

# DOSSIER

## IRGAC LECTURE SERIES

**New Faces of Authoritarianism:  
Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Global South**  
Edited by Ülker Sözen



**Edited by Ülker Sözen - Jonalyn C. Paz - Maria Moritz - Zhea Katrina Estrada - Luz Sena - Kayah Nicholas de Souza - Anna Lena Menne**

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In the summer semester of 2022, IRGAC fellows taught a course titled “New Faces of Authoritarianism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Global South” in the form of an online seminar series. The course was hosted by the Institut für Sozialwissenschaften at Humboldt University as part of the Chair for Comparative Political Science and Political Systems of Eastern Europe. The initiative was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Center for Comparative Research on Democracy (CCRD) at Humboldt University and the Social Work as a Human Rights Profession Master’s Program at Alice Salomon Hochschule. The course was assisted and technically managed by Off-University. This dossier presents contributions by the course participants composed of their essays discussing conceptual issues and case studies on different topics regarding authoritarianism and counter-movements.

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# Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies in the Classroom: The Pedagogy of Collective Learning Across Geographies

Ülker Sözen



President's portrait - Guilherme Peters - action and installation, 2019

In the summer semester of 2022, in the form of an online seminar series, we as IRGAC fellows taught a course titled *New Faces of Authoritarianism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Global South*. The course was hosted by the Institut für Sozialwissenschaften at Humboldt University as part of the Chair for Comparative Political Science and Political Systems of Eastern Europe. The initiative was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Center for Comparative Research on Democracy (CCRD) at Humboldt University and the Social Work as a Human Rights Profession Master's Program at Alice Salomon Hochschule. The course was assisted and technically managed by Off-University. Each week, IRGAC fellows discussed their research as they covered the diverse manifestations of authoritarianism and right-wing politics, social movements, and anti-authoritarian currents and strategies in various countries such as Argentina, Brazil, India, Mozambique, South Africa, and Turkey.

Our provider of the online platform and technical assistance for carrying out the classes, Off-University, is an NGO based in Berlin that is founded with the intention of providing a secure online space to connect politically persecuted and at-risk academics with an audience across borders. Similarly to IRGAC, Off-University is an initiative that confronts the contemporary tide of authoritarianism and political pressures on knowledge production. It was established in 2017, as a response to both democratic backsliding in Turkey and the purge of academics which followed, and specifically effected the signatories of the Academics for Peace Petition. In recent years, the platform has been extended to academics and audiences affected by the contemporary global authoritarian turn and political repression in other parts of the world such as the MENA region.

This dossier presents a glimpse of the course participants' outputs at the end of the classes and includes their reflections and case studies on different aspects of authoritarianism, neoliberal governance, the effects of colonialism, and counter-movements that take place in a variety of settings. Before outlining the significant contribution of each essay, I would like to briefly discuss the concepts of the Global South, authoritarianism, and populism which constitute the main thematic axes of IRGAC and the lecture series, and delineate our approach on them. Then, I will reflect on the pedagogy of collective learning and knowledge production on these subjects, tackling some of the complexities stemming from diverse positionalities across geographies.

### Complex Concepts with Potential

The notion of the Global South could be thought of as a successor to the terms designating the underprivileged parts of the world such as the underdeveloped, developing, and peripheral countries, or the Third World. However, it differs from them with regard to some key perspectives. This concept implicates the global-scale systemic power inequalities and the historical contingencies of European colonization and imperialism.<sup>1</sup> It takes into account the multifaceted connections and intertwined power relations between the Global South and the Global North while giving room for recognizing "the Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South".<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, this conceptual lens allows for studying the alternative sources of knowledge, power, and transformative agency embedded in the Souths, as proclaimed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos.<sup>3</sup> The recognition and examination of these Southern sources might further assist the political projects to mobilize and bridge them within a decolonizing perspective. Following this, the notion of Global South opens a window to consider and engage with the multiplicity of grassroots movements and politics taking place in these contexts. Overall the versatile nature of the experiences and historicity ingrained in the Global South render the notion a complex analytical and political tool, albeit with potential.<sup>4</sup>

Authoritarianism, in the sense we deliberated the concept within IRGAC and the lecture series refers to a specific mode of governance that entails statecraft, political movements, and subjectivities. Following the intellectual tradition of thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas, and Stuart Hall who analyzed the interplay of coercion and consent in ruling practices, we consider authoritarianism as a response to the crisis of governance and capitalist accumulation. The financial crisis of 2008, which was a crisis of neoliberalism, triggered authoritarian responses and right-wing political currents across the world by accentuating the coercive and disciplinary capacities of the state.<sup>5</sup>

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1 S. Haug, J. Braveboy-Wagner, & G. Maihold, "The 'Global South' in the Study of World Politics: Examining a Meta Category", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 9, 2021, pp. 1923–44.

2 A. G. Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2018.

3 B. de Sousa, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Duke University Press, 2018.

4 IRGAC, "Introduction", *Global Authoritarianism. Perspectives and Contestations from the South*, Transcript Verlag, 2022, pp. 9–20.

5 Tansel, C. B., "Authoritarian Neoliberalism", *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 1–28.

A key point of our perspective is avoiding a binary understanding of authoritarianism versus liberal democracy. This dualism serves an ideological purpose by obscuring, on the one hand, the global power relations that sustain authoritarian regimes in the Global South for the interests of the affluent liberal democracies of the North and on the other, the structural and dynamic role of the authoritarian element for the preservation and expansion of the capitalist democratic system.<sup>6</sup> Another critical aspect of our approach is the consideration of the multi-levelled nature of the phenomenon which encompasses state policies, neoliberal governance, and the affective constitution of collective identities and subjectivities. This manifold character complicates the study of authoritarianism, which necessitates focusing on ideologies and the concept of populism.

In connection to this point, the question of why people lend support to authoritarian regimes and ideologies that contradict their interests was one of the critical problems which prevailed in our discussions during the classes, as well as occupying the thoughts of researchers and political activists in various parts of the world. In this regard, Stuart Hall pointed out the role of populism for authoritarian statecraft's realization of the neoliberal transformation of the state and the dismantling of its social functions.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, authoritarian populism is a way of governance that generates popular consent through converting mass grievances into polarizing discourses of moral panic and articulating them under an ideology in favour of increasing the disciplinary and punitive functions of the state, criminalizing dissent, and weakening the idea of public good.

Conversely, scholars like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau raise the idea that populism could be deployed by the left, as well as the right, as a strategy for mobilizing different sections of society into a counter-hegemonic bloc. Laclau and Mouffe advocate for the embracement of the populist moment by the leftist political actors which entails the mobilization of popular social demands, the symbolic construction of 'the people' as a category for collective identification, and the radical exclusion of 'the elites' as the common enemy, which usually refers to the neoliberal forces.<sup>8</sup> However, this approach has stirred criticism that points out the contradictions of left-wing populism and considers it as an attempt to reverse its right-wing counterpart by reproducing an elitist vision, along with noting the cases where it transforms from a counter-strategy into a tool that yields authoritarianism.<sup>9</sup>

### Pedagogy of Discussing Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies

The scholarly and political literatures on the concepts of the Global South, authoritarianism, and populism are not devoid of contestation and they involve diverse perspectives trying to address and work within the complexity of their contents and implications. Besides, these concepts are entangled with the compound geography of global power relations and the variegated versions of political repression taking place in different contexts. Hence, properly discussing these concepts and counter-strategies in the classroom setting is a difficult task. Further complicating this issue,

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6 IRGAC, "Introduction".

7 Hall, S., "Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al.", *New Left Review*, vol. 151, no. 1, 1985, pp. 115–23.

8 E. Laclau & C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (second edition), Verso, 2001, and C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, 2018.

9 H. Petersen & H. Hecker, "A Critique of Left-wing Populism: Critical Materialist and Social-Psychological Perspectives", *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 85–100.

there are particular hardships involved in leading a learning environment on these controversial subjects, with participants hailing from different backgrounds and localities, coming together in the online classroom.

This situation calls for a consideration of the pedagogy of collective learning and knowledge production. In this regard, the feminist conception of 'dissident friendship' can serve as a helpful guiding lens. Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose describe this relationship as one that is individually and socially transformative, taking place "across political boundaries and structural power that demonstrate the power of affect and emotional bonding to counter divisions".<sup>10</sup> In light of this, Nicole Nguyen and others experiment with integrating dissident friendships into the epistemic setting of learning and knowledge production.<sup>11</sup> They define "epistemic friendship" as follows:

Epistemic friendships are a learning for social justice with and by others. In our understanding, epistemic friendship is a distinct notion: more political than standard notions of friendship, but also not simply coalitionary or in solidarity. It does not explicitly seek to reach across difference, but rather strives to provide a community of support attuned to, but regardless of, one's location. An epistemic friendship is based on shared politics, rather than shared identities, and is marked by a desire to push one another toward greater, more effective, more nuanced political work for radical justice.<sup>12</sup>

This approach entails an openness to and collaboration across differences while refusing to ignore diverse positionalities, rather seeking to learn from them through a decolonizing perspective and reflexive practices. Hence, the learning environment can be imagined and practiced as part of counter-strategies. Parallel to this, we attempted to implement a pedagogy during the classes that aimed to enrich our approaches and deepen our inquiries by drawing on the diverse experiences and insights of course participants. We encouraged participants to share observations about their social environments and everyday experiences in relation to the larger political developments and the historicity of power relations shaping their localities. As such, we sought together to grasp the macro-level and subjective dimensions of authoritarianism and neoliberalism across geographies. It was of particular importance to us that every sort of question, even if it contradicts the agreed-upon stances, could be raised during the classes.

The online character of the classroom also deserves specific attention in terms of pedagogical challenges. The absence of physical proximity in our social lives became an ordinary condition that most of us grew accustomed to because of the pandemic. However, the virtual mode of interaction, especially when conversing on complex topics, can still be isolating and wearisome. Despite such predicaments, studies in the field of digital pedagogies propose ways of fostering critical engagements and decolonizing perspectives for the young generation of learners, who are fashionably

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10 E. H. Chowdhury & L. Philipose, "Introduction", *Dissident Friendships: Feminism, Imperialism, and Transnational Solidarity*, University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 1–10.

11 N. Nguyen, W. Nastasi, A. Mejia, & A. Stanger, "Epistemic Friendships: Collective Knowledge-Making Through Transnational Feminist Praxis", *Dissident Friendships: Feminism, Imperialism, and Transnational Solidarity*, University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 11–42.

12 Ibid, p. 14.

termed 'digital natives', by implementing various digital tools of alternative knowledge production.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, the IRGAC lecture series became a remarkably instructive and valuable experience for us. The essential benefit, as well as the challenge of this experience, lies in the encounters that it encouraged, among participants from multiple contexts shaped by distinct political histories and with varying approaches and levels of understanding regarding political geography and authoritarianism. For instance, concepts and arguments that do not require explanation in a homogeneous collectivity—either of geographical background, political orientation, or academic specialization—may spark debates that would instigate alternative interpretations when brought to the attention of a diverse audience in a mixed classroom setting. As such, the course experience prompted us to improve our pedagogical methods and practices for discussing political developments and social movements across geographies.

Such pedagogy should be capable of effectively connecting the social, institutional, and individual levels of knowledge, experience, and action, all while addressing issues of social justice. As a result, the lecture series initiative added to the IRGAC's perspective which seeks to strengthen efforts to bridge scholarly work and activism in a unique praxis that problematizes the numerous power inequalities within academic and political frameworks.

#### Structure of the Dossier

This collection comprises six essays opening with Jonalyn C. Paz's contribution that focuses on the lingering effects of colonialism in the discourses about climate change. Paz problematizes the notion of the Anthropocene in particular, which uncritically reproduces the dichotomy of nature versus society and conceals the historical and current responsibility of the countries of the Global North in the climate crisis. The next essay is by Maria Moritz in which Moritz delves into the potential of symbols, narratives, and affects to assist a counter-hegemonic bloc in the face of the contemporary global ecological and social crisis. It is followed by Zhea Katrina Estrada's account of the recent elections in the Philippines and the fake news campaign, which centred on social media and installed Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, the son of the former dictator, into power by confusing the lines between truth and perception.

Then, we have Luz Sena's article outlining the strategies of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil with a specific focus on its solidarity practices during the pandemic, which can provide an inspirational model for social movements in other geographies as well. The following contribution by Kayah Nicholas de Souza examines the land expropriation efforts of a multinational logistics company in a small Brazilian town within the context of the country's neoliberal transformation and the ensuing forms of governance. The final essay is by Anna Lena Menne, which scrutinizes the Russian and Chinese models of digital authoritarianism as part of their global strategies. Menne locates these practices, through a kaleidoscopic dialectical approach, in the multipolar international order

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13 R. Risam, "Postcolonial Digital Pedagogy", *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*, Northwestern University Press, 2019, pp. 89–114.

whereby the authoritarian tendencies within capitalism come to the fore.

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- Petersen, H. & H. Hecker, "A Critique of Left-wing Populism: Critical Materialist and Social-Psychological Perspectives", *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 85–100.
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- Tansel, C. B., "Authoritarian Neoliberalism", *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 1–28.

# Drowning the Multitudes of People of Colour

Jonalyn C. Paz

*The colonized, underdeveloped man  
is today a political creature  
in the most global sense of the term.  
~Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth*



Source: Pexels. Photo credit: Markus Spiske.

## Climate Reality

After years of climate denial, diversion, co-optations by the elite, and control of climate narratives, the lived realities of climate change and its profound implications for the future can no longer be ignored. Using the component of risk as a framework to understand the extensive, interconnected, and irreversible impacts of climate change at a planetary scale, the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report placed great emphasis on the deep entanglement of climate systems and human society.<sup>1</sup> It admitted that [“climate change has caused substantial damages”](#) and irreversible losses on ecosystems, human settlements, and populations across the globe, with the least equipped region needing to endure the hardest blow.

In the SWANA<sup>2</sup> region, the former United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa stressed the devastating consequences of the 1.5 degree increase in global temperature. Housing 12 out of the 17 most water-stressed countries in the planet, SWANA is projected to suffer an array of intersecting crises on agricultural production and food security, public health concerns, armed conflict, continuing poverty, drought and wildfires, as well as large-scale human displacement.<sup>3</sup> The Max Planck Institute predicts that, before the end of this

<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 2022, pp. 3056.

<sup>2</sup> SWANA is the decolonial term for the Middle Eastern, Near Eastern, Arab World, or Islamic World and used to refer to the countries in the Middle East and on the North African (MENA) continent. It is short for South West Asian/North Africa(n).

<sup>3</sup> R. Hofste, P. Reig, and L. Schleifer, *17 Countries, Home to One-Quarter of the World's Population, Face Extremely High Water Stress*, World Resource Institute, 2019, available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/17-countries-home-one-quarter-worlds-population-face-extremely-high-water-stress>.

century, most cities in SWANA will become uninhabitable.<sup>4</sup> Warning against the influx of climate migrants, the World Bank Groundswell report estimates more than 216 million displaced people by 2050, with Sub-Saharan Africa as its hotspot.<sup>5</sup>

All these claims and predictions, however, rest in some projected future scenarios. International venues for climate negotiations often fail to take into account that catastrophes have already fallen on the regions that still bear the lingering impacts of colonialism. For instance, according to the United Nations, a significant portion of the African continent has been warming by more than 1 degree since 1901.<sup>6</sup> More than a century later, in 2021, heavy rains inundated the city of Aswan in Egypt. This led to the collapse of public infrastructure, the displacement of more than 200 families, and injuries and deaths.

In addition, the summer of 2021 also brought at least 50 degree Celsius spike in the temperature in SWANA. Iraq and Iran bore at least 51 degrees Celsius. Kuwait recorded 53.2 degrees Celsius while Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia experienced over 50 degrees. Despite these recordings, institutions and platforms such as the UN and COP26 remain “theaters of climate colonialism” where the sway and influence of corporations, capitalists-bureaucrats in government seats, and self-serving elites hold the power to command global discourses and hard-decisions.<sup>7</sup>

### **False Homogenization**

Dominant climate narratives revolve around the depoliticized discourses of environmental determinisms. More so, they continue to attribute the realities of climate change to the homogenizing, totalizing, and hegemonic notion of the Anthropocene. First introduced in 1980 by Eugene Stoermer, an American biologist, and subsequently popularized in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist, the Anthropocene concept conveniently places the unprecedented disruptions in Earth systems and biosphere processes under human dominance.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the concept provides an intellectual space and political refuge where the five centuries of economic plunder and oppression, specifically of indigenous communities, people of color, and women, are concealed and continued.

This concept sweeps aside the externalization of environmental harms while accumulating capital and structurally appropriating injustices. Although the basic foundation of the Anthropocene is already deeply lodged in the groundless dualism between ‘nature’ and ‘society’, the period that set off the aforesaid era is still widely debated.<sup>9</sup> Discourses on the inception of the Anthropocene epoch revolve around at least two periodizations: First, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and specifically the Industrial revolution and its use of carbon and methane for production; and second, in 1945, when the atomic

4 P. Hergersberg, *Hot Air in the Orient*, Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, pp. 62–8, available at [https://www.mpg.de/10856695/W004\\_Environment\\_climate\\_062-069.pdf](https://www.mpg.de/10856695/W004_Environment_climate_062-069.pdf).

5 Clement, V., K. Rigaud, A. de Sherbinin, B. Jones, S. Adamo, J. Schewe, and E. Shabhat, *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*, 2021, Washington, DC: World Bank.

6 United Nations Climate Change, *Climate Change is an Increasing Threat to Africa*, available at [https://unfccc.int/news/climate-change-is-an-increasing-threat-to-africa#:~:text=Much%20of%20Africa%20has%20already,on%20Climate%20Change%20\(IPCC\)](https://unfccc.int/news/climate-change-is-an-increasing-threat-to-africa#:~:text=Much%20of%20Africa%20has%20already,on%20Climate%20Change%20(IPCC)).

7 F. Sultana, “The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality”, *Political Geography*, 2022.

8 C. Xausa, “Decolonizing the Anthropocene: ‘Slow Violence’ and Indigenous Resistance in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*”, *Il Tolomeo*, no. 1, pp. 87–100.

9 J. W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, 2016, Oakland, CA: PM Press.

bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki dispersed radioactive particles across the globe.

However, both years erroneously define the notion of the “Anthropos”<sup>10</sup> as class-less, race-less, gender-less, and devoid of power hierarchies.<sup>11</sup> Situating their argument on the reduction of carbon dioxide measured through the Antarctic ice cores, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin proposed 1610 as the inception of the Anthropocene era.<sup>12</sup> Prior to 1610, in the 1500s specifically, nearly 50 million indigenous persons were massacred in the Americas. This genocide led to the collapse of agriculture, forest regeneration, and a dramatic dip in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in the 1600s.<sup>13</sup> This positioning not only enables us to consider more encompassing circumstances surrounding the phenomena but also sheds light on the existence of a temporal gyro where colonialism and climate change intersect. This intersection fuses continuities and breeds casualties and continuities of casualties.

This starting point also captures the impacts of the Industrial Revolution. The centuries following the beginning of colonialism up to contemporary times witnessed the colonization and occupation of “nine-tenths of the surface territory of the globe”.<sup>14</sup> This period also lived through the birth of petrocapi-talism, primitive accumulation of capital, and accumulation by ceaseless dispossession.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps more importantly, this periodization lays bare the events that transpired during the construction of the Western empire. Outside its enclosures, lands were appropriated, natural resources were siphoned, indigenous communities and people of color were enslaved and subjected to genocide, and cultural heritage was pillaged and transported to colonial spaces. Up until the recent times, these spoils had been used to justify the atrocities committed against those colonially labelled as ‘savages’ while celebrating the victories of the European civilizations.

These colonial ontogenies were followed by a series of equally exploitative and politically catastrophic events. Global economic order and neoliberal policies were imposed across space. Extractivist industries were deployed and countries outside the West were converted into sacrifice zones for carbon capitalism and fossil fuel economies.<sup>16</sup> These, when combined, resulted in expendable communities in postcolonial domains and created the “shared infrastructure” of capital that rewards colonial powers.<sup>17</sup>

Climate scientists agree that catastrophic consequences are bound to arise if the global temperatures exceed the 1.5 degree limit. Despite this, the economic order imposed by the Global North consistently operates under a delusion that equates the natural environment and its inhabitants to exploitable resources. Within this capitalist-colonial paradigm, biodiversity is nothing more than a

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10 The Greek word for human.

11 C. Xausa, “Decolonizing the Anthropocene: ‘Slow Violence’ and Indigenous Resistance in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*”.

12 S. L. Lewis, and M. A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”, *Nature*, vol. 519, no. 7542, pp. 171–80.

13 Gonzales, C., “Racial Capitalism, Climate Justice, and Climate Displacement”, *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 108–47.

14 R. Young, “Sex and Inequality”, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 86

15 C. Gonzales, “Racial Capitalism, Climate Justice, and Climate Displacement”.

16 N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

17 Mbembe, A., Deglobalization, *Esprit*, 18 February 2018, available at <https://www.eurozine.com/deglobalization/>.

commodity.<sup>18</sup> These conditions refute the vacuous claims that attach climate crises to environmental determinism. The political dimensions of climate change contradict the attempt of Anthropocene discourse to construct a deceptive narrative that revolves around a swathe of planetary hallucinations and imagined equal shares in climate responsibility and burden. Climate reality signals the continuation of the dictatorship of the colonizers who exercise impunity over privatized profit and socialized disasters.

Transcending the assumptions of a green arithmetic that abstracts nature from society and consigns the former for the consumption of the latter, Jason Moore forwards the concept of Capitalocene. This notion contends that capitalism is central to ecological destruction. The Anthropocene posits that planetary cataclysm is the sum of human activities plus nature; this assumption, however, has no bearing in the capitalist dominion where 'cheap nature' is used to cash in on the natural environment and appropriate wreckage.<sup>19</sup> Within the capitalist structure, the world does not matter and active participation in multi-species genocide is habitual—profitable, even.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from these erroneous conjectures where countries are imagined to have equal responsibility for climate change and equal capacity in affecting climate policies, the Anthropocene concept is problematic on many other levels. On the one hand, its fictitious claim to universalism erases the unequal power relations between the Global North and the Global South. On the other hand, it relieves the Global North from its colossal accountability—despite its excessive and historical greenhouse gas contribution pegged at 92 percent as of 2015—and shifts the burden of adaptation and mitigation onto the Global South, without providing any material reparation or redress for colonial exploitation.<sup>21</sup> The Anthropocene veils the creation of "dual economies" which anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon used in relation to the mainstream distortion that baptizes on-going robbery as global economy. This false homogeneity conceals the racial, colonial, and capitalist underpinnings of climate catastrophes. In the process, it naturalizes the division of the world and the isolation of its segments into bordered progress and unrestricted poverty—connected by dispossessions, colonial injuries, and transgenerational injustices. Most importantly, this totalizing construct to universalism and its claim to truth is tantamount to what Fanon calls the drowning of the "multitudes of colored people",<sup>22</sup> while simultaneously blaming them for their inability to survive in a climate-colonial world.

## The Climate-Colonial World

Capitalism is a system that operates on the logic of infinite expansion in a finite world.<sup>23</sup> It is driven and reinforced by coloniality, and it marches alongside the Anthropocene. Capitalism mutates, exploits, and generates revenues for the few, and delivers ruin to the many. It draws leverage from the Anthropocene's erasure of power hierarchies and gender blindness. It resists political restructurings

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18 S. Fernandes, "Ecosocialism from the Margins", *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 137–43.

19 Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*.

20 D. J. Haraway, "Staying With the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene", *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, pp. 34–76.

21 J. Hickel, "Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown: An Equality-Based Attribution Approach for Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Excess of the Planetary Boundary", *The Lancet, Planetary Health*, vol. 4, no. 9, pp. 399–404.

22 F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004.

23 J. B. Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

that are not in its favour and insists on retaining the socio-economic relationship of production—or a version of it—that brings profits, regardless of the expenditures. Above all, capitalism provides the space for the continuity of colonization, where environmental catastrophes and climate vulnerability is dispersed in an “unevenly universal” manner.<sup>24</sup>

Mainstream and Anthropocene-centred approaches to climate change—from degrowth to green economy—often address the wrong problem and end up exacerbating existing disparities. Institutional spaces, where climate change mitigations and damage reparations should have been negotiated, end up normalizing eco-capitalism instead.<sup>25</sup> Those spaces open greenwashing haylofts where corporations create new markets, variegate capital surplus, and wring monetary gain from ecological tragedies.

Prominent examples of this are the contemporary superpowers: the European Union with more than 20 percent energy imports from SWANA,<sup>26</sup> Germany with 18 more years of continued coal use following its 2022 commitment to clean energy, and China with its growing investments in coal plants within its territories and overseas.<sup>27</sup> The Gulf States also are formulating “investor-focused mining laws” to diversify their income through excavation and large-scale quarries.<sup>28</sup> In Africa, havoc is caused by extractivism which produced USD 45 billion net profits primarily shared among the industry shareholders.<sup>29</sup> This kind of progress is created by ecological destruction and human underdevelopment, economic inequality, and protracted civil wars.

Resource and mineral exploitation may seem promising in terms of GDP and gross exports but the claimed benefits in these statistics do not translate into improvements in the everyday life of ordinary citizens. If anything, these numbers normalize authoritarian governance and prosperity for the elites. These quasi-development practices also pave the way for the enduring exclusion of the larger segments of the population from political participation. This is accomplished through national-dependency dynamics that masquerade as foreign partnerships and local employment. The historical reliance of Europe on raw materials from postcolonial regions continues to support a helix of violence that is institutionalized, legalized, and deployed by colonial architectures.

Eco-socialist and decolonial scholars like Sabrina Fernandes and Carmen Gonzales expose the anatomy of transnational developments and their historical connections to capitalism and colonialism. Transnational projects carried out in formerly colonized countries continue to enrich the Global North by diluting the Global South into commodities and an ecological sink. Damages are magnified by the dominance of the former in global institutions that oversee climate actions and

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24 R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

25 S. Fernandes, “Ecosocialism from the Margins” and Sultana, “The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality”, *Political Geography*, 2022.

26 Harvey, R., “Challenges and Opportunities for the EU in Africa’s Extractives Sector”, *South African Institute of International Affairs*, 2019, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28371> and D. S. Olawuyi, “Can MENA Extractive Industries Support the Global Energy Transition? Current Opportunities and Future Directions”, *The Extractive Industries and Society*, vol. 8, no. 2.

27 S. Fernandes, “Ecosocialism from the Margins”.

28 R. Al Rawashdeh and G. Campbell, “Mineral Policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries: The Case of Saudi Arabia”.

29 A. Standing, *Corruption and the Extractive Industries in Africa: Can Combatting Corruption Cure the Resource Curse?*, Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2007.

legitimize distributive and corrective injustices.<sup>30</sup> This not only facilitates the denial of the historical accountability of the Global North but also authorizes the unrelenting robbery of the Global South. This worldwide arrangement cultivated the former to transmogrify into an underbelly of climate cataclysms where public dispossessions, enclosures, and confinement camps for border-crossing foreigners are upheld using colonial growth models.

Western nations subsist on expanding their capital while stacking climate vulnerabilities and subjecting outsiders to slow and incremental violence.<sup>31</sup> The irreparable loss of human and non-human lives, the melting not only of the ice-caps but of day-to-day meaningful existence and routinary devastations through international partnerships ossify the Global South into a geography of trans-generational plunder. Climate institutions and policies within the framework of this colonial West-world are structured by the Global North according to its own interests. This climate-colonial world is engineered to move forward with racial blindness, participate in ancestral erasures, draw profit from multi-species genocide, and remain complicit in the methodical pillage of “the ruins that have become our home”.<sup>32</sup>

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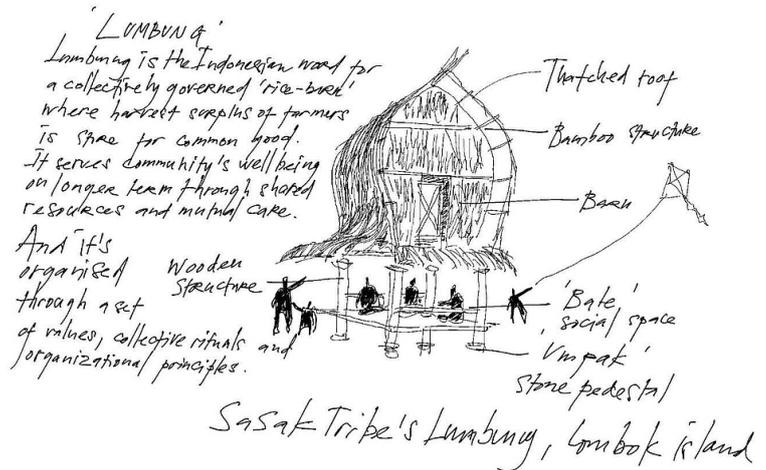
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# The Potential of Anti-Capitalist Narratives

Maria Moritz



lumbung, by ruangrupa for documenta fifteen, 2022

*...politics involve more than public management and a rational assessment of interests. Some may have forgotten, but politics still involves imagination, the capacity to dream collectively, to tell stories; politics still contains a form of mythology.<sup>1</sup>*

In the context of the lecture series *New Faces of Authoritarianism in the Global South*, I started to reflect on the potential of narratives, images, and myths, including their emotional dimensions. I became intrigued by the question of how they can be used as part of a strategy in the struggle against neoliberal authoritarianism in Western Europe. In one of our sessions, Boaventura Monjane argued that in the cases of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe it may be possible, though difficult, to deploy left-wing populism to defeat its right-wing counterpart. Moreover, the same means could assist the convergence of different classes into a broad united front in order to achieve anti-capitalist change. This, in turn, made me ponder the question of how to extract the effectiveness of populism without implementing its dangerous downsides. To shed light on this inquiry, I will draw on arguments on the use of myths:

As Roland Barthes has shown, myths are to be understood as communication systems and communicated messages (Barthes, 1957). In this sense, everything can be a carrier of a message: the visual, auditory, spoken, written, and representational—all of these can, as an associative interplay of signifier (the expression and form) and signified (the content and imagination), yield a second-order sign and thus a myth.

Myths, as a form of narrative, are not necessarily counter-concepts to truth in political interplay. They form mental constructs, collective ideas, and dreams that are as much a part of reality and politics as "hard facts," public management, and rational advocacy. My main question is how myths and narratives can be used to simultaneously address differing concerns and needs of diverse groups and how they can help overcome fragmentation to accelerate the urgent social and ecological transformation of society.

Both left and right-wing populisms turn out to be effective when their stakeholders successfully play on the political stage with images that attract people on the basis of affect. By dividing political orientation into four layers—*affective importance, epidemiocracy, narrative structures, and mythical attractions*—Yves Citton has discussed how affects mobilize us: "Hunger, lust, envy, commiseration, hope, hate will certainly push me to act, but I won't be able to enter any specific action until I can integrate my possible moves within the structure provided by a narrative or

<sup>1</sup> Oudenampsen, M. "Political Populism". Open, vol. 20, 2010, p. 20.

story" (Citton 2010, 64).

### **Affects and Unifying Symbols**

As affects form the first level of mobilization, it is critical to acknowledge popular concerns and fears, as opposed to dismissing them as ill-founded from the start. Telling those who are afraid of higher taxes or a rise in criminal activity that they are wrong can make them wait for someone to offer a solution—however damaging it may be. The so-called Querdenker\*innen in Germany, a group of people who have been protesting against the measures taken to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, provide an example of the mobilizing power of negative affect wherein fears trigger more fears and destructive narratives. Furthermore, in this case, the demand to not wear a mask becomes a symbol conveying unmet needs and longings in general.<sup>2</sup>

Esotericism, spirituality, anthroposophy, and their self-assessment as heroic opponents of the regime has played a major role in their coalition from the very beginning. However, the composition of their worldview is rather inhomogeneous. The rejection of the mask and the undesirable meanings attached to it has united them and established their identity as a group. Not wearing the mask and adopting an anti-vaccination stance is seen, by most of the movement's supporters, as resistance to oppression. Along with vaccination, the mask has become a symbol for a perceived sense of subjugation and un-representation. The Querdenker\*innen movement thus offered all those who felt betrayed and unrepresented by the state and institutionalized mainstream politics an opportunity for identification.

The fact that so many people find themselves in such stirring narratives and are attracted to symbols is hardly surprising, given that it is what narratives and myths do: they explain the past in order to enable and justify future action. We are drawn to them because they make sense and alleviate contingency fears, ambiguity, and disorientation. They respond to these phenomena and create coherence, a sense of being well taken care of, and identity through exaggeration or reduction of complexity. This is not a bad thing per se, and because it is so effective, it is also very promising. Following Yves Citton, in order to counteract destructive narratives and myths—namely those that are suicidal in nature as they provide short-term relief, but ultimately lead to a worsening of the situation, or are detrimental in the sense that they cause injustice and danger for others—we need constructive myths and narratives.

### **Common Denominator for an Alternative Union**

But what does a constructive myth look like? How can it appeal to different groups and address their different fragilities simultaneously, as well as address the root causes of their problems? How can affects be harnessed without being manipulative, but rather mobilize critical judgment? In employing myth, how can we avoid undermining the concerns of diverse groups and containing their agonistic struggle? How, then, do we create a counter-hegemonic bloc that is cohesive and united, but at the same time diverse in its fragilities and in its forming stance? How do we establish a space for those who would otherwise be tempted to follow a false prophet and identitarian enemy images?

Meanwhile, neoliberal capitalism, as so many scholars have pointed out, has penetrated all areas of our lives and is in the process of destroying them and the conditions for our continued existence. In that regard, it has the potential to represent a systemic enemy image for the entire human population. In economic terms, especially since the global financial crisis of 2008, it has threatened and even destroyed diverse livelihoods through deregulation, privatization, strengthening of the free market, and socio-political austerity measures.

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2 For more on Querdenker\*innen, see: [www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/coronavirus-vaccine-anti-vaxx-germany/2020/07/02/da7efc7e-acba-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/coronavirus-vaccine-anti-vaxx-germany/2020/07/02/da7efc7e-acba-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html)

Politically, as Chantal Mouffe argues in her book *For a Left Populism* (2018), the competitive order of neoliberalism has been accepted by almost all ruling political parties across Western Europe. Under Gerhard Schröder, chancellor of Germany from 1998 to 2005, the Social Democrats also entered into an alliance with global neoliberalism. Within almost the entire parliamentary political spectrum, from centre-left to centre-right, there has been no apparent alternative to neoliberal globalization. This, Mouffe argues, has blurred the boundaries between the political parties, making it impossible for the population to choose among real alternatives, making them feel unrepresented, weakening democracy.

It is also neoliberal capitalism that has turned us individuals into ego entrepreneurs, striving for self-maximization and making our self-worth dependent on performance and efficiency. The subjectivity technologies set forth by neoliberal capitalism demand us to constantly reinvent ourselves. Moreover, as Eva Illouz (2007) discusses, they erode our social relationships, since our interactions too are shaped by capitalist principles, such as when lovers consume goods that are conducive to a romantic atmosphere and intimacy (dinner in a restaurant, for example). Or in friendship, taken to extremes by Instagram where the maximization law of capitalism applies most particularly and the question of how many people you know becomes at least as important as how well you know them. Friendship, in other words, becomes a form of social capital and intimate relationships are determined by political and economic models such as exchange, trade, and capital.

On the basis of an economic, political, social and above all environmental problem, I therefore claim that a common denominator could be the fight against neoliberalism, which could create a sense of belonging to a counter-hegemonic bloc through all the negative affects. Such a bloc should not exist for the sake of harmony, risking a loss of conflictuality, but rather should be united particularly out of urgency, simply because, due to the climate crisis, time is running out. However, because a counter-position to neoliberal capitalism understood in this way encompasses many thematic lines, it is often too abstract as an agenda to advance the transformation of our social and ecological society quickly enough. Therefore, more people, such as the climate activist Greta Thunberg, and more narratives and myths must symbolize this disidentification with the regime of exploitation and destruction and serve as placeholders for anti-capitalist ideas.

### **Elaborating on Constructive Myths**

At documenta fifteen<sup>3</sup> in Kassel, one of the most important exhibition series of contemporary art in the world, we can find such a constructive myth and prefiguration for anti-capitalist ideas. This year, the art exhibition was directed by the collective ruangrupa, which was founded in 2000 in Jakarta by a group of artists. The central image for ruangrupa and this year's documenta fifteen is the communally shared rice barn, which is called lumbung in Indonesian. It is used to store surplus crops for the benefit of the community. It stands as a model for the practice of documenta fifteen and thus for a collective fund of resources. It is an image to hold onto, one that guides solidarity and "satisfies hunger" in a double sense.

The image of the rice barn does everything that the mask does: it becomes a symbol for unfulfilled demands, the difference being that it attacks real problems, such as the imbalance in the distribution of resources and attention. And in doing so, it is additionally emancipatory because it points to an exit strategy. It celebrates hybridity, collaborative cosmopolitanism, collectivity, shared resources, and shared experience, as well as cultural interconnections.<sup>4</sup> These are myths as well, but constructive myths: they ignite a disruptive fire and pose a challenge to the highly capi-

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3 <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/about/>.

4 The downsides of collectivity, e.g. collective loss of responsibility, are discussed elsewhere. Particularly relevant in the present context is the discussion of alleged anti-Semitism at documenta fifteen, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/06/arts/design/documenta-antisemitism.html> and <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/489580/we-are-angry-we-are-sad-we-are-tired-we-are-united-letter-from-lumbung-community>.

talist visibility regimes of the art world and constitute, as Homi K. Bhaba (2022) puts it, a redistribution of the symbolic surplus of the art world towards a commonly shared cultural resource.

However, anti-capitalist narratives and myths also run the risk of degenerating into a fetish and thus becoming fashionable and consumable. They can fall prey to an aestheticization in which the concept itself becomes a resource for capitalism and they lose their substantive dimension, such as when certain textile companies dress their models as Fridays-for-Future<sup>5</sup> demonstrators, engage in greenwashing, or cover up the fact that their sector produces more CO2 emissions than international flights and cruises. Despite this danger of co-optation, these counter-narratives and myths, through their affective dimension, contain the potential to overcome the fragmentation of counter-hegemonic forces and show a way out of the vicious cycle of profit maximization and social and ecological exploitation with a common attitude—an attitude that can, in turn, promote the development of concrete solutions.

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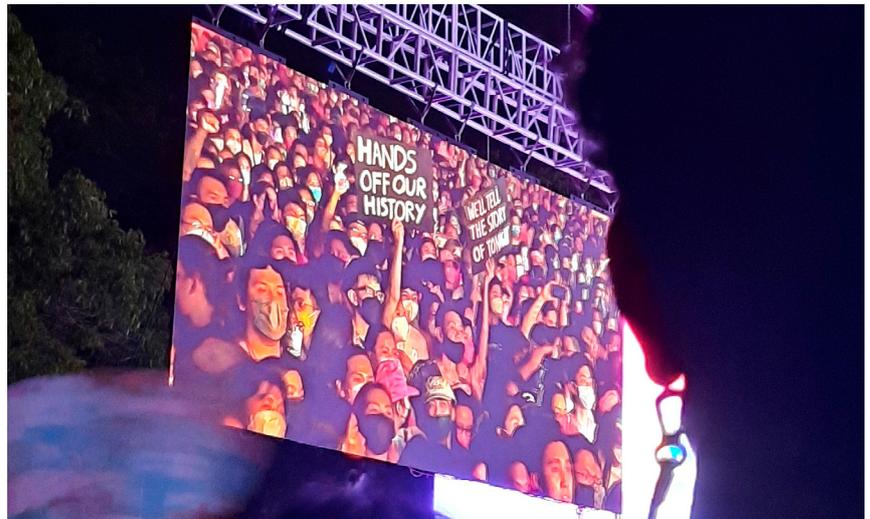
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<sup>5</sup> The global social movement Fridays for Future, initiated by Greta Thunberg, started with school strikes. The pupils and students demand action from political leaders and the fossil fuel industry to prevent climate change. See: <https://fridaysforfuture.org>.

# The 2022 Philippine President Elections are Over: When Will the Fake News Stop?

Zhea Katrina Estrada



Source: Pexels. Photo credit: Markus Spiske.

Another Marcos is ruling over the Philippines. Despite the country's grim history under the martial rule and conjugal dictatorship of Ferdinand Sr. and Imelda Marcos 50 years ago, more than 31 million Filipinos elected Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., for president in the recent May 2022 elections. Meanwhile, the new vice president is Sara Duterte, former mayor of Davao City and one of the daughters of former president Rodrigo Duterte who was in power from 2016–2022.

The May 2022 elections were marred with irregularities. The International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP) said, "It was a classic 'guns, goons, and gold' contest".<sup>1</sup> It was also pointed out that there was a "higher level of failure of the electronic voting system than ever before, along with a higher level of blatant vote-buying, a disturbing level of red-tagging of candidates and parties, as well as a number of incidents of deadly violence".<sup>2</sup> Despite citizen reports and videos being posted online to prove these happened, justice is yet to be served.

Social media was pivotal in Marcos Jr.'s win. The consistent barrage of misinformation/disinformation on different platforms is why the Philippines is as polarized as it is now. Claims that the Martial Law period was the golden years of the country, that the cache of gold that the Marcos family would allegedly use to pay the nation's debt, and that their family is the rightful 'owner' of the Philippines are just some of the narratives circulating on social media. Although these could have been easily debunked by academics, especially historians, years and years of mind-conditioning aimed at promoting the idea that what content creators and vloggers post online contains 'hidden truth' about Philippine history has muddled both the facts and the nation's collective memory.

The spread of misinformation/disinformation campaigns on social media has increased over the past few years. This is attributed to the Marcos family's goal of rebranding their family name, so it is no longer associated with the horrors of Martial Law, human rights violations, and ill-gotten we-

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1 R. ul. Khaliq, "Philippine Elections Were Not 'Free, Honest, Fair': Rights Defenders, Anadolu Ajansi, 28 June 2022, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/philippine-elections-were-not-free-honest-fair-rights-defenders/2624580>.

2 Ibid.

alth. In an interview with the online news website Rappler, former Cambridge Analytica employee-turned-whistleblower Brittany Kaiser exposed that Bongbong Marcos approached the company and requested a family rebranding before the 2016 national elections where he ran for the vice presidency.<sup>3</sup> Rappler's investigation showed that the rebranding was done by either downplaying or denying kleptocracy and human rights violations during the Martial Law years, exaggerating Marcos Sr.'s achievements, and discrediting critics, rivals, and mainstream media. Interestingly, Rappler also found that the creation of new pro-Marcos Facebook pages per month increased in 2014, when Imelda Marcos mentioned she wanted her son to run for president. In the same report, Kaiser explained that Cambridge Analytica partnered with marketing companies in the Philippines to aid politicians in their election bids. With this, Cambridge Analytica had a hand in historical revisionism, harvesting the abundant data that was haphazardly shared by Filipino social media users. As expected, the Marcos camp dismissed the claim as fake and misleading, and even considered filing a libel case against Rappler. This resulted in diminished public trust in journalists and news sites.

Finally, Bongbong Marcos lost the 2016 elections. However, instead of accepting his failure, he disputed the election results and argued that he was cheated by the former Vice President Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo, who is a social liberalist politician.<sup>4</sup> Bongbong Marcos lodged multiple electoral protests and demanded a vote recount in provinces of his choosing. In the end, the Supreme Court of the Philippines ruled that Marcos was not cheated and the recount showed that some votes were for Robredo had gone uncounted. Because of these allegations, insults, and negative fake news stories about the former vice president were amplified by both the Marcos and Duterte supporters. Over the years, Robredo was labeled as the "fake VP" and "Leni lugaw (rice porridge)" to portray that she is incapable of holding the second highest position in the land. Fabricated claims that link her to the communists, drug lords and gambling syndicates, and that she has a clandestine lover—she had been a widow since the death of her husband Jesse Robredo in 2012—were peddled online. Given that the Philippines is a patriarchal country and Rodrigo Duterte's normalization of sexism and misogyny against perceived enemies—such as Robredo—during his presidency, it is unsurprising that many Filipinos believed and shared these rumors.<sup>5</sup> A few months before the filing of his candidacy for the 2022 elections, Duterte said that the Philippine presidency is not a job for a woman despite having two female presidents in the past—Corazon Aquino and Gloria Arroyo.<sup>6</sup> The attacks worsened when Robredo declared her intention to run for the presidency in October 2021. This time, online trolls and disinformation farms also targeted those closest to her and anyone who believed in her cause.

A few weeks before election day, pro-Marcos social media accounts were abuzz with rumors of an alleged sex scandal of one of Robredo's daughters, Aika. Those who tried to access the link to the alleged video were directed to a random webpage. The Robredos remained unfazed. Less than two weeks after the uproar, trolls claimed that another daughter of Robredo, Tricia, was involved in a scandal. People deduced that Marcos was behind these low blows, although he consistently refused to answer questions regarding the issue or his troll armies. In fact, during

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3 S. Tomacruz, "Bongbong Marcos Asked Cambridge Analytica to 'Rebrand' Family Image", Rappler, 16 July 2020, available at [https://www.rappler.com/nation/bongbong-marcos-cambridge-analytica-rebrand-family-image/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social](https://www.rappler.com/nation/bongbong-marcos-cambridge-analytica-rebrand-family-image/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social).

4 Robredo was also the former chairperson of the Liberal Party of the Philippines. Upon stepping down from the vice presidency, she also left her post as the Party's chairperson to lead the Angat Buhay Foundation, a non-government organization inspired by the volunteerism of her supporters during the campaign period.

5 M. Abad, "Timeline: How Duterte Normalized Sexism in the Philippine Presidency", Rappler, 21 June 2022, available at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/timeline-how-duterte-normalized-sexism-misogyny-philippine-presidency/>

6 P. Ranada, "Sexist Duterte Says Philippine Presidency Not a Job for Women", Rappler, 15 January 2021, available at <https://www.rappler.com/nation/sexist-duterte-says-philippine-presidency-not-a-job-for-women/>.

the campaign period, he rejected interviews and debates unless questions were approved by his camp beforehand. For Marcos Jr., debates are equivalent to fights. He said, "The people are tired of fighting. If we are going to a forum to enjoy seeing candidates fight, we will not take part in that. What the nation wants to hear are solutions".<sup>7</sup> When asked about his plans for the country, his only answer was "unity", as he believed that it is the first step to recovering from the current crisis. Marcos Jr. also claimed to be a unifying leader despite refusing to apologize for the atrocities committed by his father during the Martial Law years or to return their ill-gotten wealth. Yet, numbers do not lie. According to Tsek.ph, a fact-checking initiative group, "as of April 30 [2022], 92% of fact checks about Marcos were false or misleading information in his favor. The proportion of debunked false claims praising Duterte was even higher at 95%. On the other hand, 96% of disinformation targeting Robredo was negative".<sup>8</sup>

"Perception is Real; Truth is Not"

This line came from the Marcos family matriarch Imelda in Lauren Greenfield's 2019 documentary *The Kingmaker*. It perfectly encapsulates how the Marcos family disregards the truth in order to preserve their well-curated image, which is based on lies. Gopal Krishna, a researcher on informational capitalism from IRGAC, suggested in our conversation that:

Perception is epistemological, truth is metaphysical. What is perceived can be "real" but only in the sense of perceiving a degree of reality. Total reality cannot be perceived by human beings. Truth is an aspect of Reality. Truth is about "what truly is". The cause of justice is structurally linked to truth and reality.

Following this point, we can say that the Marcos family is committing injustices as they bend the truth to reshape history and alter how Filipinos perceive truth and reality.

In today's context, whoever controls information, especially online, possesses immense power in almost every aspect of our lives. A heightened dependence on social media has made humans more susceptible to consuming misinformation and disinformation, as credible news sites no longer appear trustworthy to the public. The more people believed in fake news, the more distorted truth and reality became. Fact-checking is regarded as sinful. We are now in a post-truth age where despite being presented with evidence, people will choose to believe alternative truths which they feel closely align with their cognitive biases. For the philosopher Lee McIntyre, "it is a tactic that is used by authoritarians and wannabe authoritarians and is about dominance and power. It means that I can tell you what's true and it becomes your reality".<sup>9</sup> This is what the Marcos family are doing when they say that the Martial Law period was the golden age of the Philippines or when they claim that the crowds at Marcos Jr.'s campaign rallies were larger than Robredo's, despite photographic and video evidence indicated otherwise.

When Will the Fake News Stop?

Often attributed to Nazi chief propagandist Joseph Goebbels, "repeat a lie often enough and it

<sup>7</sup> K.J. Patag, "It's 'Unity, Unity, Unity' for UNITEAM's Presidential Bet Marcos", Philstar.com, 9 February 2022, available at <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/02/09/2159653/its-unity-unity-unity-uniteams-presidential-bet-marcos>.

<sup>8</sup> R. Noriega, "Tsek.ph: 92% of False info Favorable to Marcos, 96% of Disinformation vs Robredo Negative", GMA News Online, 7 May 2022, available at <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/830939/tsek-ph-92-of-false-info-favorable-to-marcos-96-of-disinformation-vs-robredo-negative/story/>.

<sup>9</sup> R. Hill, "Getting to The Truth in a Post-Truth Society: An Interview with Lee McIntyre, Author of Post-Truth", Intellectual Freedom Blog, 22 January 2020, available at <https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/getting-to-the-truth-in-a-post-truth-society-an-interview-with-lee-mcintyre-author-of-post-truth/>.

becomes the truth” is an adage that many are familiar with. Almost 80 years ago, George Orwell warned the world about the disappearance of objective truth and the passing of lies into history in his essay *Looking Back on the Spanish War*.<sup>10</sup> Straight from the tyrants’ playbook, the Marcos family destroyed the fragile information ecosystem and democracy in the Philippines by presenting alternative truths. Their family legitimized the distortion of facts for self-serving purposes.

Now that another Marcos is in power, one might have expected the trolling and fake news to stop, finally. On the contrary, it persists, and its desired conclusion is conformity disguised as unity. Trolls continue attacking Robredo and her supporters. Criticizing the current administration is considered detestable and a sign of rebellion. To those loyal to the Marcos family, unity means following them blindly, even if it compels them to hurl rape and death threats at anyone who dares challenge their idol.

When he ran for president, Marcos Jr. never fully outlined concrete plans, if he had any, for the Philippines. His only promise was unity, and while pleading that he should not be judged by his father’s sins, he continuously ascribed his father’s ‘achievements’ to himself. Unity is enticing for ordinary people who have been inundated with lies that present the Marcos family as victims of historical injustice. Imee Marcos, a senator and Marcos Jr.’s older sister, is grateful for their return to power and considers it as a second chance to recover from being “mocked” and “oppressed” since the 1986 People Power Revolution that deposed their father.<sup>11</sup> In his inaugural speech, Marcos Jr. bragged about having “the biggest electoral mandate in the history of Philippine democracy” thanks to 31 million votes made possible by his election campaign that “rejected the politics of division”.<sup>12</sup> More important matters, such as democracy, injustice, human rights, and corruption were not mentioned in his 25-minute speech.

The country has experienced natural calamities and another health crisis is beginning, more than a hundred days after Marcos Jr. was sworn in. We are in the middle of a pandemic, yet Filipinos are still waiting for him to appoint a health secretary. Despite all of these, their family retains a perfect image by creating new diversions and blaming all those who oppose them, accusing them of being belligerent.

In a recent post on Twitter by the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, he said that “misinformation and disinformation are increasingly used as weapons of war. Access to information is a human right. Credible, accurate, and human-centered communication is one of our best instruments to counter these threats”.<sup>13</sup> Our human rights are being trampled. If we do nothing, we can expect the violence on social media to translate into violence in offline environments. We have a long and arduous battle to fight, especially since the opponent has both a covert army and well-oiled machinery.

Marcos will never admit to having troll armies and disinformation farms. The very reason he has them is so that he can play dirty while hiding and keeping his hands clean. Authentic unity, which fosters diversity and equality, will never be achieved through lies and violence. Reparations cannot be achieved from those who deny they are at fault and instead, play the victim. In the words of the first Filipino Nobel laureate Maria Ressa: “Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it beco-

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10 G. Orwell, “Looking back on the Spanish War”, *England, Your England and Other Essays*, 1943, available at [https://orwell.ru/library/essays/Spanish\\_War/english/esw\\_1](https://orwell.ru/library/essays/Spanish_War/english/esw_1)

11 G. P. Lalu, “Imee Marcos Grateful for Family’s Second Chance: We’ve Been ‘Oppressed’, ‘Mocked’ for Years”, *INQUIRER.net*, 26 May 2022, available at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1602465/fwd-imee-marcos-grateful-for-familys-second-chance-weve-been-persecuted-for-years>

12 J. Castaneda, “Marcos vows New Era of Unity for the Philippines”, *Asia Times*, available at <https://asiatimes.com/2022/07/marcos-vows-new-era-of-unity-for-the-philippines/>.

13 <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1553839667082035203>

mes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems: climate, coronavirus, the battle for truth".<sup>14</sup>

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14 M. Ressa, "Maria Ressa Nobel Lecture", NobelPrize.org, 10 December 2021, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2021/ressa/lecture/#:~:text=Without%20facts%2C%20you%20can't,coronavirus%2C%20the%20battle%20for%20truth>

# The Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil During the COVID-19 Pandemic: How a Social Movement Feeds a Nation<sup>1</sup>

Luz Sena



Source: <https://mst.org.br/2021/10/18/food-is-the-right-of-every-human-being/>

Photo credit: Josiane Gonçalves.

The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), literally the Landless Workers' Movement, came into being during a turbulent time in Brazil. As the country left its long period of dictatorship in the 1980s and entered a phase of democracy and high expectations, numerous social movements started to take shape. One of those was the MST, calling for a self-sustaining way of life for the rural poor through land reform.

Historically speaking, the inequality of access to land in Brazil has been a direct consequence of patriarchal and racist social structures, which have prevailed from the country's colonial past up to today's agribusiness system.<sup>2</sup> According to the Constitution of 1988, the state has the responsibility to ensure that land fulfills its social function, for example by supplying food to the market, providing employment, or protecting the environment. Every large property that does not achieve these goals must therefore be distributed among those who demand to work on the land—a process that can take decades, if the state even bothers to look into it at all. Using this constitutional prerogative as its legal basis for action, the MST compels the state to take action by occupying land that does not fit into this category: usually unproductive or illegally acquired land, and land owned by farmers who either owe the government large sums in taxes or maintain labour practices similar to slavery in their fields.

Today, the MST is active in 24 out of the 26 states in Brazil's five regions and is the largest producer of organic food in the country. In what follows, I will discuss its organization and strategies as well as the important role the movement played during the pandemic through solidarity networks in a country ruled by agribusiness, necropolitics, and patriarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Hugo Fanton for suggestions and support.

<sup>2</sup> Bombardi, L.M., *A Geography of Agrottoxins use in Brazil and its Relations to the European Union*, Universidade de São Paulo. Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, 2019.

## **Organization and Strategies of the MST**

The MST is organized entirely into collective units that make decisions through discussion, reflection, and consensus. The basic organizational unit is made up of 10 to 15 families living in an MST settlement. Each unit addresses the issues and needs of their area. The members elect two representatives as coordinators (always one man and one woman, guaranteeing female participation) to represent the unit in regional meetings. The same structure is repeated at regional, state, and national levels, and everyone has the right to vote, including young people. As every MST family participates in this system, the whole movement is made up of roughly 475,000 families, or 1.5 million people.<sup>3</sup> It has no formal leadership other than a dispersed group of some 15 leaders, whose public appearances are very rare. This structure preserves a decentralized organizational model, empowers people to take political action in their own best interests, and minimizes the risk of arrest or violence by vindictive landowners. The movement facilitates communication between families and their representatives, as well as with the general public, through different forms of media, such as radio stations, books, magazines, websites, and weekly newspapers.

The main goal of the movement has not changed, however many other causes have been included in the movement, such as the democratization of communication, public health, education, ethnic diversity, improvement of international relations between rural workers, and the fight against gender-based violence.

The MST is not a political party, nor does it use violent methods. Its main tactics are marches and land occupations. In recent years, the group has been undergoing changes and incorporating new concepts<sup>4</sup>. Some examples are hunger strikes, occupations in big cities, and investments in education and literature. The MST has built more than 2,000 public schools in its camps and settlements. These follow the national curriculum and have won many awards for their high levels of education.

## **Agribusiness Versus Agroecology**

At the turn of the century, the fight for land reform pushed towards a new peasant consciousness never before associated with “New World” societies.<sup>5</sup> This new identity can largely be defined by the principles of agroecology, the antithesis of agribusiness.

Agribusiness is the industry of agricultural production and services under the exploitative rules of capitalism. It is implemented through the use of monocultures, pesticides, biotechnology, industrial farming, and mechanization and it relies on hierarchical social structures.<sup>6</sup> Although it is very lucrative for the owners, with its large exports of commodities (such as coffee, sugar, corn, or soy), it is an outdated and inefficient system for the planet and the population. In Brazil alone, agribusiness is

3 MST, “Apresentação”, <https://mst.org.br/quem-somos/>.

4 Betim, F., “As várias faces do MST, o movimento que Bolsonaro quer criminalizar”, *El País Brasil*, 2018, [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/12/13/politica/1544736443\\_496134.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/12/13/politica/1544736443_496134.html).

5 Welch, C.A., “Estratégias de resistência do movimento camponês brasileiro em frente das novas táticas de controle do agronegócio transnacional”, *Revista Nera*, vol. 6, no. 8, 2005, pp. 35–45.

6 Bassi, B.S., “Governo concede em março mais 35 registros de agrotóxicos; já são 121 produtos liberados no ano”. *De Olho nos Ruralistas*, 2019, <https://deolhonosruralistas.com.br/2019/04/01/governo-concede-em-marco-mais-35-registros-de-agrotoxicos-ja-sao-121-produtos-liberados-no-ano/>.

responsible for 20% of the planet's pesticide production, which contaminates the soil and the water and jeopardizes the health of employees and consumers alike.<sup>7</sup> Many of the pesticides used in Brazil are produced by European companies, even though they are very dangerous and banned in their own countries.<sup>8</sup>

While it claims to be a "thriving industry", agribusiness does not solve the country's hunger problem. Furthermore, it is a threat to the human right of access to healthy and nutritious food. It uses aggressive marketing strategies and takes advantage of a lack of regulation and information to sell its high-calorie and ultra-processed products.<sup>9</sup> Although it is highly celebrated in the Brazilian mainstream media, agribusiness is not the source of nourishment and riches that it pretends to be.

Agroecology, on the other hand, studies the relations between agricultural crops and their environment. It is a field of scientific knowledge, a political movement, and a social practice all in one. The system is focused on collaboration and preservation through biodiversity and the application of ancestral knowledge. It means that food comes from small producers instead of multimillion dollar companies; decisions are made from the bottom up, and the process of planting and harvesting is made in accordance with the indigenous knowledge of rural populations. In fact, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), more than 70 percent of the organic food actually consumed in Brazil is not produced by the large agribusiness ruralists, but by small family farming plantations, such as the ones of the MST—often at lower cost than the harmful versions in the supermarket.<sup>10</sup> The MST is also the largest rice producer in Latin America.<sup>11</sup>

Agroecology strives to build a restorative, resilient, and environmentally sustainable agriculture that is better integrated with the local ecosystem, creating bridges between territories marked by poverty and violence in order to build a new eco-social paradigm.<sup>12</sup>

Not everyone is in favour of this sustainable transition. The group of ruralist deputies at the base of the Brazilian government—the bancada ruralista—opposes most decisions on land reform issues and press the Congress for export-oriented policies, authorization of more pesticides, relaxation of laws on slave labour, and more deforestation. Brazil is also one of the deadliest countries in the world for environmental activists.<sup>13</sup> Between 1985 and 2018, more than 1,900 rural workers

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7 Rodrigues, G. S. D. S. C., & Ross, J. L. S., *A trajetória da cana-de-açúcar no Brasil: perspectivas geográfica, histórica e ambiental*, 2020, Edufu.

8 Grigori, P., "Multinacionais da Europa vendem no Brasil toneladas de agrotóxicos 'altamente perigosos' proibidos em seus países", *Repórter Brasil*, 2020, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2020/06/multinacionais-da-europa-vendem-no-brasil-toneladas-de-agrotoxicos-altamente-perigosos-proibidos-em-seus-paises/>.

9 Niemeyer, C. B. D., & Silveira, V. C. D. A., "Da pandemia à agroecologia: redes de solidariedade na construção de um novo paradigma socioecológico", *Saúde em Debate*, vol. 46, 2022, pp. 377-390.

10 Pontes, N., "Quem produz os alimentos que chegam à mesa do brasileiro?" ASBRAER (Associação Brasileira das Entidades Estaduais de Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural), 2017, <http://www.asbraer.org.br/index.php/rede-de-noticias/item/3510-quem-produz-os-alimentos-que-chegam-a-mesa-do-brasileiro>.

11 Sperb, P., "Como o MST se tornou o maior produtor de arroz orgânico da América Latina", *BBC News Brazil*, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-39775504>.

12 Niemeyer & Silveira 2022.

13 Braun, S., "5 deadly countries for environmental defenders", *Deutsche Welle*, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/5-deadly-countries-for-environmental-defenders/a-54298499>.

were killed due to conflicts in the countryside, resulting in only 117 trials and 33 convictions.<sup>14</sup> The solution to the agribusiness problem will never come from the top, but rather from a paradigm shift guided by anti-capitalism and social and environmental justice, the fruit of active solidarity between the countryside and the city.<sup>15</sup>

### **Solidarity Practices During the Pandemic**

The significance of the MST in Brazil has been most noticeable during the pandemic. In a country that lost more than 684.000 people<sup>16</sup> to a disease brought by plane through the wealthy elite, in a society where racialized and sexualized bodies are always the most vulnerable, it was (and still is) extremely important to find solidarity between the country and the city.

The measures taken against the pandemic that brought social isolation led to high levels of unemployment, and as Brazil does not have a national food supply policy, the population most at risk under normal circumstances was now struggling to survive. More than half of all Brazilians live with some degree of food insecurity and 9 percent of them are actually at risk of death by starvation.<sup>17</sup> Through active solidarity and partnerships between rural producers and urban workers, the movement has been able to bring producers and distributors together, eliminating the need for intermediaries. The mix of traditional forms of food production with innovative forms of organization was essential for keeping the health crisis from becoming an (even bigger) food crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, through these solidarity campaigns, the MST has donated more than 6,000 tons of food and 1,150,000 lunch boxes to indigenous communities and institutions (such as hospitals, homeless shelters, and asylums) in every major region of the country.<sup>19</sup> All of this happened while the food providers themselves were suffering from the effects of the pandemic: physical stores had to close and dozens of food markets were suspended, forcing people to find creative ways to sustain themselves. One main solution included selling organic food baskets via social media, sometimes even in partnership with taxi companies that have also been deeply affected by the pandemic. Another project was a partnership with NGOs that selected “guardians of seeds”—women responsible for distributing thousands of seed packages and seedlings of medicinal plants, flowers, and trees from the Atlantic Forest to be shared among 2,000 families in different communities. Not to mention the organization of urban gardens and community kitchens in cooperation with other social movements.<sup>20</sup>

It is also necessary to acknowledge the MST’s efforts to address patriarchal violence within its own

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14 Soares, J. P., “Impunidade: em três décadas, só 8% dos casos de morte no campo foram julgados”, *Brasil de Fato*, 2019, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/09/27/impunidade-em-tres-decadas-so-8-dos-casos-de-morte-no-campo-foram-julgados/>.

15 Rodrigues & Roos 2020.

16 Dadax, “Brazil COVID - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer. Worldometer”, *Worldometer*, 2022, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/brazil/>.

17 Roos et al. 2020.

18 Niemeyer & Silveira, 2022.

19 MST, “The MST donates more than six thousand tons of food during the pandemic”, 18 January 2022, <https://mst.org.br/2022/01/18/the-mst-donates-more-than-six-thousand-tons-of-food-during-the-pandemic/>

20 Niemeyer & Silveira 2022.

movement. It is no secret that Brazil has an alarmingly high incidence of violence against women, with black and indigenous women suffering at the highest rates. In 2018 alone, there were more than 3,000 registered cases of femicide, 30 percent of which happened inside the victims' own homes.<sup>21</sup> These numbers have been intensified by social isolation during the pandemic. Especially in poor rural areas, where such cases are overlooked or rationalized, the hidden figures of crime are particularly concerning. The state lacks sufficient safety policies and the few that still exist end up being restricted to urban reality, excluding the many groups that exist at the margins of society.

Hungry and in the midst of daily violence from the state and landowners, many landless people reproduce gender-based violence in their homes. In order to address domestic violence within its territories, the MST has developed "combat networks", which tackle different problem zones, such as the need for food sovereignty, equal land distribution, and coping strategies for the survivors of domestic violence.

During the pandemic, the movement was able to count on the constant support of an all-female team of health care professionals and lawyers who carried out hundreds of services, ranging from individual therapy sessions and mental health workshops (available for groups of men and women respectively) to publications and podcasts covering a diversity of topics: education on different types of violence (including violence against children and the LGBT community), federal laws against domestic violence, reporting channels, the struggles of motherhood during the pandemic, rural youth education, hunger, pesticides, and suicide.<sup>22</sup>

In order to develop effective policies to support the most vulnerable populations, the state has to engage in dialogue with social movements, which are already doing their best to carry this burden. The pandemic served as a warning sign of the unsustainability of cities and the vulnerability of the countryside; it revealed how they relate to each other. Despite the hardships caused by the crisis, it intensified production and distribution processes in keeping with agroecological and social values that were already in the making.<sup>23</sup> If there is a lesson to be learned from this particular period, it is that solidarity means giving what we have, not just the leftovers. There is no doubt that, in a scenario in which the state assumes part of the responsibility for supporting and promoting such solidarity and combat networks, a transition to a new social paradigm of sustainability and social justice could be achieved.

### **Lessons for the Hopeless**

In *Dialogues*, Gilles Deleuze, in conversation with Claire Parnet, examines the mechanisms of the so-called attachments of sadness.<sup>24</sup> What is in question is a type of emotional distress triggered by

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21 Lavratti, I. M., & Júnior, W. R. V., "Mulheres sem terra em tempos de pandemia de covid-19: enfrentamento às violências em Assentamentos da Reforma Agrária do Estado de São Paulo", *Revista do Instituto de Políticas Públicas de Marília*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 37-50.

22 Lavratti, I. M., & Júnior, W. R. V., "Mulheres sem terra em tempos de pandemia de covid-19: enfrentamento às violências em Assentamentos da Reforma Agrária do Estado de São Paulo", *Revista do Instituto de Políticas Públicas de Marília*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 37-50.

Ibid.

23 Rodrigues & Roos 2020.

24 Deleuze, G., C. Parnet, B. Habberjam, & H. Tomlinson, *Dialogues II*, Amsterdam University Press, 1977.

living in a “generally disagreeable world”, wherein the establishment coerces us into believing that life is hard by default. This sadness, paired with the typically human fear of change, takes away our power and willingness to act, thus keeping us in the same conditions as before. In this state, there can be no politics of progress, of construction, or of justice.

It is easy to grow hopeless about the state of politics and the environment, especially when we seem to be facing crisis upon crisis. Our lives have been turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and now inflation has become a clear and present danger for many countries in the world. Meanwhile, the lack of action to prevent climate change is resulting in fires and floods of biblical proportions, putting millions of lives and habitats in danger. On top of it all, far-right movements are growing in power and authoritarian politics are on the rise again.

The antidote to hopelessness can be found in social movements powered by unshakable convictions of solidarity and justice; but conversely, many movements fail to achieve their goals and fade out as unrealistic or utopian aspirations. Some factors that contribute to the decline of a movement, besides government repression, can be problems with the organization of the movement itself: questionable leadership, inefficient communication, or lack of community and social support can easily undermine a once promising project, as can demonstrations that turn violent, which shift public opinion of the cause.<sup>25</sup>

So what makes a movement successful? It is not enough to bring people together: they also have to move together towards a common goal, and it is the structure of their networks that best determines their behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Although many successful social movements appear to emerge spontaneously, it does not happen by chance, but rather through resilient local grassroots organizing over long periods of time. Social change can only happen when a large number of participants with a diverse array of skills, abilities, and perspectives are linked together for a shared purpose.<sup>27</sup>

Although the MST’s fight for land reform is still ongoing, the fact that the movement has lasted for decades and grown in numbers and public presence over the years can be attributed to some of the strategies presented in this essay:

1. *Transparent and empowering organizational units*: Structures within the movement are clear, allowing for democratic and decentralized decision-making within the individual units.
2. *Communication*: The movement has developed several forms of media (websites, publications, social media, etc.) to connect members with one another as well as with the general public.
3. *Adaptability*: Land reform remains its main goal, but the movement has been learning and adjusting its strategies over the years, increasing its focus on sustainability, gender equality, and education.

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25 StudyCorgi, “The Social Movement’s Success or Failure”, 14 July 2022, <https://studycorgi.com/the-social-movements-success-or-failure/>.

26 Satell, G., “Why do some movements succeed, while others fail?” *TEDxMorristown*, 9 June 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOt1dLVyHjQ&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOt1dLVyHjQ&ab_channel=TEDxTalks).

27 Nardini et al. “Together We Rise: How Social Movements Succeed”, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 1, January 2021, pp. 112–145.

4. *Networking*: Many of the MST's solidarity campaigns would not have been possible without collaboration and partnerships with other organizations and NGOs.
5. *Self-awareness*: The movement addresses patriarchal issues and improves education internally through equal participation, "combat networks", building schools in rural areas, etc.
6. *Legitimacy*: Although the idea of occupying unproductive private land to work on may seem suspicious at first, it is a constitutional right, which gives the movement a legal basis to act on.
7. *Self-sufficiency*: The movement still relies on donations and voluntary work to maintain itself, but it is largely self-sufficient, as group members produce goods and organize food markets, becoming essential for local economies.

By understanding the strength of these strategies, we can observe and compare similar movements worldwide, thus improving our own methods of organized social action. The Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil may be particular in its local laws and struggles, but its values, which encourage alternative means of production and acts of compassion for one another, are universal.

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# Neoliberal Performances for Local Development: The Case of Perdões (MG)

Kayah Nicholas de Souza



The image above shows us that there are still residences and stores along the safety streak of the Ferrovia Centro-Atlântica railway, there is no sign of demolition work yet but how long will that last? Source: Google Street View.

In 2020, VLI Logistics, a subsidiary company of Vale do Rio Doce S.A working in the multimodal logistics sector, tried to carry out a repossession of territories it never owned. The company claimed non-buildable areas at the margins of the Ferrovia Centro-Atlântica (FCA), a privately owned railway in Brazil. Despite the claim being made under the aegis of 'social responsibility', there has not been any consideration for the communities occupying the area, which falls under the municipality of Perdões, a small city in southwest Minas Gerais in Brazil. Perdões is a territory that has historically been of interest to railroad companies because of its strategic location between export areas and productive regions in the Brazilian countryside. In what follows, I will discuss this dispossession claim and its background within the scope of the emergence of neoliberal governmentality technologies and the restructuring of the state in Brazil.

## The Recent History of the Brazilian Rail Network

To better grasp why the municipality is a territory of interest and what factors shifted the state's control over the administration of the Brazilian rail network, we first need to sketch out to a brief political history of this subject.

During the late 1950s, the state-owned company Rede Ferroviária Federal S.A. (RFFSA) was established to nationalize the Brazilian railway network and manage the state's interests in the transport sector. This initiative was a central component of then-president Juscelino Kubitschek's technocratic project, which envisaged "50 years [of development] in 5 [years of mandate]" as in the slogan he famously used, by the massive industrialization of the country and the improvement

of Brazilian transport infrastructure. The project invested all of the state's available resources to accelerate economic development and boost the domestic and foreign private sectors, being the most profound economic intervention the country had ever seen since it became a Republic.

However, the nationalization of the Brazilian economy led to the extreme indebtedness of the public sector and, primarily, a lack of resources for investments in infrastructure. These events culminated in the National Privatization Programme, created in 1990. The Programme broadened the scope of the concept of 'privatization' exponentially, allowing the acquisition of shares in state-owned companies by foreign capital and created the possibility of transferring the control of companies to the private sector after three years of privatization. Encompassing the global market openings in the 1990s, it also shifted the state's position from a sovereign entity into a mediator for private companies' operation in national strategic sectors—such as the oil, mining, and railway sectors.

The privatization process took place between 1996–98, supported by the National Bank of Economic and Social Development, which recommended the transfer of rail freight transport services to the private sector. Seemingly, it encompassed the public company RFFSA and its tributaries being liquidated in 1999, resulting in the lease of its operational assets such as infrastructure, locomotives, wagons, and other goods linked to railway operations by the subsidiary companies operating the railways. After the privatization process, the stretch of the railway that crosses Perdões (MG) became the responsibility of the concessionary Ferrovia Centro-Atlântica (FCA), a former consortium of the mining company Vale do Rio Doce S.A. (or simply Vale) with groups of national and transnational capital. As of 2011, the FCA administration became VLI Logistics's responsibility, a holding company in which Vale is currently the largest shareholder.

Thus, it is clear that we are dealing with a relatively central territory to export and import interests, pervaded by oscillating tensions based on nationalizations and openings of a strategic sector of the economy. Hence, we can extrapolate that, currently, Vale is a central actor in administrating and determining what happens alongside the railway in Perdões (MG). As we shall see in what follows, there seems to be national-transnational partnerships that regularly restructure the composition of capital that operate in Brazil and the governmentality in the country, which conceives of private companies as central actors in promoting developmental interests.

### **Performances (Under)Mining Democracy: the Case of Companhia Vale do Rio Doce S.A.**

Vale is the second-largest mining and ore extraction company in the diversified mining sector in the world.<sup>1</sup> It was created by the Brazilian Federal Government in 1942, during the Second World War, as a result of negotiations between the governments of the United States, England, and Brazil, aiming at ensuring a steady supply of strategic Brazilian minerals for strategic ores to support the countries' war efforts. In the following decades, when the Brazilian military government adopted policies for the 'occupation' and development of the Amazon territory, the company expanded its activities to the Brazilian Amazon. The government partnered with transnational capital to ensure

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<sup>1</sup>Beatriz M. Saes et al., "Justiça ambiental e irresponsabilidade social corporativa: o caso da mineradora Vale S.A.", *Ambiente & Sociedade*, vol. 24.

a cheap supply of the resources needed for industrialization in countries like Japan and the United States.

After the Privatization Programme of 1990, Vale became a considerable investor in strategic formerly state-owned companies. It also restructured the Vale Foundation—created in 1968 due to the severe social and environmental impacts caused by the relentless exploitation of the Amazon during the Military Regime (1964–85)—thus expanding its ‘social investments’ and ‘social development’ actions. This process reinforced Vale’s intention to interfere in social development as a substitute for state action, restricting the spaces for public discussion about the conditions for implementing the company’s projects. In 1997, a consortium of private and state holdings and state-owned companies’ pension funds bought the company. During the early 2000s, along with the expansion of the privatization process, the company entered the international capital markets. While the state could still play a central role in the company’s direction—via funding from state agencies, environmental agencies, etc.—the interests of individual and institutional investors became more important.

It is worth noting that Vale is also widely associated with two major mining tailings dam bursts. The first one happened in late 2015 in the municipality of Mariana (MG), where Samarco—a company controlled by Vale and the Anglo-Australian company BHP Billiton—executed its mining operations.<sup>2</sup> The dam burst killed 19 people, and its rupture resulted in a volume of 43.7 million cubic metres of tailings being dumped into the surrounding area. In 2016, the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office denounced Samarco and the company, finding them responsible for the report that previously considered the dam’s stability. The processing of this finding has already been paralysed twice by the Federal Court, and still has no trial date.

The second mining tailing dam burst occurred in early 2019 in Brumadinho (MG), a site where Vale directly operates its mining activities. There were approximately 270 deaths in this case, and 11 people are still missing. The Federal Government has not concluded its investigations yet, and so far, no one has been arrested. In the state court, Vale was ordered to pay more than BRL 3 billion—approximately USD 600 million—for the consequences of the tragedy.<sup>3</sup> In the history of mining globally, these events are among the greatest tragedies, both concerning the ecological impacts and the number of fatalities.

According to a recent study based on the sustainability reports published by Vale between 2009 and 2019, we cannot restrict the environmental conflicts and damages involving the company to mining practices.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the ecological harms, the detrimental consequences of the company’s operations affect vulnerable segments of society whose livelihoods were threatened by the imminent risk of land expropriation. With its association with the International Council on Mining and Metals in 2006, the company began to assume a pivotal role in composing the measures

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2 Rocha, L., “As Tragédias de Mariana e Brumadinho: É Prejuízo? Para Quem?”, *Caderno de Geografia*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 184–95.

3 Chagas, I, “Barragem de rejeitos e os casos Mariana e Brumadinho”, *Politize!*, 19 September 2019, available at <https://www.politize.com.br/barragem-de-rejeitos/> and Jornal da USP, “Maior perda em Mariana e Brumadinho foi de vidas humanas, diz especialista”, *Universidade de São Paulo*, 28 April 2021, available at <https://jornal.usp.br/atualidades/major-perda-em-mariana-e-brumadinho-foi-de-vidas-humanas-diz-especialista/>.

4 Saes, “Justiça ambiental e irresponsabilidade social corporativa: o caso da mineradora Vale S.A.”

proposing local development and published sustainability reports periodically to this end. Such reports publicize the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices developed by the company, which attest to its commitment to 'social issues' while launching procedures and programmes aimed at local communities. These programmes claimed the promotion of environmental and consumer protection, medical and educational assistance, urban improvement, culture, arts, and recreation, etc.

These practices seem to develop an authoritarian regulation of everyday life, contemplated in measures established by the interests of a private company. There is a materialistic perspective towards the communities, in which people are approached as tools or parts for making the machinery of transnational capital work properly. Thus, those practices are based on exclusionary mechanisms since they reject popular participation in decision-making, founding the basis for neoliberal state measures. The company meddles with the everyday life of populations affected by its corporative policies, resulting in the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics. On the other hand, engagement in CSR practices could be typified as a 'technology of subjection' since it informs political strategies that regulate populations for optimal productivity, expanding through spatial proceedings that engage market forces. Thus, concerning market-driven interests associated with governance regimes space is re-designed, producing conditions focused on changing bureaucratic strategies and citizenship practices. The case of Perdões (MG) is an example of how those elements establish the basis for neoliberal performances regarding increasing revenues for transnational capital by exploiting communities and territories.

### **Messianic Reports to a Mediator State: Similarities to the case of VLI Logistics S.A. in Perdões (MG)**

In September 2020, a few months after the state declared that COVID-19 presented a public health crisis, VLI Logistics filed a repossession of land suit against 36 citizens of Perdões (MG). Based on Law No. 6.766 (1979), which regulates the parcelling off of urban land, the company alleged that some properties were not in compliance with the legislation. Also, the citizens were at risk since they built residential and commercial units upon a non-buildable safety streakless than 15 metres from the railway.<sup>5</sup> Foremost, we must question not just the company's request but also the application of the term 'repossession' in this case. The company filed a suit to claim a territory that, according to the same law, recurred, has an administrative limitation that impedes any constructions not aimed at specific activities: it is not necessarily public or private property but an area administered by the Federal Government. VLI Logistics did not seek to reintegrate territories of its property that were unduly occupied but instead, claimed the usufruct of territories administered by the state and inhabited by citizens even before the promulgation of the law that defined them as administrative boundaries. In other words, the company reclaimed a repossession of what it never owned: in this sense, was the process a request for repossession or a claim to confiscate new territories?

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that there is very little information about the process: only

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<sup>5</sup> EPTV 2, "Ferrovia entra com ação de reintegração de posse contra moradores em Perdões, MG", G1, 7 September 2020, available at <https://g1.globo.com/mg/sul-de-minas/noticia/2020/09/07/ferrovia-entra-com-acao-de-reintegracao-de-posse-contramoradores-em-perdoes-mg.ghtml>.

some local media reports attest to these occurrences. Even citizens affected by the process did not know anything about the plans to claim the land until the order of repossession: the company did not publicize its reasons. The court rejected the company's request for repossession, thus not resulting in an effective disappropriation of land for the moment. On the other hand, Perdões is a city outside of the areas of interest for the national media as it is located in the countryside of Minas Gerais, with approximately 21,500 inhabitants and few investments in tourism and industry. These factors likely contribute to the lack of data and media interest regarding the dispossession case.

The residents and merchants of Perdões (MG) report that their families lived in those territories for over 50 years. Between the development of the railway station and the law of 1979, people constructed residential and commercial units in those areas without extensive obstacles. The notion of local and territorial development mobilized by VLI Logistics does not seem to provide for any real interests of the communities. At the same time, those communities are still under the risk of getting deprived of their land by the company's 'security measures'. Furthermore, such proposals create practical misunderstandings of the company's role in the state, creating new tensions between citizenship and governance—always justified by the messianic promise of new technology and entrepreneurs that will save the poor from dangerous situations.

This case shows how VLI Logistics, a megacorporation, tries to take the responsibility of reporting possible irregularities in its territories of interest to the state upon itself. While doing so, it seeks to undertake interventions while claiming it follows the rule of law to consolidate practices somewhat similar to the CSR discourses of its major shareholder, Vale. Here, history repeats itself: a subsidiary of Vale approaches local communities based on purely technical justifications and reports, aiming to conduct an operation of local development in which there was no participation by the population whose lives are affected. The company focused only on the structural security of the railway by proposing purely technical interventions. It also claimed, based on former legislative orders, territories owned by communities—sustaining a neoliberal performance by appropriating the state's functions to make private interests become a reality.

### **Towards Neoliberal Governmentality in the Countryside?**

This discussion reveals that companies still (re)produce environmental injustices even when presenting their performance as responsible and exemplary, hence practising what can be called 'corporate social irresponsibility'. Such injustices restrict the field of action of affected populations, which could be expanded by collective movements of resistance, such as through public lawsuits and protests. In that regard, this case exemplifies how companies deploy the notion of social responsibility to increase their power, aiming to become the central political agent developing policies regarding the territories of their interest.

Furthermore, these developments taking place in Perdões (MG) call for some theoretical discussions on the changing role of the state under neoliberalism. According to Loïc Wacquant, neoliberalism brings a restructuring of the state as the primary actor that actively shapes subjectivities, social relations, and collective representations in suitable ways to make the fiction of markets accurate and

relevant.<sup>6</sup> We could note that the liberal ideology that prevailed in Brazil in the 1990s continuously reverberates in Vale's political behaviour, reinforcing—and recreating—the role of the state as a mediator of the relations between citizenship and the market through its actions.

The presence of people in risk areas adjacent to or owned by the railway and the performances by VLI Logistics so far attest to the inefficiency of the state in promoting access to safe and quality housing in Brazil's countryside areas. Hence, we are faced with deficiencies in the domain of social policies and the gradual undermining of democracy by a transnational company that proposes interventions denying the participation of local populations in decision-making processes. The situation characterizes a corporative movement toward a neoliberal governmentality that relies on a constellation of legal, administrative, and coercive state apparatuses to legitimize and shield itself from political and social contestation. Aihwa Ong postulates that this kind of governmentality rests upon a new relationship between government and knowledge in which governance activities celebrate the abstract virtues of the market by reengineering state responsibilities, recasting them as non-political and non-ideological problems requiring technical solutions.<sup>7</sup>

The neoliberal technology of government contributes to transferring many state functions to supranational institutions or the market. Ian Bruff and Cemal Burak Tansel point out that the tensions created by the political organization of capitalism continually build barriers against substantial democratization while many instances of neoliberal reforms across the world are materialized through the deployment of highly coercive state strategies.<sup>8</sup> The monitoring and intervention in territorial inequalities by private companies relegates the state to the position of a mediating agent, influenced by purely technical interests—shifting the paradigm of a democracy-driven state into a new calculative, authoritarian order. Their actions also seek to silence local populations by elevating their perspectives and proposals to the public sphere, positioning them as the most appropriate while suppressing the voices of the communities that will be affected.

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<sup>6</sup> Loïc Wacquant, "Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism", *Social Anthropology*, vol. 20, pp 66–79.

<sup>7</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, 2006, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Bruff & Cemal Tansel, *Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Trajectories of Knowledge Production and Praxis*, *Globalizations*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 233–44.

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## Export: Digital Authoritarianism

# A Kaleidoscope of Russia, China, and the Contemporary World Order

Anna Lena Menne



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Despite Francis Fukuyama's famous proclamation that liberal democracy would form the ultimate result of history after the Cold War, as various crises mar the socio-political horizon, authoritarianism is rising globally. The latest report by the US-funded watchdog organization Freedom House observes global freedom declining for the 16th year in a row, while internet freedom has deteriorated for the 11th year.<sup>1</sup> As scholars grapple with the rise of global authoritarianism and its various causes and effects, the digitization process, despite its initial liberating reputation, is increasingly criticized for facilitating civic and global control by authorizing domestic and transnational surveillance and manipulation mechanisms in both authoritarian and democratic countries alike.

Digital authoritarianism—the application of digitization for monitoring, manipulating, and repressing domestic and foreign populations—has become a trend in many regimes worldwide. Moreover, it is rebalancing power between democracy and autocracy since its leading practitioners, the Russian Federation (Russia) and the People's Republic of China (China), have started to export digital authoritarian practices and technologies to nation-states around the world, motivated to learn from or adapt to digital mechanisms of control.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, approaches to information and communication technology (ICT) as a socio-technical phenomenon are contextual, complex, and distinct. Hence, the pending question of how digital authoritarianism relates to the current configuration of worldly (dis)order and its trajectory requires a contextualized reading of the Russian and Chinese models of digital authoritarianism.

Boike Rehbein's concept of a kaleidoscopic dialectic offers a critical approach to bridging dichotomies

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Baker, C. Grothe, S. Amy, M. Vepa, & K. Vesteinsson, *Freedom on the Net 2021: The Global Drive to Control Big Tech*, Freedom House, 2021, available at [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN\\_2021\\_Complete\\_Booklet\\_09162021\\_FINAL\\_UPDATED.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN_2021_Complete_Booklet_09162021_FINAL_UPDATED.pdf) and C. Grothe & M. Vepa, *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, 2022, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

<sup>2</sup> A. Polyakova, & C. Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models*, Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2019, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/exporting-digital-authoritarianism/>.

by drawing a theoretical constellation in a complex, crisis-ridden, post-modern, and multicentric world.<sup>3</sup> Accepting the inevitability of a kaleidoscope's blind spots helps manage complexity and avoids theoretical self-affirmation, ensuring the generation of thought-provoking knowledge. Furthermore, thinking in constellations implies searching for the historical and present relations of the objects in question to perceive them beyond their naturalized self-evidence. The point of this petite kaleidoscope is to account for the Russian and Chinese models of digital authoritarianism and their complex ties to the international liberal order by uncovering their relations, resemblances, and differences from a historical perspective.

### **World Order after Digitization**

Historically, authoritarianism has been the dominant form of government. In contrast, democracy only rose to prominence after WW2 and the Cold War, a period in which the establishment of pseudo-democratic institutions for global political reputation marred the authoritarian character of many regimes worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Thus, authoritarianism is routinely opposed to democracy, although regimes are empirically diverse, comprising differing practices and concentrations of power. Furthermore, following the rise of global capitalism and neoliberal ideology, the world order came to embody a multicentric structure alongside old and new economic power centres, like China and Russia, in which globalization-induced crises and the power of capital were supposed to lead to decaying nation-state politics.<sup>5</sup>

In line with this argument, unilateral imposition of one particular ethnocentrism, as in the era of European colonial empires and the subsequent global US-Empire under the United Nations (UN), would become impossible, and control was to be negotiated. However, digitization processes<sup>6</sup> have (re)enabled the possibility of imposing the values and norms of one culture on another. The conjuncture of global capitalism and neoliberal ideology has aided in the discovery of human life in the form of digitally collected data as a socioeconomic resource for behavioural prediction and creation that generates economic profit. Thus, today, quasi-sovereign platform corporations make up most of the ICT infrastructure in a planetary but humanly-authored computational network with global reach.

Moreover, Shoshana Zuboff, the author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, claims that the absence of market regulation in the North American ICT network and its global diffusion from the 1990s onwards has established "the basis for a new social order and its moral content".<sup>7</sup> Whoever owns or controls the most significant part of this planetary ICT infrastructure can consciously exert partial control over its users' social reality and the people they symbolically engage with. The Snowden Revelations in 2013 and the Cambridge Analytica Data Scandal in 2019 are just two of the most prominent examples illustrating how information warfare is waged beyond economic profit. Thus, a tiny elite of private, institutional, and state actors compete for the prime data, information,

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3 B. Rehbein, *Critical Theory After the Rise of the Global South: Kaleidoscopic Dialectic*, Routledge, 2015.

4 Frantz, E. *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

5 B. Rehbein, *Critical Theory After the Rise of the Global South*.

6 Here referring to the development and diffusion of the increasingly omnipresent dialectical and meaningful relationship between humans, technology, and its socio-technical products.

7 S. Zuboff, "Caveat Usor: Surveillance Capitalism as Epistemic Inequality", *After the Digital Tornado*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 199.

and ICT infrastructure repository to guarantee having the most extensive stake in global knowledge production.

Zuboff asserts that surveillance capitalism reproduces “the social pattern of a pre-modern and pre-democratic era when knowledge and power were restricted to the absolute power of a tiny elite”, with its mechanisms intentionally hidden from the wider public to prevent resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its inability to capture the transnational private-public multipolarity of ICT governance, this rudimentary comparison helps us understand how surveillance capitalist mechanisms relate to and aid authoritarian governance. Here the key actors are typically defined as the leader, a tiny elite of supporters, and the masses. Engaged in the twin problem of authoritarian power-sharing and control, the leader faces a trade-off between the violent repression of political opponents and expensive co-optation, such as universal welfare provision, to control the masses and elites.<sup>9</sup>

Observably, digitization enables authoritarian regimes to counter the traditional problem of power-sharing and control. By employing tech-facilitated surveillance mechanisms to control and shape citizen behaviour via censorship, manipulation, and repression to preserve and increase political control, digital authoritarianism holds the potential for governments to shape citizens’ social realities in ways that are favourable to the regime and their opportunity structures for online and offline mobilization.<sup>10</sup> The more technologically sophisticated, the better and the quieter the networked authoritarian state can operate. Hence, its netizens tend to paradoxically retain a greater sense of freedom than before the digital transformation.

In the pre-digital authoritarian state, innermost anti-regime sentiments were usually hidden under false pretence to avoid repression. However, surveillance capitalist mechanisms encourage diverse conversation, including regime critique, generating more refined information for data collection and subsequent manipulation. As such, digitization relieves authoritarianism’s traditional informational deficit, enabling regimes to increasingly replace universal welfare provisions that would ensure regime stability with preventive targeted repression and to deter conflicts by targeting radical opponents before they gather in a critical mass for protest.<sup>11</sup>

### **Russia and China Contextualized**

State approaches to digital authoritarianism vary and are practised in line with a regime’s particular toolbox for governing technologically, through software and hardware, or regulatory, in designing policies that shape behaviour and are affected by national particularities and history.<sup>12</sup> Thus, threatened by the supposed liberating effects of digitization in the 1990s, China, in line with its pragmatic authoritarianism, i.e. flexible to adapt governance to maintain one-party rule when

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8 C. Tsalikis, “Shoshana Zuboff on the Undetectable, Indecipherable World of Surveillance Capitalism”, *Cigionline.org*, 12 July 2022, available at <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/shoshana-zuboff-undetectable-indecipherable-world-surveillance-capitalism/>.

9 M. W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

10 S. C. Greitens, “Authoritarianism Online: What Can We Learn from Internet Data in Nondemocracies?”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 262–70.

11 X. Xu, “To Repress or to Co-opt? Authoritarian Control in the Age of Digital Surveillance” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 65, no. 2, pp. 309–25.

12 Greitens, S. C., “Authoritarianism Online: What Can We Learn from Internet Data in Nondemocracies?”.

crises occur,<sup>13</sup> was early to invest in content-blocking capabilities, creating a centrally controlled censorship invention that pre-filters information, known as the Great Firewall of China.

In contrast, Russian ICT was built according to 'western principles of openness,' which complicates demarcating the Russian networked sphere today and characterizes its 'ad hoc' digital authoritarianism.<sup>14</sup> After the breakdown of the USSR within a more liberal authoritarian regime under economic reform, the Russian state firmly controlled traditional media while leaving the tech sector to prosper economically, establishing new media outlets geared to a critical audience seeking to escape state propaganda. Russia notably transformed into an oligarchic capitalist state under the autocratic leadership of Vladimir Putin, preserving inequality and regime control via repression and co-optation while maintaining a democratic façade.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in 2012 when Putin's second spell commenced, he established a regulatory maze to repress and control domestic and international platform companies, requiring them to install surveillance equipment that forwarded all domestically trafficked data to governmental agencies.<sup>16</sup> The critical online audience born out of the 1990s led to the sophistication of Russia's digital propaganda tools, combining the capabilities of bots and online trolls to manipulate the established global ICT infrastructure, in which bots numerically subdue the antagonistic and boost regime-friendly content through views, likes, and comments. At the same time, so-called troll factories provide highly believable disinformation to appease critical online audiences and to be shared by the bots.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, the Chinese state can obscurely monitor, control, and shape the domestic information consumption of its citizens while identifying, targeting, and repressing online activists, as well as increasing the cost of defying the regime but not entirely controlling or banning defiant behaviour. Through strategic 'porous censorship', masses engage in discourse, including regime critique, while simultaneously fearing physical and technological repression, investing money and time to endure calculated throttling of connection speeds, and tolerating manipulation through bots, commentators, and fabricated content.<sup>18</sup> However, while Chinese domestic ICT infrastructure comprises a sophisticated surveillance network, its capabilities are often blown out of proportion, like ignorance of the state combining technological and in-person monitoring in the Xinjiang region.<sup>19</sup>

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13 H. Lai, *China's Governance Model: Flexibility and Durability of Pragmatic Authoritarianism*. *China Policy Series: Vol. 44*. London: Routledge, 2016.

14 L. Kovachich & A. Kolesnikov, *Digital Authoritarianism With Russian Characteristics?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 May 2022, available at <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2021/04/21/digital-authoritarianism-with-russian-characteristics-pub-84346>.

15 P. Bloom, *Authoritarian capitalism in the age of globalization*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016, available at <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781784713133.xml>.

16 R. Morgus, "The Spread of Russia's Digital Authoritarianism", *Artificial Intelligence, China, Russia, and the Global Order: Technological, Political, Global, and Creative Perspectives*, Air University Press, 2019 pp. 89–97, available at [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B\\_0161\\_WRIGHT\\_ARTIFICIAL\\_INTELLIGENCE\\_CHINA\\_RUSSIA\\_AND\\_THE\\_GLOBAL\\_ORDER.PDF](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0161_WRIGHT_ARTIFICIAL_INTELLIGENCE_CHINA_RUSSIA_AND_THE_GLOBAL_ORDER.PDF).

17 S. Sanovich, *Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation*, New York University, 2017.

18 M. E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

19 J. Leibold, "Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 121, pp. 46–60.

## Exporting Digital Authoritarianism

Democracy watchdog Freedom House has observed that authoritarian regimes increasingly extend their digital tools beyond national territory “to silence critics, subvert democratic governments, and reshape international norms and institutions to serve their own interests”.<sup>20</sup> China and Russia have similarly commenced operations that go beyond domestic affairs. While Russia has garnered attention for meddling in the 2016 US elections, China is regularly placed in a resurging Cold War rhetoric, supposedly threatening US hegemony in the digital sphere by internationalizing its technology corporations.

Despite its transnational multipolar character, the cloud still gravitates to territorial law as nation-states continue to exercise their legally established role in the social contract with their citizens domestically and the UN internationally.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, ICT businesses remain located and concentrated within certain territories and, as such, can be weaponized by state actors to geopolitical ends. Consequently, the institutionally led liberal ethical consensus formed around global computation, adhering to international law and capitalist sovereignty, is commonly fractured by ‘attempts of interest-capture’. States like Russia and China seek increased regulatory control through installing decoupled digital spheres under the umbrella term digital or cyber sovereignty.<sup>22</sup>

After the economic reform era under Deng Xiaoping, the current party leader Xi Jinping induced a neo-political turn to centralized government, increasing surveillance and repression and reutilizing ideology to assert global capitalist fantasies of authoritarian nationalism, i.e. the ‘Chinese Dream’.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, China strives to establish a technologically sophisticated self-image in international discourse, carefully guarding the multicentric world as a counterhegemonic effort and positioning itself as a viable alternative to the international liberal order. Xi previously stated: “to realize a transformation from running at their heels to running abreast with or even ahead of them”, presenting socialism with Chinese characteristics as “a new option for other countries and nations that want to speed up their development while preserving their independence”.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the Chinese strategy to reshape the international ethical consensus on cyber governance promotes digital sovereignty as global developmental rhetoric.

Other strategies to achieve Xi’s goals are the global soft power expansion of state media through establishing an international social media presence with fake social media accounts and content farms, and the Chinese Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSR).<sup>25</sup> The DSR is the technology component of China’s global Belt and Road infrastructural development strategy, binding ICTs like smart cities

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20 See Freedom House. (n.d.). Authoritarian Reach. Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/authoritarian-reach>

21 M. C. Kettmann, *The Normative Order of the Internet: A Theory of Rule and Regulation Online*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

22 Ibid.

23 P. Bloom, *Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*.

24 China Daily, “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress: Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China”, *Chinadaily.com.cn*, 4 November 2011, available at [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm).

25 R. Diresta, C. Miller, V. Molter, J. Pomfret, & G. Tiffert, *Telling China’s Story: The Chinese Communist Party’s Campaign to Shape Global Narratives*, Hoover Institution, 2020, available at [https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/sio-china\\_story\\_white\\_paper-final.pdf](https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/sio-china_story_white_paper-final.pdf).

in bundles and exporting surveillance technology or governmental training in digital information management. The initiative, thus, currently ensures China's largest possible stake in the production of meaning within recipient countries, not only through centrally controlling its own tech companies but also by leading the implementation of surveillance and security platforms in the Global South while creating loan based dependency.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Russia has tried to assert its sovereignty by influencing the international ethical consensus. In contrast to the Chinese model, Russia operates more loudly, fabricating content or reverting to digitally targeted but mass-alerting traditional domestic repression via legal measures or physical attacks. Hence, instead of global developmental rhetoric, Russia employs a security notion of digital sovereignty in which central information management and control over data, filtering, and infrastructural monitoring are arguably vital in replicating the Chinese model by installing a decoupled Russian sphere retrospectively.<sup>27</sup>

Further similarities in the core objectives of the Russian and Chinese global authoritarian strategies unfold in direct comparison. First, the Russian model of digital authoritarianism appeals to governments internationally as it is cheaper than the Chinese model since it employs the existing globally connected ICT infrastructure and does not require the construction of a centralized network.<sup>28</sup> Second, while Russia, similar to China, initially focused on improving its global reputation and economic cooperation in the Global South, its outbound strategy transformed to explicitly destabilize the international liberal order through coordinated operations, by using fake social media accounts targeting the social realities of geopolitical rivals' citizens, for example.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, although Russian propaganda receives less financial backing than Chinese operations, its mis- and disinformation campaigns are more sophisticated and widespread. Russian cyberattacks have successfully amplified protest movements in the United States and have likely intensified, considering the current war in Ukraine. Thus, while both China and Russia utilize covert propaganda practices to influence politics beyond their borders, in contrast to Chinese operations, Russian attacks, often blunt and easily exposable, target the liberal order at the expense of their reputation on the international institutional stage.

## **Kaleidoscopic Conclusions**

The current multicentric world order, marred by the uncertainties of globalization and global capitalism, poses optimal conditions for normative intervention in the international ethical consensus and is (re)engaged by digitization and the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism facilitating the imposition of values and norms on global discourse. As a result, states increasingly (re)emerge as influential actors legally negotiating ownership of ICT infrastructure yet are potentially already bypassed by those states fit to weaponize multilateral tech corporations or able to influence normative policymaking on cyber governance at the UN level. Among others, Russia and China,

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26 Khalil, L., *Digital Authoritarianism, China and COVID*, Lowy Institute Analysis, available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/digital-authoritarianism-china-and-covid>.

27 Litvinenko, A., "Re-Defining Borders Online: Russia's Strategic Narrative on Internet Sovereignty", *Media and Communication*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 5–15.

28 A. Polyakova, & C. Meserole, *Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models*.

29 R. Diresta, C. Miller, V. Molter, J. Pomfret, & G. Tiffert, *Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives*.

two digitally sophisticated authoritarian states, are at the forefront of current negotiations regarding world order.

A kaleidoscopic perspective, taking into account the historicity and complexity of global order and governance, emphasizes that Russian and Chinese tools and applications of digital authoritarianism were born out of historical contextual domestic circumstances, instead of comprising a nascent strategic effort 'against the West'. Hence, both models of digital authoritarianism diverge. China centrally controls its domestic ICT infrastructure as a decoupled digital sphere, utilizing preventative targeted repression via technological tools like shaping ICT infrastructure through their firewall or throttling connection speeds. On the other hand, Russia has to overtly control its largely privatized and globally connected ICT infrastructure, able to individually target through surveillance but reverting to traditional, more violent forms of repression. Naturally, the Russian regime strives to emulate the Chinese model of centralized domestic control as China can operate more covertly both domestically and internationally.

Ultimately, this small kaleidoscopic constellation exposes the centrality of global capitalism and, almost paradoxically, liberal ideology to the relationship between Russian and Chinese digital authoritarianism. Capitalist sovereignty and economic changes played a big part in the distinct trajectories of both states' digital authoritarian models. Moreover, only economic reforms established Russia and China as centres in the multicentric world, able to enter normative international legal negotiations, like discussions on digital sovereignty. Likewise, only the multicentric world order as a result of global capitalism, accompanied by declining trust in liberal institutions such as the UN or the World Bank and a global division of labour, has facilitated export opportunities such as the DSR.

From this text alone, the landscape of worldly (dis)order comprises a multiplicity of actors and a variety of complex dimensions. Thus, predictions about the normative direction of world order cannot be answered in this short piece and favouring a particular ethnocentrism would downplay the dynamic interplay of forces typically marred by popular narratives. Nevertheless, honing in on the Chinese and Russian models concerning world order alone, Russian destabilization could aid the Chinese initiative, driving states to adopt Chinese technologies and socialism with Chinese characteristics as viable alternatives to centuries of liberal domination. Moreover, as authoritarian capitalism advances, the illusion of authoritarian market despots will likely support a security notion of digital sovereignty, encouraging centralized ICT control and digital authoritarianism around the world. ICT is slowly playing its part in the contemporary web of socio-political dynamics, guiding world order back to its diverse authoritarian roots.

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