

# Discussion Article: What do we mean by a Global Police State?

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**Phil Hearse explains the theory behind the concept.**

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Supporters of the A\*CR have used the term 'Global Police State' to describe the situation facing the exploited and oppressed worldwide - and the radical movements that defend them.

But surely it is exaggerated to call the situation in Britain and the United States, however repressive, a 'police state'. Doesn't police state mean concentration camps and protestors being driven off the streets - like in Myanmar? And anyway, the political and police situation is not global, but different in each country? Or is it?

The originator of the Global Police State idea is University of California professor William I Robinson. He coined the term to describe several interrelated developments that together are part of a global drive against democracy:

1. "The push towards paramilitary (or just plain military) policing of protest worldwide, and alongside that repressive new laws that ban or restrict the right to protest.
2. The widespread use of the police and military to manage the increasingly desperate mass of humanity who are forced into being 'illegal' immigrants or refugees. Typical examples are the policing of the US border against migrants from Central America and of European borders against refugees from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and countries in Africa ravaged by war and social collapse.
3. The increasing centrality of the military and arms production in economics and politics worldwide. This includes the development of interlocking international chains of arms production and sale, with various consequences: state taxes and borrowing are pivoted towards arms contracts and become sources of corporate profit; alliances are forged with reactionary regimes and new wars fostered; the warmongering culture is linked with growing far-right politics. William I Robinson calls the economic dimension of this process 'militarised accumulation'.
4. Linked to all the above is the growth of a modern form of fascism - the far-right movements and governments that have made such enormous political advances in the last two decades.

These things are themselves integrated into broader developments in capitalism, notably

digitalisation and the development of surveillance capitalism, crucial to police repression, and deeply integrated with the work of top tech companies like Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook - all of which compete for Pentagon mega-contracts.

## **The Global Police State in practice**

How do these things work out in practice? It's quite true that the policing of protest is very different in different countries.

Demonstrators in Britain, like those who protested violence against women in Clapham and against the new Police and Crime Bill in Bristol, London, and many other places, are not shot or clubbed to death. Neither do they face Russian-style automatic beatings and shut-down.

On the other hand, there have been examples of extreme police violence - against, for example, striking miners in 1984-85, students protesting fee increases in 2010, and against environmentalist and other direct-action demonstrators. And the direction of travel in Britain is obvious.

More and more laws have been introduced to limit the right to strike, to demonstrate, to protest. The development of so-called Tactical Support Units (riot police) versed in street-fighting and the introduction of repressive measures like kettling have added to the repertoire of police tactics.

These moves have been backed up by new laws, like the current Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Bill, giving the police widespread powers to ban protests. Sentences for public order offences have become much harsher and much more likely to lead to imprisonment.

Elsewhere the situation has become far more violent. In the United States, in 2015, police attacks on people protesting the shooting of a young Black man, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, a suburb of St Louis, involved police in military combat uniforms and deploying armoured cars and automatic weapons.

This is part of the 'SWAT squad' militarisation of US policing. It was on full view against the Black Lives Matter demonstrators in the United States in 2020, where there were a number of deaths and serious injuries at the hands of the police and fascist militias.

Less well-covered in the British media was the paramilitary repression of the Yellow Vest anti-austerity movement in France that led to five demonstrators being killed and a number of people losing hands, becoming paralysed, or being blinded.

In Spain, anti-protest laws have become much more repressive, giving the police near-total rights to ban demonstrations, with the threat of long prison sentences for demonstrators - evident in the violent repression in Catalonia in 2017 to stop the independence referendum.

In Latin America, the riot police, gunfire, and tear gas are a more or less automatic response to radical protest. In 2019, 26 anti-austerity protestors were shot dead by the police in Chile. In the same year, there was a harsh crackdown in Peru.

Throughout Africa, democracy is a dead letter, as mega-rich crony elites and the top layers of the state apparatus seize the wealth of whole countries - with dire political consequences, in that their behaviour fuels the rise of Islamist militias linked to Islamic State and al-Qaida.

And in Asia, just in the past few years, protestors in Myanmar, Thailand, and Hong Kong have faced brutal repression, while the Philippines is in the thrall of a sort of demented fascism, as the Rodrigo

Duterte regime openly encourages the murder by police and vigilantes of individual drug-users.

The rush towards deepened police-state repression was accelerated by the 2008 economic crisis, which gave rise to massive protest movements of workers, women, and youth, like the Indignados movement in Spain and the repeated general strikes like Greece. Hard police repression was the universal answer.

Outstripping everything in its horrific and morbid repression is the attempt to crush the culture of a whole people – the Uyghurs in North-West China – by putting hundreds of thousands of them into concentration camps. At the same time, a huge network of camps is being prepared by the Modi regime in India, to deal with Muslim ‘illegals’, many of whose families have lived in the country for decades.

### **Brutality at the borders**

The vast inequalities created by global capitalism have created a desperate situation for millions of people, regarded by capitalist elites as either altogether ‘surplus’ or only occasionally required as cheap labour. In order to police this vast human mass, to control their desperate attempts to migrate to a better life or to safety, borders have been militarised and are policed with extreme violence.

Migrants without legal papers – and there are millions of them in the United States and Europe – are forced into low-waged precarious work. As a symbol of hypocrisy, thousands of rich people in the United States employ ‘illegals’ as domestic servants, knowing their legal status full well.

Political hysteria about illegal immigration generates support for extreme -ight politics, not just Donald Trump and the British Tories, but fascist and semi-fascist parties like the Alliance for Germany, the Lega in Italy, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally in France, and Vox in Spain.

The irony is that tens of thousands of migrants come from countries collapsed by US- and British-led wars – in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Most of all they come from Syria, where dictator Bashir al-Assad responded to a popular uprising by turning all the weapons of modern war on the people who opposed him. He has relied heavily on the gangster-capitalist regime in the Kremlin, which has sent their air force and their army to back up Assad’s slaughter.

### **War and profits**

Post-1945 capitalism has always had its wars and a ‘military-industrial complex’ based on grotesque levels of weapons production. But since the Millennium wars have become ceaseless and endlessly profitable.

A contemporary example is the dreadful war waged in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, with the support of Britain and the United States. The Saudi-led ‘coalition’ has killed tens of thousands of civilians in continuous bombing raids in their efforts to defeat the Houthi rebels, and both Britain and the United States have provided targeting assistance and special forces on the ground. In return, countless billions have been spent by Saudi Arabia on British and American weapons. A feature of the war has been the air and sea blockade of Yemen, which has put millions in danger of starvation through lack of food, and at risk of epidemics because of the lack of drugs.

War has never been more profitable. Afghanistan and Iraq were boom-time for US arms companies like Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and Raytheon. But the huge list of companies

providing the planes, tanks, ships, and missiles doesn't tell the whole story. The American military and its suppliers are massive consumers of hi-tech equipment, with companies like Apple and even Facebook high on the list of providers. The three million people in the American military consume vast amounts of just about everything. Militarism is deeply embedded in contemporary capitalism.

War and military supplies create chains of national and company alliances. Uganda, which dominates resource-rich East Africa, is the strongest military power in the region, courtesy of its Russian and Israeli arms suppliers. Russia uses arms exports to many African countries to boost its political influence. Russia, China, Ukraine, India, and Israel provide most of the military hardware bought by the Myanmar military.

### **Creeping fascism**

The police, legal, and military offensive against democracy goes alongside the headlong growth of the far right and fascism. Austerity since the 2008 economic crash has created economic hardship and political despair, with the old centre-right and centre-left parties hollowed out, and widespread contempt for the corruption of politicians. The extreme right and the fascists - often buoyed by the sympathy of the mass media - have benefited much more than the left. The fascists and the far right will utilise the freedoms given them in more democratic countries to build their support - with the ultimate aim of closing down those very freedoms.

Democracy is the soil on which the ideas of workers' rights, the freedom of women and LGBT+ communities, and the freedom Black people and ethnic-minority communities can thrive. We have to do everything we can to defend it, starting with defeating the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Bill.

### **Digitalisation and surveillance capitalism**

In the 1998 film *Enemy of the State*, turncoat CIA operative Gene Hackman reveals the multiple tricks of surveillance the state deploys. Suspect Will Smith has bugs and secret cameras put in his house, and even a bug in the heel of his shoe. The capacity to track and watch supposed 'enemies of the state' is phenomenal. But however effective at the time, those techniques are now prehistoric.

If you have any device connected to the Internet you can be watched. America's National Security Agency harvests huge quantities of data, as do commercial companies. They know everything about you: what you buy, who you are friendly with, what demos and meetings you went to, what sites you visited and what you downloaded, what you shared on Facebook and put on Instagram, and what books you read. And of course, who you talked to on the phone.

In George Orwell's 1984, Big Brother watches you via a screen you are obliged to have fixed to your wall at home. Big Brother is watching you today through every screen you use, and especially your smartphone. They still do all that old stuff like opening letters and tapping your phone, but lots of that is a waste of time. Use a webcam for Zoom? Then multiple security agencies can watch you in real time.

The digitalisation of capitalism relies on commercial surveillance. That's the targeting of advertisements to your supposed preferences, and the creation of vast websites like Amazon to scoop up the economic surplus for mega-rich corporations.

The vast profits of digital capitalism are almost unimaginable. In the first quarter of 2020, Microsoft

made \$23bn, Apple made \$22bn, and Amazon crawled along on just \$7bn.

Deeply embedded in these figures are not just sales of iPhones, but also the provision of huge amounts of material and cloud computing capacity to military customers. Amazon is currently campaigning against the allocation of the so-called JEDI cloud computing network contract to Microsoft, a product of what Amazon says is Donald Trump's hostility to their CEO Jeff Bezos, owner of the Trump-critical Wall Street Journal. The contract is said to be worth \$10bn.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. All US military activity is based on increasingly linked computer networks. America's key combat aircraft, the Lockheed F-35, is essentially a flying computer with immense capacities to survey and target wide geographical areas. Control of the total combat environment and the deployment of massive violence all depends on digitalisation.

The Global Police State is both a reality and a metaphor. There is a world campaign against democracy by the neoliberal right, a worldwide surge of the extreme right and fascism, a global move towards militarisation and war. The theoretical frameworks that served Marxism and the radical left in the 1960s and 70s no longer suffice. The world has moved on, capitalism has moved on, and the radical left has to move on too, or be stuck with unworkable frameworks.

World capitalism needs the Global Police State to combat mass movements and popular revolts on an international scale. The rulers of the world have moved against democracy because it is no longer an efficient way to control and discipline the unruly masses of the world given the obscene levels of greed and inequality generated by neoliberalism. Against the Global Police State, the fight for democracy is key.

## **Phil Hearse**

### *FURTHER READING*

Policing the Planet, edited by Christina Heatherton and Jordan Camp, Verso Books, 2016.

The Global Police State, by William I Robinson, Pluto Press, 2020.

Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?, by Robert Kutner, WW Norton, 2018.

System Crash, by Neil Faulkner, Phil Hearse, Nina Fortune, Rowan Fortune, and Simon Hannah, Resistance Books, 2021.

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• Anticapitalist\*resistance. 5 May 2021:

<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/what-do-we-mean-by-a-global-police-state>