



Counterrevolution: The global rise of the far right

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BOOK REVIEW

Counterrevolution: The global rise of the far right, by Walden Bello, Warwickshire, Practical Action Publishing, 2019, 196 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78853-051-4

In the article entitled 'Counterrevolution, the countryside and the middle classes: lessons from five countries,' published in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Walden Bello (2018) comparatively analyzes the class dynamics of Italian fascism's rise to power (1922), right-wing military coups in Indonesia (1965-66), Chile (1973), and Thailand (1976, 2006, 2014), and Rodrigo Duterte's pathway to the presidency of the Philippines (2016), emphasizing the role of class conflicts in the countryside. In *Counterrevolution: The global rise of the far right*, Bello scrutinizes these cases further and expands his comparative horizon by examining the recent victories of the far-right in India (2014), United States (2016), and Brazil (2018). Although short, Bello's book provides a fairly comprehensive account of these cases.

Bello cautions against the frequent use of the concept 'populism' in explaining the contemporary far-right. While 'rhetorically anti-elitist' and adopts 'selected pro-people measures,' the far-right politics does 'not seek significant change in the power structure while directing the fire and fury of the majority population to the lower strata, to minority communities, to immigrants' (125). Both the first and concluding chapters lay out the book's theoretical edifice. Bello positions himself against the 'liberal perspective that prioritizes and favours peaceful, evolutionary change and sidelines, theoretically and politically, the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic' (6-7). By following the historical materialist tradition spanning from Karl Marx's writings on the mid-nineteenth-century France to the works of Barrington Moore, Nicos Poulantzas, and Arno Mayer, the book conceptualizes 'the movements of the extreme right, authoritarian right, and fascism' as 'variants of counterrevolution' (8). For Bello, there are two types of counterrevolution. The first is the 'classical class-based counterrevolution' that represents the dominant classes' pursuit of decisively defeating the revolutionary or radical reformist movements (8). The second type of counterrevolution 'is directed not at a revolutionary or reformist movement from below but at a liberal democratic regime that is perceived as corrupt, incompetent, and unable to deliver the goods [...] including social reform, the elimination of corruption, or the provision of personal security' (142). Throughout the book, Bello stresses that middle classes act as a democratizing force in certain contexts but tend to become ardent supporters of counterrevolution under the threat of flattening the differences between them and the lower classes (45, 49, 106, 143-144).

The second chapter shows that the intensification of conflict between agrarian capital and increasingly unionized left-oriented farm workers in the Po Valley and the province of Bologna laid the foundations for the rise of Italian fascism. Along with big landowners, emerging capitalist farmers and even tenants grew weary of the increasing bargaining power of farm workers. Since the state was weak, the landowners increasingly depended on fascist paramilitaries to suppress workers. The increasing effectiveness of fascists as strikebreakers pulled the upper and middle classes of other regions towards their side. This trajectory of agrarian class conflict helped Italian fascism to become a mass movement and take power (14-17).

The third chapter illustrates how the struggles of the landless peasants, unionization of plantation workers, and the meteoric rise of the communist movement created a panic among dominant classes in Indonesia and led to the right-wing coup in 1965-66. The junta and Islamist paramilitaries jointly killed at least half a million communist militants and sympathizers. In

addition to the plantation owners, 'ordinary peasants, the village middle sectors, and Muslim activists from all classes' participated in these massacres (27).

The fourth chapter traces the background of the Chilean counterrevolution to land reform movements that became increasingly radical after Allende's election to the presidency in 1970. The expropriation of latifundios without compensation and 'collectivization of land' became real possibilities in the early 1970s (35–36). The right-wing backlash started with street demonstrations and achieved a decisive victory with Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973. Although the upper classes were the prime beneficiaries of the counterrevolution, the increasing support of the urban and rural middle classes was decisive for the counterrevolutionary victory. Similar to the Italian fascists' march to victory, during the street battles preceding the Chilean coup, the rightist propagandists 'were able to connect with the fears of the middle class about [...] the levelling of society by a socialist government, and the erosion of private property' (45).

According to Bello, the intensity of counterrevolutionary violence depends on the ruling classes' perception of a threat from the left. Italian fascists calibrated their violence because they did not perceive an imminent revolutionary threat, whereas Chilean and Indonesian juntas used massive violence because of their fear of an imminent revolutionary threat. State capacity also matters. Counterrevolutionary violence was far more intense and indiscriminate in Indonesia than Chile and Italy because the Indonesian army did not have enough capacity to control the vast countryside (26–30, 42–47, 143–144). Although Bello does not clearly spell it out, his analysis implies that the absence of a credible revolutionary threat explains growing but comparatively lower levels of counterrevolutionary violence today.

The fifth chapter examines how Thai elites, scared of the sustained mobilization of the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT), supported the military coup in 1976. Similar to Chile and Indonesia, the fascist paramilitaries supported the junta by killing scores of the FFT leaders and leftist students. Many ordinary peasants, who were under the influence of a right-wing ideological offensive symbolized by the slogan 'Nation-Religion-King,' supported the coup (51–55).

The second half of the chapter on Thailand and the following three chapters examine the second type of counterrevolution, directed against liberal democracy rather than revolutionary upheavals. Bello examines the elite backlash against Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Love Thai Party, which implemented key reforms after 2001 including a universal healthcare system and generous rural development funds and agricultural subsidies (58). 'Alarmed at the increasing politicization and empowerment of the lower classes unleashed by Thaksin,' the traditional elite and the middle class 'began to question majority rule, a core concept of democracy' (60). The middle class demonstrations helped to trigger the coup in 2006. A similar process happened after the 2007 election which brought to power Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister. The middle class street mobilization provoked another coup in 2014 (61–62).

The sixth chapter examines the factors behind the rise of India's Sangh Parivar, the 'Syndicate' of organizations that aim to establish a Hindu-majoritarian fascist dictatorship by making religious minorities, secularists, and socialists second-class citizens at best. Bello shows that socioeconomic failures, corruption and the dynastic character of the leadership of the Congress Party allowed the Sangh Parivar to take a long march to power (75–81). Hindu counterrevolutionaries have successfully linked the Congress's failure to secularism and socialism. Although the middle classes have remained its core constituency, the Sangh Parivar expanded its social basis both upwards and downwards during the last forty years. While fascists attracted the big bourgeoisie by embracing neoliberalism, they also won a growing portion of lower castes and classes by promising upward mobility and presenting non-Hindus as the main enemy (82–85, 95). Since the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP, the political party

arm of the Sangh Parivar) in the general election of 2014, the government from the above and other fascist organizations from the below have created a 'synergy,' aiming to 'take over and transform the administrative and security machineries of the state,' a process whose 'parallels to fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany are striking' (98–99).

The seventh chapter examines how scandalously high levels of poverty, inequality, corruption, drug trafficking, and petty crime during the liberal democratic 'EDSA Republic' that had ruled the Philippines after 1986 paved the way for Duterte's election to the presidency in 2016 (109–111). While 'the aspiring and downwardly mobile middle classes' actively supported Duterte through street demonstrations, the poor silently casted votes in favor of the wannabe dictator (106). Although Duterte has not been able to deliver most of his socioeconomic promises, his violent campaign against drug traffickers and aggressive anti-elitist rhetoric have been effective in maintaining his popular appeal (105, 114).

The eighth chapter argues that similar to their counterparts in the Global South, the far-right movements and administrations of the Global North have immensely benefited from the mass disillusionment with the centrist and leftist parties. Bello shows that while the center-left promoted the neoliberal and pro-globalization agenda (128–129), the far-right 'opportunistically embraced an anti-neoliberal agenda and the welfare state' across Europe (129). The Trump administration diverged from many corporations and the pro-globalization wing of the Republican Party when he took the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership to win the support of the working class (124, 129). European and North American far-right leaders have also tactfully presented all unpopular policies of the centrist governments as a grand conspiracy involving corrupt elites, liberals, leftists, ethnic and religious minorities, and migrants, which has proven effective in gaining the sympathy of the workers and farmers of the majority group (134–137).

Bello closes the book with a postscript on Brazil, where he argues that the Workers' Party (PT) government's submission to a slightly welfarist version of neoliberalism since coming to power in 2002, implementation of austerity measures after the economic crisis of 2008, and failure to check corruption and skyrocketing crime rates in the 2010s alienated the masses from the PT. Demobilized by the PT leadership for over a decade, progressive social movements failed to resist the elite offensive supported by the middle class protests, which resulted in Bolsonaro's election victory in 2018. About a quarter of Bolsonaro voters were motivated just to punish the PT rather than to support his far-right agenda (150–152).

Despite its comprehensive and broad sweep, the book has three shortcomings. First, although Bello is right to argue that 'the class-driven counterrevolution can best be understood via a paradigm in which the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic is the centerpiece' (143), he does not sufficiently explain his use of the concept of 'counterrevolution' in the analysis of the contemporary Global South, where he characterizes the revolutionary pressure from below as weak.

Second, Bello ignores the rural dynamics of the rise of Indian fascism. Although they were not the hegemonic force in farmers' movements, the fascist organizations were involved in the conservative coalition of the landowning peasantry against the central government's attempts at establishing cooperative farms in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Jaffrelot 2010, 259–260). The Indian Farmers' Union (*Bharatiya Kisan Union*, BKU), founded in 1978, supported the Janata government in 1977–1979. As Bello acknowledges, the participation in the Janata coalition was a turning point with regard to the mainstreaming of Hindutva politics (71). More importantly, the BKU has become closer to the BJP since the 1990s (Jaffrelot 2010, 440). Therefore, a sound historical analysis of the rise of fascism in India should take its rural dynamics seriously.

Finally, although Bello justly recognizes the opportunistic pro-welfare turn of the far-right in the contemporary Global North, he does not pay sufficient attention to the social policy and welfare provision of other far-right movements. For example, Bello's chapter on Italian fascism entirely misses the fact that fascist peasant organizations 'delivered rewards and concessions quickly' and 'over time it became increasingly clear that it was financially beneficial to join fascism' (Anderson 2006, 199–200). Bello also overstresses the BJP's neoliberal face and ignores its effective welfare provision in slums and villages through its local affiliates, which played a critical role in gaining the support of lower castes and classes in India (Thachil 2014). There are also significant tensions within Indian fascism with regard to socioeconomic policies. For example, the BKU strongly objected to Modi's neoliberal land acquisition bill (The Indian Express 2015), which was eventually buried (Kazmin 2015). Although Modi neoliberally criticized the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of the Congress administration, after taking the post of the Prime Minister, he was forced to maintain the scheme so as not to lose the poor peasants' support (Roshan 2016). Hence, we need a more nuanced analysis of the socioeconomic policies of the far-right in the past and the present.

Notwithstanding, Bello's book makes a timely and strong contribution to the growing literature on the far-right.

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