

LIFEBOATS, STEAMPUNK AND COLONIALISM: FASCISM TODAY

*A conversation with Alberto Toscano
and Harsha Walia*



In this fascinating opening interview for State of Power 2026, scholar activists Toscano and Walia explore the historic roots and current capitalist dynamics that have led to the rise of fascism worldwide, and why the war on migrants, drugs and people in poverty have become linchpins for fascist mobilisation.

Nick: What is fascism and how does it differ today from its manifestations in the past?

Alberto: This is a somewhat awkward question for me because I have spent some time criticising the political science obsession with a hard-and-fast definition of fascism or with checklists telling us whether something is fascism or not. It's as if there were a diagnostic manual for political disorders where you could just tick off various features or elements. That said, we can start to approach the phenomenon of fascism by talking about it as a politics of domination, supremacy and exclusion that emerges from the crises of mass electoral democracies.

That's a very broad-brush take that hopefully allows us to think through the continuities as well as the differences between interwar European fascisms and current movements or regimes that we may want to characterise as fascist or fascistic.

My inclination is not to chase after an essence of fascism but to think of fascist potentials or fascist processes, to use a term that Angela Davis¹ was already using in the late 1960s and 1970s.

If we want to paint a picture of what fascism might mean in the present, we also must contend with the vast transformations in social and economic and political life that we've witnessed in the century since Mussolini's March on Rome. We also must confront issues that were not germane to interwar fascisms but are now absolutely key, namely climate catastrophe.

Harsha: A core of fascism is explicitly supremacist ideology that underlies its racism, sexism, patriarchy, and transphobia. All of those are inherent in neoliberalism and in electoral democracies. But fascism is explicitly supremacist in its orientation in ways that are distinct.

Scholars in the Black radical tradition would tell us fascism is colonialism. That is important, because so many explications of fascism revolve around Eurocentric ideas and the interwar period. George Jackson in the United States (US), ²George Padmore's articulation of colonial fascism³ or Aimé Césaire's prescient writing⁴ would all tell us that the best way to understand fascism is as a stage of colonialism. I think that is the most important way of understanding it, as a face of colonialism, whether that's the imperialist face of colonialism or the settler colony in countries like Canada and the US.

Fascism is always counter-revolutionary and pro-capitalist, despite its attempts to co-opt the working class. It's always aligned with capitalism despite its outward tendencies to suggest that it's not. So those for me are the three key pillars of fascism: explicitly expressing supremacist ideology, rooted in colonialism, and a counter-revolutionary force aligned with capitalism.

Maybe the differences today from earlier periods are that in the interwar Europe fascism understood itself as going back to a former era, based on a nostalgia for a certain supremacist puritan politics and era. Whereas today fascism has much more of a lifeboat survivalist tendency as we contend with the climate crisis. It's less nostalgic and more apocalyptic, embedded in lifeboat Darwinian ideas.

The other important reality in the current era is that fascism is increasingly spreading around the world. We're living in a real or perceived multipolar world, with growing imperial or sub-imperial powers in the Global South. Fascist tendencies are spreading beyond the former North–South divide, backed by capital and transnational capital.

Nick: What do you see as the underlying key reasons for this resurgence of fascist politics in this moment?

Alberto: Among the foremost reasons is the one that Harsha was just alluding to in terms of the lifeboat framing of contemporary far-right and fascist movements. Since the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, and arguably before that too, we have experienced a long period of capitalist stagnation: diminishing socio-economic expectations and the shrinking of the social wage and social safety net, while efforts at more egalitarian or universalist social betterment have been repeatedly crushed or curtailed – often by the forces that present themselves as liberal or indeed even social democratic or left wing.

There has been a spreading 'common sense' that things are not going to get any better, that the pie is shrinking. Even climate denialists are often implicitly climate realists, for instance, when they talk about their apocalyptic scenarios of mass migration. After all, why would those mass migrations happen? Oh yes, it's because of that very thing they're saying is not the case.

The neoliberal ravaging of social expectations has baked in a sense of precarity and a foreclosed future, which has played a massive role in making the victories of the far right possible. It has created an undercurrent of profound cynicism. Ultimately, my sense is that most people don't believe in the grand rhetorical visions of becoming 'great again' or in futures of affluence or abundance but rather are mobilised by promises that they might retain some material and symbolic goods for whatever ethnic, national, religious or class group to which they belong. If things are inexorably immiserating, so the thought seems to go, perhaps that can be slowed down through policies of exclusion or hierarchy. Often the only goods available are purely symbolic, like the impoverishing or humiliation of others, not your own betterment. Using W.E.B. Du Bois' term the 'psychological wages' may increase while the material ones flatline. This notion of a zero-sum game dovetails with the centrality of anti-migrant racist and xenophobic politics to the far right across the globe.

Harsha: I concur with everything Alberto just said. The rise of fascistic tendencies has shifted from that sense of a nostalgic past to contending with the misery of the present and also, importantly, an unknown misery into the future. There is no sense that things are getting better.

The vast majority of people worldwide understand the crisis of capitalism. The question is what they choose to do in response to that. Fascist tendencies more than anything offer people a sense of winning in a deeply unequal world. And that sense of winning is the psychological wage – it's the sadism, the culture wars, feeling superior to someone else.

Nick: What about the relationship of capital and particularly corporate elites with fascist leaders? Under neoliberalism, they were already winning, so why have they found common cause with fascist leaders?

Harsha: I'd say there's a few reasons. One is absolutely that neoliberalism works well for capitalism, but neoliberals also have to contend with the rising discontent of more sectors of society. The right-wing and fascist tendencies offer a false counter to neoliberalism that allows capitalism to resuscitate and save itself. Many neoliberals are well aware that fascism can offer a façade of being contra-capital to offer something to people disaffected by the crises of capitalism while actually maintaining capitalism. So that is one reason that neoliberals align with fascist leaders.

Many corporate leaders, as individuals with enormous political power, also actually believe in fascist ideas. Beyond the US, which is too obvious an example, we can look at India, where intergenerational wealth and neoliberalism are deeply marked by caste and racism. The billionaires, like Ambani and Adani, themselves believe in caste-based supremacy and anti-Muslim racism. Ambani, who is India's richest man and a big backer of Narendra Modi, runs a 'news' channel filled all day long with anti-Muslim drivel. So, there are those in the capitalist class – like Ambani in India or Musk in the US – who use their capital to back fascist leaders because they genuinely believe in these ideas, and not necessarily to save their capitalist interests – though of course fascist leaders will generally also protect their interests.

Alberto: This is an extremely thorny question, because the situation today is distinctly different from the one that saw the emergence of fascism in the interwar period. Back then, the bulk of industrial and finance capital eventually backed fascist leaders due to massive social turbulence, unemployment, and large-scale workers' and revolutionary movements that created a crisis of capital accumulation. But that elite choice for an extreme and potentially disruptive political option on the grounds of a political-economic emergency or crisis is not where we're at today. We are in a long period of stagnation, but also a time of enormous profits for a few large companies, especially in Big Tech. We are also 50 years into a period marked by the substantial emancipation of capital from the working class, from regulation and taxation. A big question today is: what else do the capitalists want?

One answer might be that we are not dealing with a faceless anonymous corporate capital, but rather a billionaire class that exercises personalised political power at a planetary scale. If you think of Bezos, Ellison or Musk, the individual whims and ideologies of these figures have historical consequence. At times it seems as if it's no longer a question of a statistical or macro look at the interests of the capitalist class overall, but something more like: what are the politics of these six or seven people?

So, when Musk speaks live at an Alternative for Deutschland (AFD) or English Defence League (EDL) rally, he is not speaking generally in interest of the capitalist class, but rather as a white supremacist with his own idiosyncratic history and obsession. We live in a world of such irrationality that personalised power of this kind enjoys an outsized role. Not only can a Musk intervene directly in the politics of Germany and England, he can also turn off satellites that assist Ukraine's defence against Russia's full-scale invasion of the country.

But if we zoom in at why Trump gets elected twice, it's not so much because of the billionaires *per se*, but largely due to a whole galaxy of much smaller capitalists, say owners of laundromats or gas stations or others that would previously have been classed among the petit bourgeoisie. This is a story that is compelling told in Melinda Cooper's recent book *Counterrevolution*.⁵

Nick: You started to touch on it here, but could you speak further on the class basis for far-right movements and what brings together this seemingly contradictory alliance of oligarchs such as Musk and disaffected working people?

Alberto: It's tricky, as you first need to tease apart the electoral dimension – which is the most obvious phenomenon of far-right ascendancy – but also movements that vary vastly across countries like Argentina or Hungary or India, and whose social and class bases are also not easily comparable. So, I would be wary of making any catch-all statements.

Still, I think there has been an overestimation of the material role of the working class in contemporary fascist movements, not least because the industrial working class in a traditional sense of the term is not particularly large in either Europe or the US. There's also the dubious tendency in much commentary or analysis of treating the fact of not having a university education as a stand-in for class. It turns out that Republican voters in the US, educational certifications notwithstanding, were often in higher-income groups and more often petit bourgeois than workers – in any case, hardly a reactionary army of proletarians.

This is not to say that the far right globally doesn't mobilise a lot of people who belong to the broader working class, which they of course have to do to win elections. But that still doesn't give credence to the idea that the new fascism is the product of some working-class revolt.

Harsha: I strongly believe that it's not an alliance, because there are not many major labour unions that have thrown their formal support behind fascistic movements.

The entire construction of the disaffected white working class comes from Europe and North America, so doesn't hold in most other places. And the 'white working class' itself is a construction of the settler colonial and or ethnostate that presupposes the whiteness of an otherwise multiracial working class.

It's more useful to think through what are the reasons that people who have much more to lose from fascism are finding themselves attracted to or voting for it. Unless we are looking at countries like India, where there is actual and horrifying recruitment in the tens of thousands into massive fascist paramilitaries, largely the pull to fascist ideas is based on a loose and individualised disaffection caused by neoliberalism. That doesn't necessarily mean that each person adheres to the whole fascist programme or policies. We see this perhaps most starkly today with all those people in the US who are saying they did vote for Trump but are now mortified by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) kidnappings and terror. It can often also mean that the person is disaffected from the voting electoral system and the false choices presented to them. And as I said earlier, people are also largely attracted to the idea of winning because most people's lives are becoming increasingly precarious.

The last thing I would say is that people's identity today no longer marked by traditional, Fordist ideas of class. Most people do not start by saying 'I am a worker' or 'I am on the shop floor'; they generally claim other primary identities. Fascism increasingly relies on identity construction, such as anti-Black racism and anti-migrant racism to mobilise people into particular identities. Whether it's Bolsonaro, Duterte or Trump, there is a very clear identity construction of who is the 'citizen', which can pull in any person across class lines.

In addition, fascism relies heavily on anti-drug user and anti-poor rhetoric, which both bolsters the carceral industry, while at the same time giving people a sense of superiority over others with whom they share class interests but start to see themselves as separate from and 'better' than the rest. This growing fascism pulls on people's genuine sense of hard work, but weaponises it – with a touch of moralistic policing – to explain that the reason that people have been hard done by is not neoliberalism or capitalism, but due to 'other people' who are relying on the welfare state, or using drugs, or stealing resources. So, the pull for fascism is not primarily on people's identity as workers or the working class, but on the identity construction of the 'generative citizen', generally constituted explicitly *against* migrants and people living in poverty.

Nick: We're speaking just a few days after the illegal US attacks on Venezuela and the kidnapping of Maduro and his wife. How do you understand the relationship between fascism and imperialism and more widely with militarism and the military industrial complex?

Alberto: It's useful here to go back to those continuities between colonialism and fascism that Harsha mentioned. One useful formulation from the study of colonial power come from the work of the subaltern studies historian Ranajit Guha, who in dialogue with Gramsci, uses the formula 'domination without hegemony', which is later borrowed by Giovanni Arrighi in his *Adam Smith in Beijing*.⁶ This is the form of power colonialism takes and it's increasingly the default form of power that contemporary imperialism adopts. There's no longer a sense of needing to oversee a relatively stable set of hierarchically organised planetary alliances with the US at its core. Instead, there's a very different perception of US power, which seeks to use its gargantuan military apparatus for openly extortionate plunder even when it's not straightforwardly economically necessary.

The US doesn't need Venezuelan oil. Current oil production in Venezuela is the same as in North Dakota – and it already has companies working there like Chevron. But there is obviously a nostalgia for a cruder modality of nineteenth-century imperialism with a greater degree of straightforward predation, extortion, plunder and piracy. This is an openly fascist accumulation strategy. And, given Venezuelan oil reserves (the largest in the world) and rivalry with China, there's also a bid for energy dominance – one that entirely denies that very energy transition in which China is taking a leading role.

There's not even any attempt to present a legal veneer for this resource grab. You can see the difference between Bush's Iraq war and its pretence about democracy, compared to Venezuela where Trump is openly clear that 'we're going to keep the oil' (and to keep the money in offshore accounts or 'slush funds' directly controlled by Trump himself). The idea of projecting US soft power, promoting democratic transitions, building alliances, is no longer of any interest.

The current US imperialist model is like a steampunk remake of the US of the nineteenth century, but with Palantir and artificial intelligence (AI) – and with an overarching explicit white supremacist ideology. If you read the US national security strategy, the section on Europe is deliriously reactionary: it argues that European countries will no longer be 'European' in 20 years, purely based on racial categories. Supporting far-right parties is explicitly part of US state strategy.

Trumpian foreign policy also envisages the border as something entirely impermeable in one direction and completely permeable in the other. It merges the war on drugs, war on terror, and war on migration into one endless, protean and fractal war, which is why you had this narrative of Maduro

as the head of a sinister made-up cartel that sends the drugs and the migrants from the prisons and 'asylums' to the US. Apparently Trump had this short circuit whereby he thinks that people who seek asylum come from asylums. That's the delirium and idiocy that we're dealing with. It's all fused together in the context of this Monroe Doctrine 2.0 (aka the 'Donroe Doctrine', a name as stupid as its referent), which says the western hemisphere has to be mastered to face the 'threats' to the US body politic and to secure the resources of rare-earth minerals, oil, etc., that are straightforwardly presented as belonging to the US.

It's a layering of straightforward political economic manoeuvring, power politics, material interests and pure fantastical, ideological demands that are not necessarily in the interest of US capital as a whole. There is a surplus of ideology at work here.

Meanwhile, the rational party of neoliberalism, i.e. the Democratic party, with very limited success, would like to respond by rallying the interests of capital to its side for its more moderate version of imperial strategy, instead of this extremely crude variant.

Harsha: Nice pun play there.

Alberto: Inevitable.

Harsha: As I mentioned earlier, one of fascism's pillars is being counter-revolutionary and explicitly anti-Communist, so we have to understand the attacks on Venezuela in that vein. We know that the Latin American left (understood broadly and from below, beyond individual regimes or leaders) is one of the strongholds to resist US imperialism and specifically US fascism and US hegemonic control. This is true even though we shouldn't romanticise or ignore the many, legitimate independent left-wing challenges to Maduro. So, the US action is part of the desire to make clear to the Latin American left of the power of US domination, as well as assert the supremacist Monroe Doctrine that the hemisphere is 'ours'.

There's another piece here and that is the Caribbean. The Caribbean, particularly Trinidad and Tobago, played an important role in ensuring that this invasion could take place and bolstering the US maritime build-up. So, we shouldn't lose sight of the region's role in wealth accumulation for the US, in particular the way capital is increasingly invested in port economies. We have seen a shift from straightforward resource colonialism to wealth accumulation through the logistics economy and port economies, which have become fundamental to transnational capital accumulation. In addition, we have all the tourist resorts that capitalist interests in the US are very keen on building in the region. So, Venezuela is important to the US not just for its resources, but also because of the pathways to the Caribbean.

Finally, the action is also about punishing US rivals and those with which the US believes itself to be in global competition, such as those in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). So overall, it's about expanding the US frontier, ensuring that the US remains a hegemon, punishing economic rivals, and suppressing left-wing movements. And covering it all up through espousing anti-migrant xenophobia and the rhetoric of a war on drugs and a war on terrorism – which brings us back to some of the core pillars of fascist ideology today.

Why has the war on migrants and also the war on gender been so central to fascist projects in different parts of the world? Why are those themes so constantly being weaponised and turned into victimisation and hate campaigns?

Harsha: The so-called gender wars are so central to fascism because it is an inherently patriarchal project. Patriarchal in the expansive sense: the confluence of the militaristic nation state, a saviour politics, a 'strong man' politics, and pushing regressive gender-based roles and the rise of the manosphere that relies on maintaining and reproducing the gender binary.

And in that sense, the war on trans people is so pivotal to global fascist movements in terms of patriarchal domination in the same way that migrants have become one of the unifying racial markers of how fascism understands itself. If we're to understand fascism, not just in white supremacist contexts, but across the world, we must appreciate that racialisation processes are constructed differently in different places. And across these very different contexts, the migrant has become the figure upon whom racial markers can very easily be placed and understood across geographies. So, fascism is built on these systems of othering: against drug users, against trans people, against migrants, which become reproduced as targets for different fascists across time and space.

Anti-migrant racism also offers a particular resolution to the contradictions of neoliberalism as it relates to the migration crisis – in particular the contradiction between borders needing to be open to capital and be shut down to people. Fascism allows capitalism to maintain itself by ensuring that labour remains inflexible and immobile while capitalism moves freely. And that is one of the key reasons why neoliberals really rely on fascist ideology: it ensures that labour can only travel under certain conditions, which usually involves exploitable migrant-worker programmes or guest-worker programmes. Despite what they say, it's not that fascists don't want migrants; they rely on an anti-migrant politics in order to further racism and in order to further the exploitation, precarity and deportability of migrants. The goal is not to deport all migrants because neoliberalism and capital interests and the state require them. But rather to create the conditions for increasing precarity and increasing exploitation as capital seeks increasing populations to segment and exploit.

Nick: I would like to wrap up by asking two questions. First where do you see fractures, fault lines and failings in the rising fascist project that left-wing progressive forces should take advantage of? And second, what are the strategies that you think need to be taken by the left?

Alberto: It's good to keep in mind the reactive or indeed counter-revolutionary character of these fascisms, which is sometimes difficult to discern in our own moment, which is not a time of great revolutionary radicalism. However, it's important to remember that these culture wars as well as the extreme forms of repression we're witnessing are responding to real social transformations and gains, as well as related changes in common sense. So, while there is something both sinister and hyperbolic about transphobia, it's also a response to serious social and political struggles around gender and sexuality that in everyday social life and human relations in many respects have had remarkable transformative successes. Similarly, global fascism is also a response to many moments of uprising or revolt over the past couple of decades, including the Occupy movement, anti-austerity movements in southern Europe, the Arab Spring revolutions, the George Floyd uprising in the US, and so on.

So, the far right is not just a white-supremacist fever dream that's merely projecting monstrous enemies and scapegoats; it's also a response to real social changes and real social power. That's not to neglect the tricky problems this poses for the left, because the far right targets what radicals or revolutionaries or activists would often identify and criticise as liberal co-optations of radicalism, such as diversity, equality and integration (DEI) policies, which emerge as substitutes for the radical changes that insurgent social movements originally demanded. But that's the complicated terrain in which we're fated to struggle.

Beyond that, I do think we need a politics that goes beyond rhetorical agitation. We need to mobilise people around agendas that enable people directly to transform their lives in a direction that's not one of immiseration, precarity and anxiety. So, for all their limitations, it is valuable to put energy into grassroots or municipal political projects where you can build forms of popular power that give people an experience of some transformative control over their everyday life. Otherwise, you are either acting in terrains such as national electoral politics, where the field is asymmetrical and demotivating and where the right usually has an advantage; or limiting opposition to the limited if vital duration of the clash, riot or protest.

Finally, I think it's worth keeping in mind that – apart from some cases such as India – far-right movements are by and large not mass movements with a substantial organised grassroots and institutional components that would be comparable to those of historical fascist movements. They are largely if not exclusively a result of massive levels of political disaffiliation or disaffection; and while they can have a big electoral impact, they are often very feeble at the street or even social level.

Harsha: I have to confess that I'm not very hopeful. I know no one wants to hear it and everyone needs a good story, but I think the task is enormous. The right may not exist as a movement, but it does exist as a force which feels insurmountable at present.

Much of particularly western left-wing debates are fixated on debates about the whether the American Empire is collapsing or not. Frankly, even if it does collapse, there is nothing that will convince me that there is not another sub-imperial power like India that won't emerge as a dominant structuring force that maintains accumulation and empire, as the US did after the decline of European powers, even if it may appear differently.

So, I'm not convinced that with the rise of fascism, capital accumulation, climate crisis, anti-migrant violence, sub-imperialism and colonialism at a global scale that we're going to win.

Of course, the tasks remain the same: we need to be building internationalism. We need to understand how borders are central to every nation state's expanding apparatus of carceral and militaristic violence. It's the linchpin between all fascistic policies and is also increasingly how soft power is projected and enacted across Asia and Africa and the Americas. So, all of those have to be countered and so much more, and the left-wing task of opposing empire while offering people concrete and meaningful alternatives remains true today. But it does now seem much harder, with the forces of empire and violence, the addition of Big Tech control, the rise of right-wing forces globally, and billionaires just accumulating endless wealth.

It's true that it's easy to be trite and end interviews on a falsely positive note, so how do we live this moment in a way that's authentic, honest and embeds the principles you talked about like solidarity. Do you have a final thoughts on that?

Harsha: I appreciate your gesture to honesty. Neoliberalism will continue to position itself as a counter to fascism, and so an unabashed left-wing politics requires honesty about what's next, including the confrontation with both liberalism and fascism and what it will demand of us. The Democratic party, as Alberto was saying, has of course totally failed people *and* also failed to even do what it wants to do.

Yet despite being bleak, we can point to changes such as peoples' understanding of the imperialist role of Zionists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and an end to the era of largely stifled and muted Palestinian liberation movements in the imperial core. Also, more people understand the naked reality of imperialism and capitalism and policing and borders, which is what so many leftists have fought for at least 30 years to make more visible.

But now our task is perhaps a greater one, which is once people realise it and see how this violence is omnipresent and that empire does not care about how many people are killed or about international law, how do we ensure that people are not taken in by survivalist, lifeboat-type, fascist ideas? Because showing people that shit is bad can often mean that they just want to survive through it because fighting it can feel futile. Which makes alternatives that we are building and creating at localised and small scales even more important precisely for what they do at a psychic and a relational level – they keep us connected to one another and keep our spirits alive and oriented towards transformation.

I also think that at a fundamental level, transforming ourselves and fighting against fascism is understanding that we don't need to be afraid of each other. That's fundamentally what fascism is trying to embed in all of us – fear of others. So, any project that continues to build our human connection and interconnectedness and reminds us that we don't need to be afraid of other human beings on this planet – other than billionaires – is always a worthy project for any time.

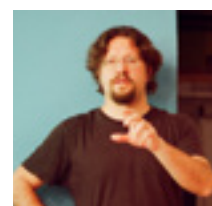
Thank you Harsha and Alberto so much for your time and for this conversation.

BIOS

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Alberto Toscano is an Italian cultural critic, social theorist, philosopher, and translator. He is an adjunct professor at the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University and author of *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*. (Verso, 2023).



Nick Buxton is founder and editor of TNI's State of Power report and co-editor of *The Secure and the Dispossessed: How the military and corporations are shaping a climate-changed world* (Pluto 2015)

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Davis, A.Y. (ed.) (1971) *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*. London: Orbach and Chambers Ltd.
- 2 https://socialhistoryportal.org/sites/default/files/raf/0419710000_01_0.pdf
- 3 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/padmore/1938/fascism-colonies.htm>
- 4 For an overview of his work, see de Oliviera, D. (2025) 'The Marxism of Aimé Césaire'. *Communist Review*, posted on 11 September. <https://www.comunistreview.org.uk/the-marxism-of-aime-cesaire/>
- 5 Cooper, M. (2026) *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 6 Arrighi, G. (2009) *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21st Century*. London & New York: Verso Books.

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