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At the Crossroads

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[Caesarism] always expresses the solution as the “arbitration”, entrusted to a great personality, of a politico-historical situation characterised by a potentially catastrophic equilibrium of forces.¹

THERE ARE A lot of interesting things to say about the Trump victory—the winning over of certain sectors of the working class and factions of the middle class threatened by the prospect of downward mobility, the compromise with the Christian Right, the vast impoverishment of the Clinton campaign, and more. Here, I am interested in adopting a wider optic, through which Trump is just one of a host of ‘morbid symptoms’

1 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1998, p. 219.

of a cycle Antonio Gramsci characterised as ‘organic crisis’.

First, a number of commentators would date this organic crisis to 2008. William Davies has recently suggested that the financial crisis has ushered in a new, third moment of neo-liberalism.² This ‘punitive’ neo-liberalism encompasses an ‘ethos of heavily moralized ... punishment’, unleashing hatred on disadvantaged sectors of the population, and it is ‘post-critical’, lacking any ‘aspiration to represent reality’, in favour of tireless reiteration of empty affirmations: there is no housing crisis, homelessness is a matter of shiftlessness and criminality, and so on.

At the same time, and bound up with the previous point, Razmig Keucheyan and Cedric Durand³ suggest a newly dominant mode of governance has arrived, which they characterise as ‘bureaucratic caesarism’, a response to economic landslides and considerable volatility in public opinion,⁴ and founded, in this case, on the rule, without hegemony, of high finance and the civil bureaucracy. This politics is tied, by these authors, to the clear shift of sovereignty to a technocratic sphere, a post-ideological insulation and retreat from popular pressures, in the name of economic order.

This, though, further opens the way for the emergence of a properly charismatic caesarism around a ‘great “heroic” personality’.⁵ This is the moment of Trump and Right-wing pop-

2 William Davies, ‘The New Neoliberalism’, *New Left Review* September-October, 101 2016, 121-34.

3 Razmig Keucheyan and Cedric Durand, ‘Bureaucratic Caesarism: A Gramscian Outlook on the Crisis of Europe’, *Historical Materialism* 23/2 2015, 23-51.

4 As Wolfgang Streeck puts this, ‘Among ordinary people, there is now a pervasive sense that politics can no longer make a difference in their lives, as reflected in common perceptions of deadlock, incompetence and corruption among what seems an increasingly self-contained and self-serving political class, united in their claim that “there is no alternative” to them and their policies’. Wolfgang Streeck, ‘A problem with democracy’, *Verso Blog*, 17 November 2016, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2943-wolfgang-streeck-a-problem-with-democracy>.

5 Gramsci, *ibid.*

ulism, more generally. These forces have appealed to certain traditionally Leftist welfarist, protectionist, and anti-elite ideas, and mobilised serious challenges to the political ‘cartels’ represented by the centrist, ‘establishment’ parties of Right and Left.

Unsurprisingly, many commentators have invoked the spectre of fascism here. Clearly, on this question, we need to steer a path away from both fear-filled catastrophism and complacency. In Michael Mann’s work on the genesis and central features of fascism, he emphasises an activating background of multi-dimensional crisis—war devastation, world-economic collapse from 1929, the unstable transition towards liberal democracy amidst Leftist mobilization, and a general sense of civilizational contradiction and decay.⁶ We can see elements of these factors in play within the world-system today.

Further, Mann outlines five component parts of fascism—nationalism, statism, transcendence, cleansing, and paramilitarism. How does today’s Right-wing populism look, in these terms? Elements of the first four components are clearly visible: a commitment to an integral nation and intolerance towards cultural diversity; a certain faith in state action—penal populism, exclusionary welfare measures, protectionism, military hawkishness—as a way of solving crises and bringing prosperity and harmony; a desire to transcend strife and a disillusionment with actually existing liberal democracy; and a hope to cleanse the nation of political opponents or cultural outsiders. The fifth element, paramilitarism, has not yet arrived.

On the other hand, nationalism and statism, today, surely happen on the very different terrain of globalised capitalism, thirty years of attacks on the big state, and a comparable period of pro-globalization rhetoric. Similarly, everyone, including the Right-populists, is democratic today and pays lip service

6 Michael Mann, *Fascists*, Cambridge 2004.

to the discourse of human rights, while sexism and racism, as Göran Therborn puts it, have been discredited as explicit public discourses in a big part of the world.⁷ These factors would appear to set profound limits to authoritarian corporatism, cleansing, and paramilitarism.

The balance sheet seems to me, then, quite a mixture—a moment of danger and opportunity for those on the Left.
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7 Göran Therborn, *The World: A Beginner's Guide*, Cambridge 2011.

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