

How can we revive “herd immunity” in the face of fascism?

Via [Viento Sur](#)

The concept of herd immunity, that is, the immunization of an entire population as a result of a high percentage acquiring resistance to a disease, has gained wide acceptance since the onset of the covid-19 pandemic. It has long been a tradition in the social sciences to borrow terms and concepts from the medical sciences, and the current global situation induces more of the same. There are therefore reasonable grounds to metaphorically describe as a pandemic the global spread of far-right movements in recent years, including governments led or co-lead by political forces that reproduce some of the main ideological tenets of fascism in countries as varied as Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy, the Philippines, Russia, and the US.

The beginning of this far-right pandemic can be traced back to the 1980s and received a strong boost in the following decade, as the editors of the collective book *Fascism and Neofascism* acknowledged in 2004: “While there was a resurgence of extremist activity in Western Europe in the 1980s, the collapse of communism led to a rise in the far right across the continent. During the 1990s, fascism, or something like it, suddenly and unexpectedly reappeared.” Like the classic fascism of the three decades after World War I, this neo-fascism (this is possibly the best name, as it refers to both the historical affinities and the renewal of forms in tune with our times) takes different forms, depending on the countries in which it develops.

Karl Polanyi devoted several pages in his classic 1944 work

The Great Transformation to underlining the wide variety of fascisms and fascist ideologies. "In fact," he commented, "there was no kind of religious, cultural, or national tradition background that would make a country immune to fascism once the conditions for its emergence were in place." He stated that even "the existence of a fascist movement as such" did not necessarily have to be part of the symptoms of what he called the "fascist situation." Equally important were such signs as the spread of irrational ideas, racist views, and hatred of the democratic system.

Read in light of the ongoing events in the United States, Polanyi's comment sounds chilling: "The potential strength of fascism, though usually based on a mass following, was detected not by the number of its followers, but by the influence of people in high places on whose goodwill the fascist leaders could rely and on whose influence in society they could count to protect themselves from the consequences of a failed revolt." For the Hungarian-American thinker, fascism was above all a "solution to the impasse reached by liberal capitalism" with the aim of undertaking "a reform of the market economy to be accomplished at the price of extirpating all democratic institutions." In this sense, the herd immunity to fascism achieved in most Western countries after 1945 was not only the result of the defeat of the Axis powers, but also and above all the consequence of an alternative solution to the impasse of liberal capitalism: the Keynesian democratic solution that discarded the idea of the "self-regulating market," which Polanyi called "a manifest utopia."

Another much earlier classic in the social sciences, Émile Durkheim, the founder of sociology, already lamented in his 1897 book *Suicide* the fact that "for a whole century economic progress consisted mainly in freeing labor relations from all regulation. The government, instead of regulating economic life, has become its instrument and its servant." For the

French sociologist, this economic deregulation was the main cause of what he called "anomie," that is, "a state of exasperation and frustrating weariness" resulting from the loss of economic security and the breakdown of social molds. Anomie leads individuals to seek refuge in some kind of identity group-unless it is inwardly oriented (suicide)-where they deploy their exasperation against other identities deemed responsible for the increasing precariousness of their social condition, mainly through racist and/or xenophobic logic. Thus, the emergence of fascist-type ideologies and movements from the 1980s onwards was accompanied by the emergence of other exclusive identity groups, of which religious fundamentalism is the most evident.

This is entirely in line with the observation made by Eric Weitz and Angelica Fenner, the editors of the aforementioned book, about the resurgence of fascism: "The resurgences of the right were largely a response to the political and social dislocations of the 1990s, including massive unemployment, the erosion of the safety net that had been woven by welfare states in both Western and Eastern Europe, and the deterioration of the urban environment. They were also a response to the large-scale population migrations that have occurred since 1945 in Europe along the north/south as well as east/west axes."

Indeed, there is a clear and undeniable correlation between the neoliberal assault that began in the 1980s, led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, an assault that made deregulation one of its main goals along with privatization, reduced social spending, and lower taxes for the rich, accompanied by the emergence after decades of marginalization of such phenomena as neo-fascism and religious fundamentalism. Just as the Great Recession, triggered in 2007, gave a major boost to neo-fascist forces, along with the large wave of refugees, mostly Syrian, who arrived in Europe in 2015. The events resulting from both crises continue to greatly affect

our world. And the current huge economic crisis, as a result of the Covid -19 pandemic, can only greatly worsen the conditions of anomie globally (the exploitation by the far right of the anti-lockout movements is one indicator), unless countered by economic policies similar to those adopted after 1945.

Add to this the fact that, important as Donald Trump's defeat in the last US presidential election certainly was not of a comparable scope to the defeat of the fascist powers in World War II. His defeat was not due to the discontent of his supporters, but was accompanied by a huge increase in his supporters (11 million more voters) at a time when, unlike in 2016, there was no possible illusion about what Trump stood for and thus almost no ambiguity in the direction of the vote. Similarly, globally, so far there are no signs of a decline in neo-fascism: the continued popularity of figures like Jair Bolsonaro (at least until very recently), Narendra Modi or Viktor Orbán does not presage any disappearance of the far-right pandemic in the foreseeable future.

Reaching again a state of collective immunity to fascism, like that of the post-war years, requires not only a political defeat of the most prominent neo-fascist movements and an uncompromising fight against their ideologies. It also requires, most crucially, a global shift away from the neoliberal paradigm that has been dominant for the past four decades.