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The Menace of Right "Populism"

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV528 - January 2019 -

Publication date: Saturday 5 January 2019

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Can it all really be Donald Trump's fault? Do the antics of the worst, most malicious and willfully ignorant president in modern U.S. history serve to explain the spread of authoritarian regimes, racist and anti-immigrant parties, and rightwing fake-populism across much of the planet?

In some cases, to be sure, Trump is a direct enabler. The murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on orders from Saudi Arabia's "reform" ruler and Jared Kushner's great friend, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was followed by a coverup so absurd that no one — except Trump — pretends to believe it, even while the U.S.-backed "Saudi-led coalition" war in Yemen assumes genocidal proportions.

But there are widespread and chilling examples of authoritarian rule from above supported by a popular rightwing base, attacking the most vulnerable groups in society. The Philippines president, Rodrigo Duterte, openly boasts of extrajudicial mass murders by his police forces. The incoming Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, promises to exterminate political opposition, revive torture, unleash the police and military on poor communities, and crush indigenous peoples' resistance to "development" of the Amazon — with the potential to turn the world's most ecologically vital rain forest into desert by mid-century.

Violent "Hindutva" nationalism in India is encouraged by the Modi government. The Erdogan regime in Turkey has jailed journalists by the hundreds and purged the civil service and professions of hundreds of thousands of opponents, real or imagined. In Tanzania, LGBTQ people are in hiding for fear of their lives. These vicious attacks on democratic rights and targeted populations are not simply perpetrated by totalitarian government repression (as is the case with the Chinese regime's mass incarceration camps and "reeducation" of the Uighur people), but gain significant support "from below."

The European situation is just as disturbing. The Polish "Law and Justice" party government attacks women's rights and purges the courts; Hungary's "illiberal democracy" strongman Viktor Orban and Italy's so-called "populist" coalition government build support by brutal assaults on immigrants and desperate asylum seekers. How much of this behavior is enabled by Trump's rhetoric over the "invasion" of refugees from Central America, the family separations and mass detentions at the U.S. border, and his incitement against journalism as "the enemy of the people"?

Vladimir Putin's regime, with its pre- and post-election relations with Trump and his extended family business, sends operatives abroad to poison defectors while Russian journalists, antiwar critics and LGBTQ rights advocates at home are rubbed out with much less publicity. In Ukraine, the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, Russian and western military provocation and counter-provocations are dangerously increasing, feeding back (as war crises generally do) into the repressive and anti-democratic tendencies arising in all these places.

Causes of Crisis

Of course, asking whether Trump is responsible for all this is only half-serious. But there are deeper substantive issues to be addressed about this reactionary pattern. What are the underlying causes of the surge in rightwing pseudo-populism, including in U.S. politics — this alliance of the wealthiest and most privileged elites with an angry popular and working-class base? What are the counter-trends, and what are the prospects and responsibilities of the

radical and socialist left in this turbulent period?

The so-called "rules-based global order," so highly praised by the wealthy classes who have prospered from it, has left behind much of the population. So-called center-right, liberal and social-democratic parties have pushed the elites' agenda of "free trade" — meaning free movement of capital — financial deregulation, and austerity for the poor.

Today, as that neoliberal order slowly crumbles and lurches toward the next recession or financial crisis, some of those who were relatively well-off see their own futures vanishing. The latest example among many is General Motors' planned idling of five North American plants, which may throw 14,000 auto workers' jobs on the scrap heap, threatens many thousands more and devastates affected communities. (Many observers feel that this move is GM's ploy to scare autoworkers into dropping their demands in the 2019 contract negotiations.)

The elites move to the right — especially in South America, most dramatically shown in Brazil — while workers and the poor are left to fend for themselves. Their response can take retrograde forms such as white U.S. working class support for Trump, but also more promising revolts against austerity as in the widespread popular support in France for the "yellow vests" protests, (see [What is at stake in the "yellow jacket" mobilization](#) by Leon Cremieux).

We can step back and view part of a larger pattern. Within Europe, the gap between wealthy nations (like Germany) that benefit from the common euro currency and the less affluent (especially Greece) that are trapped by it — and within each country, the widening gap between richer and poorer regions and classes — are pulling the European Union apart. In Britain, that dynamic enabled opportunist, anti-Muslim and barely disguised white-nationalist forces to carry the Brexit referendum, leading to a Britain-EU "divorce" that seems to be leading somewhere between a messy deadlock and a chaotic disaster.

Take another step back, and the bigger picture emerges. For the global South, the whole story of the "peaceful post-World War II liberal order inaugurated by the United States" was always a giant lie. From the Congo and southern Africa to the Middle East, southeast Asia and Latin America, multinational corporate pillage, superpower proxy wars that became genocides, western-backed dynasties and military dictatorships were the order of the day. Popular and revolutionary movements were routinely crushed.

Now, with old and new conflicts also intensified by the effects of climate change — particularly droughts and extreme weather driving masses of rural people off the land — refugees are taking their lives in their hands in desperate journeys to reach Europe or the southern U.S. border. Worldwide there are now some 68 million displaced people, only a harbinger of the hundreds of millions to come as more places become uninhabitable within a few decades (to say nothing of the escalating climate-driven disasters hitting the United States right now).

In the United States as in Europe, the anti-refugee backlash is sickening as well as frightening. If a few thousand families today fleeing drug gangs and death squads can be labeled an "invasion force" threatening U.S. security, can we even imagine what future crises might look like if the anti-immigrant forces aren't defeated?

Donald Trump is not the cause of these interlocking crises — if only the diagnosis and cure were so simple! — but a half-deranged symptom of a global systemic disease. To be sure, he's making things worse in his total indifference to friendly regimes' repression, racism and general brutality. His boasts about "bringing jobs back to America" look hollow enough in the wake of GM's announcement — and his "Tariff Man" tweets and absurd tariffs on Canadian and European steel and aluminum definitely exacerbated the December stock market plunge — but Trump at his worst can't be as destructive as neoliberal capitalism itself.

More important, the Trump regime and the assorted rightwing pseudo-populists in Europe have no solutions to the crises that have propelled them into prominence. They offer only false promises that speak effectively to the greed of the super-rich, and to the fears of people whose livelihoods, families and communities are being devastated, but offer no way out. The results of the U.S. midterm elections and the prospects of a revived left are partly a response to that reality.

U.S. Midterms and Socialist Revival

The Democrats' new majority in the House of Representatives should be seen, we think, as a re-balancing rather than a breakthrough — although significant in that they needed a big voter margin to overcome Republican gerrymandering and racist voter suppression in key states.

Widespread revulsion against Trump was obviously a huge factor, as well as high voter turnout among African Americans, women and the millennial generation. (Had the 2016 election gone the other way, we suspect that two years of a Hillary Clinton presidency would have resulted in a Republican "red wave" taking a stranglehold on both houses of Congress.)

Voter suppression is now a front-and-center issue, including the up-front Republican theft of the race for governor in Georgia. The Republican party today is a far-right-dominated outfit relying on extreme gerrymandering and vote suppression — along with the absurdity of the Electoral College — to hold on to power nationally. In states like Michigan and Wisconsin with incoming Democratic administrations, gerrymandered Republican legislatures in lame-duck sessions are enacting the most outrageous anti-democratic measures to cripple unions and hamstringing the new governors.

Nationally, the emergence of a larger "progressive caucus" including some self-declared democratic socialists, and the higher proportion of women elected to the next Congress, has to be balanced against other realities of the incoming Democratic majority. As Matt Karp incisively notes in Jacobin [\[1\]](#), the strategy that the Clinton campaign foolishly pursued in 2016 — ignoring the working class in favor of that somewhat stereotyped "college-educated suburban women" vote — worked for the Democrats this time in some contested districts, but what flipped one way in 2018 could readily flip back next time.

We won't predict here what the Democrats will do with their restored powers, or whether and when the Republican leadership and Wall Street might finally turn against Trump. We see two main takeaways from these midterms. First, even if a large minority of U.S. voters are attracted to elements of rightwing authoritarianism and fake populism, the majority didn't vote for it in 2016, and they're repelled by it now, including Trump's ugly anti-immigrant hysteria, mutual admiration with the world's sordid dictators, and obscene personal, family and regime corruption.

Second, however, the growth of the Democratic Party's progressive wing does not change the party's character as an organ and defender of capital and the neoliberal order, nor does it pose a fundamental challenge to its pro-corporate leadership. The white working class vote for the Republicans has actually slipped, but the Democratic leadership has almost nothing to say to them (beyond promises to defend health care).

Challenges for the Left

Whatever agenda the Democrats adopt — whether it's a halfway positive legislative program, or instead the

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diversionary empty noise about impeachment – real initiative and a genuine left and socialist revival depends, as always, upon social movements. The defense of immigrants and refugees, of women's rights and reproductive freedom, of Black communities against rampant police violence, continue to be priorities even if the balance of official political power has become a bit less reactionary.

The looming realities of catastrophic climate change must also be faced directly. Without a clear alternative, people are pushed toward either despair or denial – at the very time when action is most urgently required. The debacle of French president Macron's gas tax increase shows exactly what not to do, by imposing the costs on those who can't afford it.

But there are new challenges and openings. Think, for example, about the possibility of a genuinely progressive response to GM's plant closures. If threats of strikes and factory occupations force some corporate concessions, that would be welcome. But what's needed is a vision that leaps much further ahead – a fight for converting the plants and using workers' skills to production of desperately needed infrastructure for mass transit and 100% renewable energy within the next crucial decade.

That kind of transformation requires political and legislative action, to be sure – but above all, social mobilization, workers' control and democratic planning of production, and collective societal concern for the future of threatened working people and their communities. And it's not only auto, but agriculture and communications and health care and education and so much more, that require equally fundamental reorganization, and not only within national borders but globally.

That's the vision for a real socialist revival – and it's the key to overcoming the appeal of capitalist reaction and fake populism with its assorted lies and false promises.

[January-February 2019, ATC 198](#)

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[1] ["51 Percent Losers."](#)