

Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump And The Emergence Of New Right-Wing Movements



Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump and the emergence of a new right-wing radicalism in both Europe and the United States signify fundamental developments in the political and ideological landscape of Western societies, while at the same time, there is a resurgence of extreme

nationalism and authoritarian politics virtually all around the world. For an understanding and explanation of some of these disturbing developments and the alternatives available, we spoke to political economist C.J. Polychroniou, editor of a forthcoming book consisting of interviews with Noam Chomsky, titled *Optimism Over Despair: On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (Haymarket Books, 2017).

Marcus Rolle and Alexandra Boutri: Today's political landscape in many advanced capitalist societies is marked by the rise of a new right-wing populism centered around anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia and extreme nationalism fueled mainly by the antiglobalization rhetoric of authoritarian political leaders. We'd like to start by asking you to put in context the contradictions of global capitalism and the emergence of what has come to be known as the "alt-right."

C.J. Polychroniou: For quite some time now, there have been clear and strong indications across the entire political and socioeconomic spectrum in advanced Western societies that the contradictions of capitalist globalization and the neoliberal policies associated with them have reached an explosive level, as they have unleashed powerful forces with the capacity to produce highly destructive outcomes not only for growth, equality and prosperity, justice and social peace, but concomitant consequences for democracy, universal rights and the environment itself. Indeed, not long after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and its "communist" satellites in Eastern Europe — a development which led to such unbounded enthusiasm among supporters of global neoliberal capitalism

that they embarked on an audacious but highly dubious course of (pseudo) intellectual theorization to pronounce the “end of history” — it became quite obvious to astute observers that the forces unleashed by capitalism’s inner dynamism and the dominant capitalist states, with the US imperial state at the helm, were more attuned to the brutalities of societal regression, economic exploitation, war and violence than to the subtleties of socioeconomic progress, geopolitical stability and environmental sustainability.

To be sure, we now live in a world of unparalleled economic inequality coupled with massive economic insecurity and dangerously high levels of unemployment (especially among the youth), all while the depletion of natural resources has reached highly alarming rates and climate change threatens the future of civilization as we know it. All these developments are interconnected as they are fuelled by globalization’s imminent contradictions, but ultimately sustained by actual government policies and measures that cater almost exclusively to the needs of the wealthy and the concerns of the corporate and financial world. In the meantime, authoritarianism is reestablishing a foothold in many Western nations just as the social state is being reduced to the bare bone under the pretext of fiscal discipline.

Yet, despite poll results [showing rising support for socialism](#) in the US, [especially among millennials](#), growing discontent with the current economic order has thus far resulted not in a new socialist era but in the rise of ultranationalist leaders like Donald Trump who deploy rhetoric shrouded in racism and anti-immigration sentiment.

In France, Marine Le Pen is playing on similar strains of xenophobia and ultranationalism, arguing that “division is no longer between left and right ... but between patriots and believers in globalization.”

What is called the “alt-right” is in some ways a new phenomenon in the sense that, unlike conservatives and neoconservatives, the new right-wing radicalism belongs expressly in the “antiglobalization” camp. But the “alt-right’s” grievance is not with capitalism itself. Instead its adherents blame economic globalization and immigration for their woes. The strengthening of this right-wing antiglobalization movement was behind Brexit and Trump’s presidential victory and can explain the resurgence of authoritarian, xenophobic political leaders in countries like France, Austria, Hungary, Italy and Germany, to name just a few.

In a way, then, the sudden rise of the new right-wing radicalism is due to the fact that it has adopted part of the “antiglobalization” posture of the left and a good deal of the old left’s radical political discourse, such as the struggle of “people vs. elites.” In some cases, extreme right-wing leaders in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen in France, promise to strengthen the welfare state, impose capital controls to avoid speculation, nationalize banks and provide employment opportunities through keeping production at home. Marine Le Pen’s economic vision for France seeks to counter “unregulated globalization” and is based on a particular version of old-fashioned state capitalism, which globalization appears to have made obsolete.

Is the formation of an “illiberal state” also part of the “alt-right’s” vision for the future of Western society?

The term “illiberal state” is associated with the ideology and policies of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Since coming to power, Orbán has operated on a political platform that combines social and nationalist populism with anti-European Union rhetoric. He has infringed on the freedom of the press, made inroads into the judiciary system and openly advocates an “illiberal” democracy as a means to counteract the impact of globalization. More recently, he has sought to shut down Central European University, which was founded by George Soros in 1991 as part of the billionaire’s “Open Society” project.

The extent to which the rise of “alt-right” leaders in Western Europe can lead to similar outcomes as in the case of Viktor Orbán in Hungary is a rather shaky proposition. Eastern European countries do not have the system of checks and balances of established democracies. Moreover, millions of Hungarians do not embrace Orbán’s authoritarian tendencies, and oppose him every step of the way, as millions of Turks opposed Erdoğan’s quest to be granted expansive powers via a highly controversial referendum (51.4 percent voted for it, making Erdoğan officially Turkey’s new sultan). Likewise, Donald Trump may be an autocrat, but he cannot just run roughshod over the whole country. The tendency to call Trump a fascist (even though he has authoritarian leanings) and to define the US as a totalitarian state does a great disservice to political analysis and, by extension, to our imaginative capacity for realistic and sustainable alternatives.

In popular accounts of globalization, the impression one frequently gets is that this is a new phenomenon and simply irreversible. What’s your take on

globalization?

Globalization itself is not a new phenomenon in history. The conquests of Alexander the Great and the spread of Hellenic civilization in Europe and Asia was the first great instance toward the creation of a cosmopolitan, globalized world. And, for the record, Alexander actually sought the “marriage” between different cultures and expressed disdain toward some of his own generals for failing to show proper respect for civilizations older than Greece.

To be sure, as many scholars have shown, the history of the world is practically a history of imperial expansion. Most people throughout recorded history actually lived in empires. And, equally important, there have been different visions of empire. The Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire and the French Empire shaped the world in fundamentally different ways.

Nonetheless, with the advent of capitalism, sometime during the so-called “long 15th century,” the nature of expansion, through trade and commerce accompanied by the sword, follows a different trajectory. Capitalism spreads to all corners of the world, resulting in the accumulation of wealth for European powers and the gradual impoverishment of the colonized countries and regions, simply out of sheer necessity. As such, capitalism is pretty much distinguished from all previous socioeconomic systems by this fact — that is, that the system has to expand in order to survive. Alexander the Great made a decision to expand Hellenic culture to the deepest ends of Asia. Capitalists have to expand, otherwise they face possible extinction. In short, capitalism is by its nature an expansionist socioeconomic system, with the accumulation of capital being one of the system’s basic but fundamental laws of motion.

In the modern times, and prior to our own age, we saw a great wave of capitalist globalization taking place sometime around the 1880s and lasting until the outbreak of World War I. The world economy was as open as it is today, and possibly even more so, and capital movement across national boundaries was so extensive of an activity that a passionate opposition to foreign direct investment had developed in the United States by the 1890s.

After World War I, there were lukewarm efforts to return to the previous era of internationalization, but the political climate of the time proved to be a major stumbling block and the outbreak, eventually, of World War II put to an end all

aspirations for the revival of a new international capitalist order.

The latest phase of capitalist globalization begins sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s and comes in the aftermath of the collapse of the postwar structure of capital accumulation. Following World War II, Western capitalism experienced a phase of unprecedented growth and development: the ranks of the middle class exploded, labor rights were solidified (including labor representation on company boards) and workers' benefits were greatly expanded, all while the "social state" became a major pillar of the postwar Western capitalist world. But the postwar social structure of accumulation collapsed when capitalism entered a systemic crisis in the early 1970s, manifested by "stagflation," an oil crisis and the appearance of new technologies that made Fordist production obsolete.

Enter neoliberalism. In an attempt to overcome the accumulation crisis, the major international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and of course, the US Treasury, began to promote throughout the world the neoliberal triad of liberalization, privatization and deregulation. These policies were accompanied by budget-cutting for social programs and generous tax cuts for corporations and the rich. In this context, globalization becomes a development strategy vehicle for the realization of super-profits.

Like many on the left, certain powerful segments of the extreme right, such as the leader of the National Front in France, think that globalization is reversible. Is it?

If Marine Le Pen wins the French presidential election coming up (April 23-May 7) and pushes forward with her goal of taking France out of the EU and returning to the Franc, the European integration project — and hence, a major component of globalization — could collapse like a house of cards, especially since the anti-euro fever is also spreading in Italy, and a Frexit [French exit from the European Union] will surely have immediate effects among all Europeans now skeptical of the integration project in their continent. However, it should be noted that the Frexit scenario is not as easy as Brexit. It would require a constitutional change, and that is very unlikely to happen. But, yes, globalization is certainly reversible, although it will require nothing short of cataclysmic events in the world's major power centers. Having said that, it is unclear if a return to the old nation-state is desirable. A policy of autarchy is impossible in today's world, and I don't think anyone in his/her right mind advocates such a project. Socialists and radicals must come up with a new version of a globalized economy.

Speaking of the upcoming French elections, there seems to be a new twist with the momentum gained by ultra-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Is the French radical left back?

This is one of the most interesting and uncertain presidential elections in the history of the French 5th Republic. None of the traditional center-right, center-left party candidates are expected to make it to the second round. This is yet another evidence of the changing nature of the political and ideological landscape in today's Western societies. Marine Le Pen will surely make it to the second round, and the only question is who will be her opponent. Entering the final stretch, it appears that the gap separating the major contenders for the second round is closing, and that Jean-Luc Mélenchon has an actual shot (although the odds are against him) of making it to the second round. If this happens, you would have a candidate from the ultra-right and the ultra-left competing for the French presidency.

Like Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon is against the EU but also promises to pull France out of NATO. And he advocates a much more radical economic agenda than Le Pen, which includes higher wages and a 90 percent tax rate on the very rich. Moreover, and this goes to the core of your question, his supporters seem to be coming from the entire political spectrum in France. This development has been helped by Mélenchon's overt nationalist rhetoric as of late, and his promise to crack down on "illegal immigration." Not coincidentally, the French flag prevails over the red revolutionary flag in the latest rallies organized by Mélenchon's party. This must be seen as an indication that the concerns about the contradictions of globalization cross traditional party lines, and that the new political contest is between those who are in favor of globalization and those who are against it.

Does this mean that there is more hope now for resistance to global capitalism?

Perhaps. We may be reaching a point where the traditional terms "left" and "right" do not have much applicability in today's world, at least insofar as the reaction of a growing segment of the population around the world is concerned with regard to the impact of neoliberal capitalism on their lives and communities. But whatever may be going on in terms of people's political affiliations, hope is all we have.

Despair, as Noam Chomsky keeps saying, is not an option, no matter how horrendously depressing the current world situation appears to be, as resistance to oppression and exploitation has never been a fruitless undertaking even in more dire times than our own. Indeed, the Trump “counter-revolution” in the US has already brought to surface a plethora of social forces determined to stand up to the aspiring autocrat and, in fact, the future of resistance in the world’s most powerful country appears more promising than in many other parts of the advanced industrialized world. Of course, the problem with the United States is that it is in the perpetual habit of taking “one step forward and three steps backward.” But this does not mean we should give up hope, but only to work harder to create powerful organizing forces that can pose greater resistance to predatory capitalists and war-makers, while at the same time articulating consistently a coherent and realistic vision of radical change.

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