

Neo-Authoritarianism without Authority

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Abstract: This article examines two aspects of neo-authoritarianism. The first is mainly diagnostic and concerns the nature of authoritarianism as a phenomenon of transition. The article investigates tensions and conflicts between temporalities. It pays attention to the asynchronous nature of change which, alongside the social structural level of changes, also the psycho-social level, intervene politically in different forms. There are social strata that are strangers in their own country and do not share the same present with others. For them, looking to the past is the only way to imagine a different future. If they are looking for values and authority, the neoconservatives fill the lack of authority with more power and replace the liquidation of old values with identity grounded on racism, nationalism, religion. By eroding the social cement that should keep society together, neoliberalism has also created room for compensatory phenomena, such as the need for community, authority, and politics. Understanding these needs constitutes the second, predominantly prognostic, part of this article's analysis.

Massimiliano TOMBA

Neo-Authoritarianism without Authority

A wave of authoritarianism is back. And will come back again. Authoritarianism re-emerges from a layer of modernity in which old and new elements in a state of tension are combined. When this tension increases, the social and emotional temperature of entire sections of society also rises. Authoritarianism, old and new, is not a regressive phenomenon. It is not even a parenthesis or unfortunate accident, as Croce and Meinecke described Fascism and Nazism. Rather, it is a phenomenon with revolutionary traits, an attempt to respond, or at least to react, to open issues of modernity. It could be said that it is the wrong answer to right questions.

In this article, I intend to examine two aspects of neo-authoritarianism. The first is mainly diagnostic and concerns the nature of authoritarianism as a phenomenon of transition. First of all, one has to understand what is "new" in neo-authoritarianism. I intend to investigate it in the intersection of a long- and short-term temporalities, specifically, the intrinsic authoritarian nature of the modern state and the present conjuncture, respectively. It is this combination of long and short temporalities that characterizes the return of authoritarianism but in a new form. Indeed, whenever authoritarian governments appear, they emerge from a different economic and political junction and therefore, with new clothes. Neo-authoritarianism has neither fascist black shirts nor the Nazi's brown-shirts. It would be misleading to try to understand the neo-authoritarian phenomenon by focusing on some groups that exhibit the swastika. If historical fascism and communism represented alternative forms of collectivity at war with each other, then today, atomization, isolation, desocialization, depoliticization, and fragmentation of experience are the basis of new needs for community and identity. Neoconservatives satisfy these needs by appealing to the nation against immigrants, to the Western Judeo-Christian tradition against Islam, to traditional family against deracination and further atomization.

One could say that neo-authoritarianism arises from neoliberalism, in part as its rib, in part as a reaction. Neoliberalism has privatized entire strata of civil society, creating further atomization of the social and the erosion of existing authority. In the name of individual rights and liberties, it has individualized collective bargaining, de-collectivized political practices, and smashed any collective subject that is a perceived threat into individual atoms. Neoliberalism thus produced a depoliticization of the social, which is increasingly surveilled and controlled in order to guarantee the security and the private affairs of its members. By eroding the social cement that should keep society together, neoliberalism has also produced compensatory phenomena, such as the need for community, authority, and politics. Understanding these needs constitutes the second, predominantly prognostic, part of this article's analysis.

Neo-authoritarian movements respond to these needs for community and identity in a simple but immediate and effective way: nation, family, xenophobia. The nation provides some sense of belonging, the family offers some structure in the patriarchal order, and xenophobia offers identity through the opposition between ingroup and outgroup. In all these phenomena, the need for politics is crucial. And this is where neoliberalism turns into neo-authoritarianism. If the former depoliticizes the social, the latter repoliticizes it. If one wants to change the direction of the ongoing repoliticization, one has to see how it works.

At the end of her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Wendy Brown wrote that "Nation, family, property, and the traditions reproducing racial and gender privilege, mortally wounded by deindustrialization, neoliberal reason, globalization, digital technologies, and nihilism, are reduced to affective remains. To date, these remains have been activated mostly by the Right" (187-188). Brown's book ends with the question: "What kinds of Left political critique and vision might reach and transform them?" (188). The answer to this question belongs to the domain of political practice. This article aims to draw a horizon in which that question can be rephrased and an answer may be possible.

If neoliberalism has eroded traditional terms such as *family* for the sake of private individual rights, *collective authority* for the sake of market power, *national identity* and *borders* for the sake of economic globalization, then the neoconservative right has grasped and reanimated them politically and emotionally. Not only those, but terms like *religion*, which the left has abandoned in the name of secularism and *laïcité*, *tradition*, which has been abandoned in the name of progress, *authority*, which has been abandoned in the name of juridical equal rights and state sovereignty, have all been appropriated by the right. Neoconservatives in the USA, Poland, Italy or Hungary present themselves as protectors of Western civilization. They use the term West not as an essentialist concept, but rather as a performative term that produces polemical identity. It is used as an umbrella concept that replaces and reconfigures the identity of the western bloc that was used during the Cold War. In doing this, the

neoconservatives appropriate and monopolize the term *West*. When opponents of neo-authoritarianism attack the "West" as being white and predominantly Christian, as patriarchal and fundamentally based on colonial exploitation, they provide the neoconservatives with the raw material to define Western identity as a monolithic and homogeneous bloc. The right uses these identity-terms to provide a sense of belonging to be proud of. By doing this, the right offers one great tradition, i.e., the dominant Western one.

The critique of Eurocentrism and the colonial origin of the modern West is correct only if it also pays attention to internal colonialism which, with the violence of the state and the capitalist mode of production, has repressed and cancelled the many alternative trajectories and traditions that have sought to give modernity a different orientation. There are other Western traditions—the insurgency of the German peasants of 1525 massacred by Luther and the German princes; the English Diggers of 1649 disintegrated through enclosures; the French Sans-culottes of 1793 repressed by the Jacobin's edification of the nation-state; the workers-councils of 1919 smashed by the Social Democrats in power, etc. These examples are part of countless attempts to give Western modernity a different direction. For this reason, Europe and the West as a set of values do not exist. Europe is a stratified set of different trajectories and roads left interrupted. To forget them means to kill those insurgents once again. The term *West* is a battlefield. And so are terms like *tradition*, *religion* and *authority*, which the right has collected, monopolized, and used as weapons in the making of an authoritarian carrier.

Authoritarian Times

The Left has often paid little attention to the asynchronous nature of social transformations. This is what Ernst Bloch reproached the communists for in an article written in 1932. He observed, "Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others" (Bloch, "Nonsynchronism" 22).¹ There are social strata that have been left behind in the process of modernization. These strata express their dissatisfaction with the present by looking back, towards a better past. Bloch captured the potential of this nonsynchronism. He observed, "Believing, obeying, struggling, are those the fascist virtues? - perhaps, but for many, obeying is the best virtue they have. Order and hierarchy, do they make up the fascist architectural style? - perhaps, but many are looking for quiet in the order, for a job in the hierarchy. Yes, national-socialist agitation has been called an appeal to the inner scoundrel in man, and rightly so" (28). In order to dig into the "inner scoundrel in man," it is useful to combine an analysis of social strata with one of psychological strata. But one must also bear in mind that the scoundrel is inside each human being. For this reason, instead of stigmatizing entire strata of the population, it is important to recognize that the inner scoundrel can either play tricks on us or offer the opportunity to better understand what is going on in the Now.

Ernst Bloch invites us to understand the authoritarian present in terms of temporal conflicts and transition. If this is the case, the outcome is open. We are stuck in a transition that has lasted centuries. At the moment, authoritarian movements have the reins in many places around the world and seem to be able to harness the tension that derives from the friction of different temporal layers. These layers flow over each other at different speeds, but in such a way that rapid changes at the surface generate intense frictions with the long duration of social, institutional and even psychological structures. The latter should not be ignored.

In an old text that investigated the origins of Italian fascism, the author wrote that Italian workers, although neither stupid nor totally ignorant, were overpowered by a "*political unconsciousness* [that], far from making things easier, rendered a good Liberal government very nearly impossible."² Although, this consideration is inadequate and assumes the "good Liberal government" as the highest value to be restored, it offers the opportunity to combine the analysis of the transformations of economic and social structures with the analysis of psychologic transformations that can free the "political unconsciousness" or the "inner scoundrel."

Argentine sociologist Gino Germani interpreted populism in terms of a transition to new forms of integration, transition from tradition to modernity, where pieces of one and pieces of the other coexist

¹ For a recent mobilization of Bloch's analysis in order to understand the emergence of new forms of right-wing politics, see Nilges.

² This is the entire citation: "If man is to be called a political animal, the labourers of Italy were not men fifty years ago. They did not care what happened and did not think they had anything to say in the matter: they were politically unconscious. Not that they were stupid: their art, their songs, their traditions attest the contrary. Their *political unconsciousness*, far from making things easier, rendered a good Liberal government very nearly impossible" (Lion 26; emphasis added).

and fight each other. Germani also maintained that the coexistence of "advanced" groups and "late groups," generates a whole series of asynchronisms within the transformation processes ("Democracia" 12-14; *Politica* 137). He suggested considering, alongside the structural level of changes, also the psycho-social level, in which groups rooted in traditional patterns, intervene politically in different forms, which can range from protest to revolutionary movements to conservative and religious movements. Paying attention to the asynchronous nature of change, in his analysis of fascism and authoritarianism, Germani observed that some social strata manifest the "impulse to recover the traditional way of life" as part of an "active propensity to reestablish the equilibrium between the psychological and the normative and environmental levels, which may involve a change in social structures (in its norms and environment)" (*Authoritarianism* 20-22). Germani's merit is to highlight the political and psychological importance of anachronistic temporalities in the present, how they interact with the present, and can open it to different outcomes.

Since the agents of change are human beings, one must pay attention to their cultural and psychological context. In his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Wilhelm Reich wrote that one has to deal with different layers of the biopsychic structure," where "'ideology' changes at a slower pace than the economic basis," so that "*the psychic structures lag behind the rapid changes of the social conditions from which they derived, and later come into conflict with new forms of life*" (xi,18).³ According to Reich, "we are dealing with three different layers of the biopsychic structure," which "are deposits of social development." He distinguished between a "surface layer" characterized by social cooperation, an "intermediate character layer" that corresponds to what Freud called the unconscious, and a "third, deepest layer," which Reich calls biological core (xi). For Reich, fascism is an expression of the second level, a reaction to the mechanistic character of the modern human being, while the political question and therapy from fascism would be constituted by combining the first level with the third. I am not interested in following Reich in the combination of these levels, but his intuition on the different temporalities of the strata deserves attention. At the end of his "Preface," he wrote that "the social measures of the past three hundred years can no more cope with the mass pestilence of fascism than an elephant (six thousand years) can be forced into a foxhole (three hundred years)" (xxvii). Fascism finds its energy in the old, millennial, second stratum, still full of "rapacious and envious impulses" which, if freed, cannot be tamed by a few centuries of civilization (xi). The more the tension between these strata increases, the more the psychological and social pressure increases. And the "inner scoundrel" is free.

Similarly, Carl Gustav Jung compared the human psychic structure to a building with many layers, with the unconscious constituting the oldest strata. Jung compares the human psychic structure to "a building whose upper story was erected in the nineteenth century, the ground floor dates back to the sixteenth century, and careful examination of the masonry reveals that it was reconstructed from a tower built in the eleventh century." Jung continues the analogy by writing that in "the cellar we come upon Roman foundations, and under the cellar a choked-up cave with Neolithic tools in the upper layer and remnants of fauna from the same period in the lower layers." For the psyche "there is nothing that is just a dead relic" ("Mind" 31). In an essay of 1941, Jung observed that "the breakdown of a tradition, necessary as this may be at times, is always a loss and a danger; and it is a danger to the soul because the life of instinct—the most conservative element in man always expresses itself in traditional usages" ("Psychotherapy" 29). The point is that the very rapid changes taking place at the level of culture and consciousness do not find a correspondence in the deepest strata of the psyche, produced over hundreds of thousands of years. The result is a tension between these strata, and the more this tension increases, the more the psychological and social pressure increases and old structures struggle against the new ones.

If the compass of traditions, habits, and authority fails, the risk is that "the conscious mind becomes severed from the instincts and loses its roots, while the instincts, unable to express themselves, fall back into the unconscious and reinforce its energy, causing this in turn to overflow into the existing contents of consciousness" ("Psychotherapy" 29). The tension between the strata puts the building built in the last thousands of years at risk of collapsing. And if this building, i.e., the psyche, collapses, what are the consequences, individually and collectively? For Jung, "in dealing with the individual, no matter how revolutionary his conscious attitude may be, we have to reckon with a patriarchal or hierarchical orientation of the psyche which causes it instinctively to seek and cling to this order" (30). The individual

³ In *Character Analysis*, by describing the psychological impact of the Soviet collectivization on Russian peasants, Reich writes: "The role played in these difficulties by the dissolution of the family through the collectives and, above all, through the revolutionary change in sexuality can be roughly understood from the literature on this subject. *The old structures not only lag behind; they struggle against the new in many different ways*" (xxvii).

tries to face the *horror vacui* produced by the loss of order and authority by clinging to any authority. In this sense, one could say, authoritarianism is an *Ersatz*, a replacement and compensation for the loss of authority. And again, the "inner scoundrel" takes over.

Eventually, it is necessary to investigate the kinds of contemporary structural transformations that are underway and how old analyses of fascism can be useful today. On a global scale, the temporal disjuncture between national and transnational institutions is increasing, and the "slower temporal rhythms of nation states are marginalized by the transnational proliferation of soft law and fast policy" (Hope 79). As I observed in an article published in 2014, "the speed of formal democracy, with its parliamentary discussions and search for consent, is too slow in comparison to the speed and needs of capital" and, especially, financial capital ("Clash" 353-366). The two temporalities, i.e., the state and the financial market, are becoming incommensurable. For this reason, one can observe that the same authoritarian project, at least in constitutional terms of accelerating the decision-making process, has been pursued by both right- and left-wing governments. Moreover, the acceleration of decision-making processes goes together with their depersonalization. An increasing number of decisions are made by an elite of technocrats at institutional levels, which are totally beyond population's control. This increases individuals' sense of powerlessness.

Even the most trivial notion of democracy cannot survive this synchronization with the market. This temporal conflict implies that decisions must be made quicker, usually through executive orders; slow, formal democratic procedures must be bypassed; consent must be won at the speed of social media and not in long and interminable conversations; complexity produced by globalization processes must be simplified by recalling the primordial functions of the state: security, control, borders. By doing this, neo-authoritarian leaders, in a way that retrieves historical fascism, are attempting a new *synchronization* of different temporalities. The reasoning goes back to Bloch's analysis. In Germany, the strength of National Socialism, like that of recent right-wing populisms, consisted in using and making manifest the tension between non-synchronic social strata and reorienting that tension to synchronize the country. The term used by Nazis was *Gleichschaltung*, which can be understood and translated as "switching onto the same track." This operation, accomplished through a series of legislative acts (*Gleichschaltungsgesetze*), aimed at producing a new level of legal, political, social, and cultural integration. Whoever did not adapt, or preferred non-adaptation, was "switched off."

If one combines the political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of today's analysis on authoritarianism, synchronization looks like an attempt to govern a state of exception that is both internal, i.e., psychological and cultural, and external, i.e., national and international.

Today more than ever, one needs to be able to pay attention to the tension between temporal strata through which different social strata come into conflict with each other. The conflict between the city and the countryside, or in the USA between the blue coasts and the red interior, is not so much a spatial conflict, but a temporal one. Part of the rural population and the traditional working class feel left behind by modernization processes; they feel like *strangers in their own land* (Hochschild). A large middle-class stratum feels pushed downward by ever faster globalization processes beyond its control. Individuals feel disoriented and at the mercy of forces totally out of their control. There are social strata for whom looking to the past is the only way to imagine a different present.

Today, large strata of the population and an atomized working class, which is the result of a capitalist offensive against large worker concentrations, find some identity in national belonging; they find some security in limiting the uncertainties of the global market through an appeal to national sovereignty; they seek a reduction in complexity by stemming the nation with demands for impassable borders. They do not vote against their own interests, as some have claimed; rather they identify the slightest remains of common interests in the right-wing call to the nation, to a collective identity, sovereignty, and borders. They hope that these can stem the insecurities of global markets better than cosmopolitanism does in words.

In his analysis of the psychosocial roots of fascism published in 1941, Erich Fromm spoke of a "feeling of individual isolation and powerlessness" (133) that throws the individual into a state of insecurity and anxiety and is compensated through "supporting factors." These factors are found in national pride, in ethnic identity, in the family: "For those who had little property and social prestige, the family was a source of individual prestige" (121). Individuals find themselves isolated and insecure, and they make up for their sense of isolation in new and old ties by which they feel bonded.

Today, it is a matter of identifying the composition of a new working class - often disaffected from the work it does—with new habits, characterized by a growing segmentation and atomization that gives rise to uncertainty and insecurity of employment, which makes any feeling of class identity evanescent. This feeling of dispersion, mobility, precariousness, loneliness is often subjectively unbearable and a cause of frustration. This working class has every right not to have confidence in the ruling class, in the

market and in globalization. An economic crisis, such as that of 2008, can dramatically worsen its objective living conditions. And no politician was, is, or will be able to predict when the next crisis will occur—or more importantly, to prevent it.

Today, large worker concentrations are rare, at least in the West, and they coexist with a strong atomization of production processes, where a substantial number of workers work alone from home or in their cars. These workers represent themselves as their own bosses, even if their freedom is limited to the freedom to overwork themselves. Of course, if there is no boss who tells them when to start work, that does not mean that there is no boss, only that the boss has now been internalized. These new forms of work are not without discipline, but rather require a different discipline. Fordism gave rise to control over workers' homes, their private and moral lives, in order to preserve their efficiency while they were at work. Today, private places and homes are often production units and home offices. The mass sociality of Fordism, certainly forced, but nonetheless sociality, has given way to a growing atomization and depersonalized society of the web, where individuals retain impersonal relationships.

Today, there is a technological transition characterized by new media, an economic transition characterized by the centrality of financial capital, and a political-ideological transition characterized by ongoing global processes. The end of the Cold War, and therefore of a world organized in familiar bipolar terms, has deprived the West of its enemy. It also gave way to different possible scenarios. On the one hand, there has been a cosmopolitical route characterized by US hegemony, by the redefinition of human rights as a legitimizing tool for international police operations, by the "responsibility to protect," and by Western "democracy" to export. On the other hand, another paradigm emerged. It is oriented toward a multipolar system that is characterized by "a world of renewed sovereignty, resurgent religion, globalized markets, and the stagnation or rollback of universal norms about human rights." In this new system, which Stephen Hopgood calls "neo-Westphalian world," the old normative package used to define what is "normal," "democratic," or "appropriate" is no longer adequate to provide answers (166).

One could say that the entrance into the international arena of other actors quickly marked the inadequacy of the unipolar paradigm. The cosmopolitan path has come to an end, and national sovereignty has folded back on itself—but in a new way. "America first," "France for the French," "Italians first," and "Hungary first" do not represent a historic inversion but do express neo-authoritarian governments as forms that are highly adequate to the present transition. At the same time, the principle of the "supreme emergency exception," (Rawls 99) previously celebrated in the field of international law, is now largely used in each country to justify executive power's decisions.

The difference between yesterday's fascism and today's authoritarianism lies in the configuration of temporal conflicts that have taken on a new, unprecedented global configuration. As we have seen, the outcome of this clash of temporalities is the collapse of liberal democracy. Today the question is not to fix democratic procedures or to strengthen representative democracy. That can be done and can even work for short periods. But a new wave of authoritarianism will return to question everything again. It is therefore better to imagine different democratic practices starting from the numerous political and social experiments of recent years.⁴ It is better to regain possession of political terms dropped by the left and picked up by the populist right. Better to consciously use the force of anachronisms that are released in social transformations and transition phenomena—before they are used to legitimize new violent synchronizations.

On the Political Use of the Past

From the current unsustainable situation of isolation, atomization, and depoliticization, a desire for politics arises. The right has been able to give it voice, even if it does so with deep ambiguity. On the one hand, the right continues the tradition of power that depoliticizes the social; on the other, it claims its repoliticization. Both the depoliticization and the repoliticization of society are particularly intense political acts. Indeed, as Carl Schmitt pointed out, the depoliticization, i.e., the withdrawal of the state from non-state spheres, requires a strong state and intense political action ("Starker" 71-93). Its opposite is the expansion of the state into distinct spheres of society, as exemplified by the welfare state that accompanies every individual from the cradle to the coffin. This dilation of the state is thus reactive: the more intense the conflict, the more extensive the state's expansion. In other words, it is a state and administrative procedure for neutralizing the conflict. Based on the power relations existing in society, the state compromises with existing collective political subjects and yields room to collective agreements and social rights. This legal typology constitutes an anomaly in the grammar of the modern state. The Italian fascist corporate state, by integrating the dilation of the state and the repoliticization of society,

⁴ I am investigating alternative democratic practices in my next book, tentatively titled *The Democratic Excess*.

tried to incorporate this anomaly, which eventually remained a purely theoretical project. Thatcher's motto "society does not exist" removes the anomaly. For Thatcher, the political social reality articulated in a plurality of groups and collective actors had to be dismantled. The political decision to depoliticize the social coincided with the crushing of collective actors. That was the meaning of Thatcher's war with the miners. The question is how to reanimate the fruitful anomaly.

Neo-authoritarianism politically integrates neoliberal atomization processes with an intense repoliticization of the social by force of polemical opposition. I do not think a different kind of repoliticization should be pursued through other polemical oppositions. A third possibility is to look at the social as an articulation of political practices and institutions autonomous of the state. This means, at the same time, taking the need for politics expressed by large strata of the population seriously. Indeed, there is a deep need for politics at the base of neo-authoritarianism. There is a wish for change, but when this desire meets psychological and social obstacles, the energy invested in a possible change goes back to the subject and transfigures into a sort of "unconscious destructiveness" that can be channeled towards some *Gegenbild*, or counter model (Adorno, *Authoritarian Personality* 608). Individuals are thus pushed towards authoritarian solutions from a political and psychological impasse. Authoritarianism offers a *Gegenbild*, and with it a sense of individual and collective identity, a direction based on good, old, traditional (patriarchal) values. Authoritarianism offers an old, but always good commodity: hostility toward an enemy. This hostility redirects the course of the de-politicizing results of the "political revolution" by re-politicizing the social. This new conservative revolution dismantles the essential characteristics of the "political revolution." In doing this, however, it endures the project of political modernity in terms of dismantling collective rights and collective subjects. In neo-authoritarianism these collective forms are replaced by patriotism on the large scale and patriarchy on the small one. When the neoconservatives defend traditional family, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Western and white identity, they do not defend these elements in essentialist terms. They use them as polemical concepts that activate counter-concepts capable of cementing forms of belonging. In the hands of conservatives, terms like Judeo-Christian tradition mean nothing else than opposition to an equally vague radical Islam or anything else that can trigger a real opposition. What matters is the opposition, not the actual content of its terms.

Neoconservative leaders like to refer to the past. There is a common element that holds together Orbán's call for a Hungarian future in the protection of Christian and national culture and Trump's patriotism in defense of Western civilization.⁵ By pointing to some future in the past, they provide a sense of continuity, tradition and stability in a society characterized by disruptions, rootlessness and instability. Neoconservatives, by claiming the presence of the past in the present, put history and politics back into motion and give them orientation. And this is critical in times in which the present seems to be frozen and any compass useless.

The modern Western dominant trajectory is characterized by a break with the past, which borders on its erasure. Descartes started by freeing philosophy from the weight of past traditions, Hobbes freed political theory from the authority of the Aristotelian tradition, the revolutionary bourgeoisie freed itself from the authority of tradition in the name of a radical break with a past of oppression and its humble origins. In this way, by destroying the authority of tradition, the presence of the past in the present was also destroyed, or at least basically destroyed. Only the future was still available as an alternative temporality to the present. The revolutionary bourgeoisie used the concept of progress to give meaning and direction to the present. They elevated progress to historical law. But this faith in progress was possible only until the philosophy of history was snatched from the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, which claimed a classless future for itself. At this point a deep skepticism about the future began, and the philosophies of history became—actually without changing much, if not the algebraic sign placed before the historical time vector—the philosophy of historical decadence. With the collapse of faith in the future and the break with the authority of past tradition, the present becomes temporally frozen. It expands to become eternal, natural, and metahistorical. Neo-authoritarian movements are also this—an attempt to rise beyond the sense of stuckness of the present by relying on the "authority" of a leader capable of smuggling in old values to quell an uncertain future.

"Make America Great Again" expresses this move. If the present seems to be an unsustainable situation of uncertainty, isolation, and disorientation, and the future has ceased to be a politically available temporal dimension, what is left is the past as a vast political arsenal. The ability to appeal to

⁵ In 2017, President Trump stated "The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive. Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?" ("Remarks").

existing traditions and to use the enormous charge of emotional energy contained in the past is certainly an advantage for right-wing movements. The left has abdicated from the past, and the philosophy of history that could mobilize energy from the future has collapsed.

Conservatives grasp the essentials when they point to the past in the present. And since there is hardly anyone else to contend for that past, they use it as they like. The challenge, for *another* history and *another* politics, must be fought on the ground of the past. When neoconservatives claim they are defending the West and its values, they assume that the 'West' is a monolith. Paradoxically, their gesture mirrors the liberal dismissing of the 'West' because of its colonial heritage. De-westernization and re-westernization are not real alternatives. Western history is layered with different political trajectories and is characterized by internal colonialism that has repressed and erased the memory of countless insurgent attempts to give rise to another political modernity. What I am referring to is the long tradition that connects the German peasants of 1525 to the Diggers, to the first socialists of the nineteenth century. For them it was a matter of practicing institutions and authority based not on "atomized voters abdicating their power," but on "municipalities, cooperatives, and associations determining their own destiny in big assemblies" (Landauer 200). This tradition epitomizes the practical alternatives to the crisis of modern Western democracy. Forgetting these events and this tradition means not only killing the already massacred once again, but also breaking the continuity between present insurgencies and past attempts at liberation. It means erasing the presence of the past in the present and giving it away to the right.

The past, its presence in the present, is the battlefield on which the struggle against neo-authoritarianism can take place. It is a matter of seeing in the past, and in many local experiments of our time of transition, the already real presence of new forms of life in common that arise not against tradition and authority but by reactivating alternative traditions of modernity. This is how anachronism works politically.

Old Terms for New Politics

In *Education After Auschwitz* Adorno observed: "Often, for instance, in America, the characteristic German trust in authority has been made responsible for National Socialism and even for Auschwitz. I consider this explanation too superficial. (...) Rather, one must accept that fascism and the terror it caused are connected with the fact that the old established authorities of the *Kaiserreich* decayed and were toppled, while the people psychologically were not yet ready for self-determination" (194). Are we? In the present situation, it is not authority that gives rise to authoritarianism, but the other way around—the lack of authority gives room to authoritarianism. This statement has to be analyzed more thoroughly. One needs to look at authority, tradition and religion not as relics, but as temporal layers full of emotional and political energy. It is the merit of the criticism of the notion of progress and historical teleology to have shown that past formations should not be treated as stages in the historical progress, but rather as layers that carry contemporaneous relevance (Freyer 74). There are elements of novelty that emerge on pre-given strata of traditions, legal settings, theological interpretations, and institutional bonds (Koselleck 36).

Over the past century, many traditional forms of authority have been questioned. They have often been confounded with forms of power, and this has generated confusion. I am referring to the authority of teachers over students, parents over children, and elders over youth. The dissolution of pedagogical authority in educational institutions, for example, has perhaps produced greater freedom and equality between students and teachers who abused their power, but it has also destroyed the authority of tradition and elevated students to customers to be satisfied, thus replacing the authority of the teacher with market power. The authority of the past is questioned: education no longer aims to construct a common language and respect for centuries of thought accumulated in interpretations and reflections, but aims at originality, which, sans tradition is an empty and bombastic phrase. Authority gives way to the power of the catch phrase.

The dissolution of patriarchal authority in the modern family has produced greater freedom and equality for women, but it has also atomized family structures and left free access for state interference, ready to punish educational abuse and remove children from the care of parents unable to support them even just economically. The erosion of family authority opens the doors to state power, which intervenes in the name of individual rights, making arbitrary decisions that usually affect more poor and black families and can turn the household into a legal purgatory.⁶ It is useless to reiterate that it is often necessary to take action against abusive parents. That is not the point. The point is that whenever power

⁶ See Goldberg.

intervenes in the name of security, the problem of the limit of this power of intrusion always arises. Historically, individual rights have been and are imposed at the expense of existing authority and collective rights, by virtue of the constitution of the state monopoly of power and the parallel erosion of local authorities. Their disappearance perhaps leaves greater negative freedom to individuals but also leaves them more alone, isolated and insignificant. The state does nothing but occupy, with its own power, the space left empty by authority. This is not the intention that drove, and drives, anti-authoritarian movements, but sometimes it has that effect. When collective agency fails, there remain passive subjects, and at that point, to protect potential victims, power creeps into the interstices left empty by authority and finds new spaces for intervention.

Conservatives have a point in criticizing the erosion of authorities in the social fabric. The authority of tradition and intermediate bodies has historically been a brake on the centralization of power. In these terms, the aristocracy resisted the nascent concentration of power of the absolute monarch. This is the story told by the aristocrat Tocqueville. He expressed the point of view of a class that was defeated. Early socialist workers' associations, the true heirs of that aristocratic tradition, used their authority to limit the power of both the state and capitalists and, at the same time, to prefigure different forms of life.

When, in 1987, Margaret Thatcher claimed that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families," she was not giving a picture of the present but taking up the grammar of an old declaration of war. In the background was the UK miners' strike of 1984-1985. In her declaration of war against society, Thatcher was imposing an agenda in which social atomization was at the same time pursued and compensated by the authority of the family and traditional values (Hall 70). At the same time, social cohesion was imposed from above by activating the temporality of the past in the form of the "return of Britain to greatness" (70). Thatcher, in those days, and many populist leaders today, have little to invent. On the one hand, they pick up the language of a long war against commons and societal authority; on the other, they claim to defend old values and traditions.

Authoritarian forces have an easy game moving in the ambiguity that, on the one hand, strengthens state power and, on the other, refers to tradition and the past. That is what Reagan did in 1981, appealing to 'old verities,' or Thatcher in 1978 appealing to a 'return to traditional values.' Authoritarian forces take possession of the past by recalling old values. They strengthen the power of big government in the name of security, invent an enemy to re-solidify the social fabric and create a sense of common identity, pull religious symbols void of all meaning out of a magic hat. They make individuals more scared and insecure in order to sell them protection and security. They use the call for traditional forms of authority to strengthen central government and, at the same time, blame the left for expanding the power of big government. However, it is now evident that the common feature of neo-authoritarianism is the continuous practice of the state of exception to deal with real or presumed emergencies. When these emergencies disappear, if they disappear, an additional level of concentration of state power and the erosion of constitutional guarantees have been tested and achieved. This is how the state survives itself, by strengthening its primordial sovereign functions. When 'conservatives' attack big government in words, they actually reinforce authoritarianism and 'decisionism' as the real essence of the state.

The grammar of authoritarianism is inscribed in the original language of the modern state and has a long history. Marx observed that modern political revolutions, the American and the French, "abolished the political character of civil society" and shaped the new, atomized member of civil society, the "unpolitical man" (Marx, "Jewish" 232-233). It is a *depoliticization of the social* through the erosion of authority and the disintegration of associations and guilds. The state becomes a guardian, a guarantor of security and order. Its function is to neutralize possible conflicts and to *police the social*. This control has now reached extreme forms. Public spaces are monitored by cameras; e-mail and online conversations are controlled electronically; and individual behaviors are micro-disciplined. Weber's iron cage encircles the "unpolitical man" with increasingly tight links. This trajectory is inscribed in the grammar of modern power.

The modern state was built by neutralizing local authorities and dissolving the very idea of *auctoritas*. One could say that the state stands on these rubbles. Today, when neoconservatives complain because of the lack of authority, what they really claim is more power. They are masters in confounding authority with power. The left has abandoned the term authority. The right-wing does nothing but collect and use what the left has dropped.

The term authority is of Roman origin and recalls the original sense of *augeo*, not so much the act of increasing, as is often stated, but that of creating something new from fertile soil and of mediating the historical level with a level that is unachievable, and therefore not at someone's disposal (Benveniste 148-151). This clarification is important. If the discourse of power, especially in its revolutionary expression, is characterized by a break, by the introduction of a *novum ordo seclorum*, the discourse of

authority holds together and balances continuity and discontinuity. By mediating between the historical level and a transcendent one, authority presents its political plan as always unfinished, and therefore it needs the guidance of the past. Historically, in fact, the Roman senate received its authority from the past. Its position, as Mommsen noted, was "as something other and more than a mere state-council" (97). It had a binding force similar to the religious dimension, something that can be compared to the *auspices* of the *augures*—practices for deciphering divine will, the support, the approval or disapproval of human decisions. The Senate, without having real power, gave every action the authority of the past, thus acting as a political and temporal center of gravity. "Thus, this assembly of elders was the ultimate holder of the ruling power (*imperium*) and the divine protection (*auspicia*) of the Roman commonwealth, and furnished the guarantee for the uninterrupted continuance of that commonwealth and of its monarchical—though not hereditarily monarchical—organization" (99). What has to be highlighted is that the grammar of authority is completely different from that of power. Alexandre Kojève pointed out that "[e]xercising an Authority is not only something different from using force (violence), but the two phenomena are mutually exclusive. Generally speaking, one needs to do nothing in order to exert Authority. The mere fact of being compelled to call on the intervention of force (violence) proves that no Authority is involved here" (Kojève 10).⁷ When authority, to obtain obedience, needs to inspire fear, when it needs to threaten punishment, it fails and becomes power. Today, the difference between authority and power is almost unthinkable.

It was Thomas Hobbes, in the 17th century, in the midst of civil war, who formalized the new grammar that subsumes authority into power. This erosion of authority constitutes the pillar of the new state-building. This is its new grammar: the representatives act with *authority* only because they are *authorized* by the people, who remain the *author* of every act performed by the representative-actors. For this reason, Hobbes can draw the logical conclusion that "nothing the sovereign representative can do to a subject (...) can properly be called injustice, or injury; because every subject is author of every act the sovereign doth" (141). Having neutralized the *auctoritas* in authorizing an author with respect to an actor—which in the modern state is repeated periodically through the procedure of voting with a free mandate—the consequence is that "no law can be unjust" as the law that is made by the sovereign power is made in the name of the people, and therefore is "warranted and owned by every one of the people; and that which every man will have so, no man can say is unjust" (230). Seeing as people-as-the-author is the people in their unity and totality, means that individuals, as members of the people, are also authors of the law, and for this reason they cannot declare what they themselves wanted to be unjust.

In this way the tension (so vital in the Roman political and juridical system) between the *auctoritas* of the *senatus* and the *potestas* of the people, is eliminated. It is not the *auctoritas patrum* that makes a political action authoritative. Rather it is a constitutional mechanism based on the representation and sovereignty of the people, whose authority consists of authorizing the representatives on the one hand, and being symbolically the author of the acts of those representatives on the other. In the Roman world, the constantly open political question was how to make an action authoritative, hence the need for tradition as direction. In political modernity that question is foreclosed because every action of the representative has implicitly *already been authorized* by the people. Including the declaration of a state of emergency which, in the name of public safety, limits individual freedoms.

Political modernity is a long process of erosion of the authorities existing in the social fabric. In his revolutionary manifesto, Sieyès, combining Rousseau and Hobbes, states that in the name of the common interest of the nation, each "fractional interest" is to be considered "a danger to the community" and corporate bodies as "the cradle of the most redoubtable public enemies" (154). During the French Revolution, a decree of June 1791 declared "unconstitutional, derogatory to liberty and the declaration of the rights of man" any attempt to reactivate workers' craft or trade which make joint decisions. The reason for this was that the new French constitution was based on the abolition of any form of association between citizens of the same estate and profession, and any attempt to reactivate them was considered as the restoration of the corporations abolished by the Revolution.⁸ Le Chapelier, the author of that decree, in a session of the National Assembly clearly outlined the plan of attack against intermediate bodies: "There are no longer corporations in the state, there is no longer anything but the particular interest of each individual, and the general interest. It is permitted to no one to inspire an intermediary interest in citizens, to separate them from the public interest by a spirit of corporation" (Roux 194; Stewart 165-166). In this way, the revolutionary machine set in motion against the orders of the *Ancien Régime* continued to work as a giant stone-breaking machine, shattering local authorities, associations,

⁷ See also Arendt: "where force is used, authority itself has failed" ("Authority" 92-93).

⁸ On the decree of 14 June 1791, see also Marx (*Capital* 903-904).

corporations, and workers' assemblies that constituted a plurality of forms of self-government from below. In these other layers of institutions and local authorities lies a political tradition alternative to the authoritarian state. It is here that the reactivation of the authority, this anachronistic term, acquires new meaning.

It has been observed that "the revolutions of the modern age appear like gigantic attempts to repair these foundations [religion, tradition, authority], to renew the broken thread of tradition, and to restore, through founding new political bodies, what for so many centuries had endowed the affairs of men with some measure of dignity and greatness." This last step offers the right starting point, even if Arendt's almost ideological predilection for the American Revolution prevents her from seeing real alternative trajectories that run through history. She shares the narrative of the victors and presents the American Revolution as a successful example of the foundation of "a completely new body politic without violence" (Arendt 140). This narrative removes the slavery, the brutality of the Civil War, and the genocide of indigenous peoples. But it also removes alternative trajectories that have been blocked and forgotten by the winners' narrative. There is not only a history, but also a political theory that has been written by the victors. There are instead alternative traditions that, like karstic rivers, flow underground for a long time, to emerge in a new insurgency that reconfigures the present and indicates alternative political trajectories. These many pathways constitute the fabric of society. What characterizes these political events is the combination of continuity and discontinuity, individual and collective, the attempt to reconfigure the relationship between authority, tradition, power, and even religion, if by religion one intends both transcendence and bond (*religio*). In the modern state, transcendence has been displaced at the level of the invisible unity of the nation, which becomes present through the political act of its representation.⁹ This is how the modern era of the deification of the nation began. Transcendence, or better, its shadow, has collapsed into the concept of a unified nation, and this is the Western tradition that neoconservatives venerate. Transcendence is no longer the unachievable level that orients actions and opens up the political order to change, as it was in its relation to *auctoritas*. Reanimating these deeper historical strata is a way to reach and transform alternative traditions, to see the past as a political arsenal for the present, to foresee different outcomes to the ongoing transition. To reappropriate the past and conceive it as battlefield for the present.

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⁹ This is the core of the modern political theology of the state: "To represent means to make an invisible being visible and present through a publicly present one." See Schmitt (*Constitutional* 243).

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