump and Trumpism is likely to encourage and bolster the semi-militarised US police forces, bolstered with \$4bn worth of surplus military hardware from the Iraq war. This will be part of an attack on civil rights and the Black communities across the board. Already, de facto the right to demonstrate and organise protests is severely restricted.

The election of Trump has, like Brexit in the UK, given rise to a surge of racist attacks and incidents. During the election campaign there was significant harassment and intimidation of the Black voters. Official support for affirmative action will be withdrawn. In line with the idea of a new clampdown on the 'carnage' in American cities, the number of prisoners, especially Black prisoners, is likely to rise substantially.

The weakness of the Trump project is whether it can deliver any significant economic improvements for the white working class voters in the de-industrialised areas who supported him. Approval ratings for Trump are at a historical low for an incoming president, and he has already taken a political hit in the size and scope of the women's marches on 21 January. But Trump retains immense reactionary political capital. Most likely the banging of the nationalist-military drum will be used to rally right-wing voters. Let us not forget that before the Falklands war Thatcher was immensely unpopular and way behind Michel Foot in the polls. It was the nationalism whipped up around the war, (plus the intervention by the SDP/Liberal Alliance) that robbed Foot of victory.

The coming fightback

The mobilisations in Washington and around the United States – and worldwide – represent a historic events which presages the coming fightback. The extent of the mobilisation exceeded all expectations, in the US, the UK and elsewhere. Probably the only worldwide mobilisation that can compare with it was February 15 2003 anti-war demonstrations. And the consequences will be immense, for the anti-Trump movement as a whole and for the rebuilding and strengthening of the women's movement worldwide.

Very noticeable among American demonstrators, and speakers at the rallies, is a widespread understanding that the Trump agenda is across the board and threatens multiple communities. The film actress America Ferrara articulated this well; "Mr. Trump, we refuse. We reject the demonization of our Muslim brothers and sisters. We demand an end to the systemic murder and incarceration of our black brothers and sisters. We will not give up our right to safe and legal abortions. We will not ask our LGBTQ families to go backwards. We will not go from being a nation of immigrants, to a nation of ignorance."

The extent of January 21 testifies to the extent of the polarisation of American society. Numerous anecdotal reports talk about the determination and high morale of radical forces in the US.

On the other hand, while all perspectives are provisional, a rapid unravelling of the Trump presidency is extremely unlikely: US administrations are possessed of huge resources – political, material, financial, military, ideological – that makes it certain that what will play out in the United States is a prolonged and harsh political battle. However, it is now next to certain that victimised communities and the diverse forces of radicalisation in the United States will not roll over and take it. On the contrary a sustained fightback is likely, particularly among women, Black communities and immigrants.

The problem remains that of political coherence and leadership: as always the main obstacle is the Democratic Party itself. It remains to be seen whether any radical political alternative with staying power emerges from the forces around Bernie Sanders.

In the fightback an understanding of the role of the mass media and alternative media is essential. Capitalist society is always suffused with bourgeois ideology which becomes part of daily 'common sense'. But control of the mass media – partial or complete – is always an active policy of bourgeois politicians and their ideologues. In times of crisis and acute political polarisation, dictatorial politicians try to shout down or intimidate all centres of opposition and critical thought. Two blatant examples today are Egypt, where the al-Sisi military dictatorship tortures, imprisons and murders critical journalists and opposition activists in general, and the Turkish Islamic-police dictatorship where in Erdogan's counter-coup and after newspapers and TV stations have been closed down, hundreds of journalists sacked or imprisoned and widespread attacks on academics and critical intellectuals made.

While nothing like these two egregious examples, the mood in the United States vis-à-vis the mass media is threatening. When Steve Bannon tells the US media to 'shut up', when Trump calls journalists 'some of the biggest liars on the planet' and there is much concern with providing 'alt facts', you can tell the administration wants to control and intimate critical mass media. (Ironically of course there are some journalists who are the biggest liars on the planet, and most of them are pro-Trump). In the US we now have the case of journalists arrested just for covering the anti-Trump riots in Washington and potentially facing long prison sentences. This follows the attempt to prosecute Amy Goodman and others for their coverage of the Dakota Access pipeline conflict.

Right wing concern with critical journalism extends to social media, which in open dictatorships is regularly shut down. In the imperialist countries the hard right has a massive social media presence, but left-liberal and left wing

forces also have an important presence. In the next period we can be sure that big social networks will come under pressure the censor the left and there remains the danger of the imposition of a 'two tier' Internet where corporations and 'trusted sources' get even more priority than they currently do. A left wing and critical online and social media presence is not merely entertainment, but part of an active ideological fight.

The mass media is just one area where the present crisis has generated a massive attacks on human and democratic rights across the board. Renewed talk about torture, extraordinary rendition and secret 'black site' prisons is just one sign of this. Today the Universal Declaration of Human rights is mainly ignored and reads like a revolutionary document, proclaiming as it does the rights of all people to freedom for arbitrary arrest and punishment, to have a job and somewhere to live, to enjoy free movement and to seek asylum in another country, to be treated equally "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status", to not be subject to cruel and unusual punishments such as torture, not to be subject of forced marriage and so on and so forth. Neoliberal capitalism is increasingly incompatible not only with democracy, but the slightest respect for human rights.

World Impact

The first thing to be said is that the election of Donald Trump is in many ways an ideological defeat for American capitalism. It is a terrible blow to the prestige of the United States that such a person could become US president. It is likely to engender massive public hostility worldwide to US plans on climate change, militarism and economic nationalism

While no doubt many rightwing and reactionary forces were encouraged by Trump's victory, his international profile makes his patronage a distinctly mixed blessing: Nigel Farage may come to regret his unqualified praise for Trump. In addition to clashing with sections of the American bourgeoisie, Trump's 'America First' line is bound to result in massive political tension with the leaders of European capitalism. We are likely to see a period of major political and economic turbulence, the precise outcome and scope of which we cannot exactly predict. Major variables include whether the extreme right in Europe makes further major gains, the extent of the US clash with China, whether there is a rapprochement with Vladimir Putin and whether, and at what speed, the world economy stumbles.

It should be noticed that part of the worldwide move to the right is the probably terminal crisis of 'socialism for the 21st century' in Latin America. The PT government has fallen, the Maduro government in Venezuela is in dire crisis and Evo Morales in under siege in Bolivia. The collapse of these radical reformist projects will be a significant demoralising factor for the left internationally, and in Latin America especially. We should commission a serious document on the Latin American left and have a discussion throughout the organisation before any hasty and simplistic judgements are made.

Trump's accession to power is part of the process of the emergence of right-wing, authoritarian strong-men (mainly men) worldwide, an obvious feature of this situation – Modi In India, Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines and al-Sisi in Egypt are obvious examples. What Gilbert Achcar (after Gramsci) calls Morbid Symptoms' abound and talk about capitalist barbarism is no longer an exaggeration, but here and now.

We must follow the fightback in the United States in detail and mobilise in solidarity. But in the last analysis there will be no end of crisis and reaction without the building of a radical, anti-capitalist alternative in the United States and around the world. Despite the difficulty of this task, we know from January 21st that there is a massive worldwide audience for this project.

PS:

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[1] Globalise Resistance, 2002, ["Lessons of Success"](#).

[2] See Thomas Picketty, 2014, [Capital in the Twenty-First Century](#).

[3] See Gilbert Achcar, 2016, [Morbid Symptoms](#)