

Editorial

WHAT IS TRUMP?

DEBATES AROUND the politics of Trump and other new-right leaders have led to an explosion of historical analogizing, with the experience of the 1930s looming large. According to much of this commentary, Trump—not to mention Orbán, Kaczynski, Modi, Duterte, Erdoğan—is an authoritarian figure justifiably compared to those of the fascist era. The proponents of this view span the political spectrum, from neoconservative right and liberal mainstream to anarchist insurrectionary. The typical rhetorical device they deploy is to advance and protect the identification of Trump with fascism by way of nominal disclaimers of it. Thus for Timothy Snyder, a Cold War liberal, ‘There are differences’—yet: ‘Trump has made his debt to fascism clear from the beginning. From his initial linkage of immigrants to sexual violence to his continued identification of journalists as “enemies” . . . he has given us every clue we need.’ For Snyder’s Yale colleague, Jason Stanley, ‘I’m not arguing that Trump is a fascist leader, in the sense that he’s ruling as a fascist’—but: ‘as far as his rhetorical strategy goes, it’s very fascist.’ For their fellow liberal Richard Evans, at Cambridge: ‘It’s not the same’—however: ‘Trump is a 21st-century would-be dictator who uses the unprecedented power of social media and the Internet to spread conspiracy theories’—‘worryingly reminiscent of the fascists of the 1920s and 1930s.’¹

From the right, former Republican adviser Max Boot insists: ‘To be clear, I am in no way suggesting there’s any analogy between Trump and Hitler’—however: ‘Trump is a fascist. And that’s not a term I use loosely or often.’ For the liberal neo-con Robert Kagan, ‘This is how fascism comes to America, not with jackboots and salutes’—but ‘with a television

huckster, a phony billionaire, a textbook egomaniac “tapping into” popular resentments and insecurities.’ On the left, eco-Marxist John Bellamy Foster agrees that there are ‘historically distinct features’—yet Trump is nevertheless a systematic ‘neofascist’ who, like his interwar forebears, aims at ‘the repression of the workforce’. Queer theorist Judith Butler acknowledges, ‘With Trump, we have a different situation’—but ‘one which I would still call fascist.’ For social democrat Geoffrey Eley, ‘It makes no sense to draw direct equivalences’—nevertheless: ‘we have the kind of crisis that can enable a politics that looks like fascism to coalesce. And this is where Trump has prospered.’ For anarcho-syndicalist Mark Bray, ‘No, I wouldn’t say that Trump is a fascist’—although, ‘he has displayed quite a few fascist qualities . . . Trump was enabled by fascism (among other things) and in turn enabled fascism.’²

Another point these commentators have in common is that their analogies are rarely placed in a properly comparative and historical perspective. Instead they treat the past as a storehouse of disconnected examples to be pulled out for weaving morality tales or constructing yardsticks against which they measure the contemporary moment. The procedure is similar to what Hegel called the pragmatic form of reflective history, in which the writer searches for ‘examples of good deeds’ (or bad ones) without placing them in their historical context, thus creating a false immediacy in which the past appears as a reservoir of ‘lessons’. But as

¹ Timothy Snyder, ‘Symposium: Repeating History’, TLS, 16 November 2018. Jason Stanley, interviewed by Isaac Chotiner, ‘OK, Trump’s Not a Fascist Leader—But does his fascist rhetoric mean he’s on the way to being one?’, *Slate*, 10 September 2018; see also Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, New York 2018, p. xiv. Richard Evans, ‘Symposium: Repeating History’.

² Chauncey De Vega, ‘Max Boot on the End of Conservatism’, *Salon*, 16 October 2018. Robert Kagan, ‘This is how Fascism comes to America’, *Washington Post*, 18 May 2016. John Bellamy Foster, ‘Neo-Fascism in the White House’, *Monthly Review*, April 2017, and ‘This Is Not Populism’, *Monthly Review*, June 2017; see also *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and Farce*, New York 2017, p. 29. Judith Butler, ‘Trump, fascism and the construction of “the people”’, translation of Christian Salmon’s interview with Butler, ‘Pourquoi Trump est un Phénomène Fasciste’, *Mediapart*, 18 December 2016. Geoff Eley, ‘Is Trump a Fascist?’, *Historians for Peace & Democracy*, February 2018. Mark Bray, ‘Interview: “At Its Core, Anti-Fascism Is Self-Defence”’, *Truthout*, 11 February 2018. Of these, Bellamy Foster is distinctive in advancing the category of ‘neofascism’, a sub-family within the ‘fascist genus’ to which he claims Trump unqualifiedly belongs, and is thus not strictly representative of the apophatic ‘not actually fascist, but fascist nevertheless’ Trump discourse.

Hegel warned, ‘nothing is more shallow’.³ Marx developed and sharpened Hegel’s critique in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, suggesting that the pragmatic form could itself become a historical force, as when ‘Luther donned the mask of Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.’⁴

This approach to the past distorts the central question of contemporary politics. For the issue is not to explain why, in the aftermath of a severe financial and economic crisis in the capitalist core, accompanied by a massive upward transfer of wealth by ruling centrists, blue and red, right-wing—and, in a few instances, left-wing—outsiders have come to power, but rather why these politicians have largely remained within the established framework. In short, the question is not why our contemporary politics resembles those of the 1930s, but why it does not. For this, it is necessary to take the comparison seriously, systematically contrasting the era of classical fascism—roughly, from 1922 to 1939—with the present period, in order to enable greater theoretical and political clarity about the situation today. I do so along four comparative axes: geopolitical context, economic crisis, relations of class and nation and, finally, the character of civil society and of political parties. I focus here on the Trump administration rather than generalizing for the whole spectrum of contemporary right-wing parties and leaders. As Achin Vanaik has shown for the case of India, in his comparison of Modi’s hegemony to that of Nehru,⁵ each new right needs to be carefully located in its domestic political-cultural context before they can be meaningfully aligned with each other. To situate the usual suspects in their home environments would lie beyond the scope of this article.

I. INTERWAR EUROPE

The classical fascisms that took shape in Italy and Germany would be inconceivable without the recent and interlinked experiences of

³G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, New Jersey 1997, p. 8.

⁴Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York 1963, p. 15.

⁵Achin Vanaik, ‘India’s Two Hegemonies’, *NLR* 112, July–August 2018.

inter-imperial warfare and revolutionary-socialist uprising, unfolding in a context of massive excess productive capacity, on a world scale. The Russian Revolution erupted from the devastation of the Eastern Front and then washed back across the countries of the West, setting off a wave of fraternal uprisings in Germany (1917–23), Italy (1918–20) and Hungary (1918–20) that inflected the political impact of the War and formed the immediate backdrop for the emergence of the fascist movements. It was in this context that the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD) right, Ebert and Noske, legitimized Freikorps thuggery to eliminate the revolutionary leaders. Mass anti-capitalist political parties of the left threatened to transform the interwar crisis within capitalism into a political crisis of capitalism. The strike waves and factory occupations in Italy of 1918–20 occurred under the leadership of socialists who were committed to wiping out large-scale private ownership. Similarly the German Communist Party (KPD) continued to operate as a mass organization after the defeat of the 1919 and 1923 uprisings, not least during its ultra-radical 'Third Period' after 1928; behind it, amplifying its threat to German capital, stood the Soviet state.

Wage-earners experienced the crisis of interwar Europe alternately as rampant inflation or mass unemployment. Both the classic cases of European fascism were in part reactions to this. In Italy, millions of returning war veterans faced economic desolation. Unemployed and unemployable ex-soldiers were a prominent feature of the fascist squads which, in addition to destroying socialist organizations with their punitive expeditions, also led land and factory occupations and promised work.⁶ The economic context of the rise of the NSDAP differed from that of the PNF in Italy. Germany was in a deflationary spiral after 1930, not an inflationary one as was the case in post-war Italy. However, the underlying problem that Germany faced in 1930 was not entirely different from Italy in 1920: the country had an overbuilt industrial sector attempting to compete in an overcrowded and tariff-divided world market, and lacking a sufficient base in domestic demand. Although the

⁶ Angelo Tasca, *Nascita e avvento del fascismo*, Milan 2012, p. 542 drew a parallel between 'The socialist leaders who did not understand the veterans of 1919–22 and the German union leaders who did not understand the unemployed of 1929–32.' The war had removed the possibility of migration which was of major importance in managing structural unemployment in pre-war Italy. Thus Tasca, p. 17: 'The traditional emigration outlets to which in 1913 almost 900,000 workers and above all peasants without land had channeled themselves, were closing ever more.'

Weimar Republic survived its post-war readjustment, it knew only a few years of relative economic stability, between 1924 and 1928, before Germany was hit by the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing mass unemployment. Here, as in Italy, a large part of fascism's appeal lay in its promise to address the problem of joblessness.⁷

Global overcapacity had first emerged in the late nineteenth century with the onset of the Long Depression of 1873–96, as dynamic new manufacturing powers—above all, Germany and the US—entered the world market. The First World War, which was highly destructive of human life, but not of fixed capital, only intensified these problems. By the 1920s European economies were saddled with large amounts of old plant and equipment, in addition to expanding new industries. Rather than shifting out of old lines of production, capitalists fought to defend their existing investments via price wars or tariffs, in conditions of sagging profits, money-printing and unemployment.⁸ In Italy specifically, wartime investment brought an enormous expansion in productive capacity in steel, auto and aircraft, which far outstripped either domestic or international demand for such products after 1918.⁹ Italian governments' first reaction to this problem was to extend easy credit terms to industrialists, leading to inflation and speculation. Excess capacity was equally severe in agriculture. During the War, non-belligerents had increased their food exports, but by the late 1920s the former combatant countries were returning to production, thereby driving down agricultural prices, leading to rising rural indebtedness and depressed demand.¹⁰

The First World War thus exacerbated the problems of overcapacity that had helped set the dynamics of inter-imperialist rivalry in motion. In addition, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the newly

⁷ Hitler's first radio address after his appointment as Chancellor contained the promise of overcoming unemployment. See Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, New York 2006, p. 37.

⁸ For the basic logic of this argument see Robert Brenner, 'The Economics of Global Turbulence', *NLR* 229, May–June 1998, pp. 26–9.

⁹ Vera Zamagni, *The Economic History of Italy: 1860–1990*, New York 1993, pp. 223–7. See also Franklin Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism: The Political Development of the Industrial Bourgeoisie*, New York 1995, p. 162.

¹⁰ For a good account of this see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Volume 3: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945*, New York 2012, p. 217.

independent republics threw up a series of tariff barriers across central Europe, while the Russian Revolution removed a large potential market at a stroke.¹¹ In Italy and Germany, markets were constricted by a specific combination of elements. After a furious process of capitalist development, their steel, chemical and electrical industries were more 'advanced' by the 1920s than those of the United Kingdom. But alongside these highly productive pockets there persisted large tails of pre-capitalist agriculture, which could not consume industrial output at a sufficient level. This increased the impatience of a bellicose dominant class, particularly in heavy industry, which wanted colonies to shore up a monopolistic position abroad, while depending on military budgets to make up for weak domestic demand and saturated foreign markets.

Imperialist dynamics

Consequently, a revisionist form of imperialism was a central feature of the classical fascist regimes. Both in Germany and Italy, these were oriented to overturning a geopolitical order that was organized against the perceived and real interests of the dominant classes they largely represented. Germany, in particular, felt trapped by the geopolitical system after Versailles.¹² Aggressive imperial expansion, articulated by Hitler in strikingly concrete terms already in the 1920s, fitted well with the interests and outlook of important sections of the German ruling class, above all the Army. As Arno Mayer pointed out, 'not a single German general took exception to the proposed invasion and conquest of Russia.'¹³ There was a field of compatibility between Nazi and conservative geopolitical ideas. Italian fascist imperialism was a somewhat different

¹¹ Alex Anievas, *Capital, the State and War: Class Conflict and Geopolitics in the Thirty Years' Crisis, 1914–1945*, Ann Arbor, MI 2014, p. 20; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Volume 3*, p. 218; Arno Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The 'Final Solution' in History*, New York 1989, p. 7; Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, New York 1941, p. 18.

¹² Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, London 1974, p. 17. Here Poulantzas writes, 'he who does not wish to discuss imperialism should also stay silent on the subject of fascism'. Franz Neumann interprets 'the fundamental goal of National Socialism' as 'the resolution by imperialistic war of the discrepancy between the potentialities of Germany's industrial apparatus and the actuality that existed and continues to exist': Neumann, *Behemoth*, p. 38.

¹³ Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?*, p. 203.

phenomenon: much of northern industry (with the exception of the war-time heavy manufacturing described above), which was concentrated in high-value consumer goods, was supportive of international cooperation and free trade. Nevertheless, like Germany, Italy was a geopolitically revisionist power, seeking its 'place in the sun'. The possession of an empire had become the key attribute of a great power. Imperialism was a powerful ideological tool for winning over mass support, in addition to any economic rationale. Italian imperialism was largely a 'prestige' project, at the price of some half a million Ethiopians killed in the invasion of Abyssinia. Although expansionism of this sort had a slimmer objective foundation in the structure of Italy's social elite than its German counterpart, the declaration of an Italian 'Empire' in 1936 brought great popularity to Mussolini.

The imperialist goal of geopolitical revision lent the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy a dynamism and policy-making coherence they would otherwise have lacked. The centrality of war preparation lay behind their most innovative features, including Mussolini's Balilla brigades and his demographic programme. The experimentalism of Nazi economic policy was not an abstract application of Keynesian ideas but a tool for imperialist aggression, closely tied to efforts to secure supplies of raw materials and guarantee markets for the burgeoning, state-sponsored arms industry. Fascist societies unquestionably remained capitalist societies: the basic idea was to underwrite private ownership, while using finance to steer the economy in the desired direction.¹⁴ Elements of planning often went together with a strengthening of private business. The establishment of compulsory cartels for all branches of German industry in the 1930s was, for example, an attempt to use the power of the state to protect existing industries from problems of excess capacity.¹⁵ In this context, and faced with competition from the anti-capitalist left, these regimes were willing to adopt pragmatic economic solutions that

¹⁴ Giuseppe Bottai, *Esperienza corporativa (1929–1934)*, Rome 1934, pp. 144, 152 ff. On the first of these pages Bottai suggests that the state should 'orient' and 'guide' economic activity; on the second he emphasizes the 'exceptional character' of state intervention.

¹⁵ See Neumann, *Behemoth*, p. 266. Roland Sarti comments: 'By the Second World War, the industrialists were more entrenched in the economic and social system than they were when fascism came to power.' *Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy*, Berkeley 1971, p. 2.

broke sharply with preceding orthodoxy. In Germany, the contrast with the austerity policies imposed by Brüning in 1930, with the backing of the SPD, was particularly marked. It allowed the NSDAP to present itself as a true alternative to the economic hardships of liberalism under the Weimar Republic. In Italy, economic policy was more ambiguous. One of Mussolini's first acts, under the impetus of the dour conservative liberal Alberto De Stefani, was to cut state employment.¹⁶ But later, the fascist government was more than willing to spend on public works and job-creation schemes, adopting a corporatist phraseology to justify these efforts. During the Great Depression, the Istituto per Ricostruzione Industriale transferred business losses to the state by buying up industrial shares held by Italian banks.¹⁷ But the ultimate stimulus for both the Italian and German regimes was the war economy; military spending was the key to domestic recovery.

Party, class and nation

In terms of class and party, the classic cases of interwar fascism reversed the course of political development that Marx had set out in *The Communist Manifesto*. Here, the bourgeoisie is the first class to establish mass political organizations and the working class 'learns' from it, as both classes struggle against the old order. The unification of the workers would be 'a consequence of the unity of the bourgeoisie, which must set the whole proletariat in motion in order to achieve its own political purposes'.¹⁸ Marx's argument rested on a stylized story based on his understanding of English and French developments. But such an alliance would rarely be seen after 1848. In Germany and Italy, it was the proletariat that taught political organization to the bourgeoisie; both countries had generated impressive socialist parties by the late nineteenth century. In Germany the SPD, founded in 1875, was by far the most important mass-political organization in the country by 1912. In Italy the PSI was regarded as a 'state within a state', drawing its members into inner-party deliberations at party congresses and undertaking intense efforts at political education.

¹⁶ Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello stato totalitario*, Turin 1995, pp. 10–11.

¹⁷ Alberto Aquarone, 'Italy: The Crisis and Corporative Economy', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1969, p. 46.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in Terrell Carver, ed., *Marx: Later Political Writings*, Cambridge 1996, p. 9.

This was in sharp contrast to Britain and the United States, where mass pro-capitalist parties dominated the stage.¹⁹ The Italian and German bourgeoisies lacked comparable party organizations. Their political representatives in the late nineteenth century were organized either as cliques of notables—the followers of Giolitti in Italy, the National Liberals in Germany—or as pressure groups: the Italian Nationalists, the Navy League, the Defence League, the Pan-German League. Missing in both cases was a pro-capitalist party capable of garnering mass support. As Togliatti put the point for pre-WWI Italy: ‘The bourgeoisie never had strong, unified, political organizations in a party form.’²⁰ The fascist movements would provide them.

The mass party was intrinsic to interwar fascism. Without it, neither Mussolini nor Hitler would have been able to stabilize their control. Given the political strength of the working class, and its party’s penetration of civil society, a personalistic dictatorship on the Bonapartist model could not generate a sustainable structure of rule.²¹ The mass base of the fascist parties welded together a coalition of salaried employees and small shopkeepers, a segment of the working class and a considerable number of petty agrarian direct producers in a paramilitary formation, organized on a nationalist basis against international socialism.

¹⁹ Pace Geoff Eley, who argued that ‘the modern mass party, which became the prevailing model of political mobilization between the 1890s and the 1960s, was invented by socialists in the last third of the nineteenth century’—neglecting the major capitalist parties of the Anglophone world. See *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe 1850–2000*, New York 2000, p. 25. For the role of the PSI in Italy see Maurizio Ridolfi, *Il PSI e la nascita del partito di massa: 1892–1922*, Bari 1992, p. 46.

²⁰ Palmiro Togliatti, *Corso sugli avversari. Le lezioni sul fascismo*, Turin 2010, p. 39. This was a lecture delivered in 1935 to members of the Communist International.

²¹ Trotsky, who initially classified fascism as a type of Bonapartism, was aware of the difference: ‘In the epoch of imperialist decline a pure Bonapartist Bonapartism is completely inadequate; imperialism finds it indispensable to mobilize the petty bourgeoisie and to crush the proletariat under its weight’: ‘Bonapartism, Fascism and War’ [1940], in Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, New York 2001, p. 518. Gramsci seems to have had a similar sense: ‘In the modern world, with its great economic-trade-union and party-political coalitions, the mechanism of the Caesarist phenomenon is very different from what it was up to the time of Napoleon III.’ *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York 1971, p. 220. This note is quite difficult to understand, however, since it seems to group together reformist governments such as Ramsay MacDonald’s with Mussolini’s early years in power.

Two elements of this interwar fascist coalition are worth emphasizing. The first was its relative success in appealing to the growing strata of white-collar professionals: the so-called ‘new petty bourgeoisie’, very much including women as mothers and wives. In Germany and Italy, these layers—the product of national bureaucracies and systems of education, grouped on a national basis by their professional and interest associations, or making up the lower ranks of the officer corps—were basically supportive of national-imperialist projects, and profoundly hostile to internationalism. (In Britain and France, these layers could be more open to international institutions such as the League of Nations, which seemed to advance the interests of their own countries as well.) A considerable part of the cadre of fascist parties was made up of these middle classes.²² The defeats of 1918–23 had weakened the socialists’ ability to lead these middle strata in a struggle for the profound renewal of state and society. As the socialists’ capacity ebbed, these groups became available for fascist mobilization. In turn, mass mobilizing for war helped to form the type of people likely to be drawn to supporting fascist ideologies and tactics, as well as creating the political environment in which fascist parties could gain elite support.

The second point to note about the fascist coalition was its relative lack of success in appealing to the core of the manufacturing working class. Despite the support of the SPD leadership—though not the PSI—for the Fatherland in World War One, nationalism had limited purchase in the industrial working classes of Italy and Germany. This was evident in the failure of the fascist left—the Strasser brothers in Germany, the revolutionary syndicalists in Italy—to win the working class to a politics of national-imperialist prestige. The collapse of these ‘left-fascist’ attempts, which might fruitfully be compared with Peronism, and deserve more careful attention than they have received, is central

²² There is a lot of theory, and very little evidence, on the social bases of interwar fascism. For Germany, because of the NSDAP’s electoral history, there is good material on voting patterns, but no good data on party membership before the seizure of power; whether voting behaviour is a good indicator of the ‘social basis’ of fascism is an important question. The best study is Thomas Childers, ‘The Social Bases of the National Socialist Vote’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1976, pp. 17–42, particularly tables 40–2. The Italian party had virtually no electoral history; however, the PNF did conduct a membership survey in 1921, which showed a massive overrepresentation of white-collar workers compared to the population as a whole: Michael Mann, *Fascists*, New York 2004, p. 377.

to understanding the subsequent course of the interwar fascisms. These were not expressions of popular nationalism within the working class itself; instead, they emerged in part as a consequence of the failure to extend nationalism to an internationalist—and internationally organized—proletariat. Thus in Italy and Germany, class and national divides reinforced one another, pitting an alliance between landlords, capitalists and the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ against an internationalist working class.²³

Ruling-class unity

The fascist movements also forged a political alliance between hitherto divided fractions of the dominant class. One line of division was between the relatively unproductive, and only partly ‘capitalist’, agrarians in the east (Germany) and south (Italy) and industrial capitalists as a whole. Another rift lay between competitive export-oriented manufacturers and the heavy industries requiring state support.²⁴ In both countries, for specific historical and cultural reasons, these class fractions could find unified form neither in a single political organization nor in a functioning system of party alternation. These splits were largely overcome under the fascist regimes, which developed tight relations with both landowners and capitalists. Fascists provided a national organization for the social elites in the form of the fascist party. In addition to their national-imperial programmes, fascist regimes pursued policies of wage repression and direct economic assistance that helped all sectors of the dominant classes prior to the outbreak of World War Two. By the

²³ For a good analysis of the working-class base of Perónismo in Argentina see David Rock, ‘Argentina, 1930–1946’, in *The Cambridge History of Latin America Volume VIII: Latin America Since 1930. Spanish South America*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 3–71. Discussing the struggles of 1944, Rock notes that Perón faced opposition from ‘ranchers’ and farmers’ associations’ but could count on ‘his trade union and working-class followers’: p. 64. For a fascinating contrast between Latin American populism and interwar European fascism see Gino Germani, *Autoritarismo, fascismo e classi sociali*, Bologna 1975, pp. 71–3. Germani had grown up in Italy and was active in the PSI; he was subsequently forced to emigrate to Argentina due to the racial laws of 1938. As a consequence, he developed a unique comparative perspective on fascism and populism. His work was unfortunately associated with ‘modernization theory’.

²⁴ David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*, Princeton 1981, pp. 9–10.

late 1930s, these regimes had excellent relationships with their respective dominant classes.

The fascist party cadre had a marked impact on the trajectory of the regimes. Emerging in the context of highly mobilized populations, their development was shaped by a dualism of 'bureaucratic' and 'prerogative' state.²⁵ In imitation of the communist parties, cadre leadership was based 'not upon universalistic intellectual knowledge, but on *commitment* to the aims and "line" of the organization and on experience of its struggles'.²⁶ Mussolini and Hitler balanced party militants pushing for a 'second revolution' against bureaucrats defending the practices of the old regime. Thus the politics of the interwar fascist governments were shaped by a tendency to incipient or actual Frondist movements, led by true believers of various sorts: Edmondo Rossoni and Roberto Farinacci would be examples in the Italian case.

These party revolts often acted as an invigorating tonic to the fascist regimes, forcing their extension into new areas. In Germany, the establishment of an NS state was partially due to pressure from the NSDAP after the March 1933 elections: the demand for posts and positions for loyal cadre largely explains the expansion of party control over economic and social life. In Italy, the final liquidation of political pluralism was a consequence of the mobilization of party activists in the wake of the Matteotti crisis. Both Mussolini and Hitler disciplined and weakened their parties with a fair degree of success. But the struggle between party and state never entirely disappeared; indeed, the duality of these regimes re-emerged as they plunged into crisis after 1941, with pressure from the party remaining a major source of 'radicalization'. In the German case, the party was the major institutional force behind the Final Solution. In Italy, it was party pressure that forced Mussolini's hand in seizing control of the unions and professional organizations.

In sum, the interwar fascist regimes were a product of inter-imperial warfare and capitalist crisis, combined with a revolutionary threat from the left. They emerged within the late-coming, second-rank powers that had been excluded from the imperialist game, where civil societies were

²⁵ Paolo Pombeni, *Demagogia e tirannide: uno studio sull'forma-partito del fascismo*, Bologna 1984, pp. 448–9.

²⁶ Göran Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When it Rules?*, London and New York 2008, p. 49.

characterized by a high degree of political mobilization, with a nationalist bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie pitted against an internationalist working class, and offered an imperialist-revisionist solution to the crisis.

2. TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICA

How do conditions in the advanced economies today compare with the interwar period? The last major geopolitical conflict, the Cold War, ended with barely a shot being fired between the two arch-antagonists and the virtually total surrender of the Soviet bloc. The United States was the unconditional victor, while the European Union absorbed swathes of new territory and cheap labour. From the Yukon to Estonia and the Danube Basin, the military forces within NATO are grouped under US command. It has no serious geopolitical rivals. Since the Cold War ended, nearly two decades of asymmetrical warfare have devastated a chain of Muslim countries, but the blowback remains minimal for Washington. In place of enemies, the US security establishment invokes the phantom threat of so-called rogue regimes, which currently include North Korea and Iran, and a ubiquitous 'terrorism'. Given the scale of America's global preponderance, the rise of a regional power anywhere will grate against it, and China's unprecedented growth and size call US ownership of the Western Pacific into question. But for now the Middle Kingdom remains relatively isolated geopolitically even within its own regional sphere of influence and is hemmed in by US bases. In contrast to the paramilitary mobilizations of the interwar years, the populations of the developed world, and particularly the United States, have little tolerance for casualties among their own citizens. They are not willing to die for their country.²⁷ Since Vietnam, every American administration has made strenuous efforts to ensure the military can operate without a mass mobilization of the citizenry. Nothing would be more threatening than a draft.

In terms of the global economic situation today, there is a generic similarity with the interwar period in that excess manufacturing capacity on a world scale underlies the shift to financialization and debt-fuelled growth that were among the causes of the 2008 crisis and Great Recession. The failure of any decisive shakeout after the 1970s is one

²⁷ As Richard Lachmann's *First Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship*, forthcoming from Verso, clearly shows.

basis for the long-term stagnation that continues to drag on the advanced economies, with profitability only rising at the expense of wages.²⁸ Yet there are major differences in the political economies of the two periods. The most obvious is that the standard of living is vastly higher in the US today than in interwar Europe. Second, the bipartisan Bush–Obama response to the 2008 financial crisis was, in its own terms, partially successful. Despite the dramatic contraction in the world economy, the banking system did not melt down, thanks to the torrent of cheap money provided by the state to financial institutions, who could then lend it at much higher rates of interest than they were required to pay.²⁹ Unemployment in the US did not rise above 10 per cent, compared to 25 per cent during the Great Depression. The remnants of the post-war welfare state mitigated the effects of the crisis on the mass of the population and avoided the pro-cyclical consolidations of the 1930s. Experimental monetary policies drove up asset prices, although they failed to spark a new round of investment.³⁰

Debt and globalization

Instead, economic malaise today focuses on the ‘downsides’ of globalization—the relocation of manufacturing jobs abroad, to be replaced by growing precariousness, longer hours worked for falling real pay and rising household debt—thrown into relief by the trillion-dollar banker bailout. The personal debt-to-income ratio in the United States exploded in the run-up to 2008 and now averages around 100 per cent of household income, with huge regional variations: on the coasts and in Appalachia, debt runs at three or four times household income.³¹ In social terms, indebtedness is not a collective experience, in the way that mass unemployment is, but an intrinsically individual one: every debtor has a quantitatively specific credit score, for example, and the crisis for her or him takes the form of difficulty in paying the bills. Debt therefore tends towards an individualization, or serialization, of

²⁸ Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy*, London and New York 2002, pp. 26–7.

²⁹ For a lucid explanation of the mechanisms involved see Robin Blackburn, ‘Crisis 2.0’, NLR 72, November–December 2011, p. 38.

³⁰ David Kotz, ‘End of the Neoliberal Era?’, NLR 113, September–October 2018, p. 36.

³¹ Michael Ahn, Mike Batty and Ralf Meisenzahl, ‘Household Debt-to-Income Ratios in the Enhanced Financial Accounts’, *FEDS Notes*, 11 January 2018.

political activity. Rather than collectivizing wage-earners, it atomizes the population into what Marx famously described as ‘a sack of potatoes’.³² But ‘potatoes’ don’t make for fascism; they make for Bonapartism—rallying as individuals to a charismatic leader, rather than forming a coherent paramilitary bloc. If they are to be galvanized today, it is likely to be on the defensive basis of protectionist nationalism, rather than yet further imperial aggression.

This underlines the dramatic inversion of class–nation relations that is another contrast with the 1930s. In the US today, a pro-globalist professional layer³³ is pitted against a ‘nationalist’ white working class—a configuration that is almost the opposite to that of interwar fascism.³⁴ Classic ‘populist’ movements of the Peronist type, which are not much in evidence today, linked nationalist working classes and nationalist white-collar workers, or ‘new petty bourgeoisies’.³⁵ Fascism, in contrast, emerged in contexts in which the political leadership of the working class, the communist parties, remained internationalist, whereas the petty bourgeoisie swung to extreme nationalism. Far from being a form of populism, fascism was premised on its failure. Socialism, at least in the advanced world, has emerged where both the new professional strata and the leadership of the working class are oriented internationally: an unfortunate rarity. The contemporary new rights differ from these in attempting to mobilize a nationally oriented working class against a globally oriented ‘new petty bourgeoisie’.

A final contrast with interwar Europe concerns the realm of civil society and political parties. In place of the mass socialist organizations of 1920s Germany and Italy, the United States has two powerful capitalist parties that have dominated the political stage for over a century. Since the 1980s they have undergone an extreme ideological polarization, while continuing to share a broad set of substantive policies.

³² Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 124. Mike Davis saw the relevance of this interpretation of politics to the rise of Howard Jarvis’s Proposition 13 campaign in 1978. See *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, London and New York 2006, pp. 209–10.

³³ ‘Globalism’ is more cultural than political: a key difference between the ‘internationalism’ of the working class and that of the professionals.

³⁴ Perry Anderson, ‘Internationalism: A Breviary’, *NLR* 14, March–April 2002.

³⁵ Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London 1978, pp. 204–6.

With the partial exception of the evangelical churches, the hollowing-out of the civil-society organizations that once mobilized electoral support for these oligarchic formations has been a condition for the steady decline in voter turnout—American political culture thus reinforces the political-economic tendency to atomize the population.³⁶ On the other hand, the movements for black civil rights and women’s self-determination, while lacking formal organizational structures, have continued to renew themselves and now constitute a significant feature of the political landscape.

3. TRUMP’S ASCENDANCY

This broader context shaped the political fall-out that followed the 2008 crisis. That the Obama administration’s response to the crisis—trillion-dollar cash infusions for Wall Street, shame-faced gestures for the dispossessed—was a ticking political time-bomb was already evident in the 2010 midterm elections, when the Republicans swept the House and the Democratic Party was haemorrhaging seats in state houses across the country.³⁷ A new American left did emerge in response to the crisis, its first signs being the student protests of 2010 and the Occupy encampments of 2011; but it was smaller, weaker and slower to make itself felt, only generating national momentum with the Sanders campaign from 2015. As a consequence, the most serious political assault both on Bush’s immediate response and on Obama’s policies came from the anarcho-capitalist right. The pattern was evident from the beginning. The staunchest opponents of the notorious Troubled Asset Relief Program, which authorized the Treasury to purchase \$700 billion-worth of bad securities from the financial industry, were on the Republican right.³⁸ If the Tea Party initially emerged out of the rage created by the bail-outs, the awkward spectacle of Obama’s half-hearted Keynesianism and his incomprehensibly technocratic healthcare bill provided easy targets for it. In addition—and in comparison to the

³⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000, pp. 31–64; Rogers Brubaker, ‘Why Populism?’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2017, p. 369; Peter Mair, ‘Ruling the Void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy’, NLR 42, November–December 2006.

³⁷ Mike Davis, ‘The Last White Election?’, NLR 79, January–February 2013, pp. 36, 47.

³⁸ The vote count on the first, failed, attempt to get TARP through was 205 for, 228 against. Only 65 Republicans voted for TARP on the first round, compared to 140 Democrats: Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, New York 2018, p. 184.

student protests and Occupy—the right-wing rebellion had the advantage of easy-to-grasp solutions.

Trump's campaign for the Republican presidential nomination built on this initial politicization. Leveraging his father's slumlord fortune, and mobilizing talents honed in TV entertainment, Trump launched a vigorous attack on globalist American elites who had spent billions helping other countries—notably China—get rich. Protectionist tariffs, a border wall and a massive infrastructure programme would make America great again. Crassly 'unpresidential', he won the GOP nomination precisely because he was different from the rest. This appeal clearly resonated to some extent with today's inverted politics of class and nation. Here it would be futile to separate 'cultural' from 'economic' issues: the two are inextricably linked. To the extent that Trump's economic-nationalist agenda had a popular basis, it rested on workers and middle-class layers who had suffered from the offshoring of jobs and who feared competition from immigrants in employment, rather than welcoming them as a cheap source of labour.

Analysis of Trump's supporters before the November 2016 election suggested they were likely to lack a college degree and have slightly higher-than-median incomes; he did well among skilled blue-collar workers.³⁹ The immediate material interests of these groups in the era of globalization can plausibly be cast in nationalist terms. Trump's key move in 2016 was to combine the core Republican electorate—evangelicals; relatively affluent white, rural and suburban southern voters; a section of the Appalachian working class—with a sliver of working-class swing voters in the Upper Midwest.⁴⁰ He would be hard-pressed to retain that alliance in 2018.

³⁹ Jonathan Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell, 'Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump', *SSRN*, 15 August 2016. Although more substantial than what exists for interwar fascism, the evidence for Trump's social support is not robust, especially in terms of class analysis. There are three basic sorts of information: exit polls, in which 'education' is used as a proxy for class position; surveys which aim to correlate 'attitudes' to voting, and therefore are also dogged by the shadow of tautology; and 'ecological' analyses in which the characteristics of locales rather than individual persons are linked to voting outcomes.

⁴⁰ The best analysis of this is Mike Davis, 'The Great God Trump and the White Working Class', *Catalyst*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, which emphasizes the importance of Trump's alliance with evangelical Christians through Mike Pence, stressing also that the Upper Midwest working-class vote was to a significant extent already existing 'Reagan Democrats'.

More striking, in class terms, is Trump's hostile relationship with key sections of the American elite, in sharp contrast to the good relations the interwar fascist leaders enjoyed with their big bourgeoisies and landowners. Violating the 'norms' of capitalist democracy, @realDonaldTrump regularly singles out major US corporations—General Motors, Google, Pfizer, Amazon and Comcast, owner of NBC—for blistering attack. American business elites are divided, not only between sectoral interests competing for state largesse in a context of structural stagnation—fossil fuels versus nuclear, for example, or the health-insurance companies' defence of the massive corporate handout known as the Affordable Care Act—but over major issues of global free trade, capital flows and protectionism, given the symbiotic yet agonistic relationship between the US and a rising China. The effect of the Trump administration has been to exacerbate the deep conflicts of interest within the dominant class, rather than attempt to overcome them.

His lack of any organic connection to the class of which he is part can be seen in the collapse of Trump's 'Manufacturing Jobs Initiative', in the wake of his notorious Charlottesville comments, and in the resignation of ex-Goldmans Gary Cohn as Chairman of the National Economic Council, over the Administration's steel and aluminium tariffs.⁴¹ So, while the Stock Market seems to be doing relatively well, and tax cuts and deregulation are welcomed, there is a high level of unease within the US capitalist class about Trump. Relations with intellectuals and the media are even worse. Republican grandees like Karl Rove are openly critical of his sustained attacks on the 'fake news' corporations and his lack of support among the highly educated.

Trump's relations with the national-security intelligentsia and imperial bureaucracy have likewise been antagonistic. The President clearly views the International Relations schools and 'their' agency, the State Department, with contempt; the White House initially proposed cutting its budget by 30 per cent.⁴² There have been numerous cries of alarm from this sector about the 'precipitous drop in the standing and

⁴¹ See David Gelles et al., 'Inside the CEO Rebellion Against Trump's Advisory Councils', *NYT*, 16 August 2017, and 'Gary Cohn's Departure from White House Has Wall Street Worried', *NYT*, 7 March 2018.

⁴² Nahal Toosi, 'Tillerson Scales Back State Department Restructuring Plan', *Politico*, 7 February 2018.

influence of the United States around the world', with Trump accused of having 'denigrated and decimated' the professional civil services, in particular the State Department, CIA and FBI.⁴³ He is the only president in living memory with the temerity to make a public issue of how much US deployments in Europe and Asia cost. This has led to indignant commentary across the political spectrum, condemning the President for failing to understand the vital role that forward bases play. Indeed the State Department, with the support of the Democrats, has often been more belligerent than Trump himself, forcing him to take a harder line on Russia and the DPRK.⁴⁴

Abroad, Trump has consistently broken taboos by mixing commercial demands on allies with calls for military tribute. His avowed stance is not to overturn the international order, however, but rather to pursue an upgrade of American primacy within it. Thus there is far greater continuity in this area than might at first seem to be the case. Trump has increased the US military budget and called for a modernization of its nuclear arsenal, but these proposals are basically continuous with the previous administration. On trade, it is too soon to tell what is mere spectacle, for electoral purposes—NAFTA tweaked and rebranded: 'promise kept'—and what is hard-nosed policy. Most consequentially, the Trump administration is packed with China hawks, ratcheting up Obama's 'pivot to Asia', although Trump's jettisoning of the stalled Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) did away with an anti-China trade agreement. On the Middle East, the White House leans to the right-wing side of the bipartisan consensus, continuing Obama's support for the Saudi war on Yemen while tightening the screw on Iran. Scrapping the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a kick at his predecessor, but Obama too had threatened Tehran that 'all options are on the table',

⁴³ Respectively: Samantha Power, 'How Mike Pompeo Could Save the State Department', *NYT*, 13 March 2018; John Shattuck, Amanda Watson and Matthew McDole, 'Trump's First Year: How Resilient is Liberal Democracy in the US?', *Carroll Center for Human Rights Policy*, 2018.

⁴⁴ A member of his government notoriously penned an anonymous piece for the *New York Times* boasting that Trump 'complained for weeks about senior staff members letting him get boxed into further confrontation with Russia, and he expressed frustration that the United States continued to impose sanctions on the country for its malign behaviour. But his national security team knew better—such actions had to be taken, to hold Moscow accountable': Anonymous, 'I am Part of the Resistance inside the Trump Administration', *NYT*, 5 September 2018.

waging cyber warfare against the regime and attempting to strangle the Iranian economy.

At home, the standard Republican economic policy of tax cuts and de-regulation has been embellished by executive tariffs and re-negotiated trade deals. Trump's Cabinet combines conventional GOP personnel with a scattering of wild-card appointments. Republican Party loyalists occupy State, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Energy, Labor, Transportation, Interior, Agriculture, Veterans' Affairs and the Office of Management and Budget. The CIA is in the hands of a thirty-year career veteran. Treasury is, as is usual, in the hands of a Goldman Sachs guy. Defense is under the control of a career general. This leaves neurosurgeon and lifestyle guru Ben Carson at Housing and Urban Development, billionaire evangelical Betsy DeVos at Education, distressed-company speculator Wilbur Ross at Commerce and coal-lobbyist Andrew Wheeler at the EPA. These agencies are the ones most directly concerned with the welfare of the mass of the population and are, accordingly, relatively marginal to the central concerns of American capitalism. The programmes pursued here are hardly in contradiction with conservative goals: undermining the Fair Housing Act (Carson), support for for-profit colleges and predatory school loans (DeVos), distorting the census count (Ross), denying climate change, deregulating fracking and pulling out of the Paris Accord (Wheeler). Trump is electorally dependent on the GOP's evangelical voters and has done his best to deliver for them on the Supreme Court: an agenda that any successful Republican candidate would have pursued.

Trump's style of leadership is certainly norm-breaking: his disregard for the hallowed gravitas of the presidential office and overt insistence on personal loyalty; his show of policy-making on the hoof, direct to his 56 million Twitter followers; his racist messaging and general boorishness.⁴⁵ But his struggles with the civil service are largely personal—matters of autocratic management—and have nothing in common with the cadre radicalization that helped shape the interwar fascist regimes, for Trump has no cadre organization at his command. The product of a political

⁴⁵ On Trump's upbringing and personal formation, see Sidney Blumenthal, 'A Short History of the Trump Family', *LRB*, 16 February 2017. For a rare defence of his behaviour in office, see Charles Kesler, 'Breaking Norms Will Renew Democracy, Not Ruin It', *NYT*, 23 August 2018.

culture dominated by money and spectacle, he has fastened his star to the GOP and his Administration is to a large extent its creature.

4. PATRIMONIAL MISFIT

But if ‘fascism’, however qualified, is a misleading category for grasping this presidency, what is a better conceptual approach? Here it may be useful to recall Weber’s three forms of rule, each with its own apparatus of domination and logic of legitimation: the charismatic, the patrimonial and the bureaucratic. Where Trump has had room to determine the character of the Executive, he has operated less as a modern-bureaucratic party leader than as a patrimonial household head. In Weber’s description:

The patrimonial office lacks above all the bureaucratic separation of the ‘private’ and the ‘official’ sphere. For the political administration, too, is treated as a purely personal affair of the ruler, and political power is considered part of his personal property, which can be exploited by means of contributions and fees.⁴⁶

Yet patrimonialism, in this understanding of it—government run as a household, with little if any distinction between the public and private interests of the ruler, whose favours secure the allegiance of dependents and followers—was a form of rule designed for pre-modern, pre-capitalist societies, in which the ideological weight of ‘tradition’ could suffice to legitimate the process of domination. In the later Roman Empire and medieval Europe, this system could organize entire realms. Trump’s notion of government is precisely patrimonial, in this sense. For him, the relationship of the staff to the leader is not an impersonal commitment to the office of state but ‘a servant’s loyalty, based on a strictly personal relationship’.⁴⁷ In short, it is familial. Bonds of purely personal loyalty bind the seedy milieu of lumpen-millionaires (Ross and Kushner inside the Administration, Thomas Barrack outside) and hangers-on of various sorts (Miller, Whitaker) to Trump. Yet he is practising this style of rule at the head of a modern capitalist state. This is an inherently paradoxical combination.

⁴⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology* II, Berkeley 1978, pp. 1028–9.

⁴⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 1030–1.

Trump's election has inserted this patrimonial structure like a foreign body within the massive legal-rational American bureaucratic state, creating serious problems of rule. One issue is that Trump's patrimonial network is simply too small to staff federal agencies with people who are both minimally competent and meet the desired standard of loyalty. The high turnover rate—a third of the most influential personnel in the Executive Office of the President had to be replaced in the first year—is a symptom of this misfit.⁴⁸ The Trump administration's slowness in filling leadership positions in the federal bureaucracy might seem like standard Republican strategy to undermine the agencies, but is more likely due to Trump's distant relationship to the Republican Party and the smallness of his own network.

A second problem is the active resistance of the legal-rational state to the patrimonial household. Commentators often present the conflict between Trump and the bureaucracy as one between an authoritarian president and bearers of 'democratic norms'.⁴⁹ But Comey (author of a memorandum approving thirteen forms of torture under the Bush administration), Mueller (staunch defender of secret mass surveillance), Wray (who worked under Comey when he was providing legal justifications for torture), and Rosenstein (an assiduous leak plumber) have, at best, a dubious commitment to democracy or even the constitution, insofar as it signals the protection of individual rights. If anything, their orientation is to legality, in the narrow sense of written rules as the basis for legitimate action; bureaucratic officials, unlike patrimonial table-companions, are supposed to view their activities as the fulfilment of a duty to the office, not to the person.⁵⁰ Trump's accession to the White House has thus unleashed a titanic struggle between contrasting structures of domination, embodied most obviously in the Mueller investigation. This grinding conflict is an obvious limit on the Administration's agenda. It means that, in practice, the patrimonialism cannot be complete.

Limited attraction

Moreover, while Trump's style of rule may be patrimonial, its legitimacy clearly cannot depend upon the weight of tradition—the symbolic

⁴⁸ Kathryn Dunn Tenpas et al., 'Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration', *Brookings*, 7 November 2018.

⁴⁹ Among numerous examples, see Steven Livitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future*, New York 2018, p. 99.

⁵⁰ *Economy and Society*, p. 959.

power of the eternal yesterday; nor is it legal-rational. It can only be charismatic. This is a second contradiction, since the patrimonial ruler doesn't require charisma, which in pre-modern societies is typically an attribute of prophets, not rulers. Trump's version of charisma derives from his capacity to speak a language that—however often he utters patent falsehoods—sounds far closer to ordinary, unvarnished home truths than the rote phrases and official euphemisms of every other politician in sight. Another speciality is the way he breaks with the boring routines of official power: ripping up speeches, insulting foreign dignitaries, calling out the Bush family as a collection of mediocrities and so on. His appeal is that of the taboo-breaker—if, certainly, with a macho swagger.⁵¹

But charisma has to be transmitted. There are two ways this can be done: through an organization—a movement, or party: typically the modern form—or through media of one kind or another, typically the postmodern form. Fox and Twitter, plus assorted websites of the right, provide this projection downwards to the population in the case of Trump. The result resembles Marx's description in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of Louis Napoleon's hold on an atomized French peasantry. But if that was perhaps the earliest example of charisma without mass organization, it was transmitted not through mass media but by 'legend'—the memory of Napoleon I, as consolidator of the Revolution that distributed lands to the peasants, borrowed by the unimpressive person of his nephew. Today, charismatic leadership polarizes a serialized public via the media, along the lines of Sartre's description of a bus-queue: the unity of Trump's supporters consists in the image of Trump, just as the unity of those queueing consists in the bus for which they wait. But this is a standard postmodern format, exemplified by Obama and Berlusconi before Trump.⁵²

Postmodern charisma throws up yet another contradiction for a would-be patrimonial ruler. Ideally, the charismatic aura is transmitted to the staff through some sort of ideology, creating a layer of disciples who can spread the central message outward and downward. But Trump has no mechanism for this and so lacks disciples. Bannon was quickly side-lined, partly through pushback by the legal-bureaucratic state, espe-

⁵¹ See the razor-sharp analyses by David Bromwich in 'Act One, Scene One', *LRB*, 16 February 2017, and 'American Breakdown', *LRB*, 9 August 2018.

⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, London and New York 2004, p. 262.

cially its military-imperial wing—he was first ousted from the NSC—but also because Trump instinctively understood that Bannon’s intellectual pretensions were a threat to the purely personal loyalty which is the only basis for membership in the Administration. Jefferson Sessions, the closest thing to an ideologue within the Cabinet, offers another case. Sessions’s anti-immigrant fanaticism is rooted in a theory of US development over the past ninety years or so. According to him, the massive inequalities of the Gilded Age were an expression of uncontrolled immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. With the passage of the National Origins Act of 1924, the European population was assimilated, becoming a homogeneous white working and middle class—the foundation for US world power and domestic tranquility in the twentieth century.⁵³ It is remarkable that Trump forced him out because of his insufficient loyalty, replacing him with the hapless and apparently idea-less Matthew Whitaker. This frustrated patrimonialism expresses itself in the mixture of slavish public fealty and rampant leaking and back-biting that characterizes the Administration’s inner circle.

The combination of a charismatic leader ruling in patrimonial fashion over a legal-rational bureaucratic state, in a political system that is largely oligarchic, within its democratic forms, is constitutively—and manifoldly—contradictory. Trump’s incoherence as a ruler is thus not just, though also, a temperamental failing. It is a structural effect of the kind of figure he cuts, presiding over the kind of political-cultural order that is postmodern America. The extreme form of hybridity he embodies suggests that it is futile to assign to him any general classification like fascism, authoritarianism or populism, even though he may exhibit traits of at least the third, if not the second—as well as nationalism, racism and sexism. Flukey in origin, this form of rule is too unstable a compound to have much staying power. There is no Trumpian ideology or ‘cause’ to which loyalists might commit themselves when he leaves office. After all, the President’s own political background is firmly rooted in the New York Democratic machine.

⁵³ Adam Serwer, ‘Jeff Sessions’s Unqualified Praise for a 1924 Immigration Law’, *Atlantic*, 10 January 2017. Serwer quotes a Breitbart News interview from 2015 where Sessions said, ‘Some people think we’ve always had these numbers [of immigrants], and it’s not so, it’s very unusual, it’s a radical change. When the numbers reached about this high in 1924, the President and Congress changed the policy, and it slowed down immigration significantly, we then assimilated through to 1965 and created really the solid middle class of America, with assimilated immigrants, and it was good for America.’

The 2018 midterm elections underscored this weakness. Even with the advantages of, in relative terms, an extraordinarily favourable economic climate and the staggering gerrymandering of electoral districts by the GOP, the midterms showed a sharp swing away from Trump in the crucial Upper Midwest—Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania—and severe erosion of his support in Arizona and Texas. Over 60 million voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates, against approximately 50 million for the Republicans. Women voted against Trump by 19 points; his 2016 advantage among white women has disappeared. Young voters and Hispanics turned out in record numbers for a midterm, and 18–29 year-olds broke Democrat by 35 points. Democrats recaptured the House on the basis of strong gains in the suburbs, where the great majority of Americans live, and won independent voters by a 12-point margin. GOP dominance in the sparsely populated rural states gives them an advantage in the Senate and Electoral College, and Trump’s backing—and his Twitter fusillades against Central American migrants—may have helped Republican candidates in Indiana and North Dakota. But they were a disaster in most swing states and suburban congressional districts.⁵⁴

5. PROSPECTS

The political logic of pinning the ‘fascist’ label on Trump is plain enough. It means uniting behind the programme of the present Democratic leadership—Pelosi, Schumer, the Clintons, the Obamas and other superintendents of the oligarchic order; the very project that gave Trump the White House in 2016. Yet their ‘moderate’ strategy suffered stunning defeats this November in Indiana, North Dakota and Missouri, while more radical candidates for governor in Georgia and Florida did well enough to produce contested results. Democrats lost non-college-educated white men by 34 percentage points in the midterms, but there are indications that an egalitarian, pro-working-class politics might be able to break through this wall.⁵⁵ The remarkable teachers’ strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky and Oklahoma, plus successful ballot initiatives for the restoration of voting rights to felons in Florida—arguably the most important victory of 2018—and extending Medicaid in Idaho and

⁵⁴ Nate Silver, ‘Trump’s Base Isn’t Enough’, *FiveThirtyEight*, 20 November 2018; Geoffrey Skelley, ‘The Suburbs—All Kinds of Suburbs—Deliver the House to Democrats’, *FiveThirtyEight*, 8 November 2018.

⁵⁵ Alec Tyson, ‘The 2018 Midterm Vote: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education’, Pew Research Center, 8 November 2018.

Nebraska, along with the fact that Sanders remains the most popular politician in the country, all point to the possibility of a radical coalition that might span the rural-urban divide. But this calls for consistent criticism of the big-money politics and financial-sector dominance to which the neo-liberal wing of the Democratic Party is firmly allied. The welcome election of DSAers to the House—and of unprecedented numbers of women and underrepresented minorities—will have little effect on the country if they do no more than serve as foot soldiers for Pelosi.

The logic of what was once called popular frontism can be seen most clearly where it is resisted. Thus John Bellamy Foster, a spirited defender of the ‘Trump as neo-fascist’ thesis, argues that ‘The old Popular Front strategy of the left uniting with establishment liberalism is only practical to a limited extent in certain areas’, among them protecting ‘basic political rights’ such as ‘the separation of powers and constitutional freedoms’.⁵⁶ Of course the defence of basic civil and political rights is an important task for the US left. But does this mean defending an imperial presidency, superordinate Senate-appointed federal judiciary and first-past-the-post electoral system, rigged by the two dominant parties, as specified by the separation of powers and the Constitution? The American state as currently configured is one of the clearest exemplars of what Luciano Canfora calls the mixed system: ‘a little democracy, and a great deal of oligarchy’.⁵⁷ In response to the right’s call for a new constitutional convention—which ought to be welcomed, rather than greeted with horror—the left should put forward its own political vision: proportional representation in multi-member districts; a directly elected unitary chamber to which the executive, the central bank and the judiciary should be ultimately accountable; the abolition of the FBI, the CIA and the Department of ‘Homeland Security’.

One merit of the present Administration is that, despite his own lack of ideological coherence, Trump politicizes everything, thereby undermining the fiction of technocratic consensus and rule-bound behaviour. There is no real parallel to his open attacks on the Department of Justice, the courts and the security apparatuses, to say nothing of his rejection of the idea that structures such as NATO, NAFTA and the WTO, for example, are non-political. This pervasive politicization of the institutions and treaties

⁵⁶ *Trump in the White House*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*, Oxford 2006, p. 216.

of the neo-liberal state may have unintended consequences. In the 2018 congressional elections, there is no doubt that Trump bore much responsibility for a result unprecedented over the past fifty years—a 49 per cent turnout in a midterm. In this basic sense, Trump’s ascendancy has not resulted in the erosion of American democracy, but rather acted as a shot of adrenaline to a moribund system. Can the left succeed in turning this new terrain to its advantage? The US electoral system remains one of the most undemocratic in the advanced-capitalist world, with unaccountable courts, arbitrary executive power, gerrymandered districts and outright voter suppression to shore up the winner-takes-all system. The Senate operates increasingly like the Bundesrat in Imperial Germany. The one advance is that these structures are more frequently discussed in the mainstream press for what they are: obstacles to democracy. The hour is late and the stakes are high; but bad historical analogies will not aid in dealing with the present crisis.