

## NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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*The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States took most of the world by surprise. Since the 1970s, there have been periods of rise (and decline) of right-wing populist movements tainted with the xenophobia and extreme nationalism in the capitalist democracies of Western Europe. For 150 years, there has also been a segment of the U.S. population accepting of xenophobic, even racist, ultranationalist populism. However, the probability of someone winning the presidency by openly espousing these same ideas seemed remote, even more so, coming after the voting public's twice acceptance of a liberal black man as president. Because Trump's statements are sometimes odd by conventional standards, there is a tendency, common in popular political discourse, to view his behavior in psychological terms rather than in understanding the socio-political and economic context that has allowed these views to become normalized. All kinds of ideas are always present in different societies; the crucial question for sociologists is why certain ideas, such as "white nationalism," have become more widespread. This article explores the changes in global and U.S. political-economic processes over the past fifty years, and how they are used by xenophobic populists to expand their base, just as xenophobia is used by various capitalist economic forces to deflect and divert resistance to neoliberal capitalism's growing crisis, resulting in a large, if unstable, alliance of diverse interests.*

It has been said that history moves in spirals. The forms are familiar as they repeat, but it is never exactly the same because the context is different. There have been many types of authoritarian regimes throughout history. They may share some similar characteristics, but the development of authoritarian regimes in ancient Egypt is certainly different from the authoritarianism of Nazi Germany, and the rise of authoritarian regimes today in many countries may share similar characteristics to authoritarian regimes of the past but there is also something distinctive about them based

on the historical, socio-economic and political context of the times.

### **Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism**

It might be useful to differentiate among three different types of authoritarian regimes, although in many ways aspects of all of them are present in the others. The most micro-level one would be an autocratic dictator's rule that is more idiosyncratic, based on personality characteristics. But even in this case such a ruler likely has consent of major sections of the military and the wealthy. On a broader level, one might see emergency decrees or military coups that seriously restrict workers' rights and civil rights. These are more likely in response to immediate threats either because of fear of revolution, or widespread non-revolutionary mass rebellion possibly in an alliance with other sections of the capitalist class, but which nevertheless could lead to violent disruptions of society and the risk of loss of power and wealth to certain groups. Fear of alleged terrorism or agents of a foreign power are also often used to justify suspension of civil rights and imposition of authoritarian rule. While both of these levels of authoritarianism can be severe and long-lasting, it is the authoritarianisms that flow from fundamental structural political and economic changes in society that are the most profound because the broader socio-economic crises that generate them are not easily reversed.

Donald Trump's ascendancy to the presidency, despite his embracing of authoritarian and xenophobic views and policies, is not mainly the result of his personality quirks or egotistical drive for power. The conditions that laid the basis for Trump's victory flow directly from the development of the stresses of late capitalism and the adoption of neoliberal policies. It is important to understand that his electoral victory is not completely equivalent to the rise of authoritarians in places like Poland, Hungary, and the Philippines. Trump did not win a majority popular vote. The particularities of the electoral system allowed Trump, with three million fewer votes, to win the presidency. Combined with the fact that voter turnout was relatively lower among constituencies that are likely hostile to Trump and the reality that liberal African-American Barack Obama had just won the presidency twice it is clear that support for liberal policies are still very strong among the U.S. population. There are

parallels, to be sure, especially with regard to certain socio-economic groups who were left behind by industrialization and various free-trade policies, which combined with a latent cultural conservatism that merged with a latent xenophobia. While the parallels are not exact, there are important commonalities. This is especially important when considering their relationship to global economic trends.

After World War I, there was some degree of acceptance and respect for civil rights in the United States. Women won the right to vote and while unionization drives were often met with corporate and state violence, unions were established and recognized (Rauchway, 2018). Within 15 years, much of the world was mired in conflict and the installation of vicious authoritarian regimes. There is some debate even about President Franklin Roosevelt as to whether his policies promoted some form of progressive corporatism as distinct from right-wing authoritarianism or fascism.

After World War II, there was an economic boom in the United States. Corporate America came out of the War with practically no international economic competition. While anti-communism was a tool to build hostility towards the Soviet Union, and this was used to remove more militant leadership from the labor unions. This combined with the ability of the corporations to meet the economic demands of workers undercut the militancy of the labor force. Starting in the 1950's, the corporate class could use selective repression, rather than full scale authoritarian repression, while temporarily improving the conditions of the working class.

The U.S. government set up authoritarian regimes in other countries primarily to protect corporate interests or block Soviet interests, but in the U.S. the economic boom brought about by the destruction of much of the rest of the world provided some release of the pressures that built up because of the contradictions of late capitalism (Schmitz, 2006; Scipes, 2011). There was repression in the 1960s to be sure, but not anything approaching a full-scale authoritarian rule (Blackstock, 1988). The violent crushing of the urban anti-racist rebellions and the widespread use of police informants, agent provocateurs and violence against antiwar protesters was certainly common (Davis, 1992). But full-scale authoritarianism was not on the agenda is evidenced by the fact that most protests were allowed to continue, because there were at

least four major labor strikes during the Vietnam War and because progressive leftist journalists, labor leaders, intellectuals, and teachers were generally not severely repressed. The labor strikes were especially important. Strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers against General Electric and General Motors, as well as those by the Teamsters and the postal workers were all sharply criticized as being unpatriotic for striking during wartime, but they were not crushed the way they might be under a full-blown authoritarian fascist regime. Unarmed students were killed by the police and the National Guard, but nothing approaching the hundreds killed in Mexico City or elsewhere during this period of rebellion and resistance.

There has always been an element of support for authoritarian/fascist-type policies in the United States (Berlet and Lyons, 2000). These currents particularly dovetail with racism and nativism among certain sections of the population. This was exacerbated by the fear that the struggle for black liberation would somehow come to their doorstep and attack them in their homes. Proud racist Governor George Wallace of Alabama got hundreds of thousands of votes in places like Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland but much of this was residual racism from the past or unfounded fears that increasingly restive black people were getting ready to use violence against whites. Similarly, there were a number of violent racist actions against school integration, and later in the 1970s there was a resurgence of public Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi activity in many Northern states.

The 1970s were something of a transition period. Capitalism has a tendency toward a falling rate of profit brought on by, among other things, overproduction of goods that cannot be sold at a high profit. The Vietnam War brought with it a kind of military Keynesianism as the need for war production created demand for products, and combined with the removal of hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the labor market, the pressures caused by capitalism's internal contradictions were somewhat alleviated. By the 1970s, as the war wound down, unemployment began to build up.

Another important development globally was the reality that Germany and Japan had rebuilt their industrial bases, often in more modern and efficient ways than the aging U.S. industrial base could

compete with. This cut into the profits of U.S. corporations. Furthermore, it was not just Germany and Japan. Other countries were beginning to industrialize more rapidly and most importantly, weaknesses in U.S. global capital which was exposed by the Vietnam War converged with the decision by OPEC countries to significantly raise their oil prices. This created an anomaly in the U.S. economy, which was dubbed “Stagflation” — a situation where the normal tug-o-war between economic slowdowns and high inflation existed side-by-side. Often the existence of one mitigates the impact of the other, and various banks and governments attempt to fine tune the balance (The Economist, 2005). But by the late 1970s, both were rising and the U.S. economy was in serious trouble.

### **The Rise of Neoliberal Policies in the United States**

The intensification of these economic stresses, combined with weaknesses in the labor movement, provided an opportunity for large corporations and banks in the United States to increase their profitability by unraveling many of the policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier, and Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Great Society. These neoliberal policies used economic and philosophical arguments from Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman, who put forth the very old argument that society is best served by limiting government intervention in the so-called free market and allowing corporations and banks to operate with little or no government regulation.

While many commentators and the general public often believe that government policy is based on the political ideology of government leaders and their corporate friends, the reality is that even the most vocal of libertarians enthusiastically support government intervention when it serves their interests— hence the myth that unrestrained corporations and limited government intervention will lead not only to more prosperity but to more political freedom for the people as a whole. This was evident in many countries going back to the 1970s when Chile and Argentina among others began to privatize public social services, in effect lowering the taxes corporations have to pay by cutting government social services, such as education and health care, and many previously provided government services were now turned over

to private businesses. When the fascist governments of Chile and Argentina intervened to crush the workers' struggles for better pay, the so-called libertarians were in the front lines demanding that these governments intervene to protect those brutal neoliberal policies, even as thousands of people were killed.

Before the New Deal in the United States, corporations were relatively unrestrained. While the term "liberalism" with its political connotation is sometimes meant to imply support for social welfare programs, the original (economic) meaning of "Classical Liberalism" was actually very pro-business, based on the idea that society would function best if businesses were free to compete in the marketplace without government restraint. When that resulted in the Great Depression, government stepped in, sometimes with the support of sectors of the capitalist class who recognize that unrestrained capitalism could lead to economic chaos and open the door to workers' rebellion. What is different about neoliberalism is that it is not merely a relic of the past, but rather a retreat from progressive policies much the way that the weaknesses of a system in decay share some commonalities with the weaknesses of a system just coming into existence.

Under neoliberal policies of privatization, businesses generally could pay workers less, provide them with fewer health and safety protections, raise prices as they see fit, and dismantle various institutions by spinning off those parts of an institution that were less profitable—but often socially necessary—while maximizing their profits from the more profitable parts of that institution. The New Deal policies were based on the practice of allowing more profitable parts of an institution to balance out some of the unprofitable parts because those so-called unprofitable parts were nevertheless providing important services to society even if they were not turning an immediate profit

In the United States neoliberalism is often associated with political conservatives (Harvey, 2007). In fact while the intellectual proponents of extreme free-market policies were often allied with political conservatives, it was during the presidency of liberal Democrat Jimmy Carter that neoliberal policies began to take root. During his presidency there was deregulation of transportation, including airlines and the trucking industry, as well as the loosening

of restrictions on banks. This was accompanied by his promotion of a culture that people should be willing to live simpler—more austere—lives. This further converged with an aspect of the 1960s New-Left cultural rejection of consumerism. Of course the wealthy were not going to accept austerity and in fact promoted austerity for the general population in order for corporations to increase their profits.

This also converged with some rather ominous cultural/intellectual/political trends. Racist theories, arguing that poor people in general and black people in particular were poor because they were biologically inferior, were being publicized at some major mainstream universities and in the mainstream press. (Shockley and Pearson, 1992; Lane, 1994). The generally anticorporate environmentalist movement was co-opted to some degree by forces often funded by pro-corporate foundations to spin parts of that movement into the framework of arguing that overpopulation was the main problem and that there were too many people in the world – conveniently ignoring the reality that people in the affluent countries consume far more resources per person than people in low income groups and low income countries. The New Left movement against “big, impersonal institutions that treat people like numbers” was used to deinstitutionalize (defund) mental health facilities, throw people out on the street, or leave them at the mercy of for-profit corporations. The movement against large public schools which often pushed conformity over individual creativity was used to cut funding for public schools and channel students not into schools which would cultivate creativity as some hoped, but into private schools that often forced even more conformity of thought on the students. This was achieved indirectly by cutting funds such that the public schools deteriorated so much that many parents felt that they had to send their children to private schools.

In the 1980s President Reagan took this to a new level, crushing the air traffic controllers union and sending a message to other unions that they should not fight for workers’ rights. He advocated more extreme pro-capitalist ideas such as privatizing fire departments, and today much of the emergency ambulance service is done by private companies that charge exorbitant fees while paying the ambulance workers low wages.

While President Reagan talked anti-government fiscal conservatism combined with limited government involvement in the economy, the reality is that the national debt doubled during six years of his presidency, increasing by as much as it had previously taken 204 years to reach. This is because President Reagan practiced “military Keynesianism” which meant major government spending for those big corporations, including especially those with military contracts that were allied with the same corporate forces funding those think tanks that claimed to oppose big government (Krugman, 2012).

It is often assumed that debates over government policy stem from different cultural values that might express themselves politically. In actuality major debates on policy questions within the capitalist political framework may in part be based on those, but the core of those debates generally stems from different economic interests. President Nixon’s policies were mostly in line with the mainstream Wall Street/major corporations’ perspectives on economic and social policy. But part of his loyalty was towards groups that had other agendas. For example, divisions exist between those corporations heavily invested in U.S. domestic oil production and those that are primarily oriented towards buying oil internationally and reselling it. They may have considerable unity on some issues, but they may disagree intensely on others. Similarly it is sometimes the case that the wealthiest of the wealthy corporations and banks actually favor the distribution of a bit more wealth to the working class in order to maintain the social stability that they need to sustain their profits, while other corporations may be less concerned about broader societal stability and more concerned about simply making as much profit as they can; and if there is social instability, it can be met with force.

This was even more evident with President Reagan. He started out as something of an outlier, made his peace with Wall Street, but still had divided loyalties with close ties to other corporate interests. This flared up again most obviously during President Clinton’s terms as well as during the terms of President Obama and President Trump.

### **The Culture Wars Smokescreen and the Rise of Authoritarianism**

In 1930’s Germany, the Nazis stitched together a seemingly contradictory coalition of groups that normally would have nothing

to do with each other. Many of the foot soldiers were from the middle income sector that was experiencing increasing economic stress. Many of them supported government programs that might be superficially called “socialist”, but cultural issues they advocated tended towards conservatism. There were also elements of what Marx referred to as the “lumpenproletariat.” The fuzzy, ambiguous use of the term “underclass” clouds discussion by conflating unemployed workers who nevertheless have the world outlook of workers with that section of the poor who have adopted exploitative modes of behavior, such as street gangs. The street gang types were certainly generally not culturally conservative in their behavior, engaging in all sorts of socially destructive behaviors including crime, abuse of women, overuse of alcohol and other behaviors that cultural conservatives would find appalling.

The upper middle-income group often included small business owners who may have been culturally conservative and may have been culturally liberal. But they certainly were not inclined to socialize with the lower middle class and most especially not the so-called “lumpen.” Their main concern was in protecting their class standing, and if their economic interests benefited from the suppression of workers’ strikes and the expropriation of property from other groups, then they had no problem forming a major core of the Nazi machine. Behind all this however was a major section of the capitalist class. Again, many of them may have had little regard for cultural conservatism but they were more than willing to use that as a way to mobilize other sections behind their economic policies.

It is important to note that factory workers were not the core of the fascist movement. Of course there were undoubtedly significant numbers of workers that did participate, but studies have shown that the majority of them were more allied to socialist and communist parties who did, after all, gain millions and millions of votes (Hamilton, 2014).

Part of the problem with using terms like “middle class”, “lower class” and “underclass” is that they blur over differences in world outlook that different groups might have and instead make mechanistic assumptions based simply on income. The question then remains: how could economically liberal but socially conservative forces ally with economically conservative but socially liberal forces, and why would either of them end up in an alliance with crude

“street gang” types that were generally apolitical and not obvious allies to either of them? The answers may lie in how various sections of the capitalist class made effective (if occasionally imperfect) moves to build a mass movement that would support their agenda. But rather than ending the analysis there, with them as “master manipulators” freely controlling everything out of uncontrolled personal greed, it is important to reiterate how they, in turn, were responding to broader economic trends.

Looking back on that history can provide some basis for understanding how the so-called culture wars were used to move forward the neoliberal agenda in the United States over the past 50 years. The first break in the old coalition, where Republicans represented mainstream corporate America and Democrats did so as well but with more of an inclination towards various social welfare programs, began to take shape during the Nixon campaign for the presidency. While Nixon had ties to the main wing of the U.S. capitalist class, especially major Wall Street banks and large industrial corporations, he also had ties to an emerging group of capitalists (the so-called New Money) who represented, among other groups, domestic oil interests, real estate, and various other businesses that were more concentrated in the South, parts of the Midwest, and parts of the West (Sale, 1975). To secure the presidency, Nixon adopted what has been called the “Southern Strategy”, attempting to build alliances with middle and lower income white voters in the South by capitalizing on their hostility towards racial integration in the Civil Rights movement (Brown, 2004). His alliances with the mainstream capitalist interests could best be demonstrated by his opening of relations with China.

On the other hand, as a major section of the mainstream capitalist factions was coming to oppose the way the U.S. was waging war in Vietnam, Nixon used some back channel methods to prolong the war by secretly pressuring the South Vietnamese government to reject peace negotiators. The tug-of-war between the two factions and concern about Nixon’s policy in the Middle East eventually led to his resignation from the presidency after his Vice President had been forced to step down because of corruption. This ensured that Gerald Ford, a mainstream Republican and Nelson Rockefeller, a liberal Republican from New York and son of John D Rockefeller II would be caretakers representing the mainstream corporate faction.

This was further cemented by the election of Jimmy Carter who was from the South but who had close ties to the Rockefeller family and the so-called "Eastern Establishment." This is all relevant because it ties in to the greater acceptance of authoritarianism today than was the case in the 1970s. In particular while the so-called "Eastern Establishment" was maintaining its hold on the presidency, other forces were working on ways to build a base for their faction. Interestingly, it was President Carter who first popularized bringing overt religious themes into his presidency. They tended to be of a more liberal nature, but nevertheless they were an aspect of the politicization of religion that indirectly figures into current recent trends towards authoritarianism in the United States.

When Ronald Reagan won the Republican nomination, much to the consternation of the "Eastern Establishment", they were able to reach an accommodation. While most of them leaned towards Carter, Reagan met with the top bankers and reassured them that he would not do anything drastic. Taking George H. W. Bush on as his Vice Presidential candidate eased some of their concerns and filling major posts in his Cabinet with mainstream figures such as George Schultz, further demonstrated his connections to them. But his loyalties, like Nixon's, were divided, and the secondary business faction also had influence in his administration while he was building a base among lower middle income white voters (who had traditionally voted Democrat) by intensifying the "Culture Wars." Certain segments of the population were still fearful of the changes in U.S. society from the 1960s, including the empowerment of black people, the militancy of college youth and their open acceptance of what had been considered deviant behavior, including marijuana use and sexual freedom and the increasing assertiveness of women. Into this mix various religious leaders began a systematic effort to politicize a major part of their white working-class and small business owners in their congregations.

Reagan was succeeded by George H. W. Bush who was more firmly allied with the "Eastern Establishment," although he was not above appealing to crass racism to win the election. His campaign included a widely seen television ad, which projected an intensely racist stereotype of black criminals (the "Willy Horton" ad) along with the visceral statement that black criminals like Horton posed a threat to viewers of the ad and that the election of Democrat Michael

Dukakis would put them in harm's way. G.W.H. Bush was ensuring that the Republican Party would keep ties to its racist populist base.

President Bill Clinton, despite being a somewhat liberal Democrat also added momentum to the development of an angry, conservative populist base. Even as he helped institute major cuts in social welfare programs and continued the policy of racist mass incarceration, he also made statements presumably to build support in the black community but which in fact were done in a way that enraged many working class white people. For example, he issued an "apology for slavery." While this symbolic apology for slavery did nothing to improve the lives of black people, it did further feed the anger of white working class people who felt that they were being blamed for something that happened over one hundred years earlier – before many of their ancestors even came to the United States. It was also during Clinton's presidency that NAFTA and various "free trade" policies accelerated the transfer of jobs out of the United States. Among the groups most affected by this were blue-collar working-class white people. This economic assault was framed by populists as being part of the same plan that "Eastern Establishment liberal elitists" were carrying out with globalization, and that was linked to supposedly "giving America over to other countries." It dovetailed and reinforced their alienation. However, it was not simply the economic stress brought on by globalization and deindustrialization that fueled the rise of authoritarian populism. The role of culture, politics and ideology remain central to the rise of aggressive right-wing authoritarian movements (Cowie and Heathcott, 2003).

If many white workers were experiencing intensifying economic stress caused by deindustrialization, these economic policies were hitting the black working class even harder. It was not just coal miners in West Virginia who were struggling more. The black working class of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Akron, Toledo, Detroit, Gary, South Chicago and Milwaukee (and cities in between) was also hit very hard, but they still stuck with the Democratic Party and did not embrace the growing right wing populist movement, because that movement had a definite strain of racism within it. So while the economic stresses certainly helped lay the foundation for authoritarian populism and helped intensify it, the crucial role of culture and politics is what lies at the core.

Although Reagan was the first president to have been elected after being divorced, many conservative Christian leaders backed him and various political and economic forces worked to promote these politicized conservative churches. The churches did not just proselytize on television. Many of them were virtual social service agencies, with sports leagues, trips, pot luck dinners and family counseling. These all helped them seek deeper roots into this alienated section of the lower middle income groups. Whereas many of Reagan's policies were beneficial to certain sectors of the capitalist class, including those producing military hardware, and his tax cuts (which came at the expense of cuts in social services) were a financial boon to these forces, the push towards privatization also benefited the churches, receiving more and more government funding to provide services that previously had been provided by government agencies.

### **Religion, Right-Wing Politics and the Rise of Neoliberal Authoritarianism**

Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" was a major force in this use of politicized religion with "Culture Wars" as its campaign (Winters, 2012). Cable television also brought politicized Christianity into millions of homes as commentators such as James Hagee and Pat Robertson (who flew Bibles and money to Africa and brought "blood diamonds" back) heavily promoted political conservatism. Hagee and Robertson were skillful at combining people's fears of the supposed ever-impending Biblical Apocalypse with a conservative political message about how presumed social crises could best be interpreted by them using the Bible as their authority. No matter if some of their comments were cruel lies such as claiming that HIV/AIDS was God's curse against sinners, and even more recently claiming that it was "God's work" that caused the earthquake in Haiti and that the flood in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was "God's punishment" to the sinful city (Hagee, 2005). Many of his followers did not understand that actually that flood mainly destroyed the lives and homes of church going, Christian working-class black people, while the "sinful" recreational part of the city, near the river, was actually spared much damage!

The white evangelical Christian followers were often drawn to these right-wing extremist views as a way to try to make sense of

their alienation and hope for some sort of salvation from the disorder of older stable social, political, and cultural institutions and therefore relief from their immediate psychological discomfort. This is certainly not a uniquely American story. Authoritarian leaders in other parts of the world have used fundamentalist Islam, fundamentalist Hinduism, and fundamentalist Buddhism — combined with nationalism and sometimes racism to convince oppressed, alienated people to support authoritarian leaders (Payne, 2003).

### **Economic Pressures Intensify**

The United States entered the 1980s in a contradictory time, with both inflation and high unemployment creating pressures for the economy and moving corporations and their political allies towards neoliberalism. Traditionally, governments tried to fine-tune the economy, heating it up with spending or slowing it down to keep a balance between unemployment/recession and high inflation. When the balance was upset in the early 1970's, Nixon used the War Powers Act to temporarily force wage and price controls on the economy. This attempted remedy for "stagflation" as it was dubbed, was short-lived. By the 1980's inflation was soaring but unemployment was also creeping up (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Deindustrialization of major industries was growing and this caused dislocations not just of workers but also of major banks and other financial institutions that had a big stake in those industries. The economic crisis hurt most people and many corporations were also feeling the pressure.

Perhaps more important was the fact that the working class in the United States and in much of Western Europe was in retreat. Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom tried to lift their economies out of the doldrums by privatizing major parts of the economy and suppressing the unions (Krieger, 1986). As a result, the gap between the wealthiest and middle-income groups widened and the gap between them and the lowest income groups widened even more significantly.

The narrative that emphasizes the positive outcomes for some major corporations ignores the reality that the overall economy was on thin ice and in fact there was continuing pressure on major

corporations. Profits of some corporations seemed healthy, but the instability of the economy led many powerful corporations into bankruptcy. Even the biggest corporations faced increasing competition while their bottom lines seemed to be thriving. And in the United States this was within the context of massive government spending, especially for military hardware, which provided a temporary artificial boost to the economy based on the largest rapid increase in the national debt that had occurred up to that point. The corporations were under increasing pressure, especially as Germany and Japan had bounced back from the war and other emerging economies were beginning to take pieces of the global pie.

On the other hand, it would also be a mistake to ignore the reality that the working class struggle was in retreat in a number of countries. This emboldened governments to take bigger and bigger steps to deregulate business and privatize government services with the result that wages for those private sector workers who were doing work previously as government employees were now significantly reduced; this privatization also often reduced the quantity and quality of service that the working class received — and the net effect of all this was a transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporations and especially the wealthiest of them. It is not accurate to say that misery automatically leads to increase class struggle and the possibility of revolution. At certain times it can intensify the demoralization of the working class and without some sort of strategic alternative to capitalism, the anger of sections of the working class can be channeled in different directions.

The increasing alienation of the working class led to many people feeling desperate and looking for quick solutions both for the economic situation and to provide salve to take away their immediate psychological and emotional stress. The secondary, but rising faction of the U.S. capitalist class saw an opportunity to merge their interests with those of the Religious Right. Add to this alliances with elements of the capitalist class in parts of the South – not merely clinging to tradition but because of the exploitation of black workers in the South – was especially intense and thus profitable.

### **Corporations Move to the Right**

The main wing of the U.S. capitalist class, the so-called Eastern

Establishment, was for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century allied with major industrial corporations and banking interests that controlled them, especially Chase Bank and the Rockefeller family (Domhoff, 2017). This loose group had a kind of love-hate relationship with this developing nationalist, conservative trend. The economic competition from this rising sector led to more intense economic and political battles between them, including over such issues as domestic oil production versus the reselling of international oil, and with foreign policy implications as to where to support “regime change” and where to bolster allies of one or the other faction (Sale, 1975). Domestically, even though such policies as government regulation, including pollution control, might cost these mainstream corporations some profits, they actually squeezed some of the secondary corporations even more and often gave a competitive advantage to the larger corporations who could more readily afford those expenditures. Furthermore, the traditional bigger players (the “Eastern Establishment”) had been more supportive of various social welfare policies and employment strategies to minimize the possibilities of social disruption. Their long time alliance with major labor unions, for example, was not simply out of their concern for workers’ rights; they were willing to pay somewhat higher wages in order for the unions to guarantee stability and control the membership. Many of the businesses in the secondary sector were less concerned about that and more concerned about immediate profits.

On the other hand, these businesses observed how their profits were also increasing as these attacks on the working class took place. Some of them might have initially been skeptical of how rapidly and drastically the Reagan administration had suppressed unions and transferred wealth away from the working class, but they also noted that these policies were successful and that working class rebellion was minimized (Domhoff, 2013). Simmering beneath the surface, however, the right-wing organizations were consistently and systematically building their base, especially in the conservative, evangelical Christian churches. While liberals were focused on national elections, conservative forces were capturing seats in local elections. On the statewide level these proved to be very important. State legislatures are responsible for setting up congressional districts

and with skillful gerrymandering — the drawing of district lines to favor one party or another — they were able to lay the basis for capturing control of Congress.

In 2000, conservative Republican George W. Bush won the presidency. He had fewer votes than Democrat Al Gore but a combination of the U.S. Electoral College system and contested votes in Florida gave the election to him. He was primarily a more mainstream Republican. He was born in Connecticut and was schooled at Yale and Harvard. He lived much of his life in Texas and did have connections to Texas and other “New Money” interests. Although he was raised as an Episcopalian, one of the more socially liberal American churches, he made alliances with various fundamentalist Christian clergy. They were a necessary part of his political coalition and he met with them regularly and worked with them to unsuccessfully attempt to pass constitutional amendments banning abortion and banning same-sex marriage.

It is commonplace among conservatives to blame the deindustrialization, the loss of middle income jobs and the increase in the U.S. national debt on the policies of “Globalist Liberals”, but in fact the more pernicious effects of intensifying global contradictions that had begun to take root in the 1970’s were being felt in larger and larger segments of the U.S. population throughout the period encompassing both Democratic and Republican administrations. Unemployment rose from 4.2 percent in 2001 to 7.2 percent when Bush left office in 2009 (Amaded, 2018). Many thousands of those jobs were middle-income jobs that had lifted families out of poverty for eighty years in industries that had been the backbone of the U.S. economy, and the loss of those jobs had a permanent impact on American society. Even as unemployment rates eased in subsequent years, the new jobs did not have the stability that the older, traditional jobs had. Speculation camouflaged the deepening crisis until it burst to the surface when the federal support for mortgage financing of the housing market was near collapse, and such a collapse would have a ripple effect by forcing banks to close, which could bring the economy into a serious recession, if not a full-scale depression. Faced with that possibility, it was both Democrats and Republicans who supported the bailout, using the Keynesian stimulant to temporarily forestall the crisis

until economic conditions for many got better (US Government Spending, 2018).

Liberal, black, Harvard-educated Chicagoan Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008. He won conservative states such as Indiana and had the support of a significant number of white working class people. His image was more of an outsider in contrast to seemingly out of touch Senator John McCain who also lost much of the educated white suburban vote by choosing Sarah Palin as his running mate. Many of these same voters would vote for Trump eight years later. While economic conditions for most of the American people began to improve during Obama's presidency, he was being framed in a contradictory way, but the contradictory nature of the criticisms seemed to not cause much problems in the minds of his critics. He was alternately framed as an untrustworthy black man — even worse because he was from Chicago and also framed as an East Coast type Harvard educated elitist. Contradictory as these two stereotypes might be, they both fit into the different strains of anger in segments of the white population. Even as the economy was gradually improving from the severe crisis of 2008, there still were some sectors of the working class feeling left behind. It was not just the white working class. The core base for authoritarian right-wing populism comes from struggling small business owners and various midlevel supervisors who work for them. They feel threatened both by the large multinational corporations and by higher taxes which they often assume are used to pay for black and Latinx people, who, in their minds, also may be getting preferential treatment over them, not to mention millions of undocumented immigrants who could be used as scapegoats to lay the basis for the rise of Trump.

### **Enter Trump**

When Trump announced his candidacy for president, there wasn't much support among the right-wing populist base at first. He was a billionaire candidate not just from the East Coast, but from New York. He clearly had "nonbiblical" relationships with a large number of women, he was in the gambling business, and he contradicted himself constantly. But he, like fascist leaders and other authoritarians, was able to cobble together this unlikely coalition of groups that normally would have nothing to do with

each other. He appealed to the racism, including anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant racism, of certain groups. He appealed to men who believed that women were getting all the advantages in society today. He appealed to those who believed their jobs or tax money were being taken away by undeserving groups – whether workers in other countries or racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States. He appealed to those who were just “angry” and wanted some kind of change. This is not the first time that using the image of an “outsider who wants to shake up those elitists who are hurting you, and worse, insulting you.” Ronald Reagan, Jesse Ventura, and Arnold Schwarzenegger from the conservative side and Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and even Barack Obama to some extent from the liberal side all played on that image. But now the anger was even more intense.

Late capitalism in U.S. society includes a change in the job market from productive jobs to jobs that are more unstable. While unemployment rates might drop at times, the percentage of the population working part time increases and temporary jobs become more the norm for millions of people. These jobs often do not provide pensions or medical plans, and it is much less common for someone to get a job at the age of 22 and keep it for forty years with the same employer. The security of unions is gone for many people. Equally important, the nature of those jobs is not productive. As industrial jobs disappear, there are more jobs in entertainment, restaurant work, gambling casinos, police and corrections work and various bureaucratic work. Stable family structure declines and while authorities lament the “short attention span and inability to defer gratification” in the population, the structure and the culture of late capitalism reinforces those tendencies. It is not a simple “cause and effect” relationship, but it has a cumulative effect not simply on the intellectual level, but on the cognitive level.

This rootlessness among some parts of the population causes a sense of powerlessness, alienation and stress, and many people tried to leave this alienation, and stress, by grasping for something that will give them the feelings of stability or at least a simple resolution to their anxiety even if it means doing things that are self-destructive or socially destructive. Traditionally, alcohol has been a common way of dealing with this. Obsessively losing oneself

in entertainment—sports and video games—can be a part of this. Extremist religion can be another palliative. Drugs, which affect the mind or alleviate stress for the moment are another way out for some people, even if it is self-destructive. Suicide, whether intentional or “accidental” by drug overdoses, even overeating can give people the feeling that at least there is something that they have control over. These are some ways that some people deal with their alienation and some of them are more common today than in the past.

### **Economics, Politics and Emotions**

When these stresses build up, people become open to change, especially change that they believe can empower them somehow. Demagogic leaders can skillfully build on this anger and channel it into “solutions” that can give a feeling of empowerment. Vulnerable targets can make some sort of “victories” a possibility. Racism, nationalism, and extremist religion, appeal to emotion and attack intellectuals and scientific evidence. Simplistic theories about politics and society and reducing explanations to easy-to-digest simple villains are strategies that have been used by Mussolini, the Ku Klux Klan, Hitler, Trump and various other demagogic authoritarians.

It is important to note that Obama won election just a few years ago, that Hillary Clinton received over three million votes more than Trump received, Trump’s approval ratings are low and that in the 2018 midterm elections, Democrats picked up forty seats in Congress, largely because of dissatisfaction with Trump’s leadership. It is also crucial to understand that the underlying economic stresses that are inherent in capitalism and the neoliberal policies which accelerate those stresses are what intensify the alienation and channel some people towards simplistic authoritarian solutions. Those major sections of the capitalist class which are tiring somewhat of Trump are happy to have received their huge tax cut, but they are not going away. They will continue to be behind the scenes players ready to inject support into another demagogic authoritarian if necessary.

If the major converging forces that build and sustain this kind of movement among the populace are cultural (especially racism, nationalism, extremist religion, anti-science irrationalism and other forms of authoritarianism) and economic (intensifying capitalist crisis aggravated by the “rich get richer and everyone else gets

poorer” results of neoliberalism), then it remains for an anti-authoritarian movement to resist this on both fronts—the cultural/ideological and importantly the economic front. Any struggle for economic rights cannot neglect the cultural/ideological battle or authoritarian leaders will be able to split its opposition by granting some temporary economic benefits to some groups while scapegoating others. Any struggles on the cultural/ideological/political front cannot neglect the reality that class society, and in particular neoliberal capitalism, is at the root of the alienation that makes people vulnerable to authoritarian propaganda. If that understanding is not grasped, those struggling against authoritarian rule will not be able to mobilize the working class and will not be able to strike at the *roots* of authoritarianism.

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