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Rise of far right

How Can We Revive Herd Immunity to Fascism?

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The concept of "herd immunity," that is, the immunization of a whole population as a result of a high percentage acquiring resistance to a disease, has gained a lot of currency since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has long been a tradition of social sciences to borrow terms and concepts from the medical sciences, and the current global situation induces more of that. Thus, there are reasonable grounds to describe metaphorically as a pandemic the worldwide spread of far-right movements in recent years, including governments run or co-run by political forces that reproduce some of the key ideological tenets of fascism in countries as varied as Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, the Philippines, Russia, and the United States.

The onset of this far-right pandemic goes back to the 1980s and was powerfully boosted in the following decade, as the editors of a collective book, [Fascism and Neofascism](#), acknowledged in 2004: "While a revival of extremist activity in Western Europe began during the 1980s, the collapse of Communism resulted in a surge of the extreme right all across the continent. During the 1990s, fascism, or something like it, was suddenly and unexpectedly resurgent." Like the classical fascism of the three decades that followed the First World War, this "neofascism" arguably the best designation, as it refers to both historical affinities and the renewal of forms in tune with our times takes different shapes according to the countries in which it develops.

Karl Polanyi dedicated several pages of his 1944 classic, [The Great Transformation](#), to underlining the great variety of fascisms and fascist ideologies. "In fact," he commented, "there was no type of background of religious, cultural, or national tradition that made a country immune to fascism, once the conditions for its emergence were given." He even affirmed that "the existence of a fascist movement proper" was not necessarily part of the symptoms of what he called a "fascist situation." At least as important were signs such as the spread of irrational ideas, racist views, and hatred of the democratic setup.

Read in the light of the ongoing events in the United States, Polanyi's following comment sounds chilling: "Though usually aiming at a mass following, fascism's potential strength was reckoned not by the numbers of its adherents but by the influence of the persons in high position whose good will the fascist leaders possessed, and whose influence in the community could be counted upon to shelter them from the consequences of an abortive revolt." For the Hungarian-American thinker, fascism was above all a "solution of the impasse reached by liberal capitalism" aiming at "a reform of market economy achieved at the price of the extirpation of all democratic institutions." In this light, the herd immunity to fascism achieved in most Western countries after 1945 was not only the result of the defeat of the Axis powers, but also and above all a result of an alternative solution to the impasse of liberal capitalism: the Keynesian democratic solution that discarded the idea of "the self-regulating market," which Polanyi called "a stark utopia."

In another and much older classic of the social sciences, the founder of sociology, Émile Durkheim, was already lamenting, in his 1897 book [Suicide](#), the fact that "for a whole century, economic progress has mainly consisted in freeing industrial relations from all regulation.... Government, instead of regulating economic life, has become its tool and servant." For the French sociologist, this economic deregulation was the main source of what he called "anomie," i.e., "a state of exasperation and irritated weariness" resulting from the loss of economic security and the disruption of social patterns. Anomie leads individuals to seek refuge in some type of identity group and unless it is inward-oriented (suicide) deploy their exasperation against other identities held responsible for the increasing precarity of their social condition, primarily by way of racist and/or xenophobic logic. Thus, the rise of fascist-like ideologies and movements starting from the 1980s went along with the rise of other types of exclusive identity groups, of which religious fundamentalism is the most obvious.

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This fully coincides with the observation made by Eric Weitz and Angelica Fenner, the editors of the abovementioned book about the resurgence of fascism: "The right-wing revivals were very much a response to the political and social dislocations of the 1990s, including substantial unemployment, the erosion of the security net that the welfare states of both Eastern and Western Europe had provided, and the deterioration of urban neighborhoods. They were also a response to the wide-scale population migrations that have taken place across the North/South and East/West axes of Europe since 1945."

There is indeed a clear and undeniable correlation between the neoliberal onslaught that started in the 1980s, led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan an onslaught that made "deregulation" one of its main goals, along with privatization, reduction of social spending, and tax cuts for the rich and the rise of phenomena such as neofascism and religious fundamentalism after decades of marginalization. Likewise, the Great Recession, triggered in 2007, gave a major boost to neofascist forces, as did the major wave of mostly Syrian refugees pouring into Europe in 2015. The facts resulting from both crises are still very much affecting our world, and the huge economic crisis that is presently gestating as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic can only severely aggravate the anomic conditions globally (the far-right exploitation of anti-lockdown movements is an indication), unless it is countered by economic policies similar to those adopted after 1945.

Add to this the fact that, however significant Donald Trump's defeat in the latest US presidential election was, it was certainly not of a scope comparable to the defeat of fascist powers in the Second World War. His loss occurred not because of the disaffection of his supporters but despite a huge increase in their numbers (11 million more voters) at a time when, unlike 2016, there was no possible illusion about what Trump represents and, therefore, hardly any ambiguity in the sense of voting for him. At the global level likewise, there are presently no signs of neofascism waning: The continuing popularity of figures such as Jair Bolsonaro (until very recently, at least), Narendra Modi, or Viktor Orbán does not portend any withering away of the far-right pandemic in the foreseeable future.

Achieving a new state of herd immunity to fascism, like that of the postwar years, requires not only a political defeat of the most prominent neofascist movements and an uncompromising fight against their ideologies. It also requires, most crucially, a global shift away from the neoliberal paradigm that has been dominant over the past four decades.

Source [The Nation](#).

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