

Spectacular populism, technology, and division

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Published: 2024-11-27

Dear friends,

The acceleration of populist movements globally presents an interesting contradiction for analysis. Populism, a peculiar (if increasingly popular) political “logic” positions people against one another for the benefit of a person, or small group of people, vying for political power. Building on manufactured “us vs them” narratives, populist leaders will typically suggest *the people* need to rally behind their cause to take on the *elites*. The elites, importantly in this context, are not capitalists –but rather minorities that have been or can be depicted as evil, menacing, and controlling society. There is an aura of sophistication to the way populists speak, engage, and share their messaging, but above all else it is regularly xenophobic, racist, and comes with a chaser of hatred. All this in the name of clawing over some political power while allowing the continued exploitation of workers, and so on. Over time, populism has come to serve as a sophisticated tool for capital by leveraging new technologies to fragment class consciousness while continuing to reinforce the power structures it claims to oppose. This deserves our attention, particularly as we suffer from the transformation of social relations through algorithmic mediation and the cultivation of what can only be described as digital fascism.

Populism, which, positions an imagined “pure people” against a supposedly corrupt elite offers a relatively straightforward power grabbing tool for political figures –and so its proliferation globally over the last hundred odd years has an almost self-evident feeling. Because populism doesn’t demand truth, nor offer anything genuinely transformative, it does not upset capitalist status quo. Indeed, it can simply serve extant capitalist agendas, while keeping the working class fighting amongst ourselves. Populist campaigns across history have shown this, from Long’s “Share Our Wealth” movement in 1930s America to contemporary figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Modi, populist movements have emerged as responses to capitalist crisis. They swoop in, purporting to connect with working class issues, and offer seductive but false solutions to systemic contradictions. While these movements often appropriate left-wing critiques of inequality, they invariably redirect legitimate working class grievances toward reactionary ends, substituting scapegoating for structural analysis.

The historical record reveals some distinct variants: right-wing populism, which typically combines nationalist mythology with racial grievance (c.f., George Wallace); left-wing populism, which attempts to build multi-racial working class coalitions but often remains trapped within capitalist logic (c.f., Peron in Argentina); and what we might call technopopulism, exemplified by figures like Elon Musk who marry Silicon Valley utopianism with reactionary politics. Each variety, despite their surface differences, shares a fundamental characteristic: they offer individualist solutions to collective problems while reinforcing rather than challenging capital’s grip on social relations. Frequently, populist movements have relied on technologies to advance their messaging, initially a reliance on radio broadcasts and mass rallies, today demagogues harness algorithms and data analytics to micro-target their messaging –or just buy an entire social media platform and run it into the ground with fascist spam. This technological “evolution” requires theoretical framing to understand how capital reproduces its hegemony through increasingly sophisticated means. Let me digress slightly to reactionary politics, first, though.

Marx offers a critique of reactionary politics, particularly his analysis of Louis Bonaparte’s rise to power, which provides a crucial substrate for insights into contemporary populism’s function within capitalism. Importantly, Marx observed how reactionary movements

emerge during periods of *class struggle*, presenting themselves as defenders of “traditional” social relations while actually serving capital’s need to forestall revolutionary consciousness. His famous line about history repeating “first as tragedy, then as farce” continues to hold resonance as we witness capital’s recycling of reactionary tropes through digital means.

What Marx identified as “Bonapartism”, where a supposedly charismatic leader claims to transcend class conflict while actually intensifying capitalist exploitation, perfectly describes the function of contemporary populist figures. Nailed it. Analysis over...But not quite. The key difference lies not in the fundamental mechanism, but in its technological amplification. Where Bonaparte relied on army and bureaucracy to maintain power while appearing to stand above class interests, today’s populists leverage technological manipulations, algorithmic timelines, and digital surveillance to achieve the same end with unprecedented precision. Marx’s insight that reactionary politics serves to “represent” the masses while actually defending ruling class interests remains, devastatingly, relevant as the specific technologies of control metamorphose.

Historically, populist movements have emerged during periods of capitalist crisis, offering simplistic solutions to complex systemic problems while redirecting working class anger away from its true source. As we’ve touched on, the fundamental playbook hasn’t changed. Scapegoating marginalised groups, promoting nationalist mythology, and promising restoration of an imagined golden age. Rinse and repeat. But the mechanisms of delivery have evolved dramatically –and while this doesn’t change fundamentally the role of populism, it does alter the scale and damage. Where demagogues once relied on radio broadcasts and mass rallies, today’s fascist authoritarians deputise traditional intellectuals to leverage data analytics, manipulate social media feeds, and micro-target their messages of hate and division. As with all right-wing ideas, the goal is to continue capitalist accumulation, exploiting and fucking over the 99% –fracturing working class solidarity while maintaining capitalist hegemony.

From the printing press enabling nationalist propaganda, through radio and television creating the first “celebrity” politicians, to today’s social media platforms optimising for engagement through extremism, each new communication technology has been seized by capital to enhance its ideological control. The key here is that capital does not care who on the spectrum is chosen to “lead” –it cares only that growth continues. In this humanity-destroying way, capitalism is tantamount to cancer. The only difference offered by new technologies is the unprecedented precision of manipulation. Social media algorithms don’t just broadcast populist messaging. Rather, they actively cultivate ideological bubbles, pushing users toward increasingly extreme content while creating the illusion of mass movement. Your feed becomes a carefully curated echo chamber, with each interaction driving you further from genuine class consciousness and deeper into manufactured tribal identity. Regardless of the “specific messaging” you’re seeing, this is true for you if you use *any* of Meta’s platforms. The resulting right-wing scream-fest of hatred and misguided anger coupled with the extremely inequitable capitalist model we continue to allow creates such angst and suffering and, remains, largely unidentifiable by the 99% due to hegemonic enforcement and cultural institutions.

The cruel genius is that populism, through its “almost truth” about exploitation, extraction, harm and division, transforms legitimate working class grievances into individualised rage, redirecting systemic critique into personal vendettas. Better yet, for the capitalists, cottage industries of hatred and “content creation” intersect to fuel accumulation and production of whole categories of misanthropic, cynical, and despotic media, merchandise, and more. Rather than recognising shared class interests, atomised “users” are encouraged to view their fellow workers as enemies, with algorithms helpfully suggesting which out-group to blame for their precarity. This technologically enhanced division serves capital perfectly –keeping the 99% fighting each other while the 1% continues accumulating wealth at our collective

expense. The new found dictators rising to prominence through these platforms aren't threatening the capitalist order; they're its perfect products/pundits, offering the illusion of rebellion while reinforcing its fundamental logic. Or better yet, they are capitalists, beneficiaries of the worst of the system, seeing how it operates and perpetuating crueler and intersectionally more disadvantageous systems to solidify their own wealth and power.

This brings us to the wicked problem of electoral strategy in an age of algorithmic radicalisation. While the liberal fantasy of individual consumer choice in the "marketplace of ideas" has proven catastrophically inadequate, we must also reject the false populist promise of strongman solutions. The path forward requires rebuilding class solidarity and collective political consciousness -what we might term utilitarian voting *for* the many, not the few. This means understanding elections as tactical terrain in an ongoing struggle, not as ends in themselves. When we vote, we must do so with clear eyes about the systemic limitations of electoral politics while recognising the material differences that policy choices make in working class lives -particularly at the margins and intersections of gender, race, disability and class. The myths perpetuated to forestall this kind of collective consciousness are as numerous, from the bootstrap fallacy of the "self-made millionaire" to the fiction of meritocratic mobility, capital relies on an elaborate mythology to naturalise its violence. These just-so stories about deserved wealth and poverty serve to individualise systemic problems, making structural critique appear impossible or naive. The ultimate success of these myths lies in how they've infected our ontological understanding. They make the artificial constructs of capitalism appear as natural as gravity -and even economists will tell you it's not. We must remember that every "self-made" fortune rests on generations of stolen labour, every "individual success" story obscures a network of social relations and structural advantages.

What makes our current moment particularly dangerous is how new technologies amplify and accelerate these mythologies while simultaneously fragmenting our capacity for collective response. Ughh, I'm tired, are you tired? The same platforms that connect us also isolate us, channelling legitimate rage into algorithmic dead ends killing the development of genuine class consciousness. Filter bubbles abound, and rage lies at the end of every rainbow. Every click, every share, every angry reaction feeds the machine learning models determining what content spreads -let alone the deeply manipulated content priorities on platforms such as Twitter and "Truth Social". All this, naturally, supports capitalist accumulation -more clicks, more ads, more engagement, more MAUs, more investors, more money! And engagement metrics inevitably favour extremist content that drives division over nuanced systemic critique -because who wants to listen to a Marxist when you've got Andrew Tate on the scene (present company excluded).

The "self-made" mythology really deserves scrutiny as a masterwork of hegemonic control. This narrative performs a dual function in service of capital, offering a phantasmic promise of class mobility while legitimising the structures that make mobility impossible. Like a cruel parody of Tantalus, the "American Dream", hello white picket fence, or "Australian Dream", just "a house", I guess -the colonial-capitalist branding matters not, dangles forever out of reach, close enough to maintain hope while far enough to ensure continued submission to wage labour exploitation. This mythology operates simply: a very small handful of privileged workers *do* manage to ascend to petit bourgeois status through some combination of "foundational capital", chance, and brutal self-exploitation. Their stories are then weaponised by capital's (occult) cultural apparatus, transformed into morality tales about "hard work" and "determination" -better yet "GRIT" my absolute favourite psychology bullshit-ism -carefully excising any mention of structural advantage or stolen labour value. That's right, these "self ascending" dickheads stole from you to get where they are. These exceptional cases serve as both carrot and stick -promising rewards for compliance while implicitly blaming the vast majority of workers for their own exploitation. "If they made it, why haven't you?" (words that I've heard way too many times). The unspoken accusation, transforming systemic critique into personal failing -a joy.

The ideological sleight-of-hand ever effective because it leverages real examples while completely mystifying the underlying relations of production. Yes, some workers do become small business owners or climb the corporate ladder. But their individual success stories obscure how this limited mobility actually reinforces rather than challenges capitalist hegemony. The petit bourgeois small business owner often becomes an even more passionate vanguard of capitalist relations than the capitalist class itself, having internalised the logic of exploitation through their own desperate struggle to avoid falling back into the proletariat. They become the perfect deputies of capital, enforcing its logic at the micro level while championing the very system that keeps them in constant precarity. Not to mention the narcissistic, psychotic, torturous class of professional “managers” that capital deputises to “bootstrap enforcement” jobs.

Naturally the ingenious, come utterly evil, system transforms the potential energy of class consciousness into the energy of individual striving (or cutthroatism). Rather than organising collectively to challenge exploitation, workers are encouraged to view their peers as competition in a grand meritocratic game. What. An. Absolute. Load. Those “above” are more interested in pulling the metaphorical ladder up behind them than doing *any* work, and constantly in the process of creating new platitudes, torture technologies, and endless bureaucratic bullshit to keep workers busy. This process of selective co-optation serves capital perfectly –fracturing class solidarity while creating a layer of ideological enforcement within the working class itself. The. Worst.

We need both tactical savvy and strategic clarity. We need to deeply understand these technologies without being used by them, to use alternatives like Mastodon, Lemmy, and other decentralised systems rather than gargling corporate fascist propaganda on Bluesky, Instagram or Reddit. We need to find ways to build genuine solidarity that can withstand algorithmic manipulation. This means developing new forms of digital literacy and collective resistance –my assertion is that digital literacy remains one of the most foundational pieces of knowledge required to date, and Australia’s political leaders have spent a majority of the last term in office ensuring that kids have absolutely 0 exposure to any kind of analytical thinking or technology capabilities. Only by understanding how these systems work while refusing to let them work on us can we see “through” the shit –the constant normalisation of harm. The alternative is continued fracturing of the working class, with populist demagogues serving as the perfect instruments of distraction while we literally COOK OURSELVES ALIVE. The jet stream is gone, folks, we’ve already passed the point of no return on climate. If anyone’s willing to learn a lesson here, its the 8 billion of us who will be left here suffering when Musk’s on his way to Mars.

Deep time is such an important concept for our futures –and its something we absolutely have not come to understand. Caring for the future –generation, ecology, collectivism –these are things we notionally cared about as a society –now it’s militant individualism and capitalist propaganda all the way down. What the hell.

In solidarity,

Aidan