

The International Marxist-Humanist

Journal of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization

Summary: Examines right-wing populism and its similarities/differences with fascism, and the relationship of both to economic crisis, both today and in the writings of Trotsky, Grossmann, Sohn-Rethel, and Dunayevskaya; considered in light of the need to overcome the capital relation in favor of humanism and freedom - Editors

In the Ocean of Crisis: Right-wing Populism and Awakening Fascism vs. Marxist-Humanism and Freedom

Karel Ludenhoff

April 14, 2017



International Marxist-Humanist Organization
Email: arise@internationalmarxisthumanist.org
Web: www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org

“The question is what to do about it, and that ‘doing’ is not limited to actions but extends to thought, to a strategy flowing from a philosophy which recognizes the social system which has brought these intolerable conditions about.”

Raya Dunayevskaya

Right-Wing Populism and Freedom

Racism, right-wing populism, and fascism are the products of a crisis ridden capitalist society, of class contradictions and the interests of the ruling classes of the owners of capital. Racism serves to distract the minds of people from the true social problems and the forces that actually are the cause of these problems by making migrants, Muslims, Black people or other groups into scapegoats. Here, the principle of "divide and rule" is present on all sides. The split among those affected by social problems -- wage-workers, the socially disadvantaged, young people, people of colour, refugees, and retirees -- is intended to make collective resistance more difficult or impossible.

In taking up related developments in capitalist society theoretically, Marx remarked in *Capital* that “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded.” Here, in *developing* his analysis of capitalist society, he actually pointed to the centrality of the Black

Dimension in the struggle for an alternative to this society. We touch here upon the central element of his theory in *all* of his works, the search for an alternative to capitalist society and therefore the analysis of the connections among the ongoing struggles in this society for that alternative. This would mean a human society in which freedom for human beings possible only with the abolition of production for value and surplus value, and of the alienated labour that accompanies that production.

In this analysing of our crisis-ridden capitalist society, which takes concrete form in the policies of Trump toward the Black Dimension, we have to centre the remark Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has made in a recent interview, “Black Awakening, Class Rebellion” <https://roarmag.org/magazine/black-awakening-class-rebellion/> in which she raises the issue of the connectedness of working class oppression and the age-old discrimination against Black people in all areas of society. In this interview, related to the publication of her book, *From Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*, she emphasizes that “We have to be in the streets confronting the Trump agenda and the fascist menace he has awakened. But we have to also articulate a political vision for the kind of world we want and the kind of politics that can win.” The need for an alternative to capitalist society also rings through her remarks.

Critique of the Liberal Response

Contextualizing right-wing populism in crisis-ridden capitalist society, and raising up an alternative to it, as above, is quite different from what Jan-Werner Müller brings to the fore in an article in the *Guardian* of September 2, 2016, “Trump, Erdogan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy.”[1] I will stress his thoughts on populism, because his views reflect the liberal notions that influence liberal democrats and Left Green parties inside and outside Europe. His way of thinking is enclosed *within* the confines of capitalist society and his manner of reacting to populism is in no way connected to the search for an alternative to it. Because Müller analyses populism from a liberal democratic viewpoint and does not relate his conception of it to the origins and development of crisis-ridden contemporary capitalist society, his article remains at the surface level of capitalist society. He merely describes some manifestations of populism with the intention to bringing in and strengthening pluralism in capitalist democracy.

His article concerns itself mainly with right-wing populism in the West, to wit the USA and Europe, although he also refers occasionally to Putin’s Russia, Erdogan’s Turkey, and the Chavista movement in Venezuela. He explicitly rejects the notion of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain as populist movements.

In his approach to populism, Müller underlines that he is basing himself on what the populist leaders are saying and doing and he points out that for him the motives of the populist voters are not important.

In his description of populism we can discern the following elements:

Firstly, populists claim that only they are morally the representatives of the people. As an example of this vision Müller refers to the speeches of George C. Wallace in the 1960's about the "real Americans" (white, God-fearing, hard-working, gun-owning, and so on).

Secondly, when populists do not win "there must be something wrong with the system [of elections]."

Thirdly, "populists deny, or wish away, the pluralism of contemporary societies."

Fourthly, populists state that they are opposed to elites. Müller refers here, however, to the situation of Hungary and Poland in order to show that the populist movements/governments there are constructing their own elitist institutions, thus doing what they denied they would do. [2]

Fifthly, "populists also engage in the exchange of material and immaterial favours for mass support." Here is interesting that "for regimes in central and eastern Europe, funds from the European Union have been the equivalent of

oil to some Arab authoritarian states: governments can strategically employ the subsidies to buy support or at least keep citizens quiet. What's more, they can form social strata that conform to their image of the ideal people – and that are deeply loyal to the regime.”

In the end Müller's notion is that of populism as tragic irony: “...populism in power commits the very political sins of which it accuses elites: excluding citizens and usurping the state. What the establishment supposedly has always done, populists will also end up doing.”

As mentioned above, Müller does not write of populism in connection with the nature of capitalist society. This explains also the specific content of his proposals to overcome populism. He begins by stating that “we should stop the inflationary use of the term ‘populism’.” He adds that “one should call populists out for what they are: a danger to democracy and not a useful corrective for too much elite power, as some commentators naively assume.” His final proposal concerns what he sees as the genuine conflict that characterises our time: “on one side there are the advocates for more openness; on the other, the proponents of some kind of closure.” It is this notion of “openness” that appeals to liberals and a lot of people in the Green Left terrain.

As Marxist-Humanists, however, we have to realize that the meaning of notions has a dialectical side. Consequently, the

meaning of a notion is determined by the context in which it is functioning. Thus, openness in the *liberal* context is in the first instance actually openness toward the mobility of capital and labour to enhance profits!

Thus, the openness to which Müller alludes is a kind of freedom that has been deduced from the existence of wage-labour, which is producing value and surplus value and is alienated relations between human beings in capitalist society. Another term for this kind of openness is *bourgeois freedom*.

Steeped in philosophy, the Austrian writer Robert Menasse clarifies the other kind of freedom, the real human freedom. When we talk of freedom, democracy and justice, he says, we see that the beginning of real human freedom occurs where the alienating power ceases to work. Therefore, we need freedom based on the need to *abolish* this alienating power, in other words, the power of value and surplus value producing labour [3]. He shows that the history of philosophy during the bourgeois era proves this, beginning with Spinoza, whom he cites as follows: “I will never participate in projects which are only therefore useful, because they harm other people.”

As for the ultimate resistance against the ultimate form of this kind of alienating labour in capitalist society, Menasse refers to the history of the slogan the Nazis put on the gateway to Auschwitz, “Arbeit macht frei” (Labour will

create freedom). The history of this slogan in Auschwitz tells us that the prisoner Jan Liwacz, an ornamental metalworker, was forced by the SS to forge this lettering and to attach it to the gate. Liwacz's quiet resistance took the form of reversing the word "B" in "ARBEIT." Thus, true freedom begins at the point where one literarily *reverses* labour in the specifically fascist form of *capitalist* society.

Marxist-Humanism, Right-Wing Populism and the Awakening of the Fascist Menace

The notion of non-bourgeois freedom and the reflection on and creation of it through philosophical thought are for Marxist-Humanists well-known notions. They are important cornerstones in the body of ideas of Marxist-Humanism. They are all the more important when we are grappling with right-wing populism and the menace of awakening fascism, because "For Marxist-Humanists, any new phenomenon, no matter how regressive or progressive, must be grasped by returning to, and remaining firmly rooted in, the *body* of ideas of Marxist-Humanism. This body of ideas is neither mere 'background' nor merely of historical interest. It is instead *the determinant* for developing our political, philosophical, and organizational perspectives *for today*" ("Theoretical and Practical Perspectives for Overcoming Capitalism," Statement of the Steering Committee of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, April 17, 2016

<https://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/theoretical-practical-perspectives-overcoming-capitalism-steering-committee-international-marxist-humanist-organization>)

In this body of ideas of Marxist-Humanism we find the connections among philosophy, history, and the principle of freedom:

“*Philosophical thought* leads from immediate experience to its historic structure via the *principle of freedom*. That which united Marx with the Abolitionists during the Civil War, with the Irish in the struggle for self-determination, with the Communards in the Paris Commune, will then reveal itself into the what now for our age.” (Raya Dunayevskaya, “Draft Thesis: The Turning Point” [July 1964], p. 3588, emphasis added

<http://rayadunayevskaya.org/raya/ArchivePDFs/3577.pdf>).

We have to keep two things in mind concerning the ideas formulated here. First, philosophical thought here is not just philosophy in general but philosophy rooted in the *dialectic* of Hegel and Marx. Second, the principle of freedom is connected to the perspective of an *alternative* to capitalist society.

What is new in contemporary right-wing populism, compared, for example, with the Goldwater phenomenon in the USA in the 1960s or Peronism in Argentina in the 1940s,

is, first of all, that it is more widely disseminated in the North America and Western Europe. Second and most crucially the recent years it received a major push from the greatest global economic crisis in capitalist society since 1929. Third, it emerged under the consequences of imperialist politics: growing inequality, wars, streams of refugees, racism, Islamic fundamentalism, etc.

Because of the worldwide dissemination of right-wing populism and the cruel and inhuman traits it surely has assumed, a lot of people on the Left are seeing an equivalence between right-wing populism and fascism, or see right-wing populism as a form of fascism. We have to be careful with such notions, however. We have to distinguish between right-wing populism and fascism, even if there are undoubtedly ideological, political and personal intersections. While right-wing populists want to dismantle democratic rights, they act within the framework of bourgeois parliamentarianism. Fascism is a special form of bourgeois reaction, which is characterized by the attempt to crush all elements of the workers' movement by means of a violent mass mobilization. Fascism is a terrorist movement against minorities and the workers' movement with the aim of establishing a comprehensive regime of oppression.

Some Marxist Theories of Fascism

In order to be able to distinguish right-wing populism from fascism and to discern the fascist danger in right-wing

populism, it will be useful to go over briefly some Marxist theories of fascism.

During the rise of fascist movements the establishment of fascist regimes in their “classical” form -- Italy, Germany and Spain -- the Left labour movement and its intellectuals theorized fascism during their search for strategy and tactics to fight it. A variety of notions about fascism resulted. To give just an outline of these theories as a whole would go beyond the limits of this article. That is why we will discuss briefly a few of the most important theorizations of fascism, by Leon Trotsky, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Henryk Grossmann.

In Trotsky’s notion of fascism, the position and role of the petty bourgeoisie is fundamental. Already in his first remarks about fascism he is emphasizing the position and role of the petty bourgeoisie. As to Italy “it [fascism- K.L.] has a very large base -- the petty bourgeoisie of the towns and cities, and the peasantry. In Germany, likewise, there is a large base for fascism....” (See, Trotsky, *Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It*

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1944/1944-fas.htm>)

When he is writing about fascism in Germany, Trotsky states that “The gigantic growth of National Socialism is an expression of two factors: a deep social crisis, throwing the petty bourgeois masses off balance, and the lack of a

revolutionary party that would be regarded by the masses of the people as an acknowledged revolutionary leader.”

This assessment of the petty bourgeoisie ensues from his conception of the three main classes in capitalist society: the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He points to the dialectical relation among these three classes and says that “we must differentiate three historical stages in the history of politics in capitalism: at the dawn of capitalistic development, when the bourgeoisie required revolutionary methods to solve its tasks; in the period of bloom and maturity of the capitalist regime, when the bourgeoisie endowed its domination with orderly, pacific, conservative, democratic forms; finally, at the decline of capitalism, when the bourgeoisie is forced to resort to methods of civil war against the proletariat to protect its right of exploitation.”

For each of these three historical stages, Trotsky distinguishes a specific political program based on a petty bourgeois current. At the first the stage, the dawn of capitalism, Jacobinism emerges; at the second stage, that of the flowering and maturity of the capitalist regime, reformist democracy emerges; at the third stage, that of the decline of capitalism, fascism emerges.

During the first and second stages, Trotsky sees the petty bourgeoisie as acting as a mediator for the proletariat in order to *integrate* the proletariat into capitalist society. At

the third stage he conceives of the petty bourgeoisie as a force to *crush* the proletariat in the interest of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, Trotsky is connecting fascism and the decline of capitalism and points to a specific role of the petty bourgeoisie for the bourgeoisie, which can (but not necessarily must) function as a mass movement for civil war and terror against the proletariat in order to continue the capitalist process of exploitation. The way out for Trotsky at the stage of declining capitalism is (the building of) a strong revolutionary party that strengthens the proletariat and pulls away the petty bourgeoisie from the bourgeoisie in order to turn the fascist tide and to set course of history toward communism.

In this context, Trotsky is polemicizing against August Thalheimer (in the 1920's one of the leaders of the German Communist Party), who sees fascism as identical to Bonapartism [4]. He is also polemicizing against the Stalinised Comintern's concept of fascism, which characterizes Social Democracy as Social Fascism and in this way hems the struggle for a United Front against (potential) fascism. Finally, he denounces the reformism of the Social Democracy for weakening the proletariat in the struggle against conservatism and (potential) fascism.

On the basis of an analysis of fascism in Germany in the 1930's, Sohn-Rethel writes: "The Nazi-regime as a whole

has been masterfully dissected and portrayed under the name of Behemoth by Franz Neumann. I am, in essence, in agreement with him and set his results here, in particular his analysis of the bourgeois power base in the form of its three pillars, monopoly capital, the army, and bureaucracy. What concerns me here is, above all, the fourth pillar, which is not derived from the arsenal of the bourgeois tradition, i.e.. the fascist party, and the connection of its power with the economy. For the class structure of Nazi-fascism is understandable only in the light of a theoretical analysis which conceives the establishment of the Fascist dictatorship in Germany from the reaction of the monopoly capital to the collapse of its capacity to function in the global economic crisis of the thirties” [5]. In other words, Sohn-Rethel’s thesis is that only through a fascist dictatorship was monopoly capitalism able to continue functioning in Germany.

To Sohn-Rethel, the economic crisis of the 1930’s was a structural crisis of capitalist society. He saw the causes of this crisis “in profound changes in the industrial forces of production, which made it impossible for monopoly capitalism to restart the production as long as one was tied up to the fundamental norm of acting economically, to wit, the reproduction of social life in capitalist sense: producing reproductive values and good saleable commodities.” He emphasizes here “the given limits of profit latitude in the

market” for monopoly capitalists which forces state intervention. In this way, a transformation in production could take place, with a focus not on reproductive values and good saleable commodities in the market but production of goods for which the state has to create demand with the bill paid by the people. In this way, it could be possible to break through the limits of the profit latitude violently and to handle competition over the world market with military instead of economic means. This, however, requires a state different from the traditional bourgeois state, all the more so because this transformation in fascism also had to institute a despotic regime over monopoly capital.

An interesting aspect of Sohn-Rethel’s notion of fascism is how he conceives of the social constitution of the “fourth pillar,” the fascist party. Here, he brings his own personal experience to bear on the problem, as he worked until he went into exile in 1937 for the company “Mitteleuropäischen Wirtschaftstages,” which was engaged in strategic planning for economic development. There he observed how monopolistic corporations and fascist state institutions were interconnected and, above all, what were the constituting elements of the Nazi-apparatus. Sohn-Rethel refers to the downgrading of the petty bourgeoisie in Germany as a reservoir for recruitment for the fourth pillar, the Party, and particularly to the very strong downgrading of the youth of these middle classes. However, through Nazi

Party membership, these youth could obtain positions in the fascist state apparatus and the companies connected with it. This offered insight into how hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people became members of the Nazi Party. Their new positions involved especially supervision of a production process that had been transformed during the fascist dictatorship.

Eighty years ago, Henryk Grossmann was also analysing fascism [6]. By that time, he was in the midst of fascism, on the run from Nazi Germany. By 1936 in London as a refugee, he wrote about the relationship between the great economic crisis of 1929 and German fascism. The fascism of Nazi Germany is in his view a specific answer to the crisis in capitalist society caused by the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit. In Grossmann's view, only two paths are open through which capital can restore profitability, Firstly, there is the process of "... reducing capital costs of machines, raw materials, *pushing down interest*, reducing taxes, reducing social services— and most importantly *pushing down wages!*" Secondly, there is one can "increase prices by extending credit, destroying part of the product or restricting part of production..."

In basing his theory of crisis of capitalist society on the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, as did Marx, he rejected the notion of the theoreticians of the theory of under-consumption or overproduction, who hold that an

increase in the purchasing power of the consumers could end the crisis.

Grossman emphasized the element of wage cuts in the restoration of profitability for capital: “If [workers] are tough in defending themselves, they slow the implementation of wage cuts— and thus the restoration of businesses’ *profitability*.” As to fascism, he concluded: “... Precisely in these developed countries [Italy and Germany - K.L.] with strong workers organizations, fascism comes to the aid of capitalism.”... That is the role of German fascism... And exactly for this reason profitability grew..., i.e., to that extent the crisis was overcome.”

It will be clear that this overcoming of the crisis was a victory for capitalist society and not for the workers. An overcoming of this kind of crisis in a manner favourable to the workers is only possible by doing away the production of value and surplus value.

Right-Wing Populism in the Context of “History and Its Process”

When we return to the issue of contemporary right-wing populism we can find a handle in the notions Dunayevskaya raises in two articles in 1964, “The Turning Point” (<http://rayadunayevskaya.org/raya/ArchivePDFs/3577.pdf>) and “Theory and Practice at the Turning Point” (<http://rayadunayevskaya.org/raya/ArchivePDFs/3591.pdf>)

Both articles, written in 1964 in the period of the Goldwater phenomenon, constitute a gold mine of Marxist-Humanist philosophical/methodological concepts for the analysis of and struggle against contemporary right-wing populism. What follows are a few highlights extracted from these articles, above all from “Theory and Practice at the Turning Point.”

To begin with, one issue that Dunayevskaya particularly stresses is the *potential danger* of fascism in the right-wing populism of Goldwater and his supporters:

“...that fascism can arise in ‘democratic’ America, that such a phenomenon must be fought at its root— its state-capitalist root with its concomitant administrative mentality— and this can be done only by uniting white labor and Negro freedom fighters with the need to construct a new social order.” (3581)

Today, this notion is crucial for the USA, because Trump, in contrast to Goldwater, is at *the centre of state power*. Right-wing populist leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey are also in the centre of state power, and in Hungary and Turkey even with features tending to fascism.

We saw above in the different theories of fascism that all of them contain as an element the connection between state power and fascist organization. Capitalism did, however, take different forms in response to the Great Depression

beginning in 1929. We see at the beginning of the 1930s the emergence of Roosevelt's New Deal in the USA, of Nazism in Germany, and of Stalinist state-capitalism claiming to be communist in the Soviet Union. Because all are forms of capitalism, albeit with a dominant role for the state in the economy, they all operate under the laws of motion of capitalist society. Thus, we can speak of state capitalism as a global stage. [7]

For this reason, the Marxist-Humanist points outlined in pp. 3596-3606 of Dunayevskaya's essay are terribly important for today when we are fighting right-wing populism in a state-capitalist context, as it gets at the state capitalist roots of the problem. We highlight below a few of these points that are particularly relevant to the struggle against right-wing populism and neo-fascism today.

- Right-wing populism is a historic phenomenon. "Historic phenomena do not arise through 'error,' but are born in response to objective class needs." (p. 3596)

- As to right-wing populism "...the dialectical methodology of Marxist-Humanism by no means exhausts itself in an analysis of the Goldwater phenomenon. It is the only method of analysis....in the year 1964, or any other year." (p. 3597)

- "...A new humanist society, then was Marx's 'Absolute' not only as 'goal', as 'end', but as 'the future' inherent in

the present’.” And as to that dialectic: “...the transformation of reality, is the core of the dialectic, for Hegel and for Marx.” (p. 3597)

- “It is necessary to clear away intellectual debris.”

Dunayevskaya refers to the psychoanalytic and abstract materialist approaches, but it holds for all schools of thought that cannot “explain the deep-rooted objective bases of the neo-fascistic Goldwater phenomenon” [and the right-wing populist and neo-fascistic movements nowadays - K.L.], because such “approaches lack what Marx called ‘history and its process’, an Absolute for any period.” (p. 3597)

- An important issue in the struggle against right-wing populism is, “The temptation to flee from the specific form of an antagonism to some abstract Absolute like revolution...”... “Marx never succumbed to this temptation, but extracted everything from the given stage until existing, live contradictions forced a transition to another stage.” In this way “he could make the next cognitive leap which met the proletarian challenge, like the 8 hour day a philosophy more concrete than the Declaration of the Rights of Man or the lower or deeper strata as the propulsion for the forward movement of humanity beyond the Paris Commune.” (See 3605/06)

These passages from Dunayevskaya clarify what the epigraph from her writings at the beginning of this essay already refers to, that the struggle against right-wing

populism and the accompanying danger of fascism in the state-capitalist context demands that we develop activity *and* thought in order to reach a new human society. These highlights from Dunayevskaya's essay make clear that in the struggle against right-wing populism and awakening fascism "...to Marxists, all history, to use the famous phrase of Benedetto Croce, [indeed - K.L.] is 'contemporary history'." They also make clear that only creative activity *and* thought in the here and now can create a human future.

1. Jan-Werner Müller is a professor of politics at Princeton and a fellow at the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna.
2. It should be noted that Müller's article was written before the Trump's inauguration.
3. Robert Menasse, *Permanente Revolution der Begriffe* (Permanent Revolution of the Notion), Frankfurt, 2009, pp. 22, 23.
4. Trotsky's definition: "By Bonapartism we mean a regime in which the economically dominant class, fit for democratic methods of government, is constrained, in order to safeguard what it owns, to tolerate over it the uncontrolled command of a military and police apparatus, a crowned 'saviour'. Such a situation arises in periods when class contradictions have become particularly severe: Bonapartism is intended to prevent the explosion." In: Trotsky, *Bolchevisme contre*

stalinisme, Bonapartisme bourgeois et bonapartisme soviétique, 1938.

5. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Ökonomie und Klassenstruktur des deutschen Faschismus* (Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism), Frankfurt am Main, 1973, Chapter 10.

6. See Rick Kuhn, *Henryk Grossmann and the Recovery of Marxism*, Urbana and Chicago, 2007, pp. 173, 174.

7. For the theory of state-capitalism, see especially Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom* (New York, 1958); see also, Kevin Anderson, “The East European Upheavals, German Unification and the Future of Marxism: The Continuing Relevance of the Concepts of State Capitalism and Marxist Humanism,” in: *Humanity and Society*, Volume 16, Number 2 (1992)