

This Is Not Populism

I am concerned with power politics—that is to say, I make use of all means that seem to me to be of service, without the slightest concern for the proprieties or for codes of honor.

—ADOLF HITLER¹

The rise of Donald Trump to president of the United States is commonly thought to represent the triumph of “right-wing populism,” or simply “populism.” The term populism is notoriously difficult to define, since lacking any definite substantive content.² It is used in the dominant discourse to refer to any movement that appeals to “the people,” while attacking “the elites.”³ In the United States, populism has a much older history associated with the great agrarian revolt of the late nineteenth century.⁴ But today the concept primarily has to do with the growth in Europe, and more recently in the United States, of so-called right-wing populism—and only secondarily with what are labeled left-wing populist movements, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or Occupy in the United States.

Right-wing populism is a euphemism introduced into the European discussion in the last few decades to refer to movements in the “fascist genus” (fascism/neo-fascism/post-fascism), characterized by virulently xenophobic, ultra-nationalist tendencies, rooted primarily in the lower-middle class

and relatively privileged sections of the working class, in alliance with monopolistic capital.⁵ This can be seen in the National Front in France, the Northern League in Italy, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the UK Independence Party, the Sweden Democrats, and similar parties and movements in other advanced capitalist countries.⁶

The same basic phenomenon has now triumphed in the United States, in the form of Trump's rise to chief executive. Yet mainstream commentary has generally avoided the question of fascism or neo-fascism in this context, preferring instead to apply the vaguer, safer notion of populism. This is not just because of the horrific images of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust that the term fascist evokes, or because it has been increasingly used as an all-purpose term of political abuse. Rather, the liberal mainstream's aversion to the neo-fascist designation arises principally from the critique of capitalism that any serious engagement with this political phenomenon would entail. As Bertolt Brecht asked in 1935: "How can anyone tell the truth about Fascism, unless he is willing to speak out against capitalism, which brings it forth?"⁷

In today's political context, it is crucial to understand not only how the failures of neoliberalism give rise to neo-fascism, but also to connect these developments to the structural crisis of monopoly-finance capital—that is, to the regime of concentrated, financialized, and globalized capitalism. Only based on such a thoroughgoing historical critique is it possible to conceive the necessary forms of resistance.

THE CLOAK OF POPULISM

The notion of right-wing populism is employed in liberal discourse as a mildly negative epithet, one that both decries this tendency, and at the same time offers it a cloak—by

setting aside the whole question of fascism/neo-fascism. This reflects the ruling class's ambiguous relation to the "radical right," which, for all its supposed "radicalism," is recognized as fully compatible with capitalism. Indeed, the forces of the neo-fascist right, though still regarded warily by global elites, have been systematically "de-demonized" in much of Europe, and are often seen as acceptable partners in a center-right (or right-center) government.⁸

The Trump phenomenon is now undergoing a comparable assimilation. Historians Federico Finchelstein and Pablo Piccato wrote in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed that "racism and charismatic leadership bring Trump close to the fascist equation but he might be better described as post-fascist, which is to say populist. . . . Modern populism arose from the defeat of fascism, [and] as a novel post-fascist attempt to bring back the fascist experience to the democratic path, creating in turn an authoritarian form of democracy." Other mainstream commentators are even more allergic to any association of the Trump phenomenon with fascism. Thus Vox writer Dylan Matthews insists, "Trump is not a fascist. . . . He's a right-wing populist." Most pundits deftly avoid the question altogether. For *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall, Trump represents "the ascendance of right-wing populism in America," plain and simple.⁹

The hegemonic liberal approach to these issues is deeply rooted in transformations in political theory that go back to the Cold War. Populism as a political rubric is seen as conforming to the coordinates of the theory of totalitarianism, as propounded most famously by Hannah Arendt. In this view, all forms of opposition to the liberal-democratic management of capitalist society, from whichever direction they come, are to be viewed as illiberal, totalitarian tendencies, and are all the more dangerous if they have mass-based roots. Society is thus only democratic to the extent that it

is restricted to liberal democracy, which confines the rights and protections of individuals to those limited forms conducive to a structurally inequalitarian capitalist regime rooted in private property. Such a society, as Marxist economists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy wrote in *Monopoly Capital*, "is democratic in form and plutocratic in content."¹⁰ Within this dominant possessive-individualist perspective, populism has therefore come to mean all movements with any popular appeal that challenge the prevailing liberal-democratic state apparatus in advanced capitalist societies.

A major ideological shift occurred with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, leading to the almost universal acceptance of the liberal-democratic state as the sole bulwark against totalitarianism (and evil), a view associated in particular with Arendt. As Slavoj Žižek writes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*:

The elevation of Hannah Arendt into an untouchable authority . . . is perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left—of how the Left has accepted the basic coordinates of liberal democracy ("democracy" versus "totalitarianism," etc.), and is now trying to redefine its (op)position *within* this space. . . . Throughout its entire career, "totalitarianism" was an ideological notion that sustained the complex operation of "fanning free radicals," of guaranteeing the liberal-democratic hegemony, dismissing the leftist critique of liberal democracy as the obverse, the "twin," of the Rightist Fascist dictatorship. And it is useless to try to redeem 'totalitarianism' through division into subcategories (emphasizing the difference between the Fascist and Communist variety): the moment one accepts the notion of "totalitarianism," one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon. The contention [here] . . . is that the notion of

"totalitarianism," far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking."¹¹

Today's conventional use of the term populism derives directly from this same "liberal-democratic horizon."¹² Populism is seen as representing incipient anti-democratic, dictatorial, and even totalitarian tendencies, to be found on both right and left, insofar as they oppose liberal democracy. Jan-Werner Müller answers the question *What Is Populism?*, raised in the title of his book, by calling populism a "danger to democracy." It can be described as "the permanent shadow of representative politics." Likewise, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser state in their *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*: "Theoretically, populism is most fundamentally juxtaposed to liberal democracy." Populists are thus seen as tending toward "extremism," precisely in their opposition to the liberal-democratic state that has traditionally dominated in capitalist society.¹³

Nearly every substantive issue is lost in this definition of populism, most notably the different ways in which left and right revolts occur, their distinct class-ideological bases, and their divergent, indeed incompatible, objectives. Fascism is the antonym of liberal democracy within a capitalist society. Its advocates wish to replace liberal democracy with a different form of management of the capitalist system, removing basic civil rights and limits on executive power, strengthening the repressive apparatus to weaken working-class organization, and adopting ethno-nationalist forms of social exclusion. In contrast, socialism is the antonym, not of the liberal-democratic state, but of capitalism itself. Socialists seek to replace capitalism with an entirely different mode of

production, based on both “substantive equality” and “substantive democracy.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, faced with a resurgence of fascist tendencies in Western societies, many on the left have chosen—perhaps only for the sake of convenience—to join the Arendtian consensus. Hence, populism is portrayed even by leading analysts on the left as an incoherent and irrational attack on elites, born of anti-democratic and totalitarian tendencies. Acceptance of this view marks a significant political and ideological retreat, ceding the terms and direction of the debate to the interests of the liberal-democratic establishment.

Commenting on the hegemonic framing of the radical right as populist, and the analytical problems it presents, Andrea Mammone observes in his *Transnational Neo-Fascism in France and Italy* that “the terms populism and national populism” were deliberately introduced in recent decades by liberal European commentators in order to “replace fascism/neo-fascism as the used terminology.” This move was designed to “provide a sort of political and democratic legitimization of right-wing extremism.” Moreover, the rechristening of such movements as populist, Mammone argues, had less to do with any aspect of the movements themselves than with the presumption that liberal-democratic institutions were now too solid to permit an actual neo-fascist takeover. Instead, these neo-fascist forces were increasingly seen as politically malleable, with a potentially useful role in stabilizing capitalist society, checkmating the left.¹⁵

Likewise, political scientist Walter Laqueur notes that use of the term populist generates nothing but “great fuzziness,” and requires subcategories to distinguish left from right. It is particularly misleading, he argues, with respect to the right-wing movements to which the term is most often applied. Hence, Laqueur prefers to use “neo-fascism” for what is variously called “right-wing extremism, right-wing radicalism,

radical right-wing populism . . . [and] national populism”—all terms that he finds “unsatisfactory” in addressing a historically specific political tendency within the larger “fascist genus.”¹⁶

Given this complex and contested ideological context, it is all the more important to acknowledge those notable radical commentators, including Walter Dean Burnham, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Juan Cole, Henry Giroux, Paul Street, and Cornel West, who have rejected the populist designation for the Trump phenomenon and see it as part of a larger “neo-fascist wind” disrupting advanced capitalist states. Nor is this a minor issue: at stake is nothing less than the left’s understanding of and response to an ascendant transnational neo-fascist movement in Europe and the United States, in the context of a deepening economic and political crisis.¹⁷

Political movements within the fascist genus have their mass basis in the lower-middle class or petty bourgeoisie, overlapping with the more privileged sections of the working class. The lower-middle class in the United States today comprises close to a third of the U.S. population. Its representative members are lower-level managers, semiprofessionals, craftsmen, foremen, and non-retail sales workers, with household incomes typically running around \$70,000 a year.¹⁸ It is from this stratum, and from some workers in blue-collar industries, especially in rural areas, as well as from owners of small businesses and corporate franchises, that Trump has drawn his most ardent support.¹⁹

In this respect, the lower-middle class can be understood as what C. Wright Mills called the “rearguarders” of the capitalist system. In times of crisis, this class often gives rise to a “radical” petty-bourgeois ideology, divorced from both more traditional working-class and liberal views: one that criticizes “crony capitalists” and government elites, while at the same time allying itself with giant corporations and the ultra-rich against an often racialized “other,” namely low-income

people of color, immigrants, and the working poor.²⁰ More privileged than the increasingly precarious majority of the working class, but denied the security and wealth of the upper-middle class, this section of the population is the one most prone to intense nationalism and racism, calling for the revival of "lost" values and traditions—or "palingenetic ultra-nationalism" (palingenesis means rebirth). Ultimately, the neo-fascist project, like classical fascism before it, relies on an alliance of the lower-middle class with monopoly-finance capital, leading ultimately to the betrayal of the movement's mass base.²¹

A "LEGAL REVOLUTION"

The sheer elasticity of the concept of populism is evident in the fact that Hitler and the Nazi Party are often cited as examples of this phenomenon.²² Classical fascism was a complex political formation that, despite the violence associated with its rise, has often been described as the result of a "legal revolution." Both Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany sought to carry out their political "revolutions" within and through the capitalist state apparatus, maintaining at least a semblance of the constitutionality needed to stabilize and legitimize the new order. Indeed, the dominant image of fascism projected by the movement itself was of an "organized capitalism" under a centralized "total state"—referring to the concentration of power *within* the state—and a new, racialized vision of national sovereignty.²³

In his legality oath at the 1930 Leipzig Reichswehr trial, Hitler told the court: "The Constitution only maps out the arena of battle, not the goal. We enter the legal agencies and in that way will make our party the determining factor. However, once we possess the constitutional power, we will mold the state into the shape we hold to be suitable." Hitler

rose to power not by abolishing the Weimar Constitution, but rather, as historian Karl Bracher explained, through "the erosion and abrogation of its substance by constitutional means."²⁴ By November 1932, it was clear that the Nazi Party could not win a majority of the parliamentary seats. Hitler, however, would find another way to power, through his appointment as chancellor.

Once at the helm, Hitler moved quickly to invoke Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which authorized the executive, together with the army, to claim emergency powers and enact any measures deemed necessary to restore public order (originally intended as a safeguard against the left). This meant that the executive was free to act independently of the parliament, promulgating laws on its own, and suspending civil liberties. With the setting of the Reichstag fire at the end of February 1933, a month after he was sworn in as chancellor, Hitler was able to wield Article 48, thereby concentrating power in the executive. This was soon followed by the Enabling Act (the Law to Eliminate Peril to Nation and Reich), which further eroded the separation of powers.²⁵ However, the transition to full power and the consolidation of the Third Reich required a process of *Gleichschaltung*, or "bringing into line," over the course of 1933–34, during which most other branches of the state and civil society were incorporated into the new Nazi order—largely voluntarily, but under a growing terror regime.

It is important to recognize that all of this was given legal form, as was fascist management of the state in general. Historian Nikolaus Wachsmann notes that far from renouncing the law or the judiciary, the Nazi state imposed a system of "legal terror":

The Third Reich did not become an all-out police state. Leading Nazis occasionally even made public gestures of

support for the legal system, at least in the early years of the dictatorship. Hitler himself publicly promised in his speech on 23 March 1933 that the German judges were irremovable. At the same time, though, he also expected the legal system to fall into line with his general wishes, demanding "elasticity" in sentencing. Crucially, Hitler and other senior Nazis stressed that judges were ultimately answerable to the "national community," not to abstract legal principles. The only guideline for judges, it was said, was the welfare of the German people, and the mythical "will of the national community" was frequently invoked to justify brutal punishment. That this "will" was in reality nothing more than the will of the Nazi leaders, or more precisely Hitler's own, was not seen as a contradiction. . . . The legal apparatus was an essential element of Nazi terror. It played a central role in the criminalisation of political dissent and the politicisation of common crime. Trials were not completely hidden from the public. On the contrary, the Nazi media were full of news about court cases and sentences.²⁶

Hitler explicitly refused to set aside the Weimar Constitution and codify his new order, arguing that "justice is a means of ruling. Justice is the codified practice of ruling." A new constitution would therefore be premature, and would only weaken the "revolution." Eventually, of course, the *Gleichschaltung* process was complete, and the identification of the Führer with the law was absolute. Under the resulting *Führerprinzip*, as the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt wrote, "the Führer safeguards the Reich."²⁷

Similarly, Mussolini's defenders always insisted, in the words of Italian fascist Julius Evola, that *Il Duce* "did not 'seize' power, but received it from the King, and under the conformist institutional garb of entrusting the government

to him there was the equivalent of a sort of completely legal investiture."²⁸ Fascist propaganda strained to give to Mussolini's dictatorship the trappings of constitutionalism, as if the October 1922 March on Rome had never taken place. This appearance of legality was only made possible by the support of the capitalist class and the military, as well as the broader political right. The elaborate performance of constitutional order continued even as systematic repression and authoritarianism deepened.

A defining feature of fascism was its continuation of the capitalist separation of state and economy, even as the role of the state was transformed. The very notion of the "privatization" of the economy, now associated with neoliberalism, was a Nazi invention, reflecting the Third Reich's massive denationalization of industry in sectors such as steel, mining, shipbuilding, and banking.²⁹ Command of industry and finance was returned to capital. The Nazi state strongly favored economic concentration, passing legislation designed to promote cartels. Tax policy likewise favored the capitalist class: "Tax increases were levied primarily upon non-business taxpayers in the population. The tax burden was thus enlarged for wage earners and consumer groups in general."³⁰ And though Hitler's concern to protect big business and private property did not prevent him from encouraging embezzlement and corruption among his associates, in general private property (at least for "racially pure" Germans) and the institutions of capitalism remained sacrosanct.³¹

At the same time, fascist regimes in both Italy and Germany were known for supporting and even expanding the welfare state, albeit with racial exclusions. Social provision grew enormously under Mussolini, garnering global praise. In Germany, the welfare state was a cornerstone of the regime. As historian Sheri Berman writes: "The Nazis supported an extensive welfare state (of course, for

'ethnically pure' Germans). It included free higher education, family and child support, pensions, health insurance, and an array of publicly supported entertainment and vacation options." Economic expansion, driven by demand generated through spending on infrastructure and the military, ensured full employment, even as unions were abolished and wages repressed. The number of unemployed fell from almost 6 million in 1933, when Hitler came to power, to 2.4 million at the end of 1934, when he was to consolidate his power as Führer. By 1938, Germany had effectively achieved full employment, while most other capitalist countries were still mired in the Great Depression (the unemployment rate in the United States that year was 19 percent). In the eyes of much of the world, fascism's claim to legitimacy was that it had found a way to make capitalism work, even as it appeared to be disintegrating elsewhere.³²

None of this is to deny the deeply repressive character of the fascist state, its abrogation of human rights, its militarism, imperialism, and racism.³³ Yet, at the same time the classical fascist state sought to legitimate itself and consolidate its position with the population—or that part of the population that it considered its mass base. Once in power, however, fascist states purged many of their more "radical" followers (as in the "Night of the Long Knives," June 30 to July 2, 1934, in Hitler's Germany) in the process of linking up more firmly with monopoly capital.

Today's neo-fascism builds on these earlier fascist myths of the "legal revolution," along with the notion of a more organized, efficient capitalist state, able to transcend the liberal-democratic impasse. It promises both policies of ethno-national exclusion and of revitalized economic growth and employment through infrastructure spending and military expansion. At the same time, it is often less inclined than the traditional right to attack the welfare state or to

promote austerity. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Front has recently tried to remake itself as a more broadly "anti-establishment" party, exploiting popular discontent to attract a wider range of supporters, including some who formerly identified with the left. Despite this cynical rebranding, the party's politics of petty-bourgeois resentment, reactionary Catholicism, and virulent xenophobia, together with its link to the upper echelons of the capitalist class, mark it as neo-fascist.³⁴

Like the classical fascism of Italy and Germany in the 1920s and '30s, neo-fascism arises from interrelated crises of capitalism and the liberal-democratic state, undermining the latter while seeking to shore up the former. Given that explicit identification with classical fascism remains taboo in mainstream politics, organized neo-fascism today is presented as formally democratic and populist, adhering to legal-constitutional structures. Nevertheless, like all movements in the fascist genus, neo-fascist ideology combines racist, nationalist, and culturalist myths with economic and political proposals aimed primarily at the lower-middle class (or petty bourgeoisie) in alliance with monopoly capital—while also seeking to integrate nationalistic working-class supporters and rural populations. Increasingly, neo-fascism draws support from relatively privileged wage workers that in the late twentieth century enjoyed a degree of prosperity and status but who now find their living conditions imperiled in the stagnating advanced capitalist economy of the early twenty-first century.³⁵

The single most important ideological figure in the growth of neo-fascism in Europe in the post-Second World War years, and in the promotion of its distinct cultural perspective, was the Italian philosopher Julius Evola (1898–1974). As Laqueur has observed, Evola was at the "extreme wing of historical fascism," influencing Mussolini

with respect to race and racism, and later turning to Hitler as a more authentic representative of the fascist project. Significantly, Evola was present at Hitler's general headquarters in 1943 on the very day when the Waffen-SS troops were to bring Mussolini there, following their rescue of him from imprisonment in Italy after he was deposed. In the 1930s, Evola wrote: "Everything that is heroism and the dignity of the warrior in our conception must be considered justified from a higher point of view: in the same way that we have to oppose, with complete precision and on all levels, everything that is a democratic and levelling disorder."³⁶ Evola was known for his virulent anti-Semitism, even by the standards of the time. He frequently criticized fascism for not being pure enough.

Following the Second World War, Evola was to develop a set of neo-fascist theoretical works under the mantle of "traditionalism," including postwar editions of his fascist treatise *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934), as well as such works as *Men Among the Ruins* (1953), *Ride the Tiger* (1961), *The Path of Cinnabar* (1963), and *Fascism Viewed from the Right* (1970). The fascism of Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, he argued, needed to be defended in its "positive" aspects and separated from the specific mistakes that Hitler and Mussolini made that led to its defeat in the Second World War. As Evola scholar H. T. Hansen put it in his introduction to *Men Among the Ruins*, Evola came to be viewed as "the 'spiritual father' of a group of radical 'neo-fascists' (in the broad sense of the word)." Giorgio Almirante, party chairman of the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano), heir to the old Fascist Party, called Evola "the Marcuse of the Right, only better."³⁷

Evola's cultural analysis emphasized the values of tradition, spiritualism, idealism, hierarchy, and counterrevolution, and pointed to the need for a new "warrior" class.³⁸ He wrote in

Ride the Tiger: When material incentives do not suffice, "the only influence over the masses today—and now even more than ever—is on the plane of impassioned and subintellectual forces, which by their very nature lack any stability. These are the forces that demagogues, popular leaders, manipulators of myths, and fabricators of 'public opinion' count on. In this regard, we can learn from yesterday's regimes in Germany and Italy that positioned themselves against democracy and Marxism."³⁹ The pure-fascist or neo-fascist state would be organized around superior, elite racial stocks, divesting itself of "inferior races." Aryanism needed to be interpreted not as related simply to the Germanic stock, but in a way that encompassed Europeans more broadly, or at least the "Aryan-Roman" race.⁴⁰ Evola also wrote of the "decadence of modern woman" and the "feminist idiocy." The revolt against the modern world included a revolt against science. "None of modern science," he stated, "has the slightest value as knowledge."⁴¹

Although Evola had no economic analysis to speak of, he insisted that the state of the new fascist era, like that of the old, should be based on private property and corporatism, with the destruction of any autonomous working-class organizations. The state, though, should retain its relative autonomy, securing the entire system from above, through its monopoly of the use of force. Sovereignty, viewed in palinogenetic, ultra-nationalistic, and authoritarian terms, needed to be "absolute."⁴²

Evola and other neo-fascist thinkers, such as the influential French theorist Alain de Benoist, created the ideological foundations for the transnational neo-fascist movement that emerged in Europe in the 1970s and later spread to the United States. The movement was to gain a mass following as a result of the increasing economic stagnation in the advanced capitalist world, and it has grown by leaps and bounds since

the Great Financial Crisis of 2007–2009. Nevertheless, the organizational roots of many of these developments were formed in Europe in the 1970s. This can be seen, for example, in the formation of what were called “Hobbit Camps” for neo-fascist youth in Italy (named after the creatures in J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels), with the notion of Hobbits standing for the lower-middle class, the largely forgotten population rising up to transform the world. This same idea was later to catch on with the alt-right in the United States.⁴³ A key figure today in what Mammone calls the “transnational neo-fascist movement” is the Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, who has built his “fourth political theory” on Evola’s ideas (as well as on those of Schmitt, de Benoist, and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger), attracting the favorable attention of the U.S. alt-right.⁴⁴

TRUMP AND THE NEO-FASCIST ALLIANCE

Ironically, it is in the United States, where there are no neo-fascist parties of any electoral standing, that the “radical right” has enjoyed its greatest victory so far. From the Republican primaries to his defeat of Hillary Clinton in the Electoral College, Trump’s path to the White House depended on his appeal to the lower-middle class and parts of the white working class, as well as rural and evangelical Christian voters. At every turn, Trump’s campaign flouted convention and propriety, instead exploiting Evola’s “impassioned and subintellectual forces.”

A key source of Trump’s success was his connection to the alt-right, in particular Breitbart News and its CEO, Steve Bannon, who became Trump’s campaign manager. Channeling the radical right’s contempt for the political establishment, the Bannon-Breitbart strategy spoke to the fears and resentments of a decisive section of the lower-middle

and working classes. With Bannon’s help, Trump also attracted the strategic support of certain powerful members of the capitalist class, particularly the Silicon Valley tycoon Peter Thiel and the billionaire hedge fund mogul Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah.⁴⁵ Trump’s quintessentially neo-fascist strategy of enlisting mass support through racist and nativist appeals to lower-middle class insecurities, while allying with core elements of the ruling class, has sown confusion in elite political circles and the corporate media. Lacking any historical or class references, mainstream pundits saw his campaign as a confused hybrid of right and left. Some otherwise astute analysts on the left portrayed him as a “centrist,” while still others insisted that he had no principles or plan at all, that his chaotic campaign was governed only by the candidate’s egoistic impulses.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, what should be clear at this point is that the Trump administration came into office with what can only be called a neo-fascist political project. Trump’s domestic agenda reflected the class alliances and “subintellectual” ideology that brought him to power. In addition to the well-known “Muslim ban” and the proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, the Trump administration has pressed for “deconstruction of the administrative state” (as Bannon called it); the gutting of the environmental protection and scientific agencies; the elimination of most federal regulations on business; a trillion-dollar increase in infrastructure spending; privatization of education; a huge rise in military spending; the effective elimination of Obamacare; the end of net neutrality; and steep cuts to taxes on corporations and the rich. Trump has filled his cabinet and advisory positions with a ghastly ensemble of billionaires, Wall Street insiders, headline generals, alt-right ideologues, and climate-change deniers.⁴⁷

Although it is true that the administration’s early months were marked by fierce battles inside the West Wing between

alt-right true believers and more “moderate” plutocratic interests, these conflicts only reflected the inherent contradictions in the neo-fascist alliance that has thus far defined the Trump White House. The representatives of the alt-right are preoccupied with pure power politics and with bringing the federal branches and bureaucracies into line, while the plutocrats—Trump’s real constituency—appear to be steering the administration toward a newly unfettered form of corporate oligarchy.⁴⁸

The symbolic rivals in this factional struggle are Bannon, the alt-right firebreather who stands for Trump’s base—though he is himself an alumnus of Goldman Sachs and a consummate elite insider—and Trump’s son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, a real estate scion seeking to safeguard the interests of financial capital. Bannon, though supporting a hard-nosed capitalism, is primarily concerned with deconstructing the administrative state and producing political results that appeal to Trump’s base. The key to winning an election, he explains, is “to play to people without a college education. High school people. That’s how you win elections.” His main interest is thus in carrying out a “political revolution.”⁴⁹ Kushner, in contrast, is a more politically detached figure, concerned first and foremost with questions of capital accumulation and furthering the interests of the ruling class—thus representing Trump’s own ultimate interest. At present, the administration’s focus seems to be on loosening all restraints on corporate cronyism and instituting tax reform in favor of the plutocrats: Kushner’s domain. But as the midterm elections near, Trump will likely swing back toward the alt-right, at least rhetorically, Bannon’s domain.

In the imperial sphere, the administration, as we have seen, initially sought a *détente* with Russia, with the object of shifting the full force of the U.S. empire against the Islamic

world (or that part of it in the Middle East and Africa not securely within the U.S. empire) and China. This planned geopolitical shift put the White House at odds with both the national security “deep state” and leading sections of the capitalist class, and only heightened the conflict between the Kushner and Bannon factions within the White House. But with his first national security advisor, Michael Flynn, forced to resign over his alleged ties to Russia, and with his poll numbers at historic lows, Trump abruptly changed course by launching an attack on Syria. In one stroke, Trump donned the attire of commander-in-chief, to near-universal media acclaim: in the words of CNN pundit Fareed Zakaria, he “became president of the United States” that night.

Thus, within little more than two weeks from late March to mid-April, the world witnessed dramatically increased civilian casualties from U.S. bombings in the Middle East, as Trump turned day-to-day decisions over to the military commanders on the ground. This was accompanied by Trump’s launching of fifty-nine cruise missiles at a Syrian air base; the dropping of “the mother of all bombs” in Afghanistan; and explicit threats of military action against North Korea.⁵⁰

Some commentators naïvely suggested that this pivot toward a war-room posture on the part of the administration conflicted with its supposed original “isolationist” values and therefore represented a shift to the center. The mainstream media went so far as to declare that Trump’s reversals (including the removal of Bannon from the National Security Council) meant that he had finally decided on a more “presidential” course. In fact, these were precisely the kind of violent swings in U.S. imperial posture that were to be expected from a neo-fascist White House. The original *détente* with Russia was dropped, without the abandonment of any of the new administration’s earlier geopolitical objectives, aimed at increasing pressure on the Islamic State and China.⁵¹

The stark reality is that under Trump, the United States is being armed to the teeth, and is exhibiting greater signs of belligerence. The new administration has now signed on to the neoconservative strategy of simultaneously opposing both Russia and China. Nor should this be occasion for any particular surprise. Significantly, it was none other than Bannon who declared: "America has to be strong—economically strong and militarily strong. And a strong America could be ultimately a provider of Pax Americana," that is, a new unipolar world empire. None of this places Trump outside the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, the demand to restore U.S. power abroad is supported by the entire U.S. ruling class, as evidenced by Hillary Clinton's promise on the campaign trail to impose no-fly zones in Syria, which would have brought the world to the brink of a global thermonuclear war, and by her strong support of Trump's actions against Syria. Nevertheless, the Trump administration in its short time in office has managed to signal a bravado and recklessness in the use of force, coupled with a shift toward military over civilian control in this area, that is nothing short of ominous.⁵²

THE NEW BARBARISM

As indicated above, the White House has been the site of competing allegiances: responses to the interests of monopoly-finance capital on one side, and to Trump's lower-middle-class base on the other. Though there is no doubt that the administration will ultimately prioritize the former over the latter, betraying its claims to populism, to retain any credibility with its base the White House nonetheless must perform an elaborate dance. It must promote the interests of the corporate rich, while distancing itself from the upper-middle-class professional strata so loathed by Trump's supporters.⁵³

His policies must give "expression" to lower-middle-class interests and, to some extent, working-class demands, even if these are not to be realized.⁵⁴ The political and strategic constellation represented by Bannon, Breitbart, and the Mercers is therefore vital.

Hence, the neo-fascist strategy that marks the Trump White House thus far is likely to continue, incorporating both the alt-right and plutocratic factions. Upon entering the White House, Trump immediately raised up representatives of the alt-right, who had been key to his campaign. Here the role of Bannon, still Trump's chief strategist, and the main link to Breitbart, remains central. Ideologically the alt-right relies on the ideas of thinkers such as Evola, Dugin, and Oswald Spengler (the influential early twentieth-century German historian and author of *The Decline of the West*).⁵⁵ Bannon has demonstrated considerable acquaintance with Evola's work, professing admiration for Evola's "traditionalism . . . particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism" and the expansion of white-European cultural sovereignty. For Bannon, the right's global struggle is to be seen in terms of a renewal of the historic war of the "Judeo-Christian West" against Islam, now extended to include the national-cultural exclusion of non-white immigrants into Europe and the United States.⁵⁶

A crucial part of the streamlined neo-fascist appeal that Bannon imparted early on to the Trump campaign and then carried over to the White House is geared to economic nationalism. Bannon argues that "the globalists gutted the American working class and created a middle class in Asia." This points to a kind of empire in reverse, where working-class, white Americans, who formerly benefited from unrivaled U.S. hegemony in the world economy, are now seeing their jobs taken away by Asians, while they are being flooded by "illegal" Latino immigrants, and by refugees

from Middle East countries dominated by “radical Islamic terrorists.” Crony capitalists, financiers on the take, and liberal globalists are all to blame. Trump, Bannon, Breitbart, and the alt-right rely heavily on racially coded language (or dog whistles) as signals to reach their more militant white supporters, who are encouraged to see immigrants, refugees, and non-white populations generally as constituting a combined economic and cultural threat.⁵⁷

The racial strategy can be seen in Bannon’s repeated references metaphorically to *The Camp of the Saints*. This is the title of a novel by French writer Jean Raspail, undoubtedly one of the most racist works of its kind ever published. In 1975, when the book was translated into English, the usually staid *Kirkus Reviews* wrote that “the publishers are presenting *The Camp of the Saints* as a major event, and it probably is, in much the same sense that *Mein Kampf* was a major event.” This rabidly racist novel depicts an invasion by 800,000 “wretched creatures,” refugees in the derelict Last Chance Armada, who seek to take over France as a beachhead into white Europe, “the camp of the saints.” Meanwhile hordes of Chinese threaten Russia, a French cruise ship has been seized in Manila, and barricades have been erected by whites around black ghettos in New York. The title comes from the Book of Revelation (20:9): “And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from the God of heaven, and devoured them.” From page 1 on, *The Camp of the Saints* is full of murder, rape, carnage, atrocities, and the most extreme forms of racism, reducing people to body parts, with severed (racially signified) body parts strewn everywhere. Its cover advertises it as “the apocalyptic, controversial, bestselling novel about the end of the white world.” It is intended to generate the emotional, subintellectual basis, in Evola’s terms, for unutterable violence, directed

not just at Asians but at all non-white races, who are seen as racial threats.⁵⁸

The Camp of the Saints has been taken up by the alt-right as a kind of racist code. For Bannon, it refers to refugees flooding from the Middle East and Africa into Europe. As he declared in 2015, “It’s been almost a Camp of the Saints-type invasion into Central and then Western and Northern Europe.” A year later, he stated, “The whole thing in Europe is all about immigration. It’s a global issue today—this kind of global Camp of the Saints.” About the same time, he said, “It’s not a migration. It’s really an invasion. I call it the Camp of the Saints.”⁵⁹ After pointedly alluding to *The Camp of the Saints* in an interview with Jeff Sessions—now U.S. Attorney General, whom Bannon has described as “one of the intellectual, moral leaders of this populist, nationalist movement in this country”—Bannon asked, “Do you believe the elites in this country have the backbone, have the belief in the underlying principles of the Judeo-Christian West to actually win this war [against immigrants, refugees and Islam]?” Sessions answered, “I’m worried about that.”⁶⁰ Others have taken this up as well. Iowa GOP Congressman Steve King, referred in a radio interview in March 2017 to the possibility of race wars in the United States today, strongly recommending that people read *The Camp of Saints* in this context.⁶¹

Trumpism is rife on a daily basis with racism, misogyny, and extreme nationalism. Bannon and Breitbart refer coyly to the alt-right movement as one made up of “working-class Hobbits,” a term for its “forgotten” white, lower-middle-class/working-class adherents. This refers back to a negative reference by Arizona Republican Senator John McCain to Tea Party “Hobbits.”⁶² Bannon took it up as an ironic term, standing for Trump’s hardcore constituency. In doing so, though, he was undoubtedly aware of the earlier neo-fascist “Hobbit camps” that had been formed in Italy,

with a similar meaning. Indeed, the U.S. alt-right, as represented by Breitbart, could be described today as a toxic mixture of European neo-fascism, U.S. white supremacism, and Christian fundamentalism.

The Trump phenomenon draws on some of the most sordid aspects of the U.S. past, including genocide (of Native Americans), slavery, Jim Crow, and imperialism. Of all U.S. presidents, the one that is seen by Bannon (and by Trump himself) as most closely related to the new resident at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is Andrew Jackson. This is ostensibly because of the popular-democratic upsurge associated with him and his attack on the Bank of the United States; but also undoubtedly because of his wealthy slaveholder status, his gruesome role in the Indian Wars, and his government's forcible removal of the southeastern tribes in the Trail of Tears. Trump declared in an interview in April 2017 that if Jackson had still been alive (he died sixteen years before the Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter) and presumably had he been president, he would have prevented the Civil War—an absurd statement doubtless meant as a dog whistle to Trump's alt-right, white supremacist supporters, who idealize the slave South and the Confederacy.⁶³

Trump's own outlook and ambitions intersect ideologically with the alt-right as his 2011 book, *Tough Times: Make America Great Again*, shows. Trump declared on the campaign trail that "the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the owner of Trump Tower in Manhattan represents monopoly-finance capital, first and foremost. Indeed, Trump's attacks on "crony capitalism" and his calls for "draining the swamp" are belied by the billionaires and lobbyists that he has brought into his administration, and the cronyism that is everywhere visible, starting with his own family and extending to the special access to

the president for those ultra-wealthy interests who belong to his Mar-a-Lago Golf Club.⁶⁵

The neo-fascist thrust of the Trump White House can be seen in those chosen to occupy key strategic roles. An example of this is Curtis Ellis, a member of Trump's beach-head transition team, appointed as special assistant to the Secretary of Labor. Ellis, a Breitbart author, wrote an article in May 2016 for the *World News Daily* called "The Radical Left's Ethnic Cleansing of America." In this article, which was to be celebrated by Bannon and featured on Breitbart, Ellis argued that, for the globalist left, "the death (literally) of white working people is a desired outcome, a feature not a bug. . . . The death of American working-class whites was planned by the radical left and carried out with willing executioners at the highest levels of American politics, academia and business."⁶⁶ Such nationalistic-racist views aimed at the left and at non-white populations were strongly encouraged by Trump in his campaign for the presidency, and in his actions since coming into office.

TRUMPONOMICS AND THE CRISIS OF THE U.S. POLITICAL ECONOMY

"The neoliberal era in the United States," Cornel West declared, "ended with a neo-fascist bang."⁶⁷ Neoliberalism was itself a ruling-class response to the deepening economic stagnation of the capitalist economy, as the quarter-century of prosperity from the late 1940s through the early 1970s broke down. Needing a stimulus in the Reagan period, the U.S. economy resorted first to military spending and tax cuts, but soon benefited more fundamentally from the long decline in interest rates (the so-called Greenspan put), which fed a period of vast debt-credit expansion and what Paul Sweezy called "the financialization of the capital

accumulation process.”⁶⁶ The result was a bubble economy that continued into the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies, and then came to a sudden end with the bursting of the housing bubble and the subsequent crisis of 2007–2009. Trillions of dollars were poured into corporate coffers in an attempt to “bail out” defaulting financial institutions, as well as heavily indebted non-financial corporations. The subsequent economic recovery, as noted previously, has been one of sluggish growth or secular stagnation—a period of “endless crisis.”⁶⁹

Everywhere neoliberalism has come to stand for policies of austerity, financial speculation, globalization, income polarization, and corporate cronyism, creating what Michael Yates has called “The Great Inequality.”⁷⁰ “Across the advanced economies,” Michael Jacobs and Mariana Mazzucato write, “the share of GDP going to labor fell by 9 percent on average between 1980 and 2007. . . . In the United States, between 1975 and 2012, the top 1 percent gained around 47 percent of the total increase in incomes.”⁷¹ Wealth inequality has increased even faster. In 1963, the average wealth of families in the ninety-ninth percentile in the United States was six times that of wealth holders in the fiftieth percentile; in 2013, it was twelve times.⁷²

All of this has been accompanied by the erosion of U.S. hegemony in the world economy; the growth of a new imperialism based on the global labor arbitrage (taking advantage of wage differentials between the Global North and South); the changing role of manufacturing and investment in the context of the digital revolution; and neoliberal attacks on labor. These factors have enormously undermined the position of the working population in the United States, while also intensifying the exploitation of workers in the Global South. What was once seen—in hyped-up fashion—as a “social contract” between capital and labor in the heyday of

U.S. hegemony and prosperity has now disintegrated entirely. With it has disappeared what was once called the “labor aristocracy,” a minority of relatively privileged, largely unionized workers in the advanced capitalist world who benefited indirectly from unrivaled U.S. imperial hegemony and the siphoning of profits from the Global South.⁷³ Monopoly-finance capital now freely outsources production from the Global North to the Global South, in what has become a new age of imperialism characterized by a race to the bottom for workers throughout the world economy.⁷⁴

The social democratic campaign of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 election showed the potential for a grassroots left upsurge in this context—the main fear of the ruling class. But Sanders’s extraordinary campaign, representing an approach that would undoubtedly have won in a contest with Trump by drawing on a far wider working-class base, was blocked by a Democratic Party establishment that had long since put into place a superdelegate system and a structure of control through the Democratic National Committee, expressly designed to prevent such a left-liberal or social democratic takeover of the party. The road was thus left open to Trump. In this context there is no real doubt about the source of Trump’s success. He received a remarkable 77 percent of the vote among those who said their financial situation had worsened in the preceding four years.⁷⁵

Few understood this overall economic dynamic better than Bannon, the strategic brains behind the Trump campaign, who had worked on Wall Street as an investment banker—before moving to Hollywood and making ultraright-wing political films, testing the zeitgeist, and finally taking over Breitbart. With a realism completely lacking in neoliberal circles, he remarked, “I don’t think there’s any doubt that the world is in the beginning state of a crisis that it can’t avoid.” Raging against liberals, he stated that the left

globalists destroyed “the American working class. . . . The issue now is about Americans looking to not get f—ed over.”⁷⁶

Trump’s declarations about the “carnage” in the U.S. economy in his Inaugural Address (written by Bannon and his Breitbart colleague Stephen Miller, now a special adviser to Trump); his claims that the United States should have taken the Iraqi oil as payment for its deposing Saddam Hussein; and his self-styled “truthful hyperbole” regarding labor statistics (he claimed the unemployment rate in 2016 was “as high as 35 [percent]” or more) were all part of this same strategy.⁷⁷ This also included his attack on unfair trade (taken from the playbook of the left), his emphasis on protecting Social Security, his proposal to cut prescription drug prices through competitive bidding, and his promised trillion dollars for infrastructure spending. All of this was designed to draw support from wage workers that the Democrats had abandoned.

Likewise, the virulent attacks on illegal immigrants and refugees, the building of the wall between the United States and Mexico, and Trump’s strong law-and-order stance (including suggestions that Black Lives Matter be put under federal surveillance) were all part of the attempt to consolidate mass support for Trump in *class-economic and racial terms*.⁷⁸

Casting aside the Obama-era Trans-Pacific Partnership, Trump has raised the prospect of trade and currency wars with China to save American jobs. He appointed as director of the White House National Trade Council economist Peter Navarro, author of *The Coming China Wars*, which accuses China of currency manipulation and unleashing a “new imperialism” on the globe. The United States, Navarro argues, should end its “mutually parasitic economic codependence” with China and fight back economically (and militarily). Among Navarro’s other works are *Death by China*

(2011) and *Crouching China: What China’s Militarism Means to the World* (2015).⁷⁹

Trump has vowed to more than double the rate of growth of the economy. Yet his economic policy is largely a supply-side fantasy, which proclaims that rapid growth will automatically follow the gigantic windfalls to monopoly-finance capital resulting from wholesale deregulation, and from lavish tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations they own. He repeatedly declared that he would hugely expand infrastructure spending, which would give a boost to the real estate and construction sectors. But since the Trump plan is based on tax cuts to firms, thus paying them to do what they would likely have done anyway, rather than a massive increase in spending, and is supposed to be strung out over ten years, it will do little to stimulate the economy as a whole. Indeed, none of this can lift the economy out of stagnation. The most likely result is continued slow growth, possibly interrupted by a bubble effect in the financial sector.⁸⁰ The one thing that is certain is the business cycle: The economy is nearing its peak and recession is on the horizon, expected by many economists to commence within a few years.

Any prospect for real economic gains for the mass of the population will run into the triple contradiction of economic stagnation, financial crisis, and declining U.S. hegemony that characterize the epoch of monopoly-finance capital. Rather than alter these conditions, Trump’s economic policy is likely to aggravate them. This means that the Trump regime will, as its only economic option, probably gravitate to further military spending increases and imperialist adventures, coupled with greater economic repression of workers at home, particularly among the poorest sectors of the workforce—conceived as the surest way to “Make America Great Again.”

The greatest danger under these circumstances is that an increase in internal repression—Bannon is on record as

supporting Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist witch hunt in the 1950s—will have as its counterpart an increase in external repression and war without bounds, seen as a way of spurring the economy.⁸¹ Certain restraints on the global use of force have already been removed. A new upsurge in barbarism nationally and internationally is in the wind, this time armed with weapons capable of destroying the world as a place for human habitation. Indeed, the exterminism that is a real danger in these circumstances is already evident in the renunciation of all efforts to contain climate change, which Trump calls a “hoax.” This, then, threatens the eventual collapse of civilization (and even the extinction of humanity) under a continuation of capitalist business as usual.

RESISTANCE IN THE “POST-TRUTH SOCIETY”

In “Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties” Brecht stated:

Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgment* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons. These are formidable problems for writers living under Fascism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or been exiled; they exist even for writers in countries where civil liberty prevails.⁸²

Brecht would not be at all surprised that the rapid growth of neo-fascism in the United States and Europe has coincided with the declaration by the Oxford Dictionaries that

the “word of the year” for 2016—in recognition of Trump’s political rise—was the adjective “post-truth.” Significantly, another word on the short list for word of the year was “alt-right.” The Oxford Dictionaries define “post-truth” as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁸³

Blatant violation of the truth, and what Georg Lukács called “the destruction of reason,” has always been associated with fascism, and has helped prepare the ground for its rise.⁸⁴ It is impossible to understand our current social reality divorced from class analysis; nor is it possible to resist that reality effectively without class organization. A defining feature of contemporary liberal-democratic ideology, which set the conditions for today’s post-truth society, has been “the retreat from class,” and particularly from the notion of the working class—ironically brought back into the mainstream in relation to Trump.⁸⁵ This makes it possible for the vague term “populism” to cloak the growing neo-fascist threat of our time.

Resistance to these trends is only possible, as Brecht reminds us, by first having the courage, the keenness, the skill, the judgment, and the cunning to address the truth with respect to this demonic political phenomenon. It is necessary to recognize the truth in its historical, structural, and dialectical connections, insisting on the fact that today’s neo-fascism is the inevitable product of the crisis of monopoly-finance capital. Hence, the only effective way to resist is to resist the system itself. Against today’s “neo-fascist wind,” the movement toward socialism is the final barricade, the only genuine class-human-ecological defense.