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Trump and American Fascism

Jerry Harris^a, Carl Davidson^b, Bill Fletcher^c and Paul Harris^d

^aGlobal Studies Association of North America, Chicago, USA; ^bNational Committee of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism, Aliquippa, USA; ^cInstitute for Policy Studies, Washington, DC, USA; ^dNational Lawyers Guild, San Francisco, USA

ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump reflects the rise of a Right-wing nationalist movement. Central to Trump's appeal has been his advocacy of anti-immigrant, racist, and misogynist ideas. At its core, his ruling power bloc consists of neo-liberal fundamentalists, the religious Right, and white nationalists. There are similarities between the new power bloc and fascism, and there are many who see Trump's administration as such. Nevertheless, the new president's authoritarian power bloc is neither hegemonic nor fascist, but such a definition can send oppositional strategy in the wrong direction.

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Is Donald Trump a fascist? Until recently it's a question only debated in small circles on the Left. But now the topic is front and center in media outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and a hot subject of discussion across the political class—Left, Center, and Right.

The question reflects a crisis in neo-liberal hegemony, and it doesn't have a simple answer. More important are questions about the social, political, and economic forces around Trump. Are they fascist as well? Much of the Left views Trump as a dangerous demagogue who may usher in a neo-fascist and racist regime. But the Left has frequently used fascism too loosely, labeling fascist everyone from cops swinging their billy clubs to law-and-order politicians to gun-toting Right-wing militias.

So what makes a particular hegemonic bloc fascist instead of just Right-wing capitalism? To answer this question, a more analytical approach is needed, one that understands capitalism has always been racist, sexist, imperialist, and violent. It has also promoted bourgeois democracy, which includes important civil liberties and rights, and a social contract that provided workers with middle-class levels of consumption and living standards.

An incorrect assessment of fascism has often had negative consequences for the Left. Certainly the McCarthy period brought the US close to a fascist state. The Communist Party believed fascism was on the horizon and sent hundreds of their leading cadre underground. Yet the Communist Party (CP) in California and Michigan (see Pintzuk 1997; Richmond 1975) continued organizing mass campaigns throughout this period. The loss of skilled open organizers and hardships suffered in the underground were major factors in the crisis faced by the CP in 1956–57 leading to the loss of thousands of members

(Harris 2010). In the late 1960s, the Weathermen faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) went underground, alongside a splinter group from the Black Panthers called the Black Liberation Army. Both believed the US faced fascist conditions under Nixon. Both groups proved ineffective, but with tragic results for their members.

The American ruling class has excelled at repressing leading revolutionary organizations with violence, jail, and political attacks. Yet democratic rights have been concurrently maintained for the majority of US citizens, even as democracy shrank to a fragile state for the Left. Those under the iron heel of repression see these conditions as a generalized state of fascism for the entire country, at times retreating from using civil liberties as their best defense. Additionally, cries of fascism did not rally the mass of people to resistance, nor create an effective united front outside relatively small circles of supporters. What often proved most effective, however, were organizing efforts to defend the Bill of Rights and civil liberties (see Somerville 2000).

An excellent example in the defense of civil liberties occurred when the Nixon administration used the FBI and the Justice Department to aggressively infiltrate, surveil, and prosecute the anti-war movement, the Black Panthers, and Left groups. One famous case that went to the US Supreme Court was entitled *U.S. versus District Court* [1972] 407 U. S. 297. This was a blatant attempt to set a precedent of restricting civil liberties in the name of national security.

Members of the White Panthers (centred in Detroit) were prosecuted for conspiracy to destroy government property, including the bombing of a CIA office in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The defense attorneys made a motion to discover any wiretaps. Previously, in political cases, the Justice Department would simply deny the existence of wiretaps and judges would accept the prosecutors' word. But in this case, to everyone's shock, the prosecutors admitted wiretaps and admitted there had been no warrants. Wanting to establish the government's power in future cases, they argued that under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Street Act of 1968 they didn't need a warrant when there was a clear and present danger to "domestic security." In addition, the government's brief took the extreme position that the President had "the inherent power" to suspend any provision of the Constitution when he determined it was in the national interest. The brief written by Assistant Attorney General William Rehnquist (later to become the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court) concluded that pursuant to such power the government could disregard the Fourth Amendment's protection against warrantless searches.

If the Supreme Court accepted the government's argument, there would have been a legal basis for the President to carry out surveillance and prosecute any political opposition without the limitations of the Bill of Rights. The Court, in a unanimous decision, written by Nixon appointee and conservative Justice Lewis Powell, strongly rejected the government's arguments. This is one of many examples of a conservative court protecting civil liberties during a period of powerful federal and state law-and-order attacks on Left political movements.

These periods are complex and intense. Among Marxist thinkers, Gramsci's insights on the dialectic of coercion and consent under capitalist rule best explains times in which state power is employed to destroy Left influence while maintaining a general democratic institutional structure for the rest of society; enough so that both McCarthy and Nixon were disgraced and expelled from power, not by the Left, but by leading sectors of the

capitalist class. Nixon and McCarthy were useful in creating reactionary conditions and using state power against radicals, but when they turned their attacks to sectors of the ruling class they were quickly done away with. In McCarthy's case, it was his intent to investigate communist influence in the military, and for Nixon it was the Watergate spying scandal with his private, extra-legal gang of "plumbers." Their political operatives and allies lost influence and some were even jailed.

If these periods posed the danger of a fascist hegemonic bloc, that political movement and their thrust for total power was defeated essentially by splits in the ruling class more so than mass action from below. Some of those splits were over fundamental ideological positions concerning democracy, while other divisions were in reaction to the social movements and how to incorporate their demands into the system. Today these same dynamics are at play over Trump's presidential victory, and so history lays the groundwork for what is to come.

Historic Fascism and Today

It is important not to get lost in personalities. Is Trump a fascist, an accomplished opportunist, or just an egocentric billionaire looking for personal power? That discussion may be interesting, but fascism as a historic hegemonic bloc features a radical, even revolutionary, break with bourgeois democracy. A comparison between historic fascism and today's conditions is a good place to start. But it's also important to avoid an exact comparison with the German Nazis or Italian fascists. If those conditions have to be repeated in all their essentials, we will never see fascism again, since history rarely repeats in such exact patterns. Just as new revolutions can break the mold of those before it, so can counter-revolutions.

Historically fascism has grown out of deep capitalist economic and social crises, challenged from below by Left and Right revolutionary movements, leaving the ruling class unable to rule in the old way. This standoff creates a crack in the ceiling that leads to the open dictatorship of the most reactionary sections of the capitalist class.

Right-wing populism (and its variants) holds nationally specific forms. There is no one-size-fits-all, though there are significant points in common. These include racism, sexism, xenophobia, and the obsession on an "origin myth," i.e., a period in the nation or people's history that was allegedly glorious.

Yet there is another aspect to Right-wing populism, which certainly can work itself into fascism: irrationalism. When we use the term "irrationalism" we are discussing a framework which is specifically anti-science, anti-fact, deeply imbued with conspiracy theories and frequently laced with myth. Such movements have occurred periodically in the United States. The current obsession with the problem of "fake news," for instance, ignores the historical precedent of "yellow journalism" in the lead-up to the Spanish-American War. But irrationalism runs deeper than phony journalism. Embedded in the history of Right-wing populism there is an appeal to the irrational, rooted in a fear of the unknown and a fear of the future.

The anti-science of irrationalism can paradoxically appear to be very scientific. Nazi Germany is certainly a case in point where there was the concurrence of both irrational myth and rational science with the irrational myth coded as scientific. Not only was scientific racism popular in Germany, it was also widespread in the United States.

Irrationalism serves an important role in the reinforcing of a delusional bubble that surrounds the mass base of Right-wing populism. Central to Right-wing populism is the creation of a narrative that describes how the “people” have been victimised by specific elites (usually demographic groups). The retreat from science and fact leads to the creation of stories that are frequently intriguing, and reinforce the basic narrative. This can take the form of the outlandish, to more subtle falsehoods like misstating what proportion of terrorist attacks in the US are committed by Muslims versus white supremacists.

The difficulty presented by irrationalism is that facts are irrelevant because all that actually matters is the story. If the facts get in the way of the story, then the facts are eliminated and either ignored outright, or replaced with reinforcing information, irrespective of its truth or falsehood. Consequently, Trump can constantly state falsehoods, such as millions of illegal voters in the presidential election, and the story is believed even when contradicted by facts. The irrational narrative speaks directly to people’s identity and their perceived place in society. To reject the story one must reject their identity, for example, as a white male suffering discrimination, or a Christian defender of freedom against Muslim terrorists.

Today capitalism faces a generalised economic and social crisis, but over the past eight years there has been a slow and shallow recovery. Conditions are bad or stagnating for many, but still don’t compare to the Great Depression of the 1930s and the carnage haunting countries after WWI. Nevertheless, the ruling class does face a crisis of legitimacy, a widespread mistrust and anger at political elites and Wall Street bankers.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties face internal challenges that reflect these general conditions. To make sense of these conflicts it is useful to consider the political landscape as a six-“party” system, rather than the usual two-party binary: three under the GOP tent and three under the Democratic tent (Davidson 2016). Although these factions have important differences, it’s essential to note that neo-liberal ideology and transnational capitalists have maintained hegemony in both parties for the past 35 years.

In the GOP, the biggest loser in the election was the “establishment” faction, the neo-liberal globalists led by the Bush family. They were challenged by a variety of groupings under the old Tea Party label that morphed into two new groupings—the Christian nationalists under Senator Ted Cruz, and the Right-wing populists fashioned by Trump and the “Alt-Right” under Steve Bannon.

Throughout the primaries, Trump routed all 16 opponents, leaving Right-wing populism with the upper hand. By the GOP convention, Trump took command by bringing Mike Pence, a Cruz ally, on as his running mate. The anti-global white nationalists, both secular and Christian, were in the driver’s seat, while the establishment was left either in disarray or in open revolt, with a number of neo-liberals turning temporarily to the Democrats.

The Democratic tent also had three groupings—the Third Way faction under the Clintons and much of Wall Street, and their allies among civil rights and women’s rights groups; the Old New Dealers comprised largely of the AFL-CIO, related think tanks, and figures like Senator Elizabeth Warren and Vice President Joseph Biden; and finally the Social-Democrats (for want of a better term) made up of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Progressive Democrats of America, Working Families Party, and Senator Bernie Sanders along with his many allies among young voters.

The Sanders campaign far exceeded expectations. As a self-defined democratic socialist he ran on a progressive, popular front program aimed at making a “political revolution” against the “billionaire class” on Wall Street. Sanders was the only anti-neo-liberal in the primaries. Although Trump spoke out against globalization, there was no mention of core neo-liberal policies such as deregulation or tax breaks for the rich. He never attacked the “billionaire class,” instead his targets were minorities, immigrants, women, and the “rigged system.”

For Sanders, a new, large sector of the electorate emerged. At its core were the Millennial “precariat,” largely younger workers, unemployed or under-employed, and heavily burdened with student debt and minimum wages. While Clinton maintained a solid majority of older minority voters, many younger Millennials of color also responded to Bernie. In the end, after featuring a run of huge and insurgent rallies, Sanders had 13 million votes and took 45% of the elected delegates to the convention. It enabled them to help write the most progressive party platform in its history. For the sake of her campaign Clinton was pulled leftward, but couldn’t overcome her 35-history as a Wall Street neo-liberal. Even so, in the end she beat Trump by 2.8 million votes.

Will the insurgent populist nationalists of the Right or the insurgent social-democrats of the Left fully take over the leadership and change the character of their respective parties? If the Right populists are successful, they could potentially constitute an important element in a new neo-liberal-fascist ruling hegemonic bloc. On the left, it could mean the emergence of a new social democratic, counter-hegemonic bloc.

In the interest of examining the question of fascism in the United States, let’s focus on whether Trump’s victory signals a new power bloc or a hegemonic bloc.

A New Hegemonic Bloc?

A new power bloc would be a significant shift in ruling class orientation, bringing together a diverse alliance of different interests. The Republican Party has been subject to internal divisions and battles for many years, riven by debates over nationalism, globalization, and transnational capitalism.

Previous presidential candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney showed the dominance of the transnational capitalist class (TCC). For the past 35 years the TCC has maintained neo-liberal political and ideological hegemony, built upon economic globalization. As state policy neo-liberalism ruled both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as conservative and social-democratic parties in Europe. It was the clear ruling-class consensus.

But the Trump victory has shaken things up, shifting political leadership to the populist Right-wing base. So far the Republican alliance, while disrupted, still holds and a new hegemonic bloc has not been established. This is partly because reactionary nationalism has not been accepted as an ideology by the TCC. It runs counter to the multicultural and cosmopolitan orientation necessary for globalization. Moreover, the TCC neo-Keynesian wing still in the Democratic Party is in clear opposition.

The reactionary nationalist power bloc in the Republican Party is also in a different position than fascism in the 1930s. Presently US fascism lacks its own consolidated political instrument. Twentieth-century fascism constructed its own party, created a hegemonic bloc with a dominant ideology, won full state control, and suppressed all opposition.

So, an important question is can reactionary nationalists turn the Republican Party into a fully-fledged fascist party? This would be a radical break, converting a conservative party into a revolutionary political instrument intent on taking full power.

Historically, fascist parties not only were new political instruments, they also brought forth a whole set of new political elites. That Tea Party operatives, Christian theocrats, and Alt-Right activists have influence and pose a danger is without question. But will that influence consolidate into a leading position within a hegemonic bloc?

The appointment of Stephen Bannon as Trump's senior counselor is a clear indication that white nationalists will be at the table of power. Bannon's Breitbart media outlet has run headlines such as, "Hoist It High and Proud: The Confederate Flag Proclaims a Glorious History," and "Birth Control Makes Women Unattractive and Crazy." His appointment by Trump got rave reviews from the American Nazi Party, the Klan, and other Alt-Right elements. This amalgamation of different racist groups and militias, such as the Oath Keepers, can certainly constitute a paramilitary force similar to the Brown Shirts in the early days of German fascism. Alt-Right leading ideologue Richard Spencer has stated, "America was, until this last generation, a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us" (Editorial Board 2016).

Granted, the Alt-Right lacks the direct organizational ties to the Republican Party that paramilitary forces possessed with the Nazi Party. And soon after the election Trump made statements putting distance between himself and the most racist Alt-Right elements. More recently he downgraded the status of Bannon. However Trump may still turn to Bannon and his Alt-Right network to mobilize their base in the 2018 elections, threatening civil liberties and possible violence. Conservatives can then keep their hands clean and declare their commitment to democracy, while indirectly promoting repression.

But will Trump bring Alt-Right activists into government? Using the state for building a large fascist bureaucracy was an important step in establishing a consolidated power base in the past century. So it will be important to track the 4000 presidential appointments to see if reactionary and racist cadre are being widely placed and promoted. Six months into his administration this does not appear to be the case.

A parallel development to the 1930s is the international character of the rising fascist danger. Throughout Europe, Right-wing nationalist and neo-fascist parties have been marching in the streets and winning at the ballot box. Similar to Trump's, their political rhetoric is rooted in anti-globalism, nationalist pride, and anti-immigrant attacks.

But important differences remain. One is the historic legacy directly linking some of these parties to twentieth-century European fascism. Another is their independence from traditional conservative parties whom they blame (alongside the social democrats) for elite corruption and loss of sovereignty to the European Union bureaucracy.

By contrast, the reactionary Right in the United States is situated inside the major conservative party, and therefore entangled in a whole host of organizational and financial ties that the European nationalists are free of. The theocratic Right, the Tea Party, and now Trump have all sought power within the existing traditional conservative political organization. Will this strategy mean compromising with, or even a minority relationship to the TCC? Or will it tie the TCC more firmly to reactionary nationalists and fascist elements? At this point the TCC remains the dominant partner and have strengthened their influence in the White House, particularly over economic issues.

Elite Opposition and Support

As already noted, US neo-liberal politicians, who have long done the bidding of the transnational capitalist class have strong roots in both the Democratic Party and Republican Party (Harris 2016). Rather than moving decisively to the Left or Right they are trying to maintain their political hegemony through minor adjustments. For example, Left regulationists such as Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and investor George Soros, have moved to a clear neo-Keynesian position. Meanwhile, the center structuralists, like Lawrence Summers, Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England, and Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), now argue for an “inclusive capitalism.” At war with each other during the Asian crisis in 1998, these two factions now share broad general agreement on debt relief, state-led investments, rising wages, and repairing the social safety net.

These players have also recognized the seriousness of the environmental threat, and some are already investing significant amounts of money into sustainable technologies. Outspoken advocates of market-based green policies include Robert Ruben, former Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton and Citigroup executive; Hank Paulson, former Treasury Secretary under George W. Bush and former CEO of Goldman Sachs; and Michael Bloomberg, billionaire and former mayor of New York. All are important voices in the TCC.

In this regard, the appointment of Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a representative of the fossil fuel industry and constant opponent of the EPA, will be an important point of conflict. Issues over science and sustainability will be a major point of opposition, not only with an energized environmental movement, but among the elite. It’s not just that this faction of the TCC are uncomfortable with the likes of Pruitt and Bannon; they have a very different strategy to solve the economic impasse and social crisis faced by transnational capitalism—one that involves market-based environmentalism, letting wages rise, and expanding open borders for trade and investments.

Therefore, oppositional TCC factions may play an important role in blocking the ascension of the hard Right, and any political moves to silence and punish them would be a bold marker to signify the full arrival of fascism. On the other end of the TCC spectrum are the transnational, free-market ideologues, what Soros calls “market fundamentalists.” These figures from the TCC Right wing are mainly centered in finance capital. They are clearly happy with the Trump victory and looking forward to significant weakening of the financial regulations that became legislation after the 2008 crash.

Trump’s cabinet appointments are a clear indication that he intends to pursue cherished neo-liberal policies, many already discredited except among Right-wing fundamentalists of the TCC. These include major tax breaks for the rich, deregulation of finance and energy, privatization of the infrastructure, and charter schools to undermine public education. In short, Trump is bringing back the Washington Consensus.

Inside the fossil-fuel industry the champagne bottles are being uncorked, as transnational investors are looking forward to a president who rejects global warming science. We already see signs of this by way of Trump’s investment in Energy Transfer Partners, the corporation in conflict with Native Americans at Standing Rock Indian Reservation. CEO billionaire Kelcy Warren was a strong supporter of Trump, and the new president is supporting the company in its confrontation over land and water rights.

Trump's cabinet is a carefully constructed alliance between TCC neo-liberals, the theocratic Right (Davidson and Harris 2006), and Alt-Right nationalists. Representing the TCC is Rex Tillerson, CEO from Exxon-Mobile as Secretary of State; billionaire and former Goldman Sachs partner Steven Mnuchin at Treasury; president of Goldman Sachs Gary Cohn as head of the Council of Economic Advisors; and private equity billionaire Wilbur Ross as Commerce Secretary.

Alt-Right and Goldman Sachs alumni Stephen Bannon is senior strategist. The theocratic Right is represented by Vice President Pence, Attorney General Jeff Sessions; Housing and Urban Development under Ben Carson; Tom Price as Secretary of Health and Human Services; and Betsy DeVos at the Department of Education (Stewart 2016). A quick examination of the appointments shows all important economic posts are in the hands of transnational capitalists, while positions covering social issues have gone to the theocratic Right. The key to this alliance and its construction as a power bloc is devotion to orthodox neo-liberalism in its most brutal and naked form.

Trump's appointments reflect his own global business dealings. He has investments in 20 countries including the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bermuda, Brazil, Canada, China, Dominican Republic, Scotland, Germany, Indonesia, India, Ireland, South Korea, Saint Martin, Panama, Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Uruguay, and is deeply involved with rich and powerful families in the global North and South. And while real estate is an important area for TCC investments, being one of the most active fields attracting transnational capital, Trump's opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) does not affect his real estate empire. His company engages in foreign direct investments and branding rather than the import/export trade.

Do these sections of capital constitute the most reactionary bloc willing to align with white nationalists to create fascist hegemony? Certainly a majority of finance capitalists and their orthodox ideologues promote authoritarian and technocratic political institutions devoted to austerity, while the fossil fuel industry is committed to bringing every remaining drop of oil and coal to the surface in their profit-driven mania to destroy the environment.

Yet such goals have been promoted for the past 30 years through the World Trade Organization, IMF, and the false science of Exxon-Mobil. Just how far an economic and political fusion with the Alt-Right will go remains to be seen.

But in such an alliance there is no solution to stagnation, and any fascist hegemony may quickly be undermined by its inability to solve the social crisis. Additionally, market fundamentalists want to use the state to reduce political regulations. But traditional fascism greatly expanded the state-run economy, with contracts and profits running through the government and doled out to supporting corporations. As Benito Mussolini commented in 1925: "Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State."

State activism versus free market capitalism is an underlying tension in the Trump presidency, and reflects a contradiction between the Republican base and its Wall Street establishment that has been its central internal dynamic for the past 20 years.

As Mike Davis has observed:

On social security, Medicare, deficit spending on infrastructure, tariffs, technology, and so on, it's almost impossible to imagine a perfect marriage between Trump and the institutional Republicans that doesn't orphan his working-class supporters . . . Therefore it would not be

difficult to imagine a future scenario where the alt-right ultimately splits with or is expelled from the administration. (Davis 2016)

Trump may try to solve this problem by using his nationalist rhetoric to hide corporate privatization. His big job programs are rebuilding the infrastructure, and the wall on the Mexican border. Infrastructure construction may be accomplished by private–state partnerships in which large amounts of tax money helps subsidize corporate construction. The corporations would then own the projects and charge user fees to both the government and private citizens for new roads, sewers, and ports. It can also serve as a large-scale jobs program that keeps his popular base of support.

The biggest policy departure between the nationalist and transnational wings of the reactionary power bloc will be over the cancellation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Trump needs to keep his promise to maintain legitimacy with his social base. This is a hard pill to swallow for transnational elites who have worked long and hard to create the treaty. But in the end it will not stop, or even long stall, globalization. Already the Chinese have made use of the new opportunity to increase their influence and role in defining globalization. China has been working on a trade deal called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Its 16-member bloc already encompasses seven of the twelve countries involved in the TPP including Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. India is an additional member, and China has now invited in Latin American TPP participants Peru and Chile. At the summit of the 21-country Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group held in November, Chinese president Xi Jinping was clearly ready to take advantage of the US rejection of the TPP, stating, “China will not shut the door to the outside world but will open it even wider” (Kohlmann 2016).

Instead of creating more US jobs, pulling out of the TPP will increase the transnationalization of US-headquartered corporations. As Deborah Elms, executive director of the Asian Trade Center in Singapore commented, “American companies will be at a competitive disadvantage. They will, in a final irony, likely outsource more to Asia because in order to use the existing trade agreements in Asia, they will need to be physically located in Asia” (Kohlmann 2016). Consequently, nationalist rhetoric and moves will only serve to weaken US state leadership of the TCC. Combined with Obama’s boycott of the widely popular Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank established by China, and China’s One Belt One Road initiative, it is not hard to see the shifting of history.

So does the Trump victory put a fascist coalition in the driver’s seat, or will Trump act as populist cover for the continued neo-liberal rule of the TCC-dominant faction?

A similar debate has long been part of the discussion over twentieth-century fascism. Was the bloc’s political wing in the form of the Nazi Party the dominant partner, or was industrial and finance capital? Rather than either, it can be argued it was a mutual merger of interests that drove power relations. But with much of the Republican apparatus first and foremost loyal to Wall Street, it may be difficult for fascist political dominance to occur with white nationalists driving the power bloc. It is clear from Trump’s cabinet appointments of billionaires and Wall Street connected elites that Trump has tied himself to finance capital. He will make a show of nationalist political acts, and pursue anti-immigration policies to maintain his social base. But the heart of the power bloc will be the neo-liberal fundamentalist wing of the TCC.

Consequently, in terms of economic policies, transnational hegemony is likely to continue in much the same form that it did under Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush and Barak Obama. Certainly more openly racist and aggressive in form, but neo-liberal and transnational in essence.

Civil Liberties, State Terrorism, and Military Expansion

Marxist Darko Suvin argues that

there is no fascism without extreme, mass, and terrorizing violence; there is no fascist State without international warfare . . . Under fascist State rule . . . an alliance or historical bloc shares power with the fascist hierarchy. It consists as a rule of top capitalist businesses, the military, and the inherited and now swollen conservative State bureaucracy: in no case does the upper bourgeoisie lose its profits, though a part or most of its macro-planning power is subordinated to State coordination and norms. (Suvin 2016)

Suvin's description of twentieth-century fascism presents significant differences with today's conditions. He positions a total suppression of democratic rights, a state-managed economy, and international warfare with the military as key elements in a fascist hegemonic bloc.

Considering the role of the military is a question with no easy answer. Clinton was seen as having a more pro-military stand than Trump, who questioned the US alliance with NATO, criticized the war in Iraq, and attacked Senator John McCain for his war record. Among active duty service men and women Clinton won by a 5% margin, suggesting a weak military social base for providing a core element in a reactionary bloc. In fact, Trump's message veered more to isolationism than expansionism. As he stated during the campaign:

We would be so much better off if Gadhafi were in charge right now. If these politicians went to the beach and didn't do a thing, and we had Saddam Hussein and if we had Gadhafi in charge, instead of having terrorism all over the place, at least they killed terrorists, all right? . . . We destabilised the Middle East and it is a mess . . . I mean I'm not a fan of Saddam Hussein, but he ran the place. And, he had no weapons of mass destruction. And now instead of Saddam Hussein, we have far more brutal. We have ISIS. (Parenti 2016)

At the same time Trump supports torture, the bombing of civilians, and harsh security measures against all Muslims. He also called for enlarging the already bloated military budget. Writing in the business magazine *Forbes*, weapons industry consultant Loren Thompson wrote, "For the Defence Industry, Trump's Win Means Happy Days are Here Again" (Hartung 2016). In the stock market post-election surge defense industry giants such as Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman were major winners.

Fascism in the twentieth century linked nationalism to war, and the quest for more territory and resources. This was a hallmark feature of its character. Trump has not pursued this path, and it is hard to imagine his regime expanding the US war effort to a qualitatively greater extent than Bush one and two, or Obama's eight years of drone assassinations. In fact Obama's military budget out-spent George W. Bush (Hartung 2016). This raises a number of questions. Is a leap in military aggression a necessary step towards fascism, when a permanent war economy was established well before Trump's victory? If the US acts as the military spearhead for the transnational capitalist class (Robinson 2004)

does a continuation of global imperialism constitute a newly characterized transnational fascist aggression? Or does fascist aggression necessitate a sharp turn towards a narrow nationalist military agenda, for example, reserving rights to Iraqi oil for US corporations while shutting out China, France, and others who have signed contracts with the local government?

Within the military there are many schools of thought. Some see Russia as the main enemy, others advocate containment of China as the most important strategic concern. Still others are primarily focused on the “arc” of terrorism they see stretching from northern Africa to Asia. There are even globalists who recognize the US must adjust to a multipolar world and ready itself for a mass of ecological refugees (Harris 2002, 2008). Trump does not seem to be rooted to any camp, and has already departed from his campaign rhetoric. One clear impulse has emerged, his military advisors want to promote a more aggressive stance than the Obama administration was willing to take, and Trump seems to agree.

The other side of violence and repression is the security state and its threat to democracy. Trump began his relationship with the CIA with insults, and rejected their findings on Russian interference in the US elections. Yet it is clearly evident that Trump and his anti-Muslim policies have deep support in the FBI, the border police, and Right-wing militias. With the appointment of Senator Jeff Sessions to Attorney General, undermining civil rights will play a prominent role in Trump’s use of power. The FBI may not only support, but be enthusiastic in helping to deport three million immigrants and register all Muslims.

The question of democratic norms and legality is an essential difference between fascism and the normative bourgeois state. Bob Jessop explores this question in his analysis of Nicholas Poulantzas’s well-known work on fascism. As Jessop explains:

Poulantzas’s analysis of the exceptional state derives from his view that the definitive features of the normal form of the capitalist type of state are democratic institutions and hegemonic class leadership . . . However, if political and ideological crises cannot be resolved through the normal, democratic play of class forces, democratic institutions must be suspended or eliminated and the crises resolved through an open “war of manoeuvre” that ignores constitutional niceties . . . Thus, while consent predominates over constitutionalized violence in normal states, exceptional states intensify physical repression and conduct an “open war” against dominated classes. (Jessop 2014)

Jessop goes on to explain that exceptional states suspend elections and end the multiparty system of political competition. Constitutional legality is deferred, the freedom of press ended, and a centralization of power reorganizes hegemony while suppressing internal opposition (see Jessop 2014; Poulantzas 1974). If we accept the importance Poulantzas gives to the division between democracy and dictatorship in the definition of fascism then Trump and the new power bloc is far from a consolidated hegemonic fascism. It contains elements and possibilities of fascism, but is closer to authoritarian state transnationalism than a dictatorship of reactionary nationalism.

Race and Class

What has fuelled charges of fascism more than anything else has been Trump’s use of racism and xenophobia to energize his social base. In post-election analysis the working class has become the focus of attention, with pundits suddenly discovering the pain,

inequality, and hardships suffered as a result of 35 years of neo-liberal globalization and technological changes.

But when the media and politicians talk about the working class, they mean the white working class, and eliminate millions of blacks and Latinos from what is in reality a multi-racial working class. Instead blacks and Latinos are assigned a “minority” identity, reinforcing the white viewpoint that minorities are just welfare recipients that take advantage of tax dollars.

Without a doubt, a good deal of Trump’s vote was a vote against globalization and Washington elites. But a good section of Trump voters responded strongly to his racist appeals, with the white nationalist/supremacist community openly rallying to his side. And more broadly, to vote for Trump was to ignore or downplay all his vulgar racist and xenophobic statements. The hurt, fear, and insult felt by millions of minorities was less important than people’s desire for “change.” Although not a change to the racist culture and history in the US.

This is a white blind spot, and a form of racism central to US history. We’re sure many of these people have minority friends at work or church and do not consider themselves racist. But they are willfully blind to structural racism and its daily consequences. Some voted for Obama as an agent of change, again change was more important than race. So race as a secondary or unimportant factor ironically can work both ways. You do not have to belong to the Klan, spray paint swastikas on a synagogue, or write “nigger” on a bathroom wall to be a racist. It runs deep in US culture and this election shows just how deep it is.

Early exit poll results conducted by the *New York Times* (Huang et al. 2016) raise further questions about the relationship of class and race. Clinton biggest gap was among those earning \$50,000 to \$99,999. This large sector of the working class broke for Trump 51% to 42%. Certainly a family earning between \$50,000 to \$75,000 dollars a year may be struggling to pay their bills and keep their heads above water. This would include the blue-collar counties going for Trump. The second half of this bracket is moderately well off, and not as badly affected by globalization, but there has been a stagnation in their income and lifestyle. They see and fear a bleak future in which their security and living standards are threatened. Those who feel “worse off today” went heavily for Trump at 78%. But we must remember those really worse off, and living on incomes below \$50,000, went for Clinton.

Trump’s strength in rural America follows the pattern of solid rural support for fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain. Isolation from diversity, and the cosmopolitan and industrial culture of big cities is reflected in the conservatism and religious-centered community of rural life. The most consistent demographic divide in the election was between urban and rural voters. Furthermore, Trump won large sectors of small- and mid-size business people who responded to attacks on foreign trade, globalization, and urban elites.

But what might be an additional explanation in the analysis of the Trump vote beyond income or class? Some 64% of Trump voters said immigration was the most important issue. Their next most common category was the threat of terrorism. Those who thought the economy was the most important problem went 52% for Clinton, and 42% for Trump (Huang et al. 2016). Clearly Trump’s appeal to racism and xenophobia paid off well, and may have been his key to success. Similar electoral strategy has been successful for past Republican campaigns, and played well for some Democrats.

Trump's open and crass racist appeals were new to modern political presidential campaigns. But the not-so-subtle Willie Horton ads under George Bush were only a camouflage difference of degree. So too was Ronald Regan's "welfare queens driving Cadillacs," and Bill Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it." Does this make Trump a fascist or an opportunist and dangerous racist?

Even liberal presidents have carried out racist policies. Roosevelt put Japanese Americans into concentration camps and Obama deported 2.5 million immigrants. The US has had openly racist presidents, among those were Woodrow Wilson and Richard Nixon, both of whom violated democratic norms. Wilson oversaw the Palmer raids that deported 500 radical activists, and fought against the right of women to vote. Under Presidents Harding and Coolidge, the 1920s witnessed a rapid growth of the Klan in the Midwest. By 1923 Indiana's Klan reached 250,000 members, and over half of Indiana's state house, the governor, and many high-ranking officials were loyal Klan supporters. When the Klan marched in Washington DC in 1925 it was estimated at 60,000. If there was ever fascist conditions in the US they certainly existed during this era in the South, where Blacks were denied basic civil and political rights and the rule of terror was punctuated by chain gangs and lynchings.

Today, even with the oppression of the prison industrial complex, police killings, and immigration prison camps, general democratic conditions are better for minorities. So can we define the current conditions as fascist, when racist oppression and racist movements have been a constant part of US history?

Although Trump openly and crudely appealed to racist beliefs, is this so qualitatively different to make him a fascist, and all that entails, rather than a patriarchal American racist? For all the faux cries of disbelief and rejection by the Republican establishment, they and Republican voters all came home to Trump on election day. But consolidating a white nationalist hegemonic bloc may be a bridge too far for Trump's social base. In all, 20% of his voters reported little confidence and tepid support. And even while many Americans hold biased beliefs, the majority are what we might label benign racists. Their slogan may well be "why can't we all get along," uncomfortable with minority demands for equality, but also white nationalism and openly repressive policies. As we argued above, nearly all Trump voters were racist, but only a minority are white nationalists.

Xenophobia and Patriarchy

Patriarchal and racist worldviews were embedded in fundamentalist Protestant religion, which was the dominant ideological influence on the Scottish and Irish settlers of America. Poverty was an indication of personal failure and economic success an indication of righteousness. The religious Right wing, a powerful faction inside the Republican Party, was attracted to Trump's racial message and nationalist rhetoric enough so that Trump got 81% of the evangelist vote, and enough so that Trump's misogynist character did not stop support from the "family value" cultural warriors of the theocratic Right.

Christian fundamentalists are bolstered by generous support from a number of super-rich families and foundations, and have a deep network of think tanks and media outlets. The religious Right sees globalization as secularization, and multiculturalism and religious

tolerance as a challenge to Christian identity. Consequently, Trump's rejection of globalization and promotion of nationalism and isolationism provided a strong attraction for Christian identity voters.

Pat Buchanan, who has long been a major intellectual spokesman for Right-wing Christians, has targeted immigration as a major threat to America. This issue, perhaps more than any other, brought evangelists to Trump. His characterization of Mexican immigrants as "murderers and rapists" was music to the ears of the theocratic Right. In Buchanan's book, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil our Country and Civilization*, he wrote:

There are thus deep differences in attitudes toward America between old immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Eastern Europe and today's immigrants from Mexico . . . Mexicans not only come from another culture, but millions are of another race . . . Unlike immigrants of old, who bade farewell forever to their native lands . . . Mexicans have no desire to learn English . . . rather than assimilate, they create Little Tijuanas in US cities . . . they are creating a Hispanic culture separate and apart from America's larger culture. They are becoming a nation within a nation. (Buchanan 2002)

The easy answer to this problem of a "nation within a nation" is mass deportations and a border wall to protect the Christian and racial purity of the "old immigrants." But this anti-immigration stance conflicts with capitalists who rely on cheap labor. Joachim Fels, global economic adviser for Pacific Investment Management, a company that manages \$1.5 trillion in assets, spoke for transnational capital when he stated, "greater barriers to immigration reduce competition for domestic workers and thus lead to higher wage growth" (Miller 2016). It will be hard for the new power bloc to round this square hole.

The misogynist and sexual boasting of Trump did put off a good number of Christians, but the subordination of women has always been part of fundamentalist religions around the world. Men want a world where they control the household, control their women, and earn the most money. These beliefs are particularly strong when they are supported by conservative religious views. The loss of industrial jobs and women's entry into the workforce has undercut traditional family roles and male identity. The right to an abortion and cultural changes in the independence and self-reliance of women have also challenged patriarchal social structures of domination. Being rich, having a beautiful wife, and freely boasting of sexual encounters appealed to many men. This is the life they want to live. Consequently, Trump attracted the religious Right in a number of important ways, and their alliance may strengthen in the future.

Conclusion

The Trump power bloc shares many similarities to classic fascism, and yet has significant differences. Trump has used populist rhetoric to capture the anger and frustration over economic inequality brought about by neo-liberal globalization. The emerging power bloc is marked by white nationalism and reactionary religious support. Both have organized social movements, with strong support in rural areas. Xenophobic rhetoric has laid the groundwork for scapegoating all Muslims and immigrants, perhaps as a spearhead in a frontal assault on all civil liberties. Reactionary elements in the state security apparatus

have given Trump their political backing. And in finance capital the most orthodox neo-liberals, alongside the anti-environmental energy sector, are rejoicing with high expectations of policies that will favor their industry and profits.

On the other hand, there is significant opposition within the ruling class. Important sectors still support formal democratic legality and environmental sustainability. There is no fascist party with a large set of new cadre ready to take over the state bureaucracy. The Republican Party is still a coalition of neo-liberal transnational capitalists and reactionary populists, at odds with each other on important questions.

In opposition to the reactionary power bloc are activated social movements, but no national Left party that threatens capitalism. An expansionist and nationalist military policy may emerge, but such policies are highly controversial within military circles. And how far attacks on democracy will go is an open question. There is no indication that a dictatorship of one section of the ruling class, pursuing the suppression of all basic constitutional rights and all oppositional parties, is presently a danger although the overall weakness of Trump's power bloc among the elite may push him to use authoritarian measures to maintain control.

So how do we define the new power bloc? A good part of the new bloc is the old hegemonic bloc of transnational capitalists. And racism, as Malcolm X said, "is as American as apple pie." So is there a qualitative difference in the Trump regime, a leap towards fascism, or is it a quantitative change revealing much of what has always been present? Can we properly use the term fascist for a system deeply embedded in transnational capitalist relations of production, with a return to a nationalist based economy virtually impossible? Have we moved away from a polyarchy (Robinson 1996), i.e., the rule of two parties playing out their differences in a tightly controlled democracy? Or is the US an oligarchy of the one-tenth of one percent consolidated around a new neo-fascist hegemonic bloc?

While a new power bloc is emerging, it is not hegemonic in the Gramscian sense that it leads other capitalist sectors in an alliance, and suppresses those it does not lead. Consequently, if we do use the term fascist to describe the current constellation of power, it must be qualified with many differences from classic fascism, and in doing so it risks losing its analytical power, causing distortions in tactics and strategy. Making similar errors in the 1950s and early 1970s led to a serious disorientation and mistakes for the Left.

We have raised a good number of questions, not all of which we have answers for. But we believe there needs to be a tough and ongoing analysis. We face dangerous times. But if we use a dialectical approach we can focus on the opposing forces that will be unleashed in contradiction to the new power bloc. The Left must combine race and class, not class and nation. In that lies our hope for defeating reactionary threats to democracy, and preventing the consolidation of an authoritarian racist regime.

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Notes on Contributors

Jerry Harris is a founding member and national secretary of the Global Studies Association of North America and a founding member and on the international executive committee of the

Network for the Critical Studies of Global Capitalism. He specializes in transnational capitalist class theory and political economy. He is author of *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy* (Clarity Press, 2016) and *The Dialectics of Globalization: Economic and Political Conflict in a Transnational World* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

Carl Davidson is a co-founder of the Global Studies Association and director of the Online University of the Left (<http://ouleft.org>). His area of interest is in American history and politics. He is author (with Jerry Harris) of *Cyber Radicalism: A New Left for a Global Age* (Changemaker Publications, 2005). His most recent book is *New Paths to Socialism* (Changemaker Publications, 2011).

Bill Fletcher Jr. is former president of TransAfrica Forum, a senior scholar with the Institute for Policy Studies, and co-author (with Peter Agard) of *The Indispensable Ally: Black Workers and the Formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1934–1941*, co-author (with Dr. Fernando Gaspas) of *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice*, and author of *They're Bankrupting Us—And Twenty Other Myths about Unions*.

Paul Harris is a founding member of the San Francisco Law Collective, was national president of the Lawyers Guild and is author of *Black Rage Confronts the Law* (New York University Press, 1997).

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