

Trumpism goes global - Capitalism's crisis and the rise of the far right

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Trumpism is capitalism's Plan B.

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"I've travelled 24 hours, from Manila to Rio, to be here, yet politically I feel I haven't left home." Walden Bello, leading light of the 'anti-globalisation movement' and former Filipino congressman reflected on the rise of authoritarian right-wing 'strong men' from the Philippines to Brazil. I joined him in Brazil to assess what has changed in the 20 years since mass protests in Seattle brought the World Trade Organisation to a standstill, and announced the birth of a new, international movement to the world. "But 20 years ago, Seattle was an exclusively left-wing affair" Bello continued. "We need to understand how the far right managed to eat our lunch."

How indeed, when capitalism is facing one of its deepest crises in history, has a rogues' gallery of financiers, billionaire businessman, and the most establishment politicians imaginable been able to capture sufficient popular imagination to take over some of the biggest countries in the world? And where is the international left, which 20 years ago fermented one of the most international and diverse movements the world has ever seen, but today seems defensive and insular in the face of a crisis which we predicted and warned about?

We were in Brazil to compare experiences, to learn from each other, to work out how to rebuild an internationalism strong enough to combat this 'Trumpist' trend. As Walden Bello's opening quote makes clear, the similarities faced by very different societies across the world is startling. Capitalism is facing its deepest crisis since the Second World War, a crisis which threatens the very existence of this economic model. But while the political left is in retreat in many places and focussed heavily on a defensive, domestic agenda, the far right have used this moment to build a terrifying global network, backed by big money and able to feed off popular discontent.

In countries including Brazil, India, the Philippines and Turkey, authoritarian strong men have been elected to office, fuelling movements of fear and hatred, further demonising marginalised groups, rolling back the limited gains made on climate change, on racial and sexual equality, and even challenging the relatively democratic spaces in which we organise. The kingpin is Donald Trump, normalising and legitimising these politics, giving confidence to far-right networks, encouraging international funding. And the narratives are spreading well beyond the countries where the strongmen rule, seeping into politics everywhere.

Trumpism around the world

20 years ago, Brazil was one of the launch pads for what became known as the anti-globalisation movement. It was here, under a radical regional government that the first World Social Forum was held, an attempt to counter the elite gathering in Davos, Switzerland known as the World Economic Forum. The World Social Forum was a space for meeting, learning and strategising with activists from around the globe. Two years later, Lula was elected president, part of the 'Pink Tide' which swept Latin America and provided a thorn in the side of free market capitalism.

Today, Lula is in prison, and Brazil is ruled by Jair Bolsonaro, an extreme-right member of the elite, an apologist for the human-rights-abusing military dictatorship, who somehow has managed to cultivate a popular image and win a majority. He came to power denouncing left-wing activists and social movements as terrorists. A racist, a misogynist and a homophobe, Bolsonaro makes Trump look moderate.

Of course, when you arrive in Brazil, you don't see stormtroopers or swastikas. And many tourists will not even notice anything has changed. But for the left, and for the marginalised, things have changed a great deal. The police and military have been let off the leash. During our 5 days in the country, soldiers shot 80 bullets into a car carrying a family, without warning, killing a black musician. They claimed it was a case of mistaken identity. 12 months ago, Marielle Franco, a Black, lesbian city councillor who spoke out for the poor of the favelas, and against police violence, was assassinated along with her driver. Two men have just been arrested for this crime, after much public outcry, but we know that the real people who ordered the murder are associated with a shadowy criminal group with links to the elite, including the new president. More generally, civil society groups are increasingly harassed and anyone who harbours hatred in society, feels empowered to spread their bigoted views online and in the streets.

Brazil is not alone. The current president of the Philippines, mentioned by Walden Bello at the opening of the conference, is Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte is responsible for the killing of 20,000 drug users, victims of the vicious war on drugs which has been a central theme of his presidency. Duterte has compared his war on drugs to Hitler's extermination of the Jews. He's proud of that. He's encouraged death squads to take part in the killings, which don't only include drug users but also street kids and the marginalised poor in general. And he's an aggressive opponent of human rights organisations which make any criticism of these policies.

Then there's India, run by Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, whose period in office has seen a massive upswing of hate crimes, murders, lynchings, public beatings, gang rapes, especially aimed at Muslims and low caste groups, combined, in true Trump style, with an unprecedented amount of political interference in, and undermining of, democratic institutions from the parliament to the courts to the media.

Of course, this is just three countries. Trumpist ideas are spreading much wider, including Europe where fascists are an important part of the Italian government and where Hungary is essentially run by a fascist. Even here in Britain, during my time in Brazil, an opinion poll suggested that 54% of the public agreed with the statement that "Britain needs a strong ruler willing to break the rules." Only 23% disagreed. In Uruguay, a stable, progressive society with no recent history of far-right activity, the head of the armed forces recently took the unconstitutional step of criticising the judiciary for investigations into human rights abuses. After his dismissal by the president, he has become a rising populist star who activists fear will run in the elections for president in elections later this year.

The essence of Trumpism

All of these situations have important differences. By the nature of the 'strongman', there is a hefty dose of individual eccentricity, sometimes bordering on mental illness, in the ascendant leaders. But there is enough commonality to begin drawing lessons from this situation confronting us.

The Trumpist leaders and movements always rise up by demonising certain vulnerable groups in society: migrants, the underclass (labelled 'criminals' or 'drug users'), muslims or low caste groups, women, trans and gay people. This has proved a vital way of building the popularity enjoyed by these leaders. The popular base for the Trumpists is very male, and feeds a feeling that white (or Hindu or Latino) men have lost space to more marginalised groups, that they can no longer say what they feel without being challenged. Even though these challenges come from groups who have traditionally been voiceless, and are finally able to express themselves to some degree, it has been successfully equated with a liberal elite project of 'political correctness'. Fascism always appeals to those who have some power to lose – however small. And of course, there's usually someone more screwed than you, and if someone tells you 'watch them, they're after a bit of what you've got' – be it migrants, or women, or Muslims or whoever – it can be very effective.

In this way, deeply establishment figures (Trump the billionaire, Bolsanaro and Modi the elite politicians, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Nigel Farage the upper class financiers) have been able to portray themselves as anti-establishment. After the defeat of the unions and the capitulation of the social democrats to the forces of the free market, these elite politicians have successfully portrayed themselves as the voice of the ordinary and forgotten majority, harnessing an often legitimate anger at an elite which has spent the last 40 years enriching themselves at the expense of everyone else.

It also explains the most frightening aspect of these strongmen – their popularity. None of these people came to power in a coup. They were democratically elected. They have very significant support from the middle classes, and from sections of the working classes who actually stand to economically lose out from their economic policies. The murderous Duterte has an approval rating hovering around 80%. Modi expected to win the upcoming Indian election. Trump and Bolsanaro, while not as popular, could easily win a second term as things currently stand.

That's how they've got away with their unprecedented attacks on the institutions of liberal democracy across the board, the dismantling of those systems which, while highly imperfect, at least allow us space to organise for our rights and for change. Like traditional fascists, Trumpists are determined to upend any form of pluralism or democracy which can thwart their power or allow resistance to build and succeed. They are trying to reshape our politics as a whole, in a way that means their power, their programmes, will enjoy a longevity well beyond their own terms of office.

What is this programme? At its core it's letting capitalism off the (very very long) lease it is on. Many of these leaders are climate change deniers. Trump has withdrawn from the main international climate treaty and Bolsanaro is expected to do so, regardless of the extremely weak terms of this treaty. Trump has began to open up all offshore waters to oil and gas exploration, to massively expand fracking potential and to open the US market fully to Canadian tar sands. Bolsanaro promised to remove protections from the Amazon and throw it open to unlimited mining. Modi is on the verge of evicting over a million indigenous peoples from lands which mining corporations are desperate to exploit. The indigenous, globally, are a major target for the strongmen, because even though they are sitting on top of some of the worst land in the world -where they were pushed - capitalism is so desperate that it now needs that resource too. And the indigenous are 'in the way'.

The view of capitalism is much more authoritarian and nationalist than we've seen over the last 4 years, but big business and big finance is still at the core of the model. Trump has passed one of the

biggest tax giveaways to corporate America in history. He's taking an axe to Obama's mild financial regulation. Bolsonaro has appointed an ultra-free market economic minister, who bases his policies on that first and most brutal and authoritarian neoliberal leader, Chile's General Pinochet, and declares "We are creating a Popperian open society" after free market ideologue Karl Popper. Both Modi and Duterte are involved in sweeping deregulation of financial investment and privatisations.

So the programme, at core, is about sweeping away those the limits that are being placed on capital by climate change and public opposition. But the pretence that the nation-state isn't important to capitalism is swept away. Partly, that's because the state will be necessary to deal with the increased anger that will result from these policies. It's clear that the policies, for instance, will fuel migration across the world. No wonder that building taller walls, enforcing harsher rules on migration, is part of the programme. An increasing authoritarian approach to those who offer resistance will also be needed as the shit really starts to hit the fan, and explains the focus on undermining space for opposition and dismantling liberal democratic institutions.

Of course, the problem with these strongmen is that they're difficult to control, difficult even to predict. There's no blueprint. Duterte claims to care about the environment and even calls himself a socialist. Trump is said to enjoy a more productive relationship with some unions than his Democrat predecessors have for some time. Modi has backed off a number of economic reforms in the face of resistance. But it's that very unpredictability - that ability to tear up the rule book of politics - that makes these leaders so necessary at this point in time.

Some of this will also be at odds with the values of individual corporate leaders. So Jeff Bezos, head of Amazon, doesn't care for Trump's incendiary anti-immigrant rhetoric. I believe him. I'm sure that many heads of industry disliked aspects of Mussolini or Hitler's rhetoric. But the point is not that these are the regimes which individual capitalists would ideally like to live under. It's that there is a structural necessity to these politics, and Silicon Valley needs it more than most. After all, the revolution in technology and communications which is taking place threatens automation which could wipe out millions of ordinary jobs, decimate small business, allow the completion of the corporate takeover of agriculture and massively increase the surveillance all of us face everyday.

There are democratic solutions to this - widespread socialisation of these technologies. But that means Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg losing control of their empires. They won't be keen on that solution. And the alternative is that things will get very messy indeed. If they think they're under scrutiny now, they've seen nothing yet. They will find that they need authoritarian capitalism more than anyone, whether they like it or not.

In the 1930s, big industrialists and finance found fascism more palatable than communism. Today, they find it more palatable than even moderate forms of social democracy - witness the horror with which they greet greater Lula in Brazil and now greet Corbyn in Britain. That's the extent of the crisis which the elite today perceives.

Trump is coming... get busy

Trump is the kingpin of capitalism's Plan B. His election has legitimised the new form of strongman politics. Even if others preceded him, he makes these politics safer through normalisation and through the dismantlement of international institutions which would have previously made life difficult for the strongmen. Trump also changes the discourse - centrists like Blair and Hillary Clinton have urged a doubling down on anti-migrant policies to 'answer' the Trumpists. Beat him by becoming him. The networks of think tanks and dark money, are emboldened. They will spread the hate right across the world. They will use new technologies to manipulate electorates in ways we

couldn't have imagined ten years ago.

How do we respond? First by not giving an inch. We must not sacrifice those most impacted and most opposed to the strongmen. In fact we need to empower them. The bit of American society least likely to have voted for Trump is the bottom 20%, measured by wealth in US society. The really marginalised don't like any of this, and with good reason. Helping them organise, and take leadership positions in our movement, is essential. And visibly confronting Trump and his ilk in the streets – like when he comes to Britain on 4 June or later in the year for the NATO summit – is a vital part of this confrontation. It's simply untrue to say Trump deserves a state visit because he's the US President. This is an unusual honour which simply legitimises his programme and his hate speech.

That doesn't mean we can write off those working class people who aren't hardcore racists, but have been attracted by Trump-like rhetoric because the economic system has so clearly failed them. Without toning down our defence of migrants, our opposition to abortion and so on, we have to admit these messages alone will not cut through to everyone. They can only work as part of a radical platform of economic restructuring – putting power into the hands of ordinary people through socialisation of the things we need – housing, healthcare, education, energy, communications. We need to show clearly, we're on the side of the have-nots, not the elite. Many are already engaged in local struggles to take back control of energy and housing, and to oppose developments that re about profit not people. It is through these concrete struggles that we can win arguments on migration.

Our Brexit woes are replicated in many others countries across the world, as the left struggles to respond to the authoritarian right. In the Philippines, some communists even went into Duterte's administration, in Thailand, some leftists supported the military coup, and in the US there's a feeling some on the traditional far left were far too soft on the dangers of Trump. This has created massive divisions and broken down trust at the very worst time. We must find a way beyond this. It's certain that a small minority (for example, anyone who stood for the Brexit Party in the European elections) is beyond the pale. Them aside, we have to try to find common ground, probably based on values rather than precise policies.

Reinventing internationalism is key to our project too. 20 years ago I was part of the 'anti-globalisation' movement, the biggest international movement the world has ever seen, which was also grassroots, and scored some incredible victories. Today, while the far-right has developed frighteningly impressive international networks, the left has never been more insular. Let's learn from history. As the First World War approached, the socialist international broke down as different national groups fell in behind their own national war machines. The horrors unleashed were beyond precedent. Of course we shouldn't dismiss the vital importance of domestic struggles. But we need to find ways to internationalise our struggles because we've never needed international solidarity more. It's not a luxury. The power of the nation state can only take us so far. Facing climate change, transnational corporate power and a well networked far right, we cannot win in Britain alone. In fact, the experiments with local democracy – from Porto Alegre to Barcelona to Preston – might be the perfect way to make give people power without falling back on the imperial nation states for 'answers'. A form of what we might call local internationalism.

We will not have an easy landing. Climate change and the sheer scale of environmental degradation alone means we need to rethink our linear view of history and 'progress'. We don't know what tomorrow will look like, but it will have to be very different, and we must embrace this. Even our 'enemy' is not as clear as it was in the past; the reason part of the right has been able to "eat our lunch" and appear more radical than the left. We need to convey hope and that can be a challenge at this point in history. But let's try to be open-minded. Again, to a degree the new right has done this better than the left, ditching neoliberal ideology when it failed to serve their values (indeed the only

neoliberals left are those in the political centre, who should never have swallowed the dogma in the first place).

We can find hope in the collapse of 'market knows best' dogma, in the progress now being made on public understanding of climate change, in the anger felt by so many at the power of Big Tech, in the inability of world leaders to complete major trade deals like TTIP. We need to have confidence in our cause, in our ideas, in our programme, and not be thrown off track by the strongmen. We can't solve all the problems of the last 200 years. The attempt would overwhelm and paralyse us. But we can, and must, make a start. As I learnt in Brazil, what we're feeling is also being felt by activists like us right around the world. Let's learn, share, try to draw energy from one another.

Trumpism is still a growing global phenomena. It can be halted, but only with a radical programme which is local and global. It won't be easy. But it's certainly possible. If not us, then who, if not now, then when?

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