

The Trump Regime

- John Bellamy Foster

interviewed by Ömür Şahin Keyif for *BirGün*(Istanbul) Cover of *BirGun*,
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ÖSK: U.S. President Donald Trump came to power with the support of the lower-middle class. But clearly his agenda is for the benefit of the rich. After gaining power, is he ignoring the lower classes and engaging primarily with corporations and the rich?

JBF: Answering this requires some background. A primary characteristic of political movements in the fascist genus, to which both the classical fascism of the 1930s and the nascent neofascism of today (including the Trump phenomenon) can be said to belong, is a tenuous class alliance between the lower-middle class, on the one hand, and significant fractions of the upper echelons of monopoly capital, on the other. The lower-middle class (extending to some of the more privileged sections of the working class) provides the mass base, and represents what is called the “radical right.” They are antagonistic toward the upper-middle class and what they see as corrupt elites above (though not extending to the big capitalist themselves) and also toward the greater part of the “unwashed” working class, the poor and racial minorities below.

For the capitalist class itself, the nascent neofascist alliance under Trumpism is a marriage of convenience in a time of crisis. This gives it more power vis-à-vis the state, paving the way for greater privatization and concentration of wealth, along with the removal of oppositional forces. But the lower-middle class with its radical-right ideology is in some ways an inconvenient ally for the powers that be in that it combines a nationalist-racist ideology with a criticism of elites that can extend in certain instances to capital itself. For example, if the next recession brings another financial crisis, as will almost surely be the case, Trump’s lower-middle class supporters will strongly oppose the bank bailouts that the ultra-rich, including Trump himself, will deem necessary. Similarly, the lower-middle class, though outwardly patriotic, is often an unreliable ally when it comes to strategies for expanding global hegemony through foreign interventions—even though these are supported by the greater part of the ruling class—for the simple reason that lower-middle class actors frequently see so-called “humanitarian interventions” as coming at the cost of their own economic welfare.

The strategy that Trump and his main loyalists have devised in these circumstances is one of giving the appearance of satisfying the wants of the white lower-middle class or petty bourgeoisie, through the promotion of racist, misogynist, and anti-environmentalist policies—and lots of talk about trade protectionism, infrastructure spending, tax breaks and the like. But the reality will inevitably be one of a betrayal of these groups, as the interests of the ultra-rich will be paramount. We are thus already seeing conflicts break out between these two elements of the Trump neo fascist alliance. Trump himself has situated himself rhetorically as the defender of the lower-middle class, while the composition of his administration and the policies adopted mirror the interests of the ruling class more directly than was even the case for Obama’s previous neoliberal administration. **Trump has a lot of billionaires in his cabinet. How do the big corporations and the capital support Trump’s agenda? Is capitalism using Trump’s fascist ideas and rhetoric to gain strength?**

Wall Street has been elated by the Trump presidency, especially by the promises of tax reforms that will result in humongous giveaways to corporate capital and the moneyed oligarchy. Trump’s demolition of environmental and other regulations on business is also supported. His policy of privatizing public schools and his goal of privatizing, while expanding, the prison-industrial complex are both viewed as big boosts to the wealthy. It is worth noting that classical fascism and neo

fascism have historically been identified with privatization, a term that first arose in Nazi Germany. Trump's proposed military budget is a 10 percent increase on the base budget, which also serves big capital.

It is certainly the case that the Trump White House is using neo fascist and white supremacist ideas and rhetoric to appeal to his base and to promote hyper-capitalist policies, transcending the liberal-democratic state structure. How conscious this is, especially on Trump's part, we don't know, though there are people around him who are familiar with these ideas. Trump is self-admittedly a very infrequent reader of books, practically a non-reader, so it is all the more significant that one of the very few books that we know he has read is a compilation of Hitler's speeches. Andrew Kolin posted a fascinating article on Informed Comment on September 5 which showed how similar Trump's stated views were to those articulated by the Nazi political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt, an icon of the far right. There is no straightforward explanation for this, however.

If Trump's right-wing policies are beneficial to capitalism, why did the CEO's in the manufacturing council resign right after he refused to condemn white supremacists?

Although significant, it is easy to make too much of this. Only five of the more than twenty CEOs that were part of the Manufacturing Jobs Initiative resigned, prior to Trump tweet in which he announced he was shutting it down. Those who resigned were the CEOs of 3M, Campbell Soup, Intel, Merck, and Under Armour (the AFL-CIO representatives and the head of a trade alliance also dropped out). Compare this to the companies where the CEOs did not resign prior to Trump's tweet, though some die after, which include some of the biggest military contractors: Boeing, Corning, Dana, Dell, Dow Chemical, GE, Harris Corporation, International Paper, Johnson and Johnson, Lockheed Martin, Newell Brands, Nucor, Timken, United Technologies, and Whirlpool. In other words, there was no signal break between the Trump administration and corporations over his vocal support of white supremacists.

Trump's policies are benefiting the rich. Didn't he promise to serve poor? But in the meantime, he must be able to please his base. How does it happen?

Trump did not promise to do anything materially for "poor people." The bottom half of the population were not in any way fooled into believing that they would gain much from his election. His big support came from predominantly white, and disproportionately rural and religious, voters in the 6th–8th income deciles, which vote in a much higher proportion than those in lower income deciles. His lower-middle class supporters are being encouraged to believe that they will gain economically through tax cuts (although it is no secret that the lion's share of the tax cuts will go to the rich and corporations) and trade restrictions. Moreover, Trump's anti-immigrant, racist, anti-union, and anti-environmentalist policies are seen as promoting the interests of his lower-middle class supporters. So are his attacks on political correctness and on liberal elites within government. All of these attacks give a big emotional charge to his base. The clearest indication of what is happening in this respect is to follow the media tied most closely to the Trump, especially Breitbart, once again headed by Steve Bannon.

According to the polls, the level of the support for Trump is lowered. Do you think that he'll intensify his right winger policies to consolidate his power? What kind of effects it is likely to have for the rest of the world?

In my view, one should not make too much of Trump's weak position in the polls. His continuing backing from his political base is the key. This gives him control of the mass constituency of the Republican Party, in addition to his hold on big money interests. As long as he controls these strategic sectors, the rest of the GOP will be forced to follow along, which means that he will benefit from the huge, entrenched, geographically based Republican Party political structure, including its built-in electoral dominance in a majority of states. Trump's overall popularity may seem low, but his primarily lower-middle class constituents represent a powerful lever to move the whole political system, barring a major working-class political revolt from below.

Viewed in these terms, I don't think that there is any question that Trump will continue to appeal to his lower-middle class base and to the neo fascist alt-right. His ability to mobilize and to win the steadfast support of a larger number of voters from these sections of the population, together

with his backing from key fractions of the capitalist class (particularly the energy, finance, and military-industry sectors) is his key strength and that of the political movement that he symbolizes. The neo fascist thrust is thus likely to become even more prominent during election campaigns. The Trump pheno-menon is a manifestation of the larger structural crisis of capitalism, which has now become a crisis of liberal-democratic state. Neo liberalism seems to a considerable extent to have metamorphosed into what is better understood as neo fascism—a product of the failures of neo liberalism itself.

As for the effects on the rest of the world it is difficult to tell. Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were for an expansive U.S. Empire. Both were willing to ramp up the level of imperial warfare. There were some crucial differences, as the geopolitical strategy of those around Trump was to implement a détente with Russia, so as to pivot more decisively toward defeating ISIS and confronting China. This created a division in the U.S. ruling class over the New Cold War, with the anti-Trump faction apparently now coming out on top. The waning of Russia-gate in the news lately is probably a manifestation of the Trump administration's increased reconciliation with the New Cold War. Having achieved this objective, his opponents at the top of the society will likely back off to some extent. What is clear is that Trump is willing to increase civilian deaths in warfare, utilize torture, drop the “mother of all bombs,” and repeatedly threaten nuclear war with North Korea. One should mention also his threats of war on Venezuela, and his economic sanctions there, as well as increased economic sanctions against Cuba. The Trump administration has gone up against the UN on Iran. More extreme measures, including increased arm twisting, are likely to be taken against allies. None of this is exactly a change in U.S. policy, merely a further evolution of what could be called the long War for U.S. Imperial Dominance (the creation of the so-called unipolar world), which has dominated U.S. geopolitical strategy since 1991, and which is, in part, a response to the reality of waning U.S. hegemony. Nationalism, including the building of wall between the United States and Mexico, the attacks on immigrants, trade wars, etc., are pivotal for the Trump regime.

A lot of staff have left White House including Steve Bannon who is known as the ‘Goebbels’ of Trump’s presidency. Do you think these changes will lead to a policy change in the White House?

The conflict within the Trump White House has to do with the inherent structure of movements in the fascist genus, which always try to combine a lower-middle class political base with monopoly capital (today monopoly-finance capital). This artificial alliance is necessarily conflictual, with such conflicts usually coming at the cost of those representing the mass political base of the movement. This has been clear in the Trump admini-stration from the start. Neverthe-less, attempts are constantly made to keep this alliance alive, since it is the foundation of the neo fascist political movement.

In my reading, Bannon’s departure does not signal a marked change in the White House, though one might argue that his exit symbolizes a partial victory for the representatives of finance capital within the administration. Your comparison to Goebbels is interesting. Goebbels was Hitler’s propaganda minister. Bannon is back in charge of Breitbart, the most potent propaganda machine in the Trump movement’s arsenal. Its goal is that of *Gleich-schaltung* (bringing into line) with respect to the right as a whole. Bannon is now actively promoting from Breitbart what he calls the “Nationalist-Populist” movement, while trying to separate himself and Trump from allegations of racism. Meanwhile, Breitbart is attacking anyone in the administration who is not part of the alt-right or not in line with its agenda. To understand the significance of this we need to think of Louis Althusser’s “ideo-logical-state apparatuses.” In Marxist theory, the communications media is in many ways an extension of the state, and the struggle around the state is being fought in this realm. Bannon is maintaining the image of Trump’s pure devotion to the cause in the eyes of his base. When it comes to the next presidential election campaign, don’t be surprised if Trump invites Bannon in again as a campaign manager.

It is well to remember that there are a lot of radical right people still in the Trump administration, along with generals like James “Mad Dog” Mattis, Trump’s secretary of defense, and leading

representatives of finance and energy capital. Stephen Miller, Trump's special advisor, still represents Breitbart in the administration. Then there are figures such as Jeff Sessions, the white supremacist attorney general; Scott Pruitt, the anti-environmentalist head of the Environmental Protection Agency; Sebastian Gorka, Trump's neofascist adviser on radical Islam; Betsy DeVos, the billionaire, ultra-privatizing Secretary of Education, Mick Mulvaney, the corrupt, real-estate developer heading the Office of Management and the Budget; and Kris Kobach, a leading figure in voter suppression and the main force behind Trump's Orwellian Presidential Advisory Committee on Election Integrity—to name just a few.

Budget, tax and anti immigrant policies will be the order of the coming days. Will Trump have hard time implementing his policies? How will this domestic political agenda affect the rest of the world?

It is hard to say how much difficulty Trump will have in getting his policies through. But given that the Republicans control both the House and the Senate, as well as the oval office, not to mention the U.S. Supreme Court, and the governorships of most of the states, while the Democrats are a weak-kneed, neoliberal opposition, it seems that the administration is in a very strong position. The Democrats are reduced to scaring various politicians by calling on an outraged public, who they hope to mobilize in the mid-term elections.

The key issue for Trump and for the capitalist class is tax reform. If he pulls this off the capitalist class will line up completely behind him and treat him as another Ronald Reagan. I don't doubt that he will get his wall along the border with Mexico in some fashion, or that he will continue to promote anti-immigrant policies—now a permanent feature of his regime, part of the Trump brand as Naomi Klein would say

The U.S. president has enormous powers. Unless a truly powerful left movement develops in the United States—and there are signs that this is still possible—we are likely to see further turns to the right, and that means a body politic more and more infected by a racist, repressive far-right ethos. The main effect on the rest of the world is that it will legitimate fascist and neo-fascist movements and governments elsewhere. Already in 2014 Samir Amin wrote an important article for *Monthly Review* on “The Return of Fascism in Contemporary Capitalism.”

The big fear on the left is that some national emergency, such as a terrorist attack, will serve as Trump's Reichstag Fire leading to the suspension of civil liberties. But already we are seeing an erosion of civil liberties for marginalized populations in the society.

The Democratic Party is also working for the sake of capitalism. There are reports that Obama deepened the income injustice in his period. The state has always been protecting the police officers that kills blacks. What makes Trump different?

You are right about the Democratic Party and Obama. Both the Democrats and the Republicans have supported a racist penal state (the New Jim Crow) in the United States, aimed particularly at black and Latino/a populations. It is reasonable, then, to ask: What is different about the Trump regime? In some ways, it is not all that different; the earlier forms of repression continue. Much of what is taking place is thus simply a continuation of the neoliberal class, race, and gender oppression that already existed under Obama and would have been perpetuated, even enhanced, if Hillary Clinton had won her way to the White House.

But Trump has made a difference. One such difference is a weakening of the rule of law, undermining civil liberties and protections for the population at a record rate. More significant, though, is the fact that Trump has legitimated racism, chauvinism, jingoism, and repression at every level of the society. The neo fascist march in Charlottesville and the murderous violence it entailed were the product of a new national atmosphere of hate that Trump has significantly contributed to through his words and actions. Racism is deeply embedded in U.S. society but now it is being actively encouraged and legitimated in the oval office as part of a move for political power. Trump in his campaign responded to Black Lives Matter by treating them as a danger to the society and said that they should be put under police surveillance. He has increased the delivery of military equipment to local police forces across the country. He has intimated that the police should rough up those that they arrest. He has, in defiance of the courts and the rule of law, pardoned the

notorious Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio who had celebrated what he called his “concentration camps” established for those he arrested on the basis of racial profiling.

In the United States, some of the anti-fascist/anti-racist groups are demonstrating in the streets with the liberals. Is it possible to fight against fascism without an anti-capitalist struggle? Not just in United States but in global scale, what kind of a struggle is needed to fight fascism?

The post-Second World War anti-fascist movement (which in the 1980s took on the name anti-fa) arose first in Europe, primarily in Britain in Germany, as a form of self-defense organized on the left against the re emergence of fascist movements. The logic behind this was that in the 1920s and 30s the left was too slow and too passive in its response to fascism with fatal consequences. A stronger anti-fa movement was therefore deemed necessary. Liberals generally see the problem of responding to fascism as one of simply shoring up liberal democracy. Anti-fa thinkers, in contrast, are more likely to recognize that the problem lies in the structural crisis of capitalism, which has now destabilized the liberal-democratic state. With the structural crisis of capital, the choice is now between socialism and barbarism (or worse, complete catastrophe). Neo fascism is emerging as capitalism’s own *solution* in this period of crisis. Here we need to remember Bertolt Brecht’s famous challenge: “How can anyone tell the truth about Fascism unless he is willing to speak out about capitalism, which brings it forth?”

The rage against establishment in a lot of countries, ironically serve the interest of rich. The leaders like Trump take advantage of this rage. How can we lead/motivate this rage for the interest of people?

We have to relearn the lessons that the left learned long ago, but that have been lost like so much else. That is, we have to relearn class analysis, and its relation to racism, nationalism, misogyny, imperialism, and other forms of repression. An empty populism that simply poses the people against the elites, is a dangerous and naïve notion. When we are talking about movements in the fascist genus we are talking about the capitalist’s class’s mobilization of the lower-middle class as a kind of rear guard, stoking its petty-bourgeois ideology, increasingly divorced from the bulk of the working class, and encouraging it to foment its rage against both the majority of those below it and those immediately above it in the class structure, leading to multiple targets: the poor, people of colour, the working class, unions, women, gays, immigrants, professionals, governmental elites, and even crony capitalists—all of whom are viewed as enemies. But these targets do not extent to the capitalist system, and not to the so-called “masters of the universe.” Some portions of the privileged working class get drawn into the radical right movement too. This is especially likely to happen with a weak working-class movement, which, rather than defining social struggle, and directing its rage reconstituting society at large, allows this role of creative defiance to be taken over in a more destructive fashion by a radical right ideology rooted in the lower-middle class. For today’s capitalist class, neo fascism is the ultimate form of creative destruction, recreating its own power, which is becoming increasingly precarious in a period of economic stagnation, financial instability, and weakening U.S. hegemony.

Is it surprising in these circumstances that we see the growth of a gendarme state and a further militarization of society? In fact, much of this had deep roots in class dynamics. The basic problem goes back as far as *The Communist Manifesto* where the issue of the lower-middle class was raised, if in somewhat different terms than today. It was only, however, with the rise of fascism in the 1930s, that the full horrors of a radical-right movement based in the lower-middle capitalist class and aligned with monopoly capital became apparent. All of this tells us that the real problem is not the rise of neo fascism, so much as the decline of a genuine socialism rooted in working-class struggle. Today either the left rises once again from the ashes, or else human society will face catastrophic decline brought on by an uncontrolled and uncontrollable capitalist system.
