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> The Rise of Authoritarian Capitalism

by **Christian Fuchs**, University of Westminster, United Kingdom

Far-right politics has in recent years expanded and consolidated its power. We have Donald Trump (Republican Party) in the USA, Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) in Hungary, Heinz-Christian Strache (Freedom Party) in Austria, Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom) in the Netherlands, Narendra Modi (Bharatiya Janata Party) in India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (AKP) in Turkey, the Alternative for Germany, Jarosław Kaczyński (Law and Justice) in Poland, Marine Le Pen (former National Front) in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, Vladimir Putin (All-Russia People's Front) in Russia, etc. How can this development best be characterized? What sociological categories are best suited for this purpose?

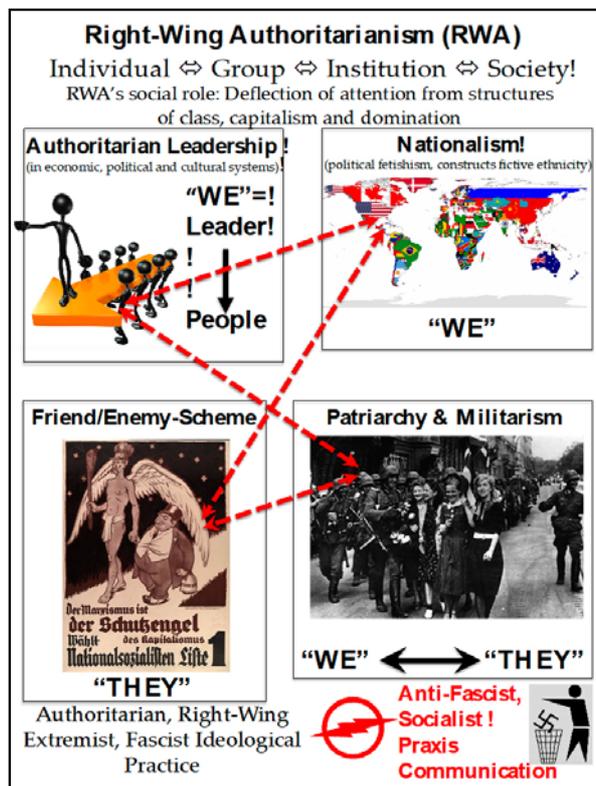
A prominent suggestion is that the notion of populism should be used. Jan-Werner Müller (2017) has recently renewed this proposal in his book *What Is Populism?* In the book, he defines populism as “a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified [...] people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. [...] Populists are always antipluralist: populists claim that they, *and only they*, represent the people.” He also notes that populism is “an exclusionary form of identity politics” that poses “a danger to democracy” and aims to “suppress civil society.”

Such approaches use one and the same category for Syriza, Evo Morales, Podemos, or Bernie Sanders on the left and Donald Trump, Geert Wilders, or Marine Le Pen on the right. The outcome is that, just like in the theory of totalitarianism, the radical right is compared to the left and thereby the dangers of the first are trivialized. For Müller, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are both populists. Bernie Sanders certainly is an unconventional politician, but in contrast to Trump there are no doubts about his democratic orientation.

The approach taken in my 2018 book *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* is different and combines critical political economy, ideology critique, and critical psychology. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) articulates four elements (see Figure 1): the belief in the need for top-down leadership; nationalism; the friend/

enemy scheme; and militant patriarchy (law and order policies; idealization of warfare and soldiers; repression of constructed enemies; conservative gender relations). RWA serves the ideological purpose of distracting attention from the role of class structures and capitalism as foundations and causes of social problems. Refugees, immigrants, developing nations, Muslims, etc., are constructed as scapegoats who are blamed for problems such as unemployment, low wages, economic stagnation, the decline of public services, the housing crisis, and crime. Trump blames Mexico and China for deindustrialization and social decline without ever mentioning that US capital exploits workers both in the US and in destinations of outsourced capital, including in Chinese sweatshops and Mexican *maquiladoras*.

Figure 1: A Model of right-wing authoritarianism



Source: C. Fuchs, 2018.

RWA is neither a form of consciousness nor a structure nor a type of society. It is a process that can take place on different levels of society: the individual (authoritarian personality structure, consciousness, individual political behavior), political groups and movements, ideology, institutions, society as totality. Right-wing extremism and fascism are intensifications of RWA that tolerate or actively pursue physical violence and terror as political means.

Culturalist explanations of the rise of RWA claim that the rise of a “post-materialist” society has created a generation gap, in which the older generation holds conservative values and moans about the loss of the past. But for example, the post-materialism hypothesis cannot explain why in the Austrian federal elections of 2017, the far right was the strongest party in the age group 16-29 (30%), but only the third largest party among those aged 60+.

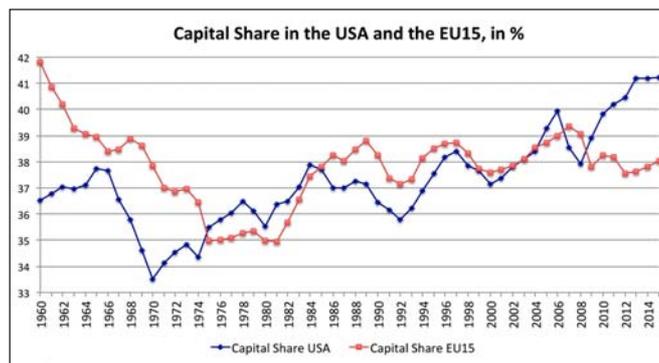
An alternative explanation takes political economy seriously. For this purpose, the approach of critical political theorist Franz L. Neumann in his 1957 essay [Anxiety and Politics](#) is helpful. The rise of right-wing authoritarianism according to this explanation has to do with the alienation of labor (see Figures 2 and 3); destructive competition; social alienation that creates fear of social decline; political alienation from the political system, politicians, and political parties; and the institutionalization of anxiety by far-right groups that stoke fears and advance the politics of scapegoating.

Figure 2: The share of wages in the GDP in the USA and the EU over time



Data source: AMECO.

Figure 3: The share of capital in the GDP in the USA and the EU over time



Data source: AMECO.

Authoritarian capitalism is the result of neoliberal capitalism’s negative dialectic. The contradiction between the freedom of the market and social freedom resulted in rising inequalities and crises that after the 2008 crash turned into a new quality. The bourgeoisification and neoliberalization of social democracy, the weakness of the left, and postmodernist identity politics that underestimated the importance of class politics and class analysis exacerbated the rise of the far-right and authoritarian capitalism. Neoliberal capitalism resulted in the universalization of alienation. As Harvey, Hardt and Negri, as well as myself have argued [elsewhere](#), neoliberalism brought about the commodification of almost everything so that we have experienced ongoing primitive accumulation by dispossession and the real subsumption of society under capital. In David Harvey’s words: “Widespread alienation has resulted in Occupy movements as well as right-wing populism and bigoted nationalist and racist movements. Donald Trump is the President of alienation.” ■

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