

Methods of understanding the “contemporary”: A discussion on populism and fascism

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The profound and incessant economic crisis of global capitalism and the concomitant ideological vacuum that started in 2008 has prepared the ground for a series of social movements and uprisings all across the world with varying characteristics. These cascades of revolts soon subsided as a result of the oppressive methods deployed by the respective states and of the militaristic or ideological intervention of imperialist powers. What has followed was the rise of reactionary right wing social movements, parties or political forces that seem to have defied mainstream political parties, their policies and power practices with an inconspicuous and sharp anti-establishment discourse. As of today these reactionary right-wing movements and political forces do no longer operate at the margins of bourgeois democracy with limited links to society. Rather they have acquired so much power and popular

appealing in recent years that they turned out to be an independent unsettling dynamic for bourgeois politics through swiftly transposing the conventional institutional arrangements and ideological codes in their respective countries and also posed a major challenge to progressive political forces.

Such a new phenomenon has sparked in recent years significant debates in both academic and intellectual circles as to the nature, possible trajectory and social basis of these movements. The presidency of Donald Trump in the USA, the appearance of Marine Le Pen as a powerful rival to mainstream politics in French presidential elections, UKIP's former leader Nigel Farage in Great Britain as a political figure who played a leading role in England's move towards Brexit, the increasing authoritarianisms of Victor Orban in Hungary, Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, AfD in Germany have been thought of in this expanding literature as the manifestations of a single phenomenon. All these political forces have been supposed to share some commonalities in terms of their political objectives and ways of appealing to public. The term to designate all these political forces based on their common features has appeared to be "right populism".

The goal of this article is to explore some leading examples of this phenomenon in relation to a discussion as to whether right wing populism is a convenient or sufficient analytical tool to grasp the nature of these reactionary political forces. Based on this discussion the paper will also engage in a methodological and conceptual elaboration in regards to the possible ways of providing a plausible and a comprehensive picture of the current era that we have been witnessing. This discussion will also include a reflection on the extent to which our *zeitgeist* could be evaluated in relation to the concept of *fascism*.

Contextualizing the "populist moment"

In the recent discussions on reactionary right-wing political climate, the concept of populism has often been used in the ways in which it was articulated by Ernesto Laclau who formulated the concept within a distinct theoretical framework in his earlier work *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977) and then revisited it in 2002 in his book *On Populist Reason*. Laclau in his earlier works conceives populism not as a coherent ideology but rather as an ideological strategy employed by both bourgeois and revolutionary political forces in their "popular democratic struggles" (in their struggle for hegemony). In his later work *On Populist Reason* he goes further to state that the populist logic is not a sporadic or secondary element of political struggles but rather is an essential element that functions and dominates

the political discourse in the turning points of modern political history.¹ At the core of populist reason lies an attempt of a political subject –be it an anti-systemic or a systemic political force– to construct “the people” against the “power bloc”, its symbolic representatives and its dominant ideology. Populism interpellates people under an overarching issue or theme that could function as a nodal point of accumulated contradictions and the sources of discontent in society. It aims to bring together and mobilize different sections of society with various grievances. What characterizes populism, however, is not simply the pursuit of achieving the consent and representation of people. Rather the quintessence of populism, according to Laclau is rebuilding and remoulding “people” in accordance with the context-dependent necessities of the political power struggles, and positioning this reconfigured “people” against the existing political establishment and its ideological codes. Such logic could operate both in revolutionary or counter-revolutionary political strategies under different political programmes and objectives. What matters for the emergence and predominance of populist reason is the presence of a convenient political/social/ideological context in which it could have an appeal in society.² In this respect populism is not a free floating discourse that could be relevant in all times and places but rather is tied to the exigencies of context. As such populism does not characterize only the discursive or rhetorical content of the ideological strategy of a political force but it also characterizes the specific spatio-temporal context that generates populist arrangements, which is in this paper referred to as “populist moment”.

When populism is defined as such one can observe that the representatives of the recent reactionary right-wing political forces from Trump to Le Pen, from Duterte to Erdoğan etc. put the “populist reason” at the center of their political pursuits. In all of them, whether currently holding political power or not, we see an attempt to build or redefine “the people” in a particular way, represent and position it against the rhetorically constructed or real “political establishment” and its representatives. It is this commonality that induces many intellectuals today to put the concept of populism at the centre of their intellectual endeavors to get to grips of the nature of current era.

Considering that “populism” defined as such has been and is still employed by some left leaning political forces ranging from Podemos in Spain to Chavistas in Venezuela the concept of populism in its plain form would not suffice to comprehend the distinctive nature of the recent rise of reactionary political forces. It is in this respect that many intellectuals and academics have added the word “right” to

1 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.

2 Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 171.

define the aforementioned reactionary political figures and forces, which has given us the concept of “right populism”. At this point the question at stake is what makes the “populism” of these reactionary forces a “right populism”. The search for answer to this question would lead us to go beyond the discursive strategy of the current reactionary forces and explore some other commonalities in their vision of world and society that is, in their ideological content as well as in their organizational structure. This will help us to take some further steps in our endeavor to grasp a picture of this reactionary wave.

One of the characteristics that these reactionary movements share with the traditional right has to do with the nature of link between the leader and followers of the movement. The role of leader in these reactionary movements is not limited to becoming a “charismatic” spokesperson that transmits the demands and concerns of the masses to political arena. The leader in these movements identifies his/her personal ambitions with the expectations and concerns of the masses, makes his/her individuality and persona a central issue and even the constitutive of the (imaginary) people/power-block division and depicts any political attack to his political or private life as an assault carried out by the political enemy against the “people”.³ It is not necessarily the socio-economic affinity or the common class belonging that makes possible and establishes such a link between the leader and masses. On the contrary, the right populist leaders achieve this despite a huge disparity between his/her economic standing and that of masses. The secret of this link lies in the leader’s “immediate” representation in his language, gestures and life-style of the average raw sentiments, reasoning and practices prevalent among general public that have been hitherto excluded by the field of formal politics under the rubric of “political correctness”. This is how, in the absence of any shared class position, the sense of “he/she (the leader) is one of us” is created among the masses. The prioritization of the leader’s own agenda and his/her individuality in these movements make them amenable to a great extent to such conventional elements of right-wing politics as cult of leadership, hierarchy and fetishism of authority.

The second and probably more crucial element situating these reactionary movements on right is concerned with the ways in which they build the antagonistic relationship between the “people” that they purport to represent and “power-bloc”. The recent reactionary movements acknowledge and attempt to mobilize the “real” daily economic problems of the ordinary citizens that stem typically from the contradictions of capitalist system and its current unending crisis. They incite and disseminate a sense of alarm among the public on the basis of an agitated rhetoric

3 Arjun Appadurai, “Demokrasi Yorgunluğu” [“Democracy Fatigue”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme* [*The Great Regression*], trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 18.

repetitively speaking about the fact that such conditions would further exacerbate unless the existing political establishment is sustained. Right-populism concedes the fact that such immediate economic grievances are linked to the fundamentals of the existing system and could only be resolved once the existing power arrangements are problematized and altered. Nevertheless, the forms in which these reactionary movements perceive and depict the culprits of these systemic problems necessarily involve the mystification of the objective roots of these problems in the fundamentals of capitalist system, and displacement and manipulation of class anger to secondary or completely false targets. Rather than the state as the field of class rule but the corrupt and passive politicians, not the capitalist class order itself but only some symbolic capital groups and financial oligarchs, not the imperialist wars but the refugees as the victims of these wars, not the unfair international world order but the other states and nations, not the neoliberal deregulation but the migrants and minorities are presented as responsible for falling wages and increasing unemployment. It has been against these enemies that populism urges “people” to react and organize. The construction of the “enemy” as such leads these reactionary movements to embrace a chauvinistic nationalism and racism and hence positions them on the right of political spectrum.

If “right populism” is not a self-evident and ahistorical political discourse but a strategy of power-seeking that bears the traces of some specific social and historical conditions (populist moment) then understanding the nature of the recent rise of right-populism entails an investigation as to what specific characteristics of contemporary capitalism could have prepared a favourable ground for this phenomenon. This means, in other words, simply asking “what characterizes the populist moment today?” Given that the refusal of longstanding political establishment, mainstream political parties and the codes of dominant ideology is an essential element of populism, a populist moment could be at stake when there emerges a social and political context in which traditional political institutions and conventional ideological patterns deeply lose credibility on the part of general public and lack capacity to ensure consent and build hegemony. This means that populist moment goes hand in hand with an ideological crisis and political stalemate that cripple the capacity of the existing political establishment to avert increasing discontent with the system.

It is on the basis of this reasoning that many intellectuals in recent years have tended to explore some linkages between the contemporary crisis of capitalism that reached its zenith in 2008 and the rise of reactionary right. Many of them rightly point out that the 2008 economic crisis and ensuing political and ideological predicaments have been rather a product of the gradual accumulation of some inherent contradictions of neoliberal capital accumulation that became conspicuously predominant as of the 1990s and triggered some significant crisis-ridden transformations

in the fields of politics and ideology as well. The accumulation of these dynamics of crisis has also been coupled with the recent exodus from Syria and Iraq, the so-called “refugee crisis” which has posed another challenge to existing political and ideological formations especially on the part of European countries. While the unending and deepening crisis of contemporary capitalism has delegitimized the deeply rooted political institutions and ideological codes and hence prepared a convenient milieu for the anti-establishment discourse of populism, the recent exodus from the Middle East has further intensified already existing xenophobic sentiments especially in Europe and has become a catalyst for the articulation of the deep mistrust in existing political system. These reactions revealed themselves in the forms of a chauvinistic nationalism and racism, a formula which gives us the right populism.

Let’s advance this analysis by carrying out an investigation as to what aspects of the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism and its accumulated social and political implications are related to the rise of right-populism. The first aspect is concerned with what is referred to in the recent discussions as the *sovereignty crisis of nation-states*.⁴ This refers to the process of gradual erosion of the role of nation-states to develop within their borders the programs and projects of enhancing capital accumulation. This role has been largely transferred to international financial institutions and oligarchs, such purportedly “supra-national” organizations as the European Union and multi-lateral economic agreements binding for the national economies.⁵ One of the implications of this process was the gradual elimination of the redistributive economic and ideological instruments that the nation-states employed to absorb within the confines of capitalist system the visible and potentially challenging class contradictions.⁶ As the capacity to devise economic programmes that would respond to the context-dependent class challenges to capital accumulation has eroded, the mainstream bourgeois political parties, be it a centre-left or centre-right party, were reduced to uniform and passive technocratic entities that have no function but defending and implementing the same standardized neoliberal economic policies.⁷

4 Appadurai, “Demokrasi Yorgunluğu”, p. 18; Wilhelm Heitmeyer, “‘A New Fascism?’ Symposium Speech”, Kassel, 2016.

5 Wolfgang Streeck, “Neoliberal Kapitalizm İçin Sonun Başlangıcı” [“The Return of the Repressed as the Beginning of the End of Neoliberal Capitalism”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 195.

6 Nancy Fraser, “İlerici Neoliberalizme Karşı Gerici Popülizm: Bir Hobson Seçimi” [“Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism: A Hobson s Choice”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 62.

7 Donatella della Porta, “Geç Neoliberalizmde İlerici ve Gerici Siyaset” [“Progressive and Regressive Politics in Late Neoliberalism”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 50.

This has created a sense of economic “insecurity” on the part of the working (or prospectively working) population whose historically gained rights and employment prospects have been threatened by neoliberal transformation.⁸ The end-result of this was the suspension of already fragile links between these political parties and general public, especially working classes. It is under these circumstances that the discourse of right-wing populism that ruthlessly denigrates existing political establishment and traditional political elites could have a large popular appeal.⁹ It is again owing to this context that the right-wing populism’s recall to “strong state”, epitomized in Donald Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again”, could have mobilized large sections of society.¹⁰

We should state here a rather more contingent but at the same time crucial factor for the increasing popular appeal of right-wing populism’s recall to “strong state”: the series of terrorist attacks carried out by radical Islamist organizations in the most significant cities of Europe and the USA. These attacks combined the concerns regarding “economic security” with “physical security” and reinforced the common sensical conviction that the state, as it stands, under the rule of weak, corrupt and dysfunctional political leaders and entities could not perform its most fundamental and agreed-upon function: protecting the physical and economic security of its citizens. The terrorist attacks facilitated and accelerated the process of right-wing populism’s establishing powerful links to general public in two ways: First, masses have become more receptive of the right-wing populism’s endorsement of an authoritarian, monolithic and securitized state structure. Second, they have become more amenable to the right-wing populism’s culturalist discourse and its racist tendency of identifying the Muslim minorities as one of the culprits of the weakening of the nation-state.

The effects of inherent contradictions of neoliberalism on the state and the field of politics in capitalist social formations are intricately connected to the ravages that neoliberal policies inflicted on working class all across the world and the changing nature of labour processes. The rise of right-wing populism cannot be thought in separation of the changing conditions of working class which constitutes a substantial component of the social base of these reactionary movements. The impacts of neoliberalism and the recent 2008 crisis on the working classes such as increasing social insecurity, precariousness, unemployment and decreasing access to welfare have been extensively demonstrated in academic literature and it is not necessary to get into this discussion within the limits of this paper. The recent literature focuses

8 Chantal Mouffe, “‘A New Fascism?’ Symposium Speech”, Kassel, 2016.

9 Gáspár M. Tamás, “‘A New Fascism?’ Symposium Speech”, Kassel, 2016.

10 Ivan Krastev, “Çoğunlukçu Gelecekler” [“Majoritarian Futures”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 99.

on the inability of the mainstream political actors to avert the discontent arising from these material effects of neoliberalism as a crucial factor to be taken into account. Yet, it is not sufficient to highlight only the material losses of working class. One should also take into account the intensification of a sense of political and ideological “impotency” on the part of working class to understand why it has oriented towards right-wing populism in recent years.¹¹ The increasing political impotency of the working class refers to its declining capacity to influence the redistributive mechanisms as well as political processes by putting pressure on bourgeoisie and on its political institutions through its organizational units such as labour unions and revolutionary parties. This brings about a gradual erosion of the political subjectivity of the working class and its increasing inability to act as an independent political force.

One should note here the unfortunate complicity of some sections of radical left in the working classes’ increasing political and ideological impotency. It is a very-well known fact that the trauma of the dissolution of actually existing socialism in the early 1990s had induced some sections of left-wing political forces to revise their political strategy in such a way as to respond to the changing ideological and political climate after the end of the Cold War. Some sections of left-wing organizations and intellectuals especially in European left tended in this period to abandon their former position of envisaging the working class as the historical agent of future emancipatory transformation of society and of prioritizing working-class related stakes in their political discourse and action. Instead they embraced a cosmopolitanist strategy of struggling for the recognition of subaltern communities and identities and offered a liberal multiculturalism as a solution to their social exclusion. The left has been reduced among these circles to the defense of universal ethico-political values against oppressive political forces and ideologies.¹²

The unintended consequence of this new orientation was two-fold: First of all an overwhelming focus on abstract-universal/liberal principles overriding the national context obstructed radical left from devising power-seeking political strategies that could accord with the historical specificities and necessities of the class struggle in their respective countries. Second, the prioritization of the agenda and particular issues of subaltern communities has impeded the left’s capacity to represent especially the neoliberalism-related material losses of working classes, which had been already left unaddressed by mainstream politics. The multiculturalist and moralist discourse of the radical left that is focused on particularistic recognition has fallen

11 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “‘A New Fascism?’ Symposium Speech”, Kassel, 2016.

12 Slavoj Žižek, “Popülist Cazibe” [“The Populist Temptation”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, pp. 211-225.

short of problematizing the underlying class roots of the grievances of all powerless and propertyless sections of society and hence of building a common integrative ground of politics that would combine the grievances of the local working class with subaltern communities and thereby endow them with a common political/class identity. The eventual result of this problem of representation was the local working classes' increasing distrust and even anger against the radical politics and their distancing themselves through an exclusionary and nationalist discourse from the other oppressed sections of population, especially the migrants and refugees.¹³ Overall, this situation has left the local working class quite susceptible to the influence of right-wing populism which addressed and prioritized their real material losses, positioned itself through crude nationalist rhetoric against liberal multiculturalism and stigmatized migrants and refugees as the scapegoat of the economic and political impotency of the working class.¹⁴

The “nature” of fascism and the “populist moment”

The concept of right populism has been beneficial so far in exploring some common ideological patterns and strategic orientations observed in the recent reactionary movements as well as in situating them within a common world-historical context. In this respect and contrary to John Belamy Foster's claim¹⁵, the concept of populism cannot be considered fully useless. However, this concept belongs to such a high level of abstraction that it would not suffice to unravel some politically meaningful differences between the concrete manifestations of the “populist moment” in different countries. Although the (re)construction of people against an imagined or real power-bloc, which is the quintessential feature of populism, has been common in the recent reactionary movements, this populist logic operates in and through different political programmes in different countries with diverse social and political implications. This diversity is the inevitable result of the uneven and combined development of capitalism which generates different capitalist social formations across the world, having their historically specific course of class struggles, ideological contexts and political structure. A more comprehensive grasp of the recent state of the world entails an acknowledgment as well as an assessment of the ways in which the rise of reactionary politics has been mediated by these context-

13 Nancy Fraser, “İlerici Neoliberalizme Karşı Gerici Popülizm”, p. 63.

14 Oliver Nachtwey, “Uygarlık Dışına Çıkma: Batı Toplumlarındaki Geriye Yönelik Eğilimler Üzerine” [“Decivilisation. On Regressive Tendencies in Western Democracies”], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et.al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 165.

15 John Bellamy Foster, “This is Not Populism”, *The Monthly Review*, 69: 2, 2017, <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/06/01/this-is-not-populism/>, accessed: 1 August 2017.

dependent dynamics. Such an investigation is also crucial for devising some solid and realistic political strategies for progressive politics to counteract and reverse the existing poisonous trend. It is for these reasons we need to recognize the limitations of the concept of populism and invoke another concept to go beyond them. The concept that needs to be invited to our discussion is fascism.

The concept of fascism will be incorporated into our analysis by pursuing an answer to the question as follows: To what extent one can argue that the recent rise of right-populism could be designated also as an indication or harbinger of (coming or actually existing) fascism, i.e. of proto-fascism? The search for an answer to this question will carry us to an analytical domain in which we would be able to discuss some meaningful differences between these right-wing movements in relation to their corresponding national context and provide some clues as to the possible trajectory of these movements as well as hints in regards to the most efficient strategy of resistance and action.

Introducing such a discussion first of all and necessarily entails a clarification as to what characterizes fascism as a specific political project and ideological arrangement? There is vast and quite contentious conceptual and methodological discussion in regards to the characteristic features of fascism. I will not attempt here to provide a full picture of class roots, political/institutional orientations (when it is in power) and organizational strategies of fascism, which have been comprehensively and intensely debated in the literature. Rather, in accordance with the subject matter of this paper and for the purpose of deepening the discussion we carried out so far, I will abstract out and scrutinize two distinctive ideological features of fascism that were in effect in its classical historical examples in Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy, and interrogate the extent to which it is present in contemporary right-populism. These two features are a) counter-*revolutionary* subversiveness¹⁶; b) non-contemporaneity.¹⁷

By counter-*revolutionary* subversiveness I mean the fascism's tendency to energize its popular base and justify its power and suppression through a discourse and (when it is in power) politics based on a promise and programme of subverting the most fundamental and long-standing political/institutional, legal and ideological arrangements of the existing order, which is depicted by fascist forces as the culprits of the existing alarming predicaments of and threats to the "nation", without necessarily building new ones to replace them. This subversiveness is necessarily counter-*revolutionary* as its demolitionist energy orient towards destroying all the

16 Robert O. Paxton, *Faşizmin Anatomisi [The Anatomy of Fascism]*, trans. Hakan Atay and Hivren Demir Atay, İstanbul: İletişim, 2004.

17 Alberto Toscana, "Notes on Late Fascism", 2007, <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism>, accessed: 1 July 2017.

emancipatory values and structures of humanity that have been gained through social struggles and also involves an inclination to completely cleanse the true revolutionary forces, i.e. communists from the political and ideological domain.

As the second idiosyncratic feature of fascism under consideration *non-contemporaneity* and *non-synchronousness* (a recurrent theme in Ernst Bloch's assessments of fascism revisited in Alberto Toscana's (2007) article on the blog of the journal *Historical Materialism*) refers to the tendency of fascism to oscillate between a mythic past, which is typically envisaged as the unfulfilled golden age of nation, and a distant future in which the nation will completely have overcome the impasses of the "present time" and be reborn from its ashes (what is referred to as "palingenetic myth" by Roger Griffin.¹⁸ The counter-revolutionary subversiveness of fascism is indeed intricately connected to its non-contemporaneity as such, since what it promises to establish in lieu of the present that it purports to destroy is the mythic and idealized past that would be renovated and fulfilled in the future under the fascist rule once it gets rid of (destroy) all the present national and international constraints. Fascism is thus non-synchronous as it discursively suspends and substitutes the present by an ancient past and promised future. These two distinctive features of fascism are important not only for the analytical trajectory of this paper. They are also crucial for not conflating such a specific political phenomenon as fascism with different variants of reactionary right with which the former shares various ideological and political (strategic) commonalities. Such characteristics of fascism as cult of leadership, militarism, anti-intellectualism, ultra-nationalism, chauvinism etc. are also present in various other right-wing political movements, but all of these seemingly common features take a different meaning and form in fascism when they are moulded by and incorporated into its counter-revolutionary and non-synchronous ideological motivations.

These two distinctive features of fascism cannot be seen merely as an "ingenious" formula invented by fascist movements and their leaders. Neither can they be assumed to dominate the domain of ideologies as an outcome of the competition between different discursive strategies of different political forces. Counter-revolutionary subversiveness and non-synchronicity should be rather interpreted as an indication of what Poulantzas calls a deep "generalized ideological crisis" of bourgeois rule in a particular society, i.e. the erosion of the capacity of bourgeoisie to secrete ideological and discursive elements that could possibly sustain the political and social framework reproducing existing regime of capital accumulation or, more seriously, social relations of production. It is true that not all ideological crises of bourgeoisie allow room for these two features to infiltrate into the domain of ideo-

¹⁸ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, London: Routledge, 1991.

logies. They could appear as an alternative or indeed a last resort when all hitherto functioning ideological strategies that could remain within the confines of existing political establishment has been delegitimized to such an extent that their circulation in the domain of ideologies is of no avail for and even a catalyst of the ideological crisis. Expectedly such a context is also a favorable ground for the revolutionary left to introduce its radical alternative in a more full-fledged manner. Nevertheless, in the absence of or as a result of weakening of a powerful progressive revolutionary organization with deep links to working class and society the shocking subversiveness of fascism as well as its non-contemporaneity that substitutes a fantasy of past and future with the crisis-ridden contemporary that could no longer offer a realistic alternative may appeal to people with the consent, if not full support, of dominant classes. In this respect fascism with its unprecedented oppressive militaristic machinery could also play (and indeed played in its historical examples) the role of completely cleansing the left and its potentiality from the political sphere. As such, the rise of fascism with these two quintessential ideological motivations signifies, as has been the case in its historical examples, not only the ideological crisis of bourgeoisie but also of the political and organizational impotence of working class and socialist forces to retract fascism and prevent its ideological influence over some sections of working class. We should add at this point that in its historical examples such as Germany and Italy, such ideological features of fascism and the structure of a fascist regime as a whole was also complementary and in compatible with the endeavors of those sections of bourgeoisie that had seen an expansionist international strategy and hence the subversion of existing international order as a necessity for getting rid of the obstacles to capital accumulation. Yet, only this factor does not suffice to explain why not any other exceptional forms of capitalist state that would be compatible with expansionism but fascism dominated the political field in these countries. In the perspective of this article while the generalized ideological crisis of bourgeoisie and the exhaustion of the existing ideological elements to resolve this crisis, and the impotency of progressive social forces to fill the vacuum left by the existing political establishment are internal and necessary conditions for fascism to rise.

We are now in a position to further specify our question in regards to the relationship between the contemporary right-populism and fascism. The question as to whether the right-wing populism today is a symptom and indication of the existing or emerging fascism is at this stage of paper equivalent to asking whether the counter-revolutionary subversiveness and non-contemporaneity is present in the current leading reactionary political forces. The importance of this question is that it will enable us to see some context-specific diverse manifestations of right-populism across the geography of capitalism. I would state from the outset that there is not one

single answer to this question that applies to all the countries under the influence of right-wing populism. One of the missing points in Toscana's article, which tries to provide a plausible answer to a similar question, is its focusing merely on the instances of reactionary politics in Western Europe and the USA without taking into account its forms in rather more peripheral countries such as Turkey and Hungary. Here in this paper, I will try to formulate some preliminary ideas based on this question by also picking the current conditions in Turkey as an illuminating example to be compared to the right populism of advanced capitalist countries.

Is fascism actual? Where and how?

When the recent right-wing populist movements and political forces are assessed in light of the above-discussion one could say that they hardly incorporate subversiveness and non-contemporaneity, as the two essential features of fascism, into their political discourse and practice. It is true that Le Pen's National Front in France, Nigel Farage's UKIP in England and Donald Trump in USA rely on a chauvinistic nationalism and exclusionary and oppressive anti-migrant discourse in their appeal to society and it is also true that this position encourages and mobilizes hitherto submerged fascist tendencies and white supremacist groups in these countries. Nevertheless, the absence of the aforementioned two elements in these movements is a good reason to avoid a false diagnosis of their character and directly identifying them with fascism. Here what we do is not to devise a "fascist minimum"¹⁹ around the list of necessary properties of classical fascism and test whether any of these elements are present in the contemporary reactionary movements in advanced capitalist countries. As stated before these two essential elements are not simply two items among yet many other characteristic features of fascism. Rather they are constitutive of the distinctiveness of fascism as an ideology and movement, giving a qualitatively different character to all other features of fascism that are shared in varying degrees by other right-wing movements. As such they are the most convenient vantage points through which to discuss whether the recent reactionary movements could follow a fascist path.

The crude anti-establishment discourse of Trump, Le Pen and Farage, at least as of recently has not been yet combined with a radical subversiveness that promises to demolish longstanding political institutions and ideological traditions in their respective countries. They, particularly Le Pen, rather tend to organize its political discourse around the condemnation of the depreciation of these traditions under neoliberal globalization and corrupt politicians who are indifferent to the demands

¹⁹ Stefan Breuer, *Milliyetçilikler ve Faşizmler [Nationalisms and Fascisms]*, trans. Çiğdem Canan Dikmen, İstanbul: İletişim, 2010.

of people.²⁰ They also do not build their political position on the emergent need to forcibly transform the existing balances of power in international relations as had been the case in the classical historical examples of fascism. In some cases they offer a kind of nationalist protectionism and isolationism as the necessary shifts in foreign policy. This is not to say that these movements are not dangerous and alarming enough. To the contrary they are the most striking epitomes and also catalysts of capitalism's reactionary predispositions in contemporary world and there is no guarantee that they could come to a position of fully embracing and embodying a true fascist character when the crisis of capitalism deepens further and the course of class struggle reaches at a more decisive level. Nevertheless, still, one should be cautioned against diagnosing their present position as fascism in order to be able to devise more reliable strategies of counteracting.

As for the non-contemporaneity of populist right in advanced capitalist countries today, Toscana's following statement is illuminating:

Now, how might we revisit this question of fascism and (non-)contemporaneity in our moment? Perhaps we can begin with an enormous dialectical irony: the fascistic tendencies finding expression in the election of Trump, but also in coeval revanchist nationalist projects across the 'West', are seemingly driven by a *nostalgia for synchronicity*. No archaic pasts, or invented traditions here, but the nostalgia for the image of a moment, that of the post-war affluence of the *trente glorieuses*, for a racialized and gendered image of the socially-recognised patriotic industrial worker (Bifo's national-workerism could also be called a *national or racial Fordism*, which curiously represses the state-regulatory conditions of its fantasy). To employ Bloch's terms this is a *nostalgia for the synchronous, for the contemporary*. The authorised emblem of a post-utopian depoliticised post-war industrial modernity, the industrial worker-citizen, now reappears – more in fantasy than in fact, no doubt, or in the galling *mise-en-scène* of 'coal workers' surrounding the US President as he abolishes environmental regulations – in the guise of the "forgotten men", the "non-synchronous people" of the political present. If this is a utopia, it is a utopia without transcendence, without any "fanatic-religious" element, without an unconscious or unspoken surplus of popular energies.²¹

As such contemporary reactionary political forces in advanced capitalist countries rest on the nostalgia of the ideal of organic, expanding and seemingly homogenous society of the post-second World War era rather than on the recall of a

20 Bruno Latour, "Güvenli Avrupa" ["Europe as Refuge"], in Heinrich Gieselberger (ed.) *Büyük Gerileme [The Great Regression]*, trans. Merisa Şahin et al., İstanbul: Metis, 2017, p. 107.

21 Alberto Toscana, "Notes on Late Fascism", p. 4.

heroic and archaic past that is supposed to be revitalized in the future by means of subverting “the present” in both domestic and international arenas. It is therefore, at least as of today, unlikely for these political forces to enlarge their autonomy from the rationality of dominant capitalist classes, a disposition that has been seen in the historical classical examples of fascism.²² This crucial difference needs to be taken into consideration before drawing hasty parallels between classical fascism and examples of right-populism in the core countries of capitalism.

Those stated about the right populism of advanced capitalist countries do not necessarily hold true for the instances of populism in the rather more peripheral countries of the world such as Turkey. Here, both the counter-revolutionary subversiveness and non-contemporaneity is more obvious than USA, France and England, albeit much less intense, continuous and ambitious than the classical historical examples of fascism. Let’s now very briefly elaborate on some characteristic features of the AKP rule in Turkey and situate them within these two quintessential features of fascism. The AKP has been in power in Turkey since 2002 and its ideological strategies of hegemony have possessed continuous features as well as intermittent ones that have come to the stage depending on the course of political struggles in Turkey and in international arena. After the Gezi Uprising in 2013 a right-wing populism, as defined in this article, has occupied a central position in the ideological strategy of the AKP. This populism is characterized by the party’s and its leader Tayyip Erdoğan’s search for crafting a conception of “nation” and people from its conservative social base that is to be juxtaposed against those sections of society that have been alienated by the AKP project. This strategy has gone hand in hand with the increasing authoritarianism, cult of leadership and an assault against those traditional institutions and ideological codes in the country that have been depicted by the party as the remnants of earlier elitist political establishment. Today highly oppressive practices of political power in Turkey is coupled with and justified by a populist rhetoric of defending the “victimized” people against traditional elites.

What is crucially important in the Turkish experience is that such populist practice of power converges upon a certain degree of subversiveness and non-contemporaneity that differentiates this party from other right wing political forces in modern Turkish history. The party reveals its subversiveness in its objective of unsettling conventional political traditions, constitutional frameworks and long-standing official ideological elements and symbols to the extent that they pose an obstacle to the party’s and its leader’s unfettered desire of monopolizing power. The attempts to build a new regime by deliberately undermining, eliminating or at least circumventing institutional, ideological and legal framework of the “republic”

22 Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: the Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, London: New Left Books, 1974.

is what differentiates the populist practice of power in Turkey from its counterparts in advanced capitalist countries. The whole discourse of “New Turkey” epitomizes such a subversive motivation of the AKP rule. The quest and promise of building “a new regime under one-man rule” has resonated in varying degrees so far with a reconfigured historical narrative that builds on an exaltation of the former Ottoman Empire. The medieval Ottoman times have been envisaged and presented by the party and its affiliated ideologues as an “unfulfilled Golden age” (i.e neo-Ottomanism) and supposed to be revitalized in future once the party and its leader eliminate the present obstacles threatening such a dream. The AKP’s subversiveness towards “the present” and “near past” does not accompany a novel political project or a new social contract based on the *synchronous* necessities and conditions of contemporary Turkey. What the party offers in lieu of the “present” is a glorified “past” that could be actualized in the future. It is this non-contemporaneity that is coupled with subversiveness that makes the AKP rule make at least *ideologically* closer to fascism compared to the instances of right-populism in the Western world. This discussion could be further expanded by demonstrating the concrete manifestations in the last ten years of this subversiveness and non-contemporaneity, but this lengthy discussion could be beyond the limited space of this paper. It is rather more crucial here to answer the following question within the limits of this paper: Does this ideological affinity suffice to identify contemporary Turkey with fascism?

In classical historical examples of fascism subversiveness and non-contemporaneity were not only discursive components of the ideological framework of fascist political powers but they also constituted the underpinnings of their actual political practice in domestic as well as international arena. The revisionist and expansionist endeavors of Italy and Germany before and during the Second World War were ideologically justified as the necessary actions oriented towards revitalization of the unfulfilled Golden Age in the distant future. At the same time it was by means of this continuous militaristic expansion and subversiveness that they tried to demonstrate to the public the “potentiality” of the nation under their rule.²³ This was necessary because any setback or failure to prove in the present time their capacity to actualize the glory of the mythic past would have jeopardized the sustainability of this fascistic fantasy. The question for Turkey in this context is that whether Turkey could have succeeded so far in presenting the public at least traces of the potentiality of its non-synchronous and subversive neo-Ottomanist rhetoric. Indeed, the facts indicate to us that there are some insuperable structural impediments for the AKP to “actualize” adequately its subversiveness and non-contemporaneity particularly in the international arena. Whenever the AKP searched for pushing the

23 Paxton, *Faşizmin Anatomisi*, p. 260.

limits of the structure of power in international relations for the purpose of actualizing its non-synchronous Ottomanism it could not fail to find itself more entangled by and dependent on more powerful international actors. (The course of conflict between Russia and Turkey in Syrian issue is an indicative example of this.) The Syrian conflict, which the AKP rule had initially seen as an opportunity to prove the potentiality of neo-Ottomanism and then completely found itself in a trapped situation with no exit strategy, has been a litmus-test for seeing the limitations of the actualization of fascism in Turkey. Such limitations stem from both economically and politically “dependent” position of Turkey in international capitalist order that does not allow this country to possess an adequate imperialist capacity to fully and independently actualize its subversiveness and non-contemporaneity. This is a crucial point that makes it necessary to be cautioned against equating Turkey with a form of fascism despite the presence of meaningful and obvious ideological affinities.

This discussion overall shows us that although they share many commonalities making it possible to evaluate them collectively under the rubric of right-populism, the recent reactionary political forces across the world exhibit some significant context-specific features. Without taking into account this contextual variance one would not be able to devise thorough and realistic strategies of counteracting and resisting the current trend. Such historical and contextual specificities of right-populism could be more comprehensively grasped by incorporating the concept and phenomenon of *fascism* into our discussions..