

¿FASCISM, POPULISM OR ULTRA-RIGHT?

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The new right is very different from classical fascism, which erupted in the first half of the last century in the face of the threat of socialist revolution, in a scenario of inter-imperialist wars. That danger of a workers' insurrection against the tyranny of capitalism unified the ruling classes, which brutally defended their privileges against the workers.

Fascism was an unusual instrument, in the framework of great political actions of the wage earners and unprecedented warlike conflagrations between the main powers (Riley, 2018). For that reason, it included extreme ideological modalities of absolutization of the nation and repudiation of progress, modernity, or enlightenment.

None of those conditionings are present today. In the second decade of the 21st century, there are no glimpses of Bolshevik threats or consequent demands for immediate counterrevolution. Warlike tensions have reappeared, but without generalized wars between competitive blocs. The motivations that gave rise to classical fascism are not observed in the current situation.

PAST AND CONTEMPORARY MODALITIES

It is a frequent mistake to liken the ultra-right in vogue to its predecessors of the last century. Rather than the full-fledged fascism of that era, so far a potential proto-fascism is emerging, which could only become the preceding modality if the features of that model are generalized (Palheta, 2018).

Such a turn would imply the massification of violence, through paramilitary militias analogous to the brown gangs of the past. Hostility against minorities would be transformed into massacres, warnings against opponents would turn into assassinations and aggressive speeches would be transformed into savage actions. Such a course is a possibility, which would entail the conversion of the current formations into fascist forces.

Such a passage would also imply the abolition of the existing legal status, by means of a forceful increase in state authoritarianism. As long as the ultra-right organizations act within the institutional framework, they will maintain at most a neo-fascist profile, still far from the classic virulent modality. A totalitarian reorganization would also require drastic changes in the leadership and movements that sustain the current reactionary course.

A fascistization dynamic would require greater plebeian sustenance, more identified internal enemies, and a language of stark violence against opponents (Louçã, 2018). Such concretization would presuppose the total amputation of democracy (Davidson, 2010). Fascism is not a mere dictatorship, nor a simple authoritarian management. It introduces a political model marked by the methodical use of the stick and the consequent conformation of a totalitarian regime.

This characterization of the phenomenon centered on the political system is more accurate than the generic presentation of fascism as an epoch or an ideology of capitalism. It is also more accurate than its evaluation as a configuration counterposed to neoliberalism. These dimensions constitute, at most, complements of the political system that distinguishes fascism.

Liberals often shy away from this specific characterization, presenting fascism as a discourse or a program of violation of republican norms. With this simplified characterization they disqualify their rivals by denouncing fascists everywhere.

That magnification has been very common in the United States to justify aligning with the Democratic Party against the Republicans. With that view, Trump rejected postulating the convenience of sustaining Biden (Fraser, 2019). The same multiuse of the term fascist serves in other countries to approve alliances with the bourgeois establishment. The real battle against fascism never traveled along those paths.

But it is also true that the current ultra-right incubates the germs of fascism. For that reason it is not sensible to avoid the qualifier, arguing the absence of the missing links to complete that status. It is never irrelevant to denounce reactionary currents, which can push society into the monstrous scenario of the 20th century. The additives “post”, “neo” or “proto” help to specify the scope or proximity of this danger.

Today, the extreme right is already setting the agenda of many countries and governments. By relativizing (or naturalizing) this advance, its danger is diluted. The evolution of these processes is still open and tends to lead to traditional conservative dynamics, but a stormy renewal of the old fascism is not excluded.

We should distance ourselves from the thesis that restricts fascism to an exclusive drama of the middle of the last century. Nor is it correct to suppose that it would only erupt in response to a socialist revolutionary danger. This virulent process is periodically generated by capitalism, to counteract the discontent provoked by the inequitable, impoverishing and convulsive dynamics of that system.

The social subjects that are the protagonists of this reaction can mutate with the same parameters of their victims. The petty bourgeoisie that confronted the factory proletariat during Nazi Germany does not constitute an immovable prototype for any epoch or country. Fascism is a political process that does not follow immutable parameters. Recording this variability is particularly important for assessing its dynamics in Latin America.

DIFFERENTIATED PRESENCE IN THE PERIPHERY

The potential fascist outbreak of the ultra-right is not a danger confined to the United States or Europe. It is also a threat to the periphery. Events in the Arab world offer an indication of such an outcome. The great democratic revolt embodied by the Arab Spring of the past decade was bloodily crushed by dictatorships and monarchies, which were aided by fascist formations.

These militias deployed an atrocious counter-revolutionary action. They used the religious banner to carry out massacres that crushed all expressions of secularism, tolerance and democratic coexistence. That ferocious response to a youth uprising that spread throughout the Middle East confirmed that bloodletting with fascist overtones is feasible in any corner of the planet. It does not require the pre-existence of a socialist enemy or an organized industrial proletariat.

The same criterion applies to Latin America. Nor in this zone is fascism excluded by the peripheral character of the region. The old denial of that possibility because of the economic-social distance that separates the area from the centers is based on mistaken assumptions. It assumes that Hitler and Mussolini never had emulators in the Third World because of the intrinsically imperialist character of that modality.

But the fact is forgotten that this reactionary aspect adopted forms of dependent fascism when the dominant classes of the periphery faced major threats to their domination. The chronological difference between the two scenarios does not alter these similarities. The peaks of fascism in the periphery occurred during the Cold War and not in 1930-45.

This shift in the virulent regressive responses was congruent with the geographical mutation of the popular uprisings and included massacres of the same magnitude as those recorded in Europe. Suffice it to recall, for example, that the crushing of communism in Indonesia claimed a million dead.

The magnitude of these massacres followed the pattern of the great genocides of the last centuries. These annihilations began with the conquest of the New World, consolidated with the devastation of Africa and continued with the Victorian holocausts in Asia, which ended up rebounding on European territory itself.

This succession of exterminations is not enough to explain the contemporary phenomenon of fascism. That traumatic process obeyed specific circumstances and political confrontations, which liberal thinkers never managed to comprehend (Traverso, 2019).

This theoretical tradition especially misinterpreted what happened in Latin America. It placed in the pigeonhole of fascism the nationalist movements or popular leaders in the conflict in the metropolises, such as Perón, for example. It used formal arguments of discursive similarity and magnified minor diplomatic episodes to reproduce the biased U.S. denunciations against governments dealing with their domination. That sovereign resistance never had any kinship with fascism.

The proximity of fascism in the periphery was present in another terrain. It burst into Latin America with the counterrevolutionary regimes that tried to destroy the projects of the left. Several theorists of dependency investigated the peculiarities of this brutal reaction (Martins, 2022).

Pinochetism came to Chile supported by an anti-worker social base blinded by anti-communist fanaticism. But like Franco in Spain or Salazar in Portugal, the trans-Andean dictatorship did not forge a political system comparable to that of Hitler or Mussolini.

Uribeism also propped up an oligarchic regime in Colombia, based after several decades on the methodical assassination of social militants. But it never completed the totalitarian reconversion of the political regime that fascism presupposes.

In Bolsonaro's most recent experience, this failure was greater and he did not manage to translate the reactionary verbiage of the military madman into a fascist system. The former captain got

some support from plebeian sectors, but not the leadership of the entire bourgeois political arc. He favored the increase of violence, without achieving its generalization, and backed down in the attempts to replace the institutional system with totalitarian power. The army supported him but never agreed to get involved in adventures of greater scope. The disastrous management of the pandemic and the defeat he suffered with the release of Lula, closed all loopholes for his conversion into a dictator.

Fascism is also a danger in the current regional scenario and it is important to avoid underestimating this possibility. The weakness of the left or reflux of workers' struggles does not dilute this eventuality. The disregard of this horizon sometimes adopts the sophisticated modality of replacing the term fascist with vague allusions to Bonapartism.

More problematic is the trivialization of the phenomenon, through its identification with other types of misfortunes. Fascism is not equivalent to extractivist and even less to enduring forms of macho violence. It is a modality of political management of the State, to recompose the domination of the capitalist class with methods of extreme virulence.

It is important to situate the problem on this plane, in order to face the battle against fascism with tactics and strategies adapted to each country. In the generic universe of misfortune generated by the decline of capitalism, civilizational regression, or the empire of irrationality, there is no way to specify timely and successful anti-fascist policies.

BASIC AND ACCURATE DISTINCTIONS

The characterization of today's ultra-right as fascist competes with its identification with populism, but the use of this term is particularly inconsistent in Latin America. In this region, references to populism were identified during the second half of the 20th century, with governments that granted social improvements (Löwy, 2019). The profile that in Europe embodied social democracy, was related in the New World with regimes that favored greater sovereignty and increases in popular income. To liken the current ultra-right with any of those predecessors is a major contradiction.

But the main confusion introduced by this identification is the mixture of progressive and reactionary leadership, in the indistinct caratula of populism. In Europe, this combo pigeonholes Melanchon with Meloni, Crobyn with Len Pen and Pablo Iglesias with Orban. In Latin America, the same salad places Maduro with Bolsonaro, Evo Morales with Kast, and Díaz Canel with Milei. The shortcomings of this mixture are obvious. The liberal press tends to insist on this type of absurd identification and whimsical amalgamations.

Instead of reiterating this unproductive mixture, it would be more correct to retake the basic political barometer that contrasts the right with the left, in order to define the position of each force. The two poles are clearly distinguishable, without any need to add the populist adjective. With this guideline, it is very clear that the radical left is the main antagonist of the ultra-right. The usual concept of populism nullifies this distinction by assuming that both extremes have been dissolved in some kind of "twilight of ideologies".

The notions of left and right have been rightly used for centuries. They distinguish courses in favor of social equality from courses in favor of the privileges of the oppressors. With this computer, it is possible to grasp which are the social interests at stake in each conflict. It is very easy to note that Fidel Castro managed to the left of Menem, but it is impossible to determine how populist the administration of each was.

The political differentiation between the left and the right arose with the French Revolution and persists to the present day because the social regime that cements this distinction subsists. As long as capitalism continues there will be left and right-wing formations confronting each other for the primacy of social improvements or regressions (Katz, 2008: 59-60).

The specificity of the new right can be perceived with traditional trappings (ultra, extreme) or with more innovative complements (2.0). But whatever the denomination chose, the essential thing is to underline its positioning in the field of reaction. Populism is a term that only adds to the confusion.

THE POLYSEMY OF A CONCEPT

The concept of populism has been adopted with great enthusiasm by many analysts who highlight the “anti-systemic” imprint of this current, its opposition to conventional politicians and its disregard for institutionality.

But none of these characteristics define the currents that participate in the current reactionary wave. Their conflicts with the political system are secondary data, compared to their central purpose of transforming the current discontent into a systematic harassment of the underprivileged. This regressive objective of confronting the middle class (and part of the salaried workers) with the most unprotected sectors does not have the slightest kinship with populism.

Liberals use the term to disqualify any stance critical of individualism, the market or the republic. But the new right is neither alien to nor an enemy of these paradigms. It has simply gained ground with a discourse that objects to the stormy contemporary reality sponsored by neoliberalism. Nor does it place itself outside the institutional regime, when it questions with great demagoguery the prevailing political parties.

Liberals equate right-wingers with the forces coming from the opposite pole of the left. They consider that populism amalgamates both sides in a similar position. In this way, they present two opposing conglomerates as if they were complementary. They dissolve the evaluation of the contents in dispute and emphasize minor aspects of style or rhetoric. Through this analytical path, there is not the slightest possibility of clarifying any relevant feature of the new right wing.

The hegemonic media have generalized this view, which superficially disqualifies populism in order to relegate neoliberalism. From this point of view, they highlight the centrality of a particularly vague term, which mixes different historical meanings derived from dissimilar roots.

In its old American or Russian meaning, populism alluded to projects of popular protagonism or to exaltations of the healthy and friendly behavior of rural populations, which had been

mistreated (and corrupted) during their conversion into urban wage earners. Populism claimed that initial purity and proposed to recreate it as a force for the transformation of society.

The current right-wing discourse picks up some facets of that longing but modifies its regenerative, communitarian, or friendly meaning. It uses it to develop a counterposition with hostile minorities. It usually exalts the working class punished by globalization and deindustrialization, attributing that degradation to the presence of immigrants (Traverso, 2016). No significant echo of the old purposes of brotherhood is present in the new ultra-right meaning.

The liberal denigration of populism has also motivated a symmetrical praising look. This vision defends the validity of this concept, to represent the oppressed sectors of society. It particularly highlights the consistency of this notion in nations with a fragile constitutional structure (Venezuela) or a long tradition of institutionalism (Argentina). He also vindicates the role of its leaders and justifies all the variants he observes of this modality (Laclau, 2006). This pro-populist approach is the reverse of the socio-liberal diatribe and does not provide clues to clarify the current imprint of the new right.

In order to understand the meaning of this space, it is necessary to investigate the social roots of its political action. The current reactionary wave is a project of sectors of the ruling classes to reestablish the corroded stability of capitalism. They intend to achieve this re-composition by generalizing aggressions against the most unprotected sectors of society.

This attention to the class substratum of the ultra-right is diluted in the ambiguous universe of observations on populism extolled by its defenders. They reject the evaluation of the interests at stake, because they ignore the leading role of social classes, pondering the alternative centrality of an indistinct variety of subjects with contingent identities, who achieve centrality through their discourses.

From this point of view, it is impossible to register which are the underlying social interests in the disputes of each political scenario. There is no way to understand why the ultra-right is currently bursting in and what are the economic forces that sustain its presence. This perspective investigates the discourses in themselves, without offering explanations of the way in which they are articulated with their social determinants. Because of these inaccuracies, they also fail to clarify the meaning of the reactionary ideology in vogue (Anderson, 2015).

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES

Analysis of the ultra-right should enrich the struggle against this current. The evaluation of this space aims at achieving the defeat or neutralization of a force that threatens democracy and popular conquests.

In Latin America, recent experience pieces of evidence very different results, when decisive responses or hesitant reactions prevail. In the first case is the battle of the Venezuelan government against the coup, which at an enormous economic and social cost, managed to defeat the guarimbas of the reactionary gangs.

An attitude of the same type is emerging in Bolivia after the arrest of Camacho. Instead of passively accepting the provocations of the neo-fascist groups, the government went on the offensive and undertook a daring operation to contain a ruthless enemy. The defeat of the failed coup in Brazil with arrests of those involved, trials of those responsible and investigation of the financing is in the same direction.

These forceful positions have made it possible to stop the reactionary onslaught, in contrast to the conciliatory attitudes that facilitated the escalation of the coup against Lugo in Paraguay or against Dilma in Brazil. Castillo has repeated this same behavior in Peru, opening the way for a bloody civilian-military uprising.

These hesitations constitute a serious warning for countries where the right wing is groping for deadly incursions. In the case of Argentina, the consummation of the failed attempt to assassinate Cristina would have generated unimaginable consequences.

That aggression provoked a great democratic reaction of immediate demonstrations. But the government itself discouraged that response and promoted only occasional rejections with conservative figures. In the great experience of democratic battles in that country, consistent positions are crowned with clarifications (Mariano Ferreyra, Kostecki-Santillán) and attitudes of resignation lead to impunity (AMIA, Embassy of Israel and Rio Tercero).

Many links of Cristina's failed assassins with quasi-fascist organizations have already been verified. If a path of mobilization prevails these complicities will come to the surface. But if the opposite course prevails, the right will gain profit from the prevailing confusion (as happened with Nisman's suicide).

Finally, the Chilean experience illustrates how the vacillations of the ruling party facilitate the vertiginous recomposition of an emboldened right wing. After three years of successive defeats, this force managed to impose the rejection of the constitutional reform project at the ballot box. It took advantage of the confusion, inaction, and capitulations of the government. It recomposed its presence in the face of a president who deactivated the protest and ignored his electoral promises.

In Latin America, therefore, several successful and unsuccessful experiences of confrontation with the ultra-right have already been observed. This reactionary sector is just emerging and the priority is to crush it before it can establish its preaching (Colussi, 2022).

The authority of the left depends on its ability to demonstrate firmness in the face of an enemy determined to sweep away social improvements. Europe's recent experience illustrates the self-defeating effects of shying away from the battle by looking the other way (Febbro, 2022).

The main terrain of that struggle is street mobilization against an enemy that also acts in that terrain. The naive belief that this field belongs to the left has been definitively refuted by the active presence of its adversaries in marches and demonstrations.

In some cases, this intervention preceded the pandemic (Brazil) and in others, it gained intensity with the irruption of the negationists (Argentina). The protagonism of these formations has

grown in the confrontation with progressive governments (Bolivia, Mexico) and in the rejection of popular revolts (Chile, Colombia, Peru).

This dispute for street preeminence makes it necessary to carefully evaluate the progressive or regressive sense of the mobilizations that abound in the region. Calls with explicitly socialist or right-wing banners are as rare as events with a purely political profile. Characterizing the content of each event is vital to distinguish progressive actions from their reactionary antithesis.

There is no recipe for getting this evaluation right, not even by ascertaining the social composition of the participants in each rally. The barometer of the left and the right provides the basic instrument to draw some conclusions. It is not enough to register the legitimacy of the demands at stake. It is also necessary to observe who is driving them. The right tends to encourage popular irritation against progressive governments while repudiating any struggle for the same aspirations when a conservative administration prevails.

But it is also true that many governments of popular origin resort to the ghost of a right-wing conspiracy to justify anti-worker policies. This type of dilemma cannot be resolved with a manual and each case requires a concrete evaluation, starting from a characterization of current progressivism. We will address this evaluation in our next text.

ABSTRACT

The revolutionary danger and inter-imperial wars that determined classical fascism are not present today. The ultra-right converges with traditional conservative dynamics, but capitalism tends to recreate modalities of great violence and totalitarianism.

In Latin America, the shadow of fascism did not emerge with nationalist leaders, but with counterrevolutionary actions to crush the left. It persists as a card of the powerful against popular uprisings.

Populism is not an enlightening concept of the right-wing wave. It places the exponents and opponents of this process in the same pigeonhole, dissolves its opposition to the left, and obscures the interests at stake. The ongoing battle is fought in the streets and at the ballot box, avoiding the hesitations that embolden a dangerous enemy.

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