

The Restructuring Crisis of Global Capitalism and the Spectre of 21st Century Fascism - The counterweight: transnational struggle from below

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The crisis of global capitalism is unprecedented, given its magnitude, its global reach, the extent of ecological degradation and social deterioration, and the scale of the means of violence. We truly face a crisis of humanity. The stakes have never been higher; our very survival is at risk. We have entered into a period of great upheavals and uncertainties, of momentous changes, fraught with dangers if also opportunities. I want to discuss here the crisis of global capitalism and the notion of distinct political responses to the crisis, with a focus on the far-right response and the danger of what I refer to as 21st century fascism, particularly in the United States.

Facing the crisis calls for an analysis of the capitalist system, which has undergone restructuring and transformation in recent decades. The current moment involves a qualitatively new transnational or global phase of world capitalism that can be traced back to the 1970s, and is characterized by the rise of truly transnational capital and a transnational capitalist class, or TCC. Transnational capital has been able to break free of nation-state constraints to accumulation of the previous epoch, and with it, to shift the correlation of class and social forces worldwide sharply in its favour and to undercut the strength of popular and working classes around the world in the wake of the global rebellions of the 1960s and the 1970s.

Emergent transnational capital underwent a major expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, involving hyper-accumulation through new technologies such as computers and informatics, through neo-liberal policies, and through new modalities of mobilizing and exploiting the global labour force – including a massive new round of primitive accumulation, uprooting, and displacing hundreds of millions of people, especially in the third world countryside, who have become internal and

transnational migrants.

We face a system that is now much more integrated, and dominant groups that have accumulated an extraordinary amount of transnational power and control over global resources and institutions.

Militarised accumulation, financial speculation - and the sacking of public budgets

But by the late 1990s the system entered into chronic crisis. Sharp social polarization and escalating inequality helped generated a deep crisis of over-accumulation. The extreme concentration of the planet's wealth in the hands of the few and the accelerated impoverishment and dispossession of the majority even forced participants in the 2011 World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos to acknowledge that the gap between the rich and the poor worldwide is "the most serious challenge in the world" and is "raising the spectre of worldwide instability and civil wars." Global inequalities and the impoverishment of broad majorities mean that transnational capital cannot find productive outlets to unload the enormous amounts of surplus it has accumulated. By the 21st century, the TCC turned to several mechanisms to sustaining global accumulation, or profit making, in the face of this crisis.

One is militarized accumulation; making wars and interventions that unleash cycles of destruction and reconstruction and generate enormous profits for an ever-expanding military-prison-industrial-security-financial complex. We are now living in a global war economy that goes well beyond such "hot wars" in Iraq or Afghanistan.

For instance, the war on immigrants in the United States and elsewhere, and more generally, repression of social movements and vulnerable populations is an accumulation strategy independent of any political objectives. This war on immigrants is extremely profitable for transnational corporations. In the United States the private immigrant prison-industrial complex is a boom industry. Undocumented immigrants constitute the fastest growing sector of the US prison population and are detained in private detention centres and deported by private companies contracted out by the US state.

It is no surprise that William Andrews, the CEO of the Corrections Corporation of America, or CCA, the largest private US contractor for immigrant detention centre, declared in 2008 that "the demand for our facilities and services could be adversely affected by the relaxation of enforcement efforts... or through decriminalization [of immigrants]." Nor is it any surprise that CCA and other corporations have financed the spate of neo-fascist anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona and other US states.

A second mechanism is the raiding and sacking of public budgets. Transnational capital uses its financial power to take control of state finances and to impose further austerity on the working majority, resulting in ever-greater social inequality and hardship. The TCC has used its structural power to accelerate the dismantling of what remains of the social wage and welfare states.

And a third is frenzied worldwide financial speculation - turning the global economy into a giant casino. The TCC has unloaded billions of dollars into speculation in the housing market, the food, energy and other global commodities markets, in bond markets worldwide (that is, public budgets and state finances), and into every imaginable "derivative," ranging from hedge funds to swaps, futures markets, collateralized debt obligations, asset pyramiding, and Ponzi schemes. The 2008 collapse of global financial system was merely the straw that broke the camel's back.

This is not a cyclical but a structural crisis - a restructuring crisis, such as we had in the 1970s, and before that, in the 1930s - that has the potential to become a systemic crisis, depending on how social agents respond to the crisis and on a host of unknown contingencies. A restructuring crisis means that the only way out of crisis is to restructure the system, whereas a systemic crisis is one in which only a change in the system itself will resolve the crisis. Times of crisis are times of rapid social change, when collective agency and contingency come into play more than in times of equilibrium in a system.

Responses to the crisis and Obama's Weimar republic in the United States

In face of crisis there appear to be distinct responses from states and social and political forces. Three stand out: global reformism; resurgent of popular and leftist struggles from below; far-right and 21st century fascism. There appears to be, above all, a political polarization worldwide between the left and the right, both of which are insurgent forces.

A neo-fascist insurgency is quite apparent in the United States. This insurgency can be traced back several decades, to the far-right mobilization that began in the wake of the crisis of hegemony brought about by the mass struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s, especially the Black and Chicano liberation struggles and other militant movements by Third World peoples, counter-cultural currents, and militant working class struggles. Neo-fascist forces organized during the years of the George W. Bush government. But my story here starts with the Obama's election.

The Obama project from the start was an effort by dominant groups to re-establish hegemony in the wake of its deterioration during the Bush years (which involved as well the rise of a mass immigrant rights movement). Obama's election was a challenge to the system at the cultural and ideological level, and has shaken up the racial/ethnic foundations upon which the US Republic has always rested. However, the Obama project was never intended to challenge the socio-economic order; to the contrary; it sought to preserve and strengthen that order by reconstituting hegemony and conducting a passive revolution against mass discontent and spreading popular resistance that began to percolate in the final years of the Bush presidency.

The Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of passive revolution to refer to efforts by dominant groups to bring about mild change from above in order to undercut mobilization from below for more far-reaching transformation. Integral to passive revolution is the cooptation of leadership from below; its integration into the dominant project. Dominant forces in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North America are attempting to carry out such a passive revolution. With regard to the immigrant rights movement in the United States - one of the most vibrant social movements in that country - moderate/mainstream Latino establishment leaders were brought into the Obama and Democratic Party fold - a classic case of passive revolution - while the mass immigrant base suffers intensified state repression.

Obama's campaign tapped into and helped expand mass mobilization and popular aspirations for change not seen in many years in the United States. The Obama project co-opted that brewing storm from below, channeled it into the electoral campaign and then betrayed those aspirations, as the Democratic Party effectively demobilized the insurgency from below with more passive revolution.

In this sense, the Obama project weakened the popular and left response from below to the crisis, which opened space for the right-wing response to the crisis - for a project of 21st century fascism - to become insurgent. In this way, Obama's administration appears as a Weimar republic. Although the social democrats were in power during the Weimar republic of Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s they did not pursue a leftist response to the crisis but rather sidelined the militant trade

unions, communists and socialists, and progressively pandered to capital and the right before turning over power to the Nazis in 1933.

21st century fascism in the United States

I don't use the term fascism lightly. There are some key features of a 21st century fascism I identify here:

(1) The fusion of transnational capital with reactionary political power.

This fusion had been developing during the Bush years and would likely have deepened under a McCain-Palin White House. In the meantime, such neo-fascist movements as the Tea Party as well as neo-fascist legislation such as Arizona's anti-immigrant law, SB1070, have been broadly financed by corporate capital. Three sectors of transnational capital in particular stand out as prone to seek fascist political arrangements to facilitate accumulation: speculative financial capital, the military-industrial-security complex, and the extractive and energy (particularly petroleum) sector.

(2) Militarization and extreme masculinization.

As militarized accumulation has intensified the Pentagon budget increased 91 percent in real terms in the last 12 years, and the top military brass has become increasingly politicized and involved in policy making.

(3) A scapegoat which serves to displace and redirect social tensions and contradictions

In this case, immigrants and Muslims in particular. The Southern Poverty Law Center recently reported that "three strands of the radical right - hate groups, nativist extremist groups, and patriot organizations, increased from 1,753 groups in 2009 to 2,145 in 2010, a 22 percent rise, that followed a 2008-9 increase of 40 percent."

A 2010 Department of Homeland Security report observed that "rightwing extremists may be gaining new recruits by playing on the fears about several emergency issues. The economic downturn and the election of the first African American president present unique drivers for rightwing radicalization and recruitment." The report concluded "over the past five years, various rightwing extremists, including militias and white supremacists, have adopted the immigration issue as a call to action, rallying point, and recruitment tool"

(4) A mass social base.

In this case, such a social base is being organized among sectors of the white working class that historically enjoyed racial caste privilege and that have been experiencing displacement and rapid downward mobility as neo-liberalism comes to the US and losing the security and stability they enjoyed in the previous Fordist-Keynesian epoch of national capitalism.

(5) A fanatical millennial ideology involving race/culture supremacy embracing an idealized and mythical past, and a racist mobilization against scapegoats.

The ideology of 21st century fascism often rests on irrationality - a promise to deliver security and restore stability is emotive, not rational. 21st century fascism is a project that does not - and need not - distinguish between the truth and the lie.

(6) A charismatic leadership

Such a leadership has so far been largely missing in United States, although figures such as Sarah Palin and Glen Beck appear as archetypes.

The mortal circuit of accumulation-exploitation-exclusion

One new structural dimension of 21st century global capitalism is the dramatic expansion of the global superfluous population – that portion marginalized and locked out of productive participation in the capitalist economy and constituting some one third of humanity. The need to assure the social control of this mass of humanity living in a planet of slums gives a powerful impetus to neo-fascist projects and facilitates the transition from social welfare to social control, or police, states. The system becomes ever more violent.

Theoretically stated – under the conditions of capitalist globalization the state’s contradictory functions of accumulation and legitimation cannot both be met. Economic crisis intensifies the problem of legitimation for dominant groups so that accumulation crises such as the present one generate social conflicts and appear as spiralling political crises. In essence, the state’s ability to function as a “factor of cohesion” within the social order breaks down to the extent that capitalist globalization and the logic of accumulation or commodification penetrates every aspect of life, so that “cohesion” requires more and more social control.

Displacement and exclusion has accelerated since 2008. The system has abandoned broad sectors of humanity, who are caught in a deadly circuit of accumulation-exploitation-exclusion. The system does not even attempt to incorporate this surplus population, but rather tries to isolate and neutralize its real or potential rebellion, criminalizing the poor and the dispossessed, with tendencies towards genocide in some cases.

As the state abandons efforts to secure legitimacy among broad swaths of the population that have been relegated to surplus – or super-exploited – labour, it resorts to a host of mechanisms of coercive exclusion: mass incarceration and prison-industrial complexes, pervasive policing, manipulation of space in new ways, highly repressive anti-immigrant legislation, and ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity through petty consumption and fantasy.

A 21st fascism would not look like 20th century fascism. Among other things, the ability of dominant groups to control and manipulate space and to exercise an unprecedented control over the mass media, the means of communication and the production of symbolic, images, and messages, means that repression can be more selective (as we see, for example, in Mexico or Colombia), and also organized juridically so that mass “legal” incarceration takes the place of concentration camps. Moreover, the ability of economic power to determine electoral outcomes allows for 21st century fascism to emerge without a necessary rupture in electoral cycles and a constitutional order.

The United States cannot be characterized at this time as fascist. Nonetheless, all of the conditions and the processes are present and percolating, and the social and political forces behind such a project are mobilizing rapidly. More generally, images in recent years of what such a political project would involve spanned the Israeli invasion of Gaza and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, to the scapegoating and criminalization of immigrant workers and the Tea Party movement in the United States, genocide in the Congo, the US/United Nations occupation of Haiti, the spread of neo-Nazis and skinheads in Europe, and the intensified Indian repression in occupied Kashmir.

The counterweight to 21st century fascism must be a coordinated fight-back by the global working class. The only real solution to the crisis of global capitalism is a massive redistribution of wealth and power downward towards the poor majority of humanity. And the only way such redistribution

can come about is through mass transnational struggle from below.

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P.S.

* "The Crisis of Global Capitalism and the Spectre of 21st Century Fascism":

Aljazeera. 08 May 2011 08:59:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/04/201142612714539672.html>

Focus on the Global South:

<http://focusweb.org/content/crisis-global-capitalism-and-spectre-21st-century-fascism>