

The Age of Neofascism and Its Distinctive Features

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Neofascism claims to respect the basic rules of democracy instead of establishing a naked dictatorship as its predecessor did, even when it empties democracy of its content by eroding actual political freedoms to varying degrees, depending on the true level of popularity of each neofascist ruler (and thus his need or not to rig elections) and the balance of power between him and his opponents. There is today a wide range of degrees of neofascist tyranny, from near absolute in the case of Vladimir Putin to what still retains a space of political liberalism as in the cases of Donald Trump and Narendra Modi.

Neofascism differs from traditional despotic or authoritarian regimes (such as the Chinese government or most Arab regimes) in that it is based, like last century’s fascism, on an aggressive, militant mobilization of its popular base on an ideological basis similar to that which characterized its predecessor. This base includes various components of far-right thinking: nationalist and ethnic fanaticism, xenophobia, explicit racism, assertive masculinity, and extreme hostility to Enlightenment and emancipatory values.

As for the differences between old and new fascism, the most important of them are, first, that neofascism does not rely on the paramilitary forces that characterized the old version - not in the sense that it is devoid of them, but it keeps them in a reserve role behind the scenes, when they are present - and, second, that neo-fascism does not claim to be “socialist” like its predecessor. Its program does not lead to the expansion of the state apparatus and its economic role but rather draws inspiration from neoliberal thinking in its call to reduce the economic role of the state in favour of private capital. However, necessity may make it go in the opposite direction, as is the case with Putin’s regime under the pressure of the requirements of the war he launched against Ukraine.

While twentieth-century fascism grew in the context of the severe economic crisis that followed World War I and reached its peak with the “Great Depression”, neofascism grew in the context of the worsening crisis of neoliberalism, especially after the “Great Recession” that resulted from the financial crisis of 2007-08. Whereas past century’s fascism endorsed the national and ethnic hostilities that prevailed in the heart of the European continent, against the backdrop of the heinous

racist practices that were occurring in the colonized countries, neofascism flourished on the dung of racist, xenophobic resentment against the rising waves of immigration that accompanied neoliberal globalization or resulted from the wars that the latter fuelled, in parallel with the collapse of the rules of the international system. The United States played the key role in thwarting the development of a rules-based international system after the end of the Cold War, thus quickly plunging the world into a New Cold War.

Neofascism may seem less dangerous than its predecessor because it is not based on paramilitary appearances and because nuclear deterrence makes a new world war unlikely (but not impossible: the Ukraine war has brought the world closer to the possibility of a new world war than any events since World War II, even at the height of the Cold War in the time of the USSR). The truth, however, is that neofascism is more dangerous in some respects than the old. Twentieth-century fascism was based on a triangle of powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) that did not have the objective ability to achieve its dream of world dominance, and was confronted by powers that were economically superior to it (the United States and Britain) in addition to the Soviet Union and the global communist movement (the latter played a major role in confronting fascism politically and militarily).

As for neofascism, its dominance over the world is increasing, driven by the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency in a guise that is much more in line with neofascism than during his first term. Thus, the world's greatest economic and military power is today the spearhead of neofascism, with which various governments in Russia, India, Israel, Argentina, Hungary and other countries converge, while the possibility of neofascist parties coming to power in the major European countries (in France and Germany, after Italy, and even in Britain) looms on the horizon, not to mention smaller countries in Central and Eastern Europe in particular.

If it is true that the possibility of a new world war remains limited, our world faces something no less dangerous than the two world wars of the twentieth century, namely climate change, which threatens the future of the planet and of humanity. Neofascism is pushing the world towards the abyss with the blatant hostility of most of its factions to indispensable environmental measures, thus exacerbating the environmental peril, especially when neofascism has taken over the reins of power over the most polluting people in the world proportionally to its number, namely the people of the United States.

There is no equivalent in today's world to what the workers' movement was like with its socialist and communist wings after World War I. Instead, the forces of the left are suffering from atrophy in most countries, after most of them merged into the crucible of neoliberalism to the point that they no longer constitute an alternative to the status quo in the eyes of society. Or else, they are unable to adapt to the requirements of our era, reproducing the flaws of the twentieth century's left that led to its historical bankruptcy. All the above makes us uphold that the era of neofascism is more dangerous in some respects than the era of the old. The new generation remains the focus of our greatest hope, and significant sections of it have revealed their rejection of racism, such as that manifested in the Zionist genocidal war in Gaza, and their defence of equality of all sorts of rights, as well, of course, as their defence of the environment.

In the face of the global rise of neofascism, there is a vital and urgent need to confront it by bringing together the broadest ad hoc alliances in defence of democracy, the environment, and gender and migrants rights, with the variety of forces that embrace these goals, while working to rebuild a global current opposing neoliberalism and defending the public interest in the face of the dominance of private interests.

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P.S.

- Gilbert Achcar blog. 2/4/2025

<https://gilbert-achcar.net/age-of-neofascism>

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