Anti-oligarchy as anti-fascism

Neil Warner

Progressive responses to the rise of the far right have often been confused due to a tendency to overemphasise its distinctiveness from the status quo. Neil Warner writes that the most effective responses, both now and historically, have instead emphasised the presence of authoritarianism within the pre-existing economic and social systems from which the far-right emerges.

The 'crisis of neoliberalism' and the crisis of progressive politics

In an atmosphere of general confusion about how to respond to the second Trump administration, one section of the left seems to have a clearer idea than the rest. The 'Fighting Oligarchy Tour', led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, has galvanised opposition in a series of rallies that have drawn large crowds around the US. As the name suggests, this tour emphasises resistance not only to the Trump administration but to deeper inegalitarian structures that it sees as inescapably connected to Trumpian politics.

Helpfully amplified by the enthusiasm prominent billionaires have shown for the second Trump administration, the tour echoes many left-wing populist ideas of the past fifteen years, but with a twist. 'Left-wing populism' has been presented as an alternative to 'right-wing populism', as a way of pursuing an agenda that defines itself by opposition to elites while rejecting the attacks on more dominated 'others' that define the right. For left-wing populists, however, this

enemy elite has generally been treated as separate from the far right itself, which is seen more as a competitor for general populist sentiments arising out of frustration with the capitalist system. The Fighting Oligarchy Tour, by contrast, recognises these enemies as one and the same: far-right government is an amplification of the rule by and for the rich that characterised the neoliberal era, and an expansion of anti-democratic social and economic practices into the broader political sphere.

This is an approach that progressives elsewhere can learn from. It draws on a powerful set of political traditions to resolve tensions in much progressive messaging about the far right. It also makes sense both in terms of coalition formation and for challenging the structural inequalities that enable the far right.

A crisis of neoliberalism and a crisis of direction for progressives

The rise of Trump and associated 'anti-globalist' right-wing politics appears as part of a wider crisis for neoliberal ideas and regimes. Policies associated with some of the 'populist right', including rejection of free trade and challenges to the political insulation of central banks, represent one form of a wider turn against neoliberal ideas about limiting state interventions and expanding market logics. By implication, this crisis of neoliberalism has meant a crisis of meaning for a large strand of progressive politics that, over several decades, came to define itself through opposition to neoliberalism. It has become harder to define the antagonist that progressive politics is targeting.

Many responses to this crisis of meaning have been confused. Some emphasise how the far right is a dangerous and aberrant new development, a threat to stability and democracy that requires a coalition against it to protect liberal and democratic norms. Other responses have sought to downplay the novelty of the far-right threat and emphasise the opportunities for the left that come from an apparent crisis in global capitalism. Even while arguing that right-wing populism is a false and dangerous alternative to neoliberalism, this second camp emphasise the extent to which its popularity illustrates the bankruptcy of that system. Both approaches are characterised by an emphasis on the difference between the far right and the neoliberal 'status quo'.

The dominant approach of the current Labour government encapsulates the first approach. Labour under Starmer is encumbered, among many other things, by a sense that it has a mission to defend rather than confront the status quo. This is encapsulated in reports of a planned message that, contrary to claims by Farage, 'Britain is not broken'.[1] There is also a continued emphasis, intermittently expressed but less plausibly practiced, on 'delivery' through better public services and economic growth, which downplays deeper barriers to 'delivery'. This

comes together with a reinforcement of the authoritarian and racist contexts that fuel far right ideas, including anti-migrant rhetoric and measures such as the suppression of Palestine Action. Behind all of this is a general attitude that neglects structural connections between the current status quo and the far right and treats both Trump and Reform as aberrations to survive.

On the other hand, many people to the left of Labour, frequently make a different mistake, one nevertheless connected to the same basic flaw in analysis. Here, the focus of attack remains the neoliberal system as classically understood. Neoliberalism is presented as implicated in right-wing populism, but primarily indirectly, by driving the frustrations and alienation that right-wing populists manipulate. There continues to be an implicit assumption that the 'capitalist establishment' is something separate from the far right. This can be seen in claims made recently by James Schneider, when promoting the new party launched by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana, that the 'the capitalist onslaught' is 'beginning to stall'.[2]

Often enough, these two responses come from the same people. The Biden administration and Harris campaign, for example, moved between messaging that toyed with economic populism and messaging about the dangers that Trump posed to the political and economic status quo. This combination creates something disjointed: simultaneously emphasising the threat that the far right poses to the status quo while also pointing to the problems with that status quo.

Approaches such as the Fighting Oligarchy Tour emphasise a different logic: Trump reflects the plutocratic status quo and is especially dangerous because of that. In making this case, they also echo important progressive anti-fascist traditions.

Fighting oligarchy and fascism then and now

The tour also has an emphasis on returning to the New Deal 'roots' of the Democratic Party, when a progressive coalition under Franklin D. Roosevelt turned the US government in a more interventionist and pro-labour direction in response to the Great Depression. This has long been a staple of the Democratic left, but it feels unusually appropriate for the current era. New Deal liberalism was built partly in response to the threat of fascism, and among many members of its coalition there was an understanding that the authoritarianism they confronted could be seen in many forms and places. Union leaders and organisers saw themselves as in a fight against 'industrial autocracy', which was connected to the political autocracy that threatened the US and that had crushed workers in Italy and Germany.[3] Various Black antifascist writers and campaigners identified the fascist nature of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow regimes, and

used analogies to European fascism to enhance understandings of, and campaigns against, both.[4]

With the New Deal, these comparisons were combined with a concerted programme of action in response to economic depression. In the process, the New Deal coalition responded to the fascist claims that democratic government was muddled and ineffective by associating it with the industrial autocracy that opposed their actions. In this reading, authoritarianism was not a more practical and efficient alternative to the muddles of political democracy, but a pre-existing social force that was a barrier to the effective and positive democratic programmes of the Roosevelt administration and its allies.

The same tendencies could be seen internationally, particularly through the 'Popular Front' anti-fascist coalitions that formed from 1935. As Tom Buchanan has shown, the ideas of European anti-fascist Popular Front coalitions were based around a defence of 'democracy' that emphasised the defence of political forms of democracy meant expanding it to the economic realm.[5] Buchanan also quotes the trade union leader Arthur Horner as describing the situation of Welsh coal mining as having 'every characteristic of Fascism … No free trade unions, victimisation, harder work for lower wages, imprisonment and ruthless brutality'.[6] These were understandings of democracy and anti-fascism that still tended to neglect European imperialism, but anti-imperialists in Europe's colonies also emphasised that anti-fascist expansion of democracy meant anti-imperialism and pointed to connections between metropolitan European fascism and the fascist characteristics of European colonialism.[7]

These connections helped Popular Front anti-fascists to support a movement that was quite coherently both a defence of and an attack on the existing liberal order. They also involved descriptions of 'fascism' that would be rejected by most scholarly definitions. Contrary to arguments that broad designations of fascism undermine opposition to 'true fascism', Popular Front anti-fascists often identified fascism everywhere, and conflated 'fascism' and other forms of 'authoritarianism'. This could sometimes lead in dangerous or counter-productive directions. While Communists moved past their previous description of Social Democrats as 'social fascists', they still presented anti-Trotskyism as 'anti-fascism'. The Roosevelt administration had also been described as 'fascist', with some evidentiary basis given its penchant for state-led corporatism and acceptance of Jim Crow segregation.[8] However, the interchangeable references to different manifestations of political and economic autocracy had the effect of connecting a broad range of experiences to the same movement. These analogies emphasised the authoritarianism of existing systems by connecting them to fascist politics, but they also made fascism more easily graspable in concrete terms.

Fascism at different scales

This question of terminology has clear echoes with debates about how to describe Trump and the contemporary far right. Beyond problems connected to politically-distracting semantics and the technicalities of historic specificity, these debates frequently revolve around the question of how extreme and unusual these politics are compared to pre-existing practices. [9] Given this, the most helpful descriptions of fascism for current contexts are often those that emphasise a family of fascistic practices that are differentially applied and exist along a spectrum.

As Alberto Toscano argues in his theorisation of 'late fascism', fascism is more effectively understood as a 'process and potential'.[10] The development of fascist political regimes builds upon pre-existing 'emergent' fascistic tendencies. This builds on arguments made in Black radical interpretations of fascism that go against what Anna Duensing calls 'essentialist readings of fascism' by pointing to the fascistic treatment of racialised groups within liberal democratic systems.[11] Another tradition has used Felix Guattari's concept of 'microfascism' to emphasise how the macro-level appeal of fascism builds on everyday orientations to what Jack Bratich describes as the 'subjective sovereignty' and 'eliminationism' that arise from structures of patriarchy and racial domination.[12] Some arguments that emphasise everyday fascistic tendencies can be counterproductive, designating everything as fascist to the point that nothing is. But there is no need to interpret them in this way. As summarised by Christian Fuchs, in an account of Henry Giroux's description of Trumpism as 'neoliberal fascism', 'fascism can exist at the level of individual character, ideology, institutions, or society as a whole, but fascism on one of these levels is a necessary foundation but not a sufficient condition for fascism on the next'.[13]

The current Trump project, and far-right movement more generally, apply to a wider political realm the authoritarian ideas and systems that already exist in parts of the state and in society. In part, this involves taking authoritarian practices that already existed in, for example, border regimes, and extending them to a much broader set of targets and areas. However, it also seeks to apply to the political system the ideologies and power concentrations that neoliberalism has encouraged 'outside of' the state.

These analogies between political structures and more micro- or meso-level social contexts are already being made by members of the Trump coalition. Peter Thiel and writers such as Curtis Yarvin advocate for a government based on what Yarvin refers to as a 'CEO-monarch', presenting the authoritarianism of business ownership as an explicit model.[14] Trump himself built much of his image on the model of himself as a businessman who gets things done through his 'dictator'-like authority. This connects with the ethos of 'entrepreneurship', which

Joseph Schumpeter associated with 'the dream and the will to found a private kingdom, usually…a dynasty'.[15] Such ideas provide a basis for the 'family capitalist' coalition, 'from the smallest of family businesses to the most rambling of dynasties', that Melinda Cooper has emphasised as central to the Trump movement.[16] As work by Vladimir Bortun and others points out, most European far right parties are also strongly influenced by coalitions of nationally-oriented capitalists.[17] This ethos that links big and small capitalists is, in turn, deeply interconnected with broader ideas of 'sovereign' domination over others based on whiteness, masculinity, and nationality, which provides a basis for wider far-right coalitions.

In contrast to the interwar period, these contemporary manifestations of authoritarianism are connected not so much to a crisis of capitalism, at least as an ideology, as to its exuberant hubris. Neoliberalism sought to resolve the tensions between capitalism and democracy by subordinating democracy to 'expert'-dictated rules for economic management. The practical function of this rule of experts was to bolster rawer forms of authoritarianism in the hands of capital owners at the social and economic level. This context has now enabled a revolt against 'expert'-based neoliberalism, one that is heavily influenced by a section of those capital owners and that seeks to transpose everyday authoritarian practices onto a broader political level. This does not mean that the policies of, for example, Trump are pro-capitalist in the sense that they will expand market logics or even bring greater profits, and they involve some dramatic new forms of state intervention that are also resented by influential owners of capital (though so far with remarkably little active resistance). But they build from impulses connected to the internal authoritarianism of capitalist organisations, and the resources that neoliberal capitalism provides to those in control of those organisations.

None of this negates more common observations that the broad popularity of the far right is connected to economic disorientation and alienation in combination with demands to maintain racial, gender, and citizenship-based hierarchies. But it is also neoliberalism that has led not only to that economic disorientation but to a place that gives a greater concreteness to appeals to reassert an everyday sense of power over others than to more democratically-inspired alternatives. Right-wing populism can be understood as a revolt against neoliberalism, but neoliberalism created its own gravediggers. By empowering authoritarian ecosystems and ideas that celebrated those ecosystems, it made those ecosystems and ideas the most effective forms of revolt against itself.

Building a cross-scale anti-authoritarian agenda

Right-wing authoritarianism therefore achieves much of its power by operating on a cross-scale logic. These kinds of cross-scale logics are something that

progressives have failed to pursue as effectively and from which now often seem to be in retreat. Academics such as Isabelle Ferreras and Elizabeth Anderson have pointed to analogies between political authoritarianism and the 'dictatorships' of bosses at work, but these are generally neglected in political discussions.[18] Not only is there continued inattention to the relationships between political and economic authoritarianism, but increasingly influential sections of the US Democratic and UK Labour parties, for example, now argue for greater distance from anti-racist, LGBTQ+, and feminist movements that have often provided the most effective bases for cross-scale anti-authoritarian mobilisations. This will have the effect of both reinforcing the micro- and meso-level logics that fuel the far right, and of demobilising effective coalitions against it. A more promising approach would be to pursue ideas and forms of mobilisation based around a competing cross-scale anti-authoritarian message.

Right-wing populism has always effectively been an expression of elite power . However, it is now directly associated with the most powerful government on Earth and, in Elon Musk, the richest man in the world. These are dangerous and potentially devastating alignments, but they should make the absurdity of claims to insurgency easier to expose. In turn, opposition to authoritarianism on these different scales also aligns with opposition to the international authoritarianism of the US, which is now personified in an unusually stark way through Trump.

In order to counter these forces effectively, progressive movements need an agenda that connects the political, social and economic authoritarianisms of the far right. There is good evidence for the potential of such messages. Polling by Persuasion UK suggests that the most effective political message against Reform comes from tying Nigel Farage to 'the rich, the powerful, his mates in big business'. The second most effective message was focused on tying Farage to Trump.[19]

Arguments made by parts of the left and 'soft left' of the Labour Party for different approaches to combating Reform that are based on 'popular economic dividing lines', point in a promising direction.[20] But they will be more effective if they come with an account that directly connects the authoritarian threats of the far right with the social and economic authoritarianism of everyday life. By emphasising the political implications of economic oligarchy in combination with forthright resistance to Trump, the Fighting Oligarchy Tour has also mobilised more mainstream liberals frustrated with Democratic Party apathy towards Trump. In a UK context, a comparable approach should go beyond emphasising Farage's connections to big business as a counterpoint to his false claims of an 'anti-establishment' status. It should also emphasis that the threats that Farage poses politically in the UK are connected to the authoritarianism of his economic ethos as well as to the international authoritarianism of the US as personified by Trump.

As the themes of the Fighting Oligarchy Tour and examples from interwar antifascism show, this is also an agenda that can also be understood as a form of 'deliverism'. The Fighting Oligarchy Tour is not focused simply on attacking figures such as Trump and Musk, but on campaigning for concrete programmes such as universal healthcare. In contrast to the 'deliverism' that has been inconsistently advanced within Starmer's Labour, this is a deliverism that also emphasises the power context within which such programmes are advanced and connects it to everyday power struggles as well as everyday economic needs. The far right, through its implication in economic authoritarianism, should be understood not simply as a threat to democracy but as part of the same obstacles that undermine the effectiveness of democratic government now through the structural power of capital.

The importance of linking these themes goes beyond political messaging. There should be an understanding that the more authoritarian forms of power are concentrated at the economic and social level, the greater the threat of political authoritarianism will be. This means that measures to empower workers and democratise workplaces, initiatives to challenge the power of big tech, community and other forms of democratic ownership, wealth taxes and other redistributive measures, the expansion of public ownership, and new measures to control finance should be seen not only as social and economic measures but as part of a project against political authoritarianism. The current context provides a new basis for arguing for this urgent practical political value.

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