

The future of Authoritarianism: contradictions and conflicts in a multipolar world

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In just eight years, 2010-2018, the world has seen the extreme right move from being outside the corridors of power to the center of power itself. The extreme right has captured popular frustration with globalization and the inadequacy of liberal democracy, skillfully packaging its reactionary analysis and proposals in racism and nativism. In the Global North the far right is distancing itself from neoliberalism, while in countries like India and the Philippines the far right is trying to build a strong state that can better impose neoliberal reforms.

This is a shortened version of the speech given at the Systemic Alternatives Symposium in Itaipava RJ, Brazil (7-9 April 2019)

The rapid rise of the extreme right in what used to be regarded as stable democracies in the North is the biggest political shock in this generation.

How did this happen? In a speech in Johannesburg in 2018, former US President Barack Obama pointed out that “challenges to globalization first came from the left but then came more forcefully from the right, as you started seeing populist movements... [that] tapped the unease that was felt by many people who lived outside of the urban cores; fears that economic security was slipping away, that their social status and privileges were eroding, that their cultural identities were being threatened by outsiders, somebody that didn’t look like them or sound like them or pray as they did.” To put it another way: the right ate the left’s lunch.

How did this happen? The independent left had some impressive successes, but its ability to ride on the anti-globalization agenda was severely compromised by the fact that since the 1990’s the center left in the US and Europe had bought into and aggressively promoted the neoliberal agenda. The established workers’ parties or broad left parties became defenders of globalization, leading not only to failure to expand their mass base but also to part of that base leaving their ranks.

Meanwhile, the extreme right was detaching itself from the neoliberal agenda that it had formerly supported along with the center-right. In the US, Donald Trump broke with the Republican Party and big business when he opposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership that they almost unanimously endorsed. Seeking to make inroads into the working class, right wing parties in Europe gradually abandoned the emphasis on anti-tax, anti-big-government, and free-market concerns of their original petit bourgeois base and opportunistically embraced an anti-neoliberal agenda and the welfare state. Stealing the left’s working class base by opposing parts of the neoliberal program and defending the welfare state became the extreme right’s passport to power or to the antechamber of power throughout Europe.

The extreme right is having some success in restoring economic growth and stability. According to

the Financial Times, Hungarian President Viktor Orban has “curbed... the foreign multinationals that bought national assets cheaply in 1990s privatizations, restoring Hungarian majority control of the banking sector, and helped mend public finances without imposing orthodox austerity measures.” [FT, 28 Jan 2018].

Away with liberal democracy!

The European far right has also successfully captured popular frustration with the inbuilt, chronic ‘democratic deficit’ of the European Union. While the center left and center right across were unable to address the reality of democracy playing second fiddle to technocracy, having been involved in the construction of the European Union, European Central Bank, and the Eurozone, the extreme right was able to seize the high ground, presenting itself as the champion of national sovereignty against “supranational encroachment,” “democracy” against the unelected technocracy that runs the economic machine of the EU from Brussels.

The third element in the far right’s toxic brew was the exploitation of racism and nativism, exploiting and amplifying fears that whites or people of European stock were in danger of being outnumbered by non-white migrants. The far right pushes class and racial buttons within a conspiratorial narrative. In the 1930’s, this cherry picking of left-wing concerns with equality and social welfare and their reformulation within a racial or extreme nationalist context paradigm produced National Socialism. Today, the extreme right’s message is not dissimilar: “Yes, a welfare state but only for whites or people of European stock.”

In contrast to the situation in the North, the extreme right has not broken with neoliberalism in the Global South. In India, the BJP headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has continued the neoliberal economic policies of successive governments since the early 1990’s and draws its support from the Indian bourgeoisie and middle classes that have been beneficiaries of these policies. The engine of extreme right politics is Hindu nationalism.

In the Philippines, the economic policies of Rodrigo Duterte are solidly neoliberal. Candidate Duterte made noises against mining and the World Trade Organization. Yet, like his posture towards mining, it’s been all talk. Rather than anti-neoliberal sentiments, the source of the popularity of Duterte’s politics is his anti-crime and anti-corruption agenda.

Some theses about the current wave of counterrevolution

I suggest that the far right movements in both the global South (and the global North) can best be understood as “counterrevolutions.” These movements do not primarily stem from classical class conflict. But they merit the term “counterrevolutionary” owing to the fact that they are fundamentalist and comprehensive political responses to a range of threats felt by their mass base. While often inchoate and made up of disparate elements owing to their leaders’ opportunistic efforts to reach out to new constituencies, this counterrevolutionary project is cemented by the primordial “solidarities” of race, religion, and culture.

In this regard, there are two types of counterrevolution. One is class-driven counterrevolution, which is principally a response by threatened classes to a revolutionary challenge from below. This is clearly the case in fascist Italy in the early 1920’s, Indonesia in the 1960’s, Chile in the 1970’s, and Thailand today.

Then there is the counterrevolution that is principally directed at overturning a liberal democratic, secular, and pluralistic order. It is a “total” counterrevolution that has transformative goals at the levels of the ideological, cultural, political, social, and economic. This is the case in India and the Philippines today (and, for that matter, far right movements in contemporary United States and Europe.)

While the class-driven counterrevolution can best be understood via a paradigm in which the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic is the center piece, the perceived revolutionary threat may not be a takeover by an armed insurgency but a progressive movement that is able to use the law and established institutions to promote social reform. This was the case in the rise of Mussolini in Italy, Suharto in Indonesia, Pinochet in Chile, and in Thailand today.

Nevertheless, when it feels its status and economic interests are challenged from below, by insurgent lower classes, the middle class can become the mass base of counterrevolution, allying itself with the elites to form a formidable political force (consider the rise of Hitler in Germany).

Where the state is weak, lacking in legitimacy, or slow to take action owing to constitutional considerations, threatened elites resort to fascist paramilitary groups to protect or advance their interests. On the other hand, where the state (especially the repressive agencies) is strong, it usually directs the final stage of counterrevolution—that is, the physical elimination of the leftist enemy---from above, using civilian groups mainly as junior partners.

Force and violence are often the counterrevolutionaries' preferred strategy even when the opposing side is following a strategy of gradual reform. Fascist Italy, Indonesia, and Chile are clear examples. The intensity of violence, however, may depend on a number of factors, the most important of which appears to be how immediate the existential threat posed by the left is felt by the right.

Where the threat from the left is assessed to be one of slow asphyxiation of the ruling elite and its allies via gradual electoral advances, as in Fascist Italy, the counterrevolutionaries can calibrate violence even as they threaten its indiscriminate use to terrorize the left into submission. Where the right has convinced itself that the threat of leftist seizure of power is imminent, its response is likely to be massive, widespread, intense, even indiscriminate, violence, as in Indonesia and Chile.

In some cases, the extreme right, even though it remains addicted to force and violence, comes to power through elections. Democracy, in other words, can be an enabler of authoritarianism. Once in power, however, the extreme right dismantles many of the institutions of liberal democracy and alters the electoral regime to install itself permanently in power.

While violence is a central element in the right-wing repertoire, the popular basis of counterrevolutionary regimes must not be underestimated. One must, however, distinguish between the "active consensus" of the middle class and the "passive consensus" of the lower classes.

Counter-revolutionary movements target certain groups as the disruptors of order or the corrupters of social purity, the favorites being minorities in the case of the majoritarian counterrevolution and communists or "corrupt populists" in that of the class-based counterrevolution. In some cases, the targeted group is seen as more than a scapegoat and is ideologically deconstructed into vermin stripped of all humanity and deserving of elimination, or systematic repression.

P.S.

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These notes reflect research towards two books in preparation:

- Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right (Nova Scotia/London: Fernwood)
- Paper Dragons: China and the Next Crash (London: Zed)