Digital Demagogue

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Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter

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Introduction

POLITICAL CONTEXT

We live in insecure political times, where the intensification of crises has turned into the emergence of authoritarian capitalism:

> 2016 saw the idea of human dignity and equality, the very notion of a human family, coming under vigorous and relentless assault from powerful narratives of blame, fear and scapegoating, propagated by those who sought to take or cling on to power at almost any cost. […] Donald Trump's poisonous campaign rhetoric exemplifies a global trend towards angrier and more divisive politics. Across the world, leaders and politicians wagered their future power on narratives of fear and disunity, pinning blame on the 'other' for the real or manufactured grievances of the electorate. (Amnesty International 2017, 12)

Donald Trump: 'America First'

In the USA, Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election with a nationalist campaign that promised to put 'America first' and to 'make America great again'. He used stereotypes, such as the one of immigrants as 'people coming through the border, that are from all over, and they are bad, they are really bad. […] You have people coming in, and I am not just saying Mexicans. I am talking about people that are from all over that are killers, and rapists, I mean they are coming into this country' (Trump 2015c). 'On the political stage, perhaps the most prominent of many seismic events was the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. His election followed a campaign during which he frequently made deeply divisive statements marked by misogyny and xenophobia, and pledged to roll back established civil liberties and introduce policies

which would be profoundly inimical to human rights' (Amnesty International 2017, 12).

India: Narendra Modi

In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014. Hindu nationalism has proliferated under Prime Minster Narendra Modi. In 2016, 'authorities used repressive laws to curb freedom of expression and silence critics. Human rights defenders and organizations continued to face harassment and intimidation, and vigilante cow protection groups carried out several attacks. Thousands protested against discrimination and violence faced by Dalit communities' (Amnesty International 2017, 183). Sedition charges, among others, were brought against student leader Kanhaiya Kumar from Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016 for allegedly shouting anti-Indian slogans. Kumar commented:

> This government has resorted to dictatorial and fascist ways. Those who speak against them and their ideology are being branded as anti-nationals. Laws like sedition are not needed in a liberal democratic state. It is being misused. It is being used as a political tool by this government. It's the same law drafted by the colonial power. No changes have ever been made. It's being used on the same pattern as the British used it. […] The government is attacking educational institutions. It's a continuous attack against India's intelligentsia, which talks about protection of constitution, human rights and freedom. Voice of dissent arises from there. […] The scope of freedom of expression has not shrunk but it is under continuous attack from the government. (Khalid 2016).

Turkey: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Turkey's state has, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Justice and Development Party), become increasingly authoritarian:

> On 15 July [2016], factions within the armed forces launched a violent coup attempt [in Turkey]. It was quickly suppressed […] Freedom of expression deteriorated sharply during the year. After the declaration of a state of emergency, 118 journalists were remanded

in pre-trial detention and 184 media outlets were arbitrarily and permanently closed down under executive decrees, leaving opposition media severely restricted. People expressing dissent, especially in relation to the Kurdish issue, were subjected to threats of violence and criminal prosecution. Internet censorship increased. At least 375 NGOs, including women's rights groups, lawyers' associations and humanitarian organizations, were shut by executive decree in November. […] Signatories to a January petition by Academics for Peace calling for a return to peace negotiations and recognition of the demands of the Kurdish political movement were subjected to threats of violence, administrative investigation and criminal prosecution. Four signatories were detained until a court hearing in April; they were released but not acquitted. By the end of the year, 490 of the academics were under administrative investigation and 142 had been dismissed. Since the coup, more than 1,100 of the signatories were formally under criminal investigation. (Amnesty International 2017, 367, 368)

The Academics for Peace petition demanded that the Turkish government create 'the conditions for negotiations and create a road map that would lead to a lasting peace which includes the demands of the Kurdish political movement' as well as 'an immediate end to the violence perpetrated by the state'.[1] President Erdoğan called the signatories 'so-called intellectuals' and 'a fifth column' (Weaver 2016). In the course of the crackdown against alleged supporters of Fethullah Gülen, many of the Academics for Peace lost their jobs. They also face an occupational ban from Turkish public services, and many journalists and opposition politicians face legal charges in Turkey. Noam Chomsky (2016a), who signed the petition, has argued that Erdoğan installed a 'deeply authoritarian regime'.

Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said in 2016: 'Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now, there's three million drug addicts. I'd be happy to slaughter them' (Holmes 2016).

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1.   www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36944, accessed 14 October 2017.

The [Philippine] government [in 2016] launched a campaign to crackdown on drugs in which over 6,000 people were killed. Human rights defenders and journalists were also targeted and killed by unidentified gunmen and armed militia. In June [2016], the government launched a campaign to crackdown on drugs which led to a wave of unlawful killings across the country, many of which may have amounted to extrajudicial executions. These killings followed the election of President Duterte, who repeatedly and publicly endorsed the arrest and killing of those suspected of using or selling drugs. No police officers or private individuals were known to have faced charges for over 6,000 deaths during the year. (Amnesty International 2017, 295)

Europe: Viktor Orbán, Heinz Christian Strache, Norbert Hofer, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders and Nigel Farage

In 2016, Hungary continued its systematic crackdown on the rights of refugees and migrants despite growing international criticism. […] The detention of asylum-seekers in the country continued to be implemented without the necessary safeguards to ensure that it was lawful, necessary and proportional. […] The government spent over €20 million on communication campaigns labelling refugees and migrants as criminals and threats to national security. In October, it held a national referendum on its opposition to the relocation of asylum-seekers to Hungary within an EU-wide scheme. The referendum was invalid due to insufficient turnout. (Amnesty International 2017, 181, 182, 183)

Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, spoke of migration as 'poison, we don't need it and won't swallow it' and said that 'every single migrant poses a public security and terror risk' (*Guardian* 2016). In summer 2017, Orbán's Fidesz movement ran a campaign that used posters showing a picture of philanthropist George Soros and the messages 'Don't let Soros have the last laugh' as well as '99% reject illegal immigration'. The posters created the impression that Soros fostered illegal immigration to Hungary. The campaign was widely condemned as being anti-Semitic.

In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) under Heinz Christian Strache used election campaign slogans such as 'Homeland instead of Islam: WE

are for YOU',[2] 'Vienna must not turn into Istanbul'[3] or 'More courage for our "Viennese Blood": Too much foreignness is not good for anyone'.[4] In the run-off 2016 presidential election, the FPÖ's candidate, Norbert Hofer, achieved 46.2 per cent of the votes.

In France, the leader of the National Front, Marine Le Pen, calls immigration 'an organized replacement of our population. This threatens our very survival. We don't have the means to integrate those who are already here. The result is endless cultural conflict' (RT 2011). In the Netherlands, Party for Freedom (PVV) politician Geert Wilders suggested a 'head rag tax' of €1,000 that he justified by saying that he believes in the 'polluter pays' principle (Steen 2010).[5]

In the 2016 UK referendum on leaving the European Union (EU), Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) used posters that read: 'BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'. The posters showed an image of thousands of refugees. Some observers pointed out parallels with Nazi propaganda films that showed images of Jews accompanied by the message, 'These are the type of Eastern Jews who flooded Europe's cities after the last war – parasites, undermining their host countries, threatening thousand-year-old cultures and bringing with them crime, corruption and chaos' (Bartlett 2016).

> Several European countries [in 2016] saw an increase in hate crimes targeting asylum-seekers, Muslims and foreign nationals. In Germany there was a sharp increase in attacks on shelters for asylum-seekers, and in the UK hate crimes surged by 14% in the three months after the referendum on the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit) in June compared to the same period the previous year. (Amnesty International 2017, 44)

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

These are just some examples that document the prevalence of right-wing authoritarianism. We live in times of economic crises, complex wars

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2. 'Daham statt Islam. WIR für EUCH'.
3. 'Wien darf nicht Istanbul werden'.
4. 'Mehr Mut für unser "Wiener Blut": Zu viel Fremdes tut niemandem gut'.
5. See also: www.watwilwilders.nl/WildersbeledigtgroepenEN.html.

and heavy political conflicts. Far-right demagogues make use of these insecurities and resulting fears. They distract attention from the complex societal and political-economic causes of crises, construct scapegoats and preach nationalism and law-and-order politics. The proliferation of new nationalisms and authoritarian politics reminds us of past times. The danger is that history might repeat itself. While there is a danger of regression to the past, at the same time we are experiencing the emergence of new technologies such as social media, big data analytics, the Internet of things, cloud computing, smart technologies that promise a new age. The old and the new are always linked in complex ways in the present. Right-wing authoritarianism celebrates new successes and is communicated through new formats, such as social media. Donald Trump as a president who uses the two communication tools of reality TV (*The Apprentice*) and social media (Twitter) is prototypical for how old ideologies are communicated through new media and how these ideologies take on new forms in the age of Internet spectacles.

This book asks: what is authoritarian capitalism? How is authoritarian capitalism communicated through social media? It formulates the foundations of a contemporary critical theory of right-wing authoritarianism and authoritarian capitalism. In doing so, it updates the Frankfurt School's critical theory of authoritarianism. It draws on and reinvigorates the works of the Frankfurt School thinkers Franz L. Neumann, Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Leo Löwenthal. It studies how right-wing authoritarianism works and is communicated on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS BOOK

Chapter 2 gives an introduction to the notions of ideology, nationalism and fascism from a critical theory perspective. Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for understanding right-wing authoritarianism and authoritarian capitalism.

If you want to go directly to the analysis of Trump's role in US capitalism and the way he uses Twitter, you may want to skip reading the theoretical foundations in Chapters 2 and 3 and go directly to Chapter 4. I recommend these two chapters as introductions to Marxist theories of nationalism, fascism and authoritarian capitalism.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyse economic power, state power and ideological power in the age of Donald Trump with the help of critical theory. They apply the critical theory approaches of thinkers such as Franz L. Neumann, Theodor W. Adorno and Erich Fromm. Chapter 4 focuses on aspects of political economy (Trumpism: Trump and authoritarian statism), while Chapter 5 concentrates on Trump's ideology (Trumpology).

Chapter 4 analyses changes of US capitalism that have, together with political anxiety and demagoguery, brought about the rise of Donald Trump. The chapter draws attention to the importance of state theory for understanding Trump and the changes to politics that his rule may bring about. In this context it is important to understand the complexity of the state, including the dynamic relationship between the state and the economy, the state and citizens, intra-state relations, inter-state relations, semiotic representations of and by the state, and ideology. Trumpism and its potential impacts are theorised along these dimensions.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ideology of Trump (Trumpology). Trumpology has played an important role not just in Donald Trump's business and brand strategies, but also in his political rise. The (pseudo-) critical mainstream media have helped create Trump and Trumpology by providing platforms for populist spectacles that sell as news and attract audiences. Through Trump making news in the media, the media make Trump. An empirical analysis of Trump's rhetoric and the elimination discourses in his NBC show *The Apprentice* underpins the analysis of Trumpology. The combination of Trump's actual power and Trump as spectacle, showman and brand makes his government's concrete policies fairly unpredictable. An important question that arises is what the role of social scientists should be in the conjuncture that the world is experiencing.

Chapter 6 analyses how Donald Trump uses Twitter for communicating authoritarian ideology. It uses the critical theory of the authoritarian personality for theoretically framing right-wing authoritarianism and engages with the works of Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno. The chapter identifies hierarchical leadership, nationalism, the friend/enemy scheme and militaristic patriarchy as four key elements of right-wing authoritarianism. Using this theory framework, it presents a critical discourse analysis of 1,815 tweets posted by Donald Trump between July 2016 and January 2017. The chapter gives insights into

how right-wing authoritarianism works on social media platforms such as Twitter.

This book contributes to the study and critical theory of nationalism in the age of social media (nationalism 2.0). Some conclusions are drawn in Chapter 7. This work stands in the tradition of theoretical and empirical ideology critique. Ideology, nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism are general key concepts used throughout the book. It therefore makes sense to briefly outline the understanding of these concepts, which will be the task of Chapter 2.

2
Ideology, Nationalism and Fascism

This chapter engages with the book's foundational theoretical categories, namely ideology,[1] nationalism and fascism.

IDEOLOGY

There are different traditions regarding how to define and study ideology. Approaches include Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Lukács theory of reification, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the Frankfurt School, Hallian cultural studies, various forms and schools of critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis and Althusserian ideology theory (Eagleton 1991, Rehmann 2013, Žižek 1994). These theories do not form a consensus on what ideology is and how it should be defined. Two major schools in the critical study of ideology go back to Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács.

Six Understandings of Ideology

Terry Eagleton (1991, chapter 1) discerns various understandings of ideology by identifying six theoretical approaches:

1. Ideology as the 'production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life' (28) (= ideology as culture) (28);
2. Ideas and beliefs of 'a specific, socially significant group or class' (29) (= ideology as worldview);
3. The '*promotion* and *legitimation* of the interests' of a group 'in the face of opposing interests' (29);
4. The 'promotion and legitimation of sectoral interests' in the 'activities of a dominant social power' (29) (= ideology as dominant worldviews);

5. '[I]deas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation' (30);
6. '[F]alse or deceptive beliefs […] arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole' (30).

Gramsci and Lukács

Whereas Gramsci's approach can be characterised as ideology theory, Lukács' can be seen as ideology critique (Fuchs 2015, chapter 3). Gramsci understands ideology as worldviews, the 'superstructure of a particular structure' (Gramsci 1988, 199) and a 'conception of the world' (Gramsci 1988, 343). Lukács, based on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, sees ideology as reified thought emerging in reified societies. He therefore argues that the 'emergence and diffusion of ideologies appears as the general characteristic of class societies' (Lukács 1986, 405).

Ideology Critique

Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School in particular have influenced the theoretical concept of ideology used in this book and the Marxian theory approach that underlies it (Fuchs 2015). The notion of ideology employed relates to Eagleton's fifth and sixth meanings of ideology. By ideology, I understand thoughts, practices, ideas, words, concepts, phrases, sentences, texts, belief systems, meanings, representations, artefacts, institutions, systems or combinations thereof that represent and justify one group's or individual's power, domination or exploitation of other groups or individuals by misrepresenting, one-dimensionally presenting or distorting reality in symbolic representations (Fuchs 2015). Ideology is not simply an abstract structure, but has a concrete, lived reality: ideological workers produce and reproduce ideologies (Fuchs 2015, chapter 3). Marx characterises the producers of ideology as 'the thinkers of the [ruling] class', its 'active, conceptive ideologists', who, based on a division of labour within the ruling class, 'make the formation of the illusions of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood' (Marx and Engels 1845, 68).

The definition taken in the theory approach underlying this work implies moral realism and socialist praxis: humans can analyse and