

CAPITALISM'S SAFETY NET: NEWS MEDIA AND THE FAR-RIGHT

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## **Abstract**

Mass media significantly impacts public opinion and societal norms, but it is important to recognize that news coverage has contributed to the growth of far-right beliefs in various countries. This coverage has made conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian ideas more acceptable to the public and increased support for specific political figures. It is crucial to examine whether the capitalist media encourages the development of far-right beliefs and, if so, how. To investigate the relationship between the dominant ideology and news organizations' role and influence in society, I use a political economy approach to analyze the power dynamics between politics, media, and economics. My research reveals how news organizations can influence other beliefs, such as anti-socialism, racism, sexism, and political apathy. I explain how liberalism and post-fascism aim to maintain and promote capitalist social structures, often working together to achieve this goal. Through my analytical framework, I show how the capitalist media uses the "safety net" as an ideological tool to support far-right groups and undermine radical left-wing political parties and movements during capitalist crises. This makes the "safety net" an institutional mechanism with significant power and resources to reinforce conservative beliefs. My project goes beyond analyzing commercial media and offers a critique of the capitalist mode of production.

For Maria, Charlie, and Toby Jr,  
my little family.  
I love you.

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## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>The Relationship Between the Far Right and the Mainstream Media</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>Ideology and News Production</i> .....	<i>6</i>
<i>Mass Media and the Reproduction of Ideology</i> .....	<i>9</i>
<i>Old and New Media</i> .....	<i>22</i>
<i>The Research Questions</i> .....	<i>25</i>
<i>Methods</i> .....	<i>27</i>
<b><i>Chapter One: How the Capitalist Media Altered Our Epistemology and Led to the Rise of the Far Right</i></b> .....	<b><i>34</i></b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>34</i>
<i>Epistemologies of Television News</i> .....	<i>37</i>
<i>Television News and Entertainment</i> .....	<i>43</i>
<i>The Spectacle in the Twenty-First Century</i> .....	<i>49</i>
<i>Corporate Interests Dominate Old Media and New Media</i> .....	<i>54</i>
<i>Government and Corporate Sources</i> .....	<i>58</i>
<i>Experts and Charlatans</i> .....	<i>60</i>
<i>Protests and Campaigns Against the Mass Media</i> .....	<i>63</i>
<i>The Mass Media and the Conservative Common-Sense Revolution</i> .....	<i>65</i>
<i>Liberalism and Socialism are Not the Same Things</i> .....	<i>72</i>
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	<i>75</i>
<b><i>Chapter Two: The Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism</i></b> .	<b><i>79</i></b>
<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>79</i>
<i>What is Populism and Where Does it Come From?</i> .....	<i>86</i>
<i>From Right-Wing Populism to Post-Fascism</i> .....	<i>107</i>
<i>Fascism is an Indispensable Part of Capitalism</i> .....	<i>109</i>

<i>“Classic” Fascism and Right-Wing Populism: Kindred Spirits .....</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Inverted Totalitarianism.....</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>Conclusion .....</i>	<i>121</i>
<b><i>Chapter Three: The Liberal Media Would Rather Support a Populist than a Socialist.....</i></b>	<b><i>125</i></b>
<i>Introduction .....</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>Anti-Communism Was a Popular Ideology, and It Still Is.....</i>	<i>129</i>
<i>The Liberal Media and the Horseshoe Theory .....</i>	<i>134</i>
<i>The “Propaganda Model” and the “Liberal Media” .....</i>	<i>139</i>
<i>The Liberal Media Cannot Get Enough of Trump.....</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>The Liberal Media Declares War on Sanders .....</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>The Liberal Media’s Obsession with Bernie Bros .....</i>	<i>153</i>
<i>Conclusion .....</i>	<i>155</i>
<b><i>Chapter Four: No, Trump Did Not Win Because of Twitter: The Real Impact of Social Media on US Voters during the 2016 Presidential Elections .....</i></b>	<b><i>159</i></b>
<i>Introduction .....</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Social Media Platforms .....</i>	<i>162</i>
<i>The Move to Social Media .....</i>	<i>167</i>
<i>Trump: A Walking and Talking Spectacle .....</i>	<i>170</i>
<i>US Mainstream Media Coverage during the 2016 Presidential Elections .....</i>	<i>172</i>
<i>Old and New Media during the 2016 Presidential Elections .....</i>	<i>174</i>
<i>Conclusion .....</i>	<i>177</i>
<b><i>Final Thoughts: Is the Capitalist Media Behind the Rise of the Far Right?.....</i></b>	<b><i>180</i></b>
<b><i>Bibliography.....</i></b>	<b><i>185</i></b>



## Introduction

### *The Relationship Between the Far Right and the Mainstream Media*

Globally, there has been a terrifying explosion of far-right politics. But there is no one agreed-upon definition of the terms “far-right,” “extreme right,” and “radical right.” Instead, these terms are synonymous and often used interchangeably. Most scholars describe the “far right” as a political ideology. They agree it involves several features, such as “nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and the strong state.”<sup>1</sup> Some other characteristics include anti-communism, militarism, and the need for a strong leader.<sup>2</sup> My dissertation addresses the urgent need for a critical analysis of the relationship between the rise of the far right, most notably, right-wing populism in North America and Western Europe, and the capitalist media, the most significant institution for spreading the dominant ideology. I will focus on the news industry’s part in its emergence and intensified role under neoliberal capitalism.

Far-right political parties and movements have gained significant ground culminating in the United Kingdom’s (UK) decision to withdraw from the European Union (EU) and Donald Trump’s shocking victory in 2016. His election finally ends the myth of “American exceptionalism,” i.e., that the United States of America is not susceptible to right-wing populism, a characteristic of “economically backward” countries.<sup>3</sup> “American exceptionalism” presumes that the United States’ distinctive values, political system, and history merit widespread respect and admiration. Therefore, it is entitled to play a unique role in global politics.<sup>4</sup> This concept is crucial because it also suggests that America is an empire. However, unlike the British Empire or

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<sup>1</sup> Mudde, Cas. *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*. Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Urbinati, Nadia. “On Trumpism, or the End of American Exceptionalism.” *Teoria Politica*, vol. 9, 2019, p. 215.

<sup>4</sup> Walt, Stephen M. “The Myth of American Exceptionalism.” *Foreign Policy*, 11 Oct. 2011.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/>.

French colonial empire, the “US Empire” does not officially exist. Instead, American officials claim that they are “protecting the causes of freedom, democracy, and justice worldwide.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite his defeat, Trump received a record number of votes during the 2020 United States presidential election. The former US President claimed his opponents rigged the election and refused to concede defeat. Shortly after that, on 06 January 2021, members of far-right militias, conservative evangelical Christians, and neo-Nazi groups stormed the United States Capitol in Washington, DC, in a botched attempt to reverse the election outcome. Surprisingly, not all Americans condemned the mob. On the contrary, according to *Newsweek*, nearly half of the Republican voters supported the pro-Trump rioters.<sup>6</sup> The far-right has also gained ground outside the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, across the Atlantic, in countries such as France, Hungary, Italy, Germany, and Poland, far-right political candidates and public officials enjoy unprecedented success because of rising opposition to immigration from the Global South and dissatisfaction with the European Union’s handling of the 2008 European debt crisis.<sup>7</sup> Right-wing populist political candidates and public officials have also thrived outside North America and Western Europe, such as Brazil, India, Israel, the Philippines, and Turkey.

I will examine the growing popularity of far-right ideas and beliefs and their entanglement with the dominant ideology by focusing on the capitalist media and, more specifically, news media and its coverage of far-right political candidates and public officials. I will confront the current rise of the far right and bring a critical politico-economic and historical materialist approach to analyze this development, drawing on new readings of Antonio Gramsci,

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<sup>5</sup> The Editors. “After the Attack...The War on Terrorism.” *Monthly Review*, 01 Nov. 2001. [monthlyreview.org/2001/11/01/after-the-attack-the-war-on-terrorism](https://monthlyreview.org/2001/11/01/after-the-attack-the-war-on-terrorism).

<sup>6</sup> Walker, James. “45 Percent of Republican Voters Support Storming of Capitol Building: Poll.” *Newsweek*, 07 Jan. 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/45-percent-republican-voters-support-storming-capitol-1559662>.

<sup>7</sup> O’Reilly, Jacqueline, et al. “Brexit: Understanding the Socio-Economic Origins and Consequences.” *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2016, pp. 807-854.

Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Guy Debord, and Stuart Hall. An interpretation of history based on materialism emphasizes how the mode of production shapes social, cultural, and political phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Marx's theory of "historical materialism" aims to explain human nature and progress by observing actual material circumstances intrinsic to human existence. According to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "he insisted that a materialist theory of human existence must not be naïve and unhistorical but must instead recognize the dynamic and dialectical character of human labour."<sup>9</sup> Many of Marx's followers embraced this theory and incorporated it into various forms of Marxist philosophy.<sup>10</sup> However, I will also engage with the work of political theorists who do not belong to the Marxist tradition, such as Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, Sheldon Wolin, and John Keane. These authors focus on the influence of corporate power and how it leads to the erosion and destabilization of democracy, often through mass media. The result is a "managed democracy" where citizens have become insignificant. Nevertheless, management is not a neutral idea. This system stems from the corporate world, where highly competitive economic forces constantly push ethical and legal boundaries and influence values.<sup>11</sup>

There needs to be more research on the relationship between the far right and the mainstream media, particularly the major news organizations. This absence is shocking since journalists are partially responsible for the far-right's recent breakthroughs because they legitimize their viewpoints with their disproportionate coverage and reliance on conservative sources and think tanks.<sup>12</sup> However, this is not a new phenomenon. It has been happening for many decades, but it is more common today because of structural changes in the modern media

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<sup>8</sup> Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. Penguin Books, 2016, p. 183.

<sup>9</sup> Acton, H. B., and M. Baur. "Marx on Historical Materialism." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 4, 1967, pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Democracy Incorporated*. Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 131-135.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Katy, and Aurelien Mondon. "Populism, the Media, and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian's Coverage of Populism as a Case Study." *Politics*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2021, pp. 279-295.

system and three decades of brutal neoliberal policies.<sup>13</sup> Journalists regularly resort to conservative think tanks with a radical right-wing agenda that ostensibly contradicts the neoliberal project.<sup>14</sup>

Neoliberalism is a theory of political and economic relations that suggests that people's lives can improve by unleashing personal entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework described by private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The state should set up and sustain this institutional framework but not meddle in the market's activities.<sup>15</sup> Supporters of neoliberalism maintain that there should be minimal government interference when businesses are in control. Therefore, they advocate policies prioritizing the expansion of markets and profit maximization while minimizing the role of nonmarket institutions.<sup>16</sup> As a result, widespread deregulation, privatization, and an end to social welfare programs occur,<sup>17</sup> essential to the management of democracy.

A significant detail of present-day politics is that while governmental regulations are disappearing, corporations are undertaking more responsibilities that were once considered the exclusive domain of the government. Nowadays, a close connection exists between corporations and the state, leading to extensive privatizations and criticism of economic interventionism. Privatization is vital to corporate power since it involves transferring significant public services to private companies or individuals, discrediting the welfare state by labelling it "socialism," and weakening democratic institutions. Ultimately, neoliberalism is about power relationships that

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<sup>13</sup> Alterman, Eric. "What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News." *Sacred Heart University Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2002, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. Beacon Press, 2004, pp. x-xi.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> McChesney, Robert. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New Press, 2016, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. pp. 2-3.

are essential to the management of democracy.<sup>18</sup> Thus, neoliberalism reproduces the supremacy of the ruling class, which possesses both political and ideological power. This enables the capitalist class to enforce its will upon the unorganized mass public.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, capital in neoliberal society expresses itself as biopower, and it controls all aspects of life in a stratified society. As a result, “it increasingly orients itself towards integrating the entire productive potential of subjects into the valorization process.”<sup>20</sup> This reinforces capitalism and the social relations of production.

The rise of corporate media can be attributed to neoliberalism, which led to media deregulation and allowed large media companies to thrive.<sup>21</sup> This development prioritized free market values over vital public services, resulting in depoliticized news and favouring infotainment over critical analysis. As a result, there is now less room for opposing voices to challenge the destructive outcomes of neoliberal policies. Moreover, finance capital has become increasingly dominant in many developed economies while the state no longer provides essential goods and services like housing and pensions. As a result, finance and economics news have emerged to meet the needs of investors and the public. However, in the mainstream media, business and market perspectives now dominate while the opinions of organized labour and social democratic politicians seem to have disappeared entirely. This has affected news production, as the press can no longer maintain its democratic functions due to mounting market pressures.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Democracy Incorporated*. p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Berry, Mike. “Neoliberalism and the Media.” *Media and Society*, edited by James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh, Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Karakilic, Emrah. “Acting Up with Hardt and Negri: Capitalism in the Biopolitical Context.” *M@n@gement*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2019, p. 99

<sup>21</sup> McChesney, Robert. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Berry, Mike. “Neoliberalism and the Media.” pp. 66-77.

The relationship between news organizations and conservative think tanks is problematic since these news organizations regularly print or broadcast questionable viewpoints that reinforce neoliberal ideas. Although many conservative sources provide helpful information, they also promote far-right ideas and beliefs such as staunch anti-immigration views, strong government, and support for the War on Crime.<sup>23</sup> Commercial news media can unwittingly promote authoritarian ideas and beliefs while claiming fairness and accuracy. In this way, it is partially responsible for the recent rise of the far right since it often popularizes reactionary ideas and beliefs while simultaneously bashing socialist ideals and principles. Moreover, it often ignores the social and economic conditions that enable them to emerge in the first place. So, I will show that the commercial media helps capital survive since it ensures the reproduction of capitalist social relations during crises of capitalism by offering a far-right counterweight to political parties and social movements that genuinely oppose the hegemonic order, thus functioning as a “safety net.” Ultimately, neoliberal capitalism cannot survive without the far right.

### *Ideology and News Production*

The mass media is not simply the dominant social class’s mouthpiece. This oversimplification overlooks the effects of subordinating cultural production, such as news production, to the logic of capitalist commodity production. Furthermore, it ignores the development of economic, ideological, and political relationships. Under monopoly capitalism, culture becomes industrialized. For example, large media conglomerates regularly acquire news organizations and

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<sup>23</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. pp. x-xi.

bring them under the power of their corporate logic.<sup>24</sup> A political economy approach to mass media is essential in understanding ideology since such an approach allows me to concentrate on the production and distribution of culture instead of simply interpreting texts or evaluating readers' and audiences' responses. This process occurs within a particular economic and political system, consisting of social relations related to the state, the economy, institutions, practices, rituals, culture, and organizations.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of ideology is often associated with worldviews and beliefs.<sup>26</sup> However, those who produce ideologies are less interested in values and more interested in power. For example, certain social classes and groups can impose their ideas and beliefs on others because they control institutions like the mass media. As a result, they often resort to "ideological power" to prevent opposing social classes and groups from "seeing things as they are."<sup>27</sup>

There is a critical class component to this. German philosopher Karl Marx explains that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the owners of the means of production are simultaneously the dominant intellectual power. Nevertheless, these ideas are inconsistent and often contradict one another.<sup>29</sup> However, ideology is much more pervasive. For example, sociologist Christian Fuchs argues that "ideologies veil class relations

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<sup>24</sup> Garnham, Nicholas. "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass-Communication." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, pp. 233-234

<sup>25</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. "Introduction to Part I." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Communicating COVID-19: Everyday Life, Digital Capitalism, and Conspiracy Theories in Pandemic Times*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2021, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Kevin. *Understanding Media Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology: Part I." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1972, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

and domination, legitimate class society and domination, naturalize exploitation and domination, and distract attention from the true status of society and the true causes of society's problems.”<sup>30</sup>

Neoliberalism is the current dominant ideology. Since the eighties, neoliberal ideas and beliefs regarding competition, individualism, and the dominance of the free market have slowly yet steadily shaped social relations. Furthermore, they support earlier notions concerning the need for wage labour and consumer culture. Proponents of this ideology argue that the “modern form of capitalism” is the best system people can hope for, and it is up to them to take advantage of the opportunities ahead. Neoliberal ideas and beliefs are far-reaching in our day-to-day decisions and our ability to understand what is politically and economically feasible. As a result, even when individuals are unhappy and want to improve their lives or societies, the dominant ideology still influences their vision of a better tomorrow. For example, these ideas and beliefs reorient people away from issues and concerns and instead have them focus on the idea that the current mode of production is not the problem. If anything, such ideologies articulate that the government is too big, specific groups take advantage of the system, or people must work harder. Therefore, ideology places the blame on others. When capitalism is the culprit, this reasoning asserts that there is no alternative, so people might as well accept it.<sup>31</sup> Most people have come to abide by this logic and, in this way, have ceased thinking about alternatives to capitalism. In the words of Fredric Jameson, “it is less challenging to envision the demise of the world than the decline of capitalism.”<sup>32</sup> Like this, ideology is not simply “false consciousness” but the inability to envision alternatives.

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<sup>30</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Communicating COVID-19: Everyday Life, Digital Capitalism, and Conspiracy Theories in Pandemic Times*. p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Bailes, Jon. *Ideology and the Virtual City: Videogames, Power Fantasies and Neoliberalism*. John Hunt Publishing, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Mapping Ideology*. Verso Books, 1994, p. 1.



There are rival classes and competing social groups within a social class. These groups often set aside their ideological differences when a common threat appears to maintain their dominance despite disagreements. Nevertheless, they compete.<sup>33</sup> This opposition, for example, explains the presence of liberal, conservative, and fascist ideas and beliefs in media messages. And it also helps us understand the continuous hostility towards socialism.<sup>34</sup>

### *Mass Media and the Reproduction of Ideology*

The relationship between media organizations and society's political and economic institutions is crucial for understanding news production, especially between journalists and their high-level "sources" in institutions like the government or corporations. Media outlets develop a symbiotic relationship with their social environment, turning to it for economic support and sources.<sup>35</sup>

Marxists regard news organizations as barely, if at all, independent. Instead, they argue that the mass media is indebted to and works with society's dominant institutions. Thus, the press publishes and broadcasts the ruling social class's positions as the common-sense perspective.<sup>36</sup>

However, this approach contrasts sharply with the dominant liberal-pluralist schools of thought. These scholars believe the media functions as the "Fourth Estate."<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that British statesman and political philosopher Edmund Burke first coined the term "Fourth

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>34</sup> Engels, Friedrich, "Engels to Franz Mehring." *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, 1968.  
[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_07\\_14.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott. "The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches." *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Jane Woollacott, Routledge, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Gurevitch, Michael, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Jane Woollacott. "Preface." *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Jane Woollacott, Routledge, 2005, p. 18.

Estate” to describe the press in eighteenth-century France, distinguishing it from the three Estates of the Realm – the clergy, the nobles, and the free farmers and bourgeoisie. The term exemplifies the political power of the mass media.<sup>38</sup> However, today, the term is usually used merely as a synonym for the press and news media.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, many liberal-pluralist scholars maintain that news organizations still play an essential role in democracy as an independent source of information. For example, Tony Bennett argues that they are “viewed as adding to the series of countervailing sources of power which, in liberal democracies, are said to prevent a disproportionate degree of power from being concentrated in any one section of the population or organ of government.”<sup>40</sup> In a class-based society, this is not the case.

Concerning “passive transmitter” theories, many liberal-pluralist scholars believe that the media reflects reality. This theory demonstrates “the neutral stance implied in the concepts of objectivity and impartiality embedded in the dominant professional ideology in the media.” Simultaneously, “it is rooted in a pluralist view of society, in which the media are seen to provide a forum for contending social and political positions to parade their wares and vie for public support.”<sup>41</sup>

Liberal pluralists argue that the media should reflect reality objectively and impartially, the news must be fair and balanced, and opinions must not taint facts.<sup>42</sup> As a result, many journalists develop a fixation with objectivity. However, the power of the capitalist media raises questions regarding who owns and controls cultural production. Thus, the ruling social class, or

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<sup>38</sup> Hampton, Mark. “The Fourth Estate Ideal in Journalism History.” *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by Stuart Allan, Routledge, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, Tony. “Theories of the Media, Theories of Society.” *Culture, Society and the Media*, edited by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Jane Woollacott, Routledge, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott. “The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches.” p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the bourgeoisie – a tiny minority that survives mainly on the labour of subordinate social classes – decides what, how, and who will produce the news.<sup>43</sup>

People who believe in liberal pluralism oppose the idea of a “business-dominated culture.”<sup>44</sup> Pluralism initially referred to a political philosophy developed by British liberals and socialists in the early twentieth century that affirmed the need to distribute sovereign power among various civil society associations. Today, however, it relates to social organizations, such as businesses, where power is in the hands of different groups and institutions. For example, an analysis of business management maintains that workers, administrators, and owners exercise power collectively, and no single social group dominates the others. Therefore, they freely choose to work with one another. However, the evidence shows that capital and management have much more power than labour. So, workers must cooperate to survive.<sup>45</sup>

Supporters of liberal pluralism believe it enhances democracy because power belongs to opposing social groups, none of which can dominate the others. Each social group pursues its interests. Nevertheless, there is a debate about whether liberal pluralism is a political system because it may conceal that some social classes or groups exercise power and control in democracies. Therefore, pluralism is also an ideology that describes a political system.<sup>46</sup>

Pluralists view media organizations as entirely different from business and politics. Therefore, they want to keep civil society organizations such as the press, charities, schools, universities, and churches separate from political ideologies to preserve their independence.<sup>47</sup> However, Michael Parenti maintains that “since the pluralists believe that big business is just one

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<sup>43</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. St. Martin's Press, 1993, pp. 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. p. 292.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>47</sup> Raeijmaekers, Danielle, and Pieter Maesele. “Media, Pluralism and Democracy: What's in a Name?.” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 37, no. 7, 2015, pp. 1044-1045.

of many interests in the political arena and one that does not dominate the state, they cannot imagine that it dominates civil society and cultural life.”<sup>48</sup> Liberal pluralism is an ideology that represents reality from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie.

Marxist scholars and writers, on the other hand, such as Gramsci, Adorno, Althusser, Debord, and Hall, disagree with this school of thought on the influence of big business in society. For example, they argue that news organizations produce and disseminate the dominant ideology that portrays the ruling social class’s interests as “general interests.” As a result, the capitalist media promotes existing class relations and depicts them as natural, although somewhat imperfect. Nevertheless, the dominant social class cannot do whatever it desires. Sometimes, it must make concessions or seem like they are doing so. It ought to seem democratic. The ruling social class dedicates many resources to propaganda campaigns. Command over the mass media and news production helps ensure that the bourgeoisie’s interests appear universal.<sup>49</sup>

My research is centred around three yet interconnected areas. Firstly, I work on developing theories related to ideology and the production of ideas and beliefs of the ruling class. Secondly, I focus on the political economy of mass media and journalism. Finally, I analyze the crucial role that news media plays in promoting authoritarian ideologies and views. My detailed analysis in these areas helps me investigate the emergence of far-right ideology and the vital role played by the press and broadcast media in acting as a safety net for the ruling class during a crisis of neoliberalism, a crisis of capitalism. The term “safety net” in this context refers to the capitalist news media, which has contributed to the growth of the far-right. These groups operate as an ideological false antagonism that employs intimidation, violence, and even homicide to

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<sup>48</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

uphold capitalism and its associated social institutions. Thus, I argue that they do not want to implement revolutionary social and economic reforms despite their rhetoric or overturn the actual political and economic elites, i.e., the capitalist class, but the ill-defined “elites” – “one homogeneous corrupt group that works against the ‘general will’ of the people.”<sup>50</sup>

Even though the ruling social class does not openly force journalists to reproduce reactionary ideas and beliefs that naturalize these power structures, news production is vital in normalizing such reactionary views and opinions.<sup>51</sup> As a result, far-right worldviews slowly become part and parcel of everyday life, and they go so far as to be naturalized in the form of common sense. For example, people will start to embrace anti-socialist ideas and beliefs,<sup>52</sup> and racist views, such as Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, will become widespread.<sup>53</sup>

Under the guise of liberal pluralism, the mass media historically repressed anything that challenged the dominant “liberal ideology.” Similarly, the far right seeks to maintain the same rigid class structure that ensures the dominant social class’s social, political, and economic power. For example, in the US, the far-right attempts to weaponize social issues and suppress anything that is not white, Christian, or American through hyperreal violence, racial stereotypes, and authoritarian ideas concerning the state. This political approach to the shortcomings of neoliberalism functions as a negative pressure valve that distracts from genuine social and economic issues and progressive solutions. The far-right envisions and implements a space where anything “foreign” is immediately dismissed or removed from positions of power.

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<sup>50</sup> Castanho Silva, Bruno, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay. “The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories.” *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2017, pp. 423-424.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays*. Duke University Press, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1994.

<sup>53</sup> Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Vintage Books, 1997.

I argue that the far right emerges to function as a safety net of the structures of capitalism through a series of rhetorical moves that focus on quite problematic and yet, naturalized claims, all in the name of protecting “the people.” All such rhetorical and ideological actions are articulated and mobilized to safeguard the ruling class’s interests. The production of propaganda and ideology on organizing and ordering everyday life occurs through various institutions. However, the capitalist media is crucial for articulating how subjects should behave in society.

Therefore, I argue that the mass media provides security by offering the subordinate social classes a seemingly anti-capitalist alternative to counter-hegemonic ideas and beliefs, such as communism and radical socialism, that problematize the capitalist mode of production. The other options the far-right promotes inhibit class struggle, thus benefitting the dominant social class.<sup>54</sup> Conversations involving even the most gradual and peaceful political ideas and beliefs, such as social democracy, are made to appear dangerous and extreme and are displaced in the media. Furthermore, by redirecting the audience to these ideas and opinions, the mass media also contributes to relegating alternative views to the margins. Through the capitalist press, the dominant social class reveals the incremental unmaking of liberal democracy toward an authoritarian democracy.

Marxists examine professional ideologies, mass media organizations, and their relationships with social and political surroundings. The study of ownership and control views media organizations in the same light as other industrial organizations. Mass media institutions consist of “hierarchical structures, an internal division of labour and role differentiation, clearly specified and accepted institutional goals,” and “organizational practices,” to name a few.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. City Light Books, 1997.

<sup>55</sup> Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott. “The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches.” pp. 11-12.

Although Marx introduced the concept of class conflict at an ideological level, subsequent Marxists created numerous theories on ideology. However, these theories also have limits since we are discussing a new phenomenon, i.e., how the mainstream media functions as a “safety net” for the dominant social class by supporting reactionary ideas and beliefs. For example, Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci understands how particular ideologies promote the dominant social class’s interests. So, news coverage often glorifies the ruling economic, gender and racial groups. In contrast, it vilifies subordinate social classes and groups.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, for my project, I will read together Marxist social theorists, such as Gramsci, Adorno, Althusser, Debord, and Hall, but also non-Marxist theorists of media and society, such as Herman and Chomsky and media critic Neil Postman, and draw on their ideas to explain the rise of the far right.

Gramsci argues that the ruling social class requires widespread support. However, it must do more than force subordinate social groups to comply with its needs because they are often at odds. These groups must accept it. Therefore, the ruling social class must find a way to balance consent and coercion to maintain power. Ideology is the counterweight to violence that justifies exploitation under capitalism. This balance eventually between ideology and violence leads to “hegemony.” This concept explains why people act contrary to their self-interest, supporting right-wing and conservative political parties and social movements. However, this would be unlikely without the state, i.e. political and civil society.<sup>57</sup> Civil society includes institutions such as schools, churches, and media companies, to name a few.<sup>58</sup> Vis-à-vis the “ideological structure,” I argue that Gramsci was correct when he said that the most influential institution is

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<sup>56</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Forgacs, David, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and William Boelhower. *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Cultural Writings*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 289-290.

<sup>58</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. p. 7.

the press because it maintains, defends, and develops the ruling class's ideas and beliefs.<sup>59</sup> It also reveals how specific technologies and institutions play a part in sociopolitical domination and resistance.<sup>60</sup>

The Frankfurt School's critique of the mass media, or, more broadly, the "culture industry," is one of the Marxist theory's most important developments.<sup>61</sup> The institute's members combined a "critique of the political economy of the media, analysis of texts, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications."<sup>62</sup> They first demonstrated how the ruling social class controls the media to promote its interests and dominate society. This theory is essential since it explains how the mass media is crucial in reproducing capitalism's ideas and beliefs.<sup>63</sup> If the possibility of radical social change seems unlikely, this is because the need for such change seemingly no longer exists, resulting in an ideological milieu in which the belief that there is no alternative is pervasive.<sup>64</sup>

These theories offer a less economistic way of examining the relationship between the economy, politics, and ideology. However, they still need to explain how the mass media and ideology relates to the reproduction process of capital. French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser played a vital role in developing a new approach to ideology and economic reproduction.<sup>65</sup> He puts forth two arguments concerning ideology's structure and function. First, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and second, "ideology has a material existence." Despite a so-called "imaginary relationship," ideas reflect actions, or they should. Althusser thought ideology could turn

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<sup>59</sup> Forgacs, David, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and William Boelhower. *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Cultural Writings*, pp. 289-290.

<sup>60</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Bennett, Tony. "Theories of the Media, Theories of Society." pp. 38-39.

<sup>62</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, Tony. "Theories of the Media, Theories of Society." pp. 38-39.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.



individuals into subjects through a function he called hailing or “interpellation.” As a result, ideologies reproduce the conditions and the relations of production necessary to sustain capitalism.<sup>66</sup> For example, fascism is a distinct ideology since it redirects any efforts to critique or reform capitalism.

The state allows the ruling social class to control and exploit subordinate social classes and groups. In addition, a repressive state apparatus (RSA) and ideological state apparatuses (ISA) exist. The ideological state apparatus includes many specialized institutions that support the dominant ideology. For example, Althusser argued that the Church was the most significant ISA in the feudal system, whereas the education system is the most important under capitalism.<sup>67</sup> However, I argue that this is no longer the case. Instead, we should look toward Gramsci and recognize that, under late capitalism, the mass media plays that role.

Evaluating policies, structures, and institutions related to the capitalist media is necessary since they determine news production. The political economy of the mass media analyzes news organizations’ ownership and control. Furthermore, analyzing the mass media is crucial to understand how societies function because it influences other tendencies such as racism, sexism, militarism, and depoliticization. Understanding news production and its relationship with political culture can help us explain how ownership, market structures, business interests, technologies, labour practices, and government policies impact the industry and its content. News production connects the mass media to how economic and political systems operate and how power and control function within capitalist societies. However, this does not provide a total theory about contemporary social issues. Nevertheless, analyzing and engaging with its vital role

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<sup>66</sup> Althusser, Louis. “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*.” *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Verso Books, 2012, pp. 123-131.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-127.

in the constitution of ideas and governing of subjects' insights and perceptions will allow us to shed light on how power and control function in modern societies.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, economic determinants shape the dynamics of the mass media. Economic factors often affect news production. This is because media outlets must cater to the needs of advertisers and sponsors and produce content that attracts large audiences to maximize profits. However, it is necessary to consider how journalistic practices and principles within these organizations also impact news production.<sup>69</sup> Media outlets make revenue by creating news content and advertising products and services for other industries. Therefore, a focus on the political economy of mass media reorients the reader to view the press as more than just an ideological state apparatus but also an economic entity. I argue that this position rightfully disputes scholars such as Althusser's and Nicos Poulantzas' claim of a society structured into autonomous economic, ideological, and political levels. For example, Nicholas Garnham says, "when we buy a newspaper, we participate simultaneously in an economic exchange, in subjection to or reaction against an ideological formation and often in a quite specific act of political identification or at least involvement."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, he argues that "TV news is economically determined within commodity production in general, performs an ideological function and explicitly operates within politics, in terms of balance."<sup>71</sup>

These authors highlight how capitalism determines people's understanding of the material world. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook who controls "the means of mental production." Mental production within the capitalist mode of production influences social

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<sup>68</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. Monthly Review Press, 2008, pp. 12-14.

<sup>69</sup> Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott. "The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches." pp. 13-14.

<sup>70</sup> Garnham, Nicholas. "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass-Communication." pp. 235-236.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

communication and ideology. It is worth noting that not all mass media automatically support capitalist structures or work based on capitalist principles. Instead, I want to argue that it is vital that we must explore how capital can maintain and reproduce itself and how it employs media production to ensure that. Growth constantly demands improved productivity and more markets.<sup>72</sup>

In a market economy, though, the means of cultural content are both commodities and part capital of accumulation. Moreover, the ruling social class controls the means of cultural production and determines their use. So, the political economy of mass media is a matter of theoretical interest and a political priority. Garnham is right when he says, “to understand the structure of our culture, its production, consumption and reproduction and of the role of the mass media in that process, we increasingly need to confront some of the central questions of political economy in general.”<sup>73</sup> American economist and media scholar Edward Samuel Herman and Noam Chomsky, an American linguist, philosopher, and political activist, developed the propaganda model to better understand ownership and control of cultural production. They focus on the impact of market forces on news production that integrates corporate and state power.<sup>74</sup>

Herman and Chomsky reject any delusions that journalism in the United States rests on ideas of media pluralism and free expression in a democratic society. Instead, they argue that neoliberalism enables the production of “normative and narrow reportorial frames.” Nevertheless, this theory is not without its critics. Their “work is highly controversial.” Critics have even described it as a “conspiracy theory.”<sup>75</sup> However, I consider it essential in allowing me to collect and combine an analytical framework whose focus is the political economy of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 238-243.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 248-250.

<sup>74</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. “Introduction to Part III.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 220.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

mass media. Such an approach sheds light on reorganizing and reordering production and social relations.

The media communicate messages and symbols to audiences. The mass media's purpose is "to amuse, entertain, and inform" but, more importantly, "inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society." Thus, this "requires systematic propaganda."<sup>76</sup>

Unlike countries under authoritarian rule, where control over the mass media and widespread censorship makes it clear that the press serves the regime, it is harder to see a propaganda system in a society where private companies control the media and freedom of speech is legally guaranteed. Where the press competes, they regularly criticize and expose crimes committed by corporations or the government and portray themselves as champions of freedom of speech and the community's well-being. However, the media's lukewarm criticisms, the concentration and control of vast resources, and limited access to private media organizations are not apparent and frequently overlooked.<sup>77</sup>

The propaganda model is the most comprehensive conceptual model in political economy for understanding cultural hegemony. It produces insights concerning the relationship between political and economic power, mainly due to its substantial predictive power. Furthermore, it is relatively simple. The propaganda model describes how the mass media can produce and communicate the dominant ideology and shape people's consciousness.<sup>78</sup>

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model concentrates on wealth and power and how they influence the mass media. It examines how money undermines the truth-telling function of

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<sup>76</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>78</sup> Pedro-Carañana, Joan, Daniel Broudy and Jeffery Klaehn. *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*. University of Westminster Press, 2018, p. 2.

the press in a liberal democratic society, ignores opposing opinions and allows the state to circulate its ideas and beliefs. The propaganda model consists of a collection of “news ‘filters.’” The first relates to the concentration of media ownership, distribution of wealth, and profit-seeking mainstream media organizations. The second focuses on advertising, the media’s principal source of revenue. The third describes the media’s dependence on government officials, corporate spokespeople, and various “experts” financed and supported by the state. The fourth is controlling the media, known as “flak.” The fifth and final news filter is “anti-communism.” Today, however, three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this filter has evolved into anything that challenges the dominant neoliberal ideology. Therefore, “anti-communism,” or anti-socialism, is the most straightforward filter since it upholds the notion that capitalism has no alternative.<sup>79</sup>

The ruling social class dominates the capitalist media and marginalizes dissidents with the help of these news filters. This development occurs instantaneously. Journalists, often working with honesty and thoughtfulness, can convince themselves that they decided to communicate the news impartially based on professional beliefs and values characteristic of journalists. However, their coverage appears fair and balanced within the news filter constraints. The constraints are so stringent that alternative ideas and beliefs seem almost unimaginable, thus reinforcing the dominant ideology.<sup>80</sup>

Herman and Chomsky’s most significant news filter concerns the concentration of media ownership since it enables the remaining four filters to function more efficiently. This development was relevant more than four decades ago, and it has become more significant over the years. In the past, many news organizations were relatively modest but still reliant on large

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<sup>79</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

media companies and news agencies for everything except local news. Not all media outlets are equally important. The media has a hierarchy ranked by influence, resources, and reputation. Therefore, large media companies often decide what is newsworthy.<sup>81</sup> The propaganda model raises a significant issue concerning the role of media outlets as “passive transmitters” or “active interveners” in shaping the news and information.<sup>82</sup>

### *Old and New Media*

According to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey, 82 percent of adults in the United States said they get their news and information from a digital device, such as a smartphone, computer, or tablet. On the other hand, the number of Americans who get their news from television dropped to 31 percent in 2022 from 40 percent in 2020. In addition, far fewer people tune in to the radio or read newspapers and magazines. However, age also plays an essential factor in this. For example, older adults generally trust television for news and information.<sup>83</sup> Although most Americans are more likely to rely on local and national news organizations for news instead of social media platforms, adults under 30 are more likely to trust information from Facebook or Google instead of CNN or *The New York Times*.<sup>84</sup> Social media sites have given traditional media a new platform for news organizations to reach audiences and readers.<sup>85</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>82</sup> Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott. “The Study of the Media: Theoretical Approaches.” p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Forman-Katz, Naomi, and Katerina Eva Matsa. “News Platform Fact Sheet.” *Pew Research Center*, 20 Sep. 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>.

<sup>84</sup> Liedke, Jacob, and Jeffrey Gottfried. “U.S. Adults Under 30 Now Trust Information from Social Media Almost as much as from National News Outlets.” *Pew Research Center*, 27 Oct. 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/27/u-s-adults-under-30-now-trust-information-from-social-media-almost-as-much-as-from-national-news-outlets/>.

<sup>85</sup> Khorana, Smitha, and Nausicaa Renner. “Social Media is on the Rise, but not like You’d Expect.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 21 June 2016. [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center/reuters\\_report.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/reuters_report.php).

many people limit their news consumption and sometimes avoid it altogether. According to the “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021,” people who shun the news have risen worldwide.<sup>86</sup>

Social media sites usually do not produce news stories, but this is also slowly changing. For example, large tech companies often encourage news organizations to post on their platforms or establish partnerships with various stakeholders. As a result, they are getting more involved in news production.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, large media companies with a stake in both old and new media dominate the news content on social media platforms.<sup>88</sup> Several private and public mass media companies have established social media-based news organizations that seek to produce and circulate news and information. For example, NBC News launched *Stay Tuned*, ARD in Germany started *Hochkant*, and the BBC created *Outside Source*, to name a few. Therefore, new media presents opportunities for established mass media companies to connect with audiences under 30. So, even if a format is made solely with a younger audience in mind, older adults, the leading target group, will continue to have traditional media.<sup>89</sup>

Formerly, television’s importance was related to the fact that more people depended on it for their news and information than any other means of communication. However, the type of news stories that dominated the 24-hour news cycle spilled over into other media and influenced

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<sup>86</sup> Newman, Nic. “Overview and Key Findings of the 2022 Digital News Report.” *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 15 June 2021. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary>.

<sup>87</sup> Bell, Emily. “Who Owns the News Consumer: Social Media Platforms or Publishers?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 21 June 2016. [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center/platforms\\_and\\_publishers\\_new\\_research\\_from\\_the\\_tow\\_center.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/platforms_and_publishers_new_research_from_the_tow_center.php).

<sup>88</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage, 2021, pp. 81-82.

<sup>89</sup> García-Avilés, Jose A. “Reinventing Television News: Innovative Formats in a Social Media Environment.” *Journalistic Metamorphosis: Media Transformation in the Digital Age*, edited by Jorge Vázquez-Herrero et al., Springer, 2020, pp. 150-154.

news production in the digital age.<sup>90</sup> Since they operate in a capitalist society, all news organizations face similar commercial pressures that shape reporting and decision-making. As a result, they often prioritize amusing, scandalous, and sensational news stories at the expense of truth because they attract large audiences.<sup>91</sup> Under capitalism, amusement becomes a form of work.<sup>92</sup> Dallas W. Smythe argues that the audience works when it consumes media and is simultaneously a commodity. Thus, “audience power” accomplishes economic and political functions, which ultimately is the purpose of commercial media. So, since “audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity.”<sup>93</sup>

Consequently, news organizations sell audiences to advertisers. In addition, they often appeal to specific audiences. For example, significant differences exist between Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC audiences.<sup>94</sup> This advertisement model also extends to social networking platforms. However, the main difference between old and new media is that Internet and social media users are often content creators rather than journalists.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, with the increasing concentration of media ownership, media outlets often broadcast and publish the same news stories across old and new media.<sup>96</sup> So, it is no surprise that although social media platforms have increased the popularity of many online journalists and

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<sup>90</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko, John Wiley & Sons, 2009, p. 438.

<sup>91</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. p. 156.

<sup>92</sup> Fuchs, Christian. “Dallas Smythe Today – The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value.” *Marx and the Political Economy of the Media*, edited by Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, Brill, 2015, p. 694.

<sup>93</sup> Smythe, Dallas W. “On the Audience Commodity and its Work.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001. pp. 252-256.

<sup>94</sup> Rosentiel, Tom. “Partisanship and Cable News Audiences.” *Pew Research Center*, 30 Oct. 2009. <https://www.pewresearch.org/2009/10/30/partisanship-and-cable-news-audiences/>.

<sup>95</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. p. 85.

<sup>96</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” p. 438.



reporters, the most influential newspeople are TV anchors and presenters.<sup>97</sup> Isolating social media platforms from other traditional media platforms is difficult since they often support one another. Moreover, this interconnection extends to the internal logic of television news which pervades the entire media landscape.<sup>98</sup> Television news influences how journalists and reporters produce news and information.<sup>99</sup>

### *The Research Questions*

This dissertation aims to understand the rise of the far-right historically and theoretically to explain the present-day success of far-right political parties and social movements within the dominant ideology, i.e., neoliberalism. It will focus on the Marxist tradition's concept of ideology and its historical development by focusing on authors such as Gramsci, Adorno, Althusser, Debord, and Hall. My project's primary research question is: What is the capitalist media's role in producing and distributing far-right ideas and beliefs, and how do they sustain capitalist social relations?

Some secondary questions include: Does neoliberalism contribute to the rise of right-wing populism? How does this sustain capitalist social relations? What methods and techniques do news organizations employ to produce these ideas and beliefs? Finally, are journalists and reporters accountable for the rise of the far right, or is the capitalist media prone to fostering reactionary ideologies? The emergence of the far-right allows us to understand the creeping

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<sup>97</sup> Newman, Nic. "Overview and Key Findings of the 2022 Digital News Report." *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 15 June 2021. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary>.

<sup>98</sup> Lewis, Justin. "Television and Public Opinion." p. 438.

<sup>99</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. 20th Anniversary edition, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 111.

authoritarianism in Western societies. Ultimately, I will critique the capitalist mode of production and the news industry, an integral part of the intellectual arsenal of the ruling social class that prolongs its hegemony in North America and Western Europe. I believe that news organizations contribute to the normalization of the far-right. So, I will explore the conditions that support this development.

I will examine how the mainstream media reconfigured far-right ideologies. So, I will also address other topics, such as how this impacts counter-hegemonic struggles. What are the broader social and political implications? To achieve this, I will gather and examine data concerning the far-right's disproportionate news coverage of the recent electoral successes of the political actors in North America and Western Europe.

There is little research on the relationship between the far-right and the mainstream media, particularly research concerning the rise of far-right political parties and social movements and leading news organizations in North America and Western Europe, such as CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, BBC, and *The Guardian*. This absence is shocking since they are partially responsible for recent breakthroughs of the extreme right. They are vital in normalizing far-right ideas and beliefs with disproportionate news coverage and reliance on conservative sources and think tanks. Although the ruling social class does not force the press to reproduce the dominant ideology, journalists who themselves are trained in or educated in such frameworks seem to think that they are merely reporting the news without ever putting pressure on the structures and formations that enable the emergence of such ideas and their everyday circulation and effect on different social classes. However, the press's "autonomy" is not just a "cover." It is crucial to the way power and ideology function in capitalist societies. The ruling social class controls the press, but it must be discreet since it will expose itself and upend the

myth of an independent and free press. As a result, journalists and other news workers frequently reveal a variety of contradictions inherent in the dominant ideology.<sup>100</sup> This development is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is more common today because of organizational changes in prominent media outlets.<sup>101</sup>

### *Methods*

I focus on influential news outlets, such as the conservative cable news television channel Fox News, and liberal news organizations, such as CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, BBC, and *The Guardian*. Unlike right-wing media organizations, they appear to be more hostile to far-right and populist political candidates and public officials. These news organizations rank among North America's and Western Europe's most influential print and broadcast media outlets. Moreover, they appeal to mainly liberal audiences. This project will trace how mainstream media outlets articulate their positions while supporting the dominant social class's ideas and beliefs. Therefore, I will focus on primary and secondary data to explain news media's processes and content and test theory-based hypotheses.<sup>102</sup>

Discourse and content analyses of these media outlets will examine topics concerning far-right ideas and beliefs such as nationalism, sexism, homophobia, racism, and authoritarianism. By collecting and processing data, such as news stories hostile toward progressive political candidates and public officials, I plan to reveal that those seemingly liberal media outlets normalize far-right ideologies since they often find fault with left-wing politics. Furthermore, I

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<sup>100</sup> Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays*. pp. 277-297.

<sup>101</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

<sup>102</sup> Riffe, Daniel, Stephen Lacy, and Frederick Fico. *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998.

analyze news organizations' structures and use of internal and external power and how they impact news workers. I look at the organizational structure's relationship and how it extends to journalism and political commentary. Finally, I explain how far-right ideas and beliefs seep into news production.

Using a Marxist framework, I study the connection between mass media and the far right. I believe in incorporating multiple ideas that align with my analytical approach rather than relying solely on one specific Marxist author or tradition. My analysis explores the historical and theoretical factors that led to the rise of these political movements, with a focus on media ownership and ideology. I base my approach on a broad interpretation of Marxist writings that Fuchs defines as "open cultural Marxism" rather than a narrow focus on a single aspect. Therefore, this system of thought is not rigid, positivist, reductionist, or deterministic.<sup>103</sup> By analyzing the mass media as a site of contestation where ideologies clash, and neoliberalism is legitimized, we can also view it as an institution that reinforces and reshapes the dominant ideology, even as neoliberal reforms transform it. The concept of "open cultural Marxism" suggests that the media and neoliberalism have a mutually beneficial relationship, each influencing and reinforcing the other in a complex way. Since the 1980s, the mass media has been a significant site of contestation and battleground for competing ideologies and efforts to gain popular support for neoliberal policies such as privatization and deregulation. However, this was part of a broader effort to change people's perceptions of themselves and their connection with the state and society. This ideological assault targeted both the capitalist class and subordinate groups. For example, the financial and business media spread neoliberal theories, reinforcing ruling-class ideas. On the other hand, the press and broadcast media are critical sites

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<sup>103</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. University of Westminster Press, 2016, pp. 2-3.

of ideological struggle. So, the capitalist class aims to sway the views of the white working class by reporting on the populist right's perspectives on politics, the economy, and society. This allows people to express their concerns but ultimately reproduces capitalist social relations.<sup>104</sup>

I have three reasons for my approach. Firstly, I do not limit myself to one intellectual practice but instead engage with multiple schools of Marxist thought, such as the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, Structural Marxism, and the situationists. These traditions are noteworthy and complementary to one another. I explore communication and culture as theoretical and political issues in modern capitalism through “open cultural Marxism.” Lastly, my approach encourages dialogue about how we should approach scholars and their writings in “open cultural Marxism.” Focusing solely on a single author or work is insufficient. Therefore, my analytical framework will critique ideology using Marx and Marxist philosophy to gain insightful perspectives on the capitalist media.<sup>105</sup> This project assesses policies, structures, and institutions related to the mass media.

Furthermore, I analyze the power of news organizations. This approach is crucial to explaining how societies operate because it affects other ideological tendencies such as national chauvinism, anti-socialism, racism, sexism, and political apathy.<sup>106</sup> My project contributes to the Marxist theory of ideology. Finally, I will show that the mass media, particularly news organizations, articulate counter-hegemonic positions, including far-right ideas and beliefs, to appear fair and balanced. This news coverage contests the dominant ideology. Still, it is a safety net for capitalism since, unlike left-wing ideas and beliefs, these do not threaten the ruling class.

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<sup>104</sup> Berry, Mike. “Neoliberalism and the Media.” pp. 77-78.

<sup>105</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet*. pp. 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. pp. 12-14.

I will demonstrate how the ruling social class in liberal democracies grapples with capitalist crises and looks toward the far-right for support. Although right-wing extremists claim to despise liberal as much as socialist projects, the radical left has always been their true enemy for entirely different reasons. On the other hand, liberals have a track record of being open to collaborating with the far-right, both currently and in the past.<sup>107</sup>

I view the current situation as a crisis of capitalism, which I analyze by looking at the mass media. The recent terrifying explosion of right-wing extremism in North America and Western Europe has resulted in more news coverage and a hypocritical backlash from media personalities and journalists. This project will examine accounts relating to the mainstream media, news coverage, and the far-right. These accounts include the unfavourable news coverage of socialist political candidates and public officials, such as US Senator Bernie Sanders, the former leader of the Labour Party in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn, or French left-wing presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the American, British, and French press, respectively. Finally, I explain how the traditional media, mainly broadcast news rather than new media, helped Donald Trump become elected president in 2016. In addition, the following chapters will demonstrate how the mainstream media plays a pivotal role in normalizing far-right ideas and beliefs at the expense of socialist political parties and social movements. All these processes function as a safety net for capitalism.

Chapter One, titled “How the Capitalist Media Altered our Epistemology and Led to the Rise of the Far Right,” begins by bringing together different theorists, such as Parenti, Herman and Chomsky, Hall, and Postman, to assemble my politico-economic analytic framework through which I read the production of news and information, i.e., how the mass media owners and top managers control news production. Next, it engages with the emergence and

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<sup>107</sup> Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Vintage, 2007, p. 19.

configuration of corporate power and control and how news organizations play a crucial role in producing and spreading the dominant ideology. Finally, it focuses mainly on the propaganda model and theories on television news, entertainment, and knowledge production. These reveal how news broadcasting, especially television news programs, has impacted our understanding of the world and how this normalizes far-right ideas and beliefs. Thus, the mass media functions as a “safety net.”

Chapter Two, “The Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism,” tackles the rise of the far-right in North America and Western Europe. Numerous scholars and authors argue that various left-wing and right-wing counterhegemonic movements are gaining traction. For example, Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe refers to this as the “populist moment.” However, I argue that this is not the case. The most successful political candidates and public officials belong to right-wing populist parties and social movements that espouse nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian ideas and beliefs. Therefore, I argue that this signifies the development of post-fascism. Although populism is not synonymous with fascism, there is no doubt that they belong to the same genealogy. Contemporary right-wing populism serves the same function as “classic” fascism, to take on the ideological role of diverting attention from the actual causes of social and economic issues by blaming “the elites” and minority groups while bolstering what Nancy Fraser labels reactionary neoliberalism.

In Chapter Three, “The Liberal Media Would Rather Support a Populist than a Socialist,” I discuss how the “liberal media” reports on popular socialist candidates who challenge the Democrats and the Republicans during elections. I examine Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont’s news coverage during the Democratic Party primaries for the 2016 and 2020 United States presidential elections by comparing it to his opponents’ coverage in both major political

parties, Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and, especially, former reality TV star and forty-fifth President of the United States Donald Trump. I demonstrate that Trump had a tumultuous relationship with the press yet enjoyed disproportionately positive news coverage. In contrast, Sanders, a lifelong democratic socialist, and his supporters were the targets of a slanderous media campaign in 2016. In 2020, the unfavourable news coverage only increased. The American Left's experiences uncover the aversion of the "liberal media" towards socialism. Therefore, once again, the "safety net" seeks to increase its profits by focusing its coverage on sensationalist and controversial news stories and cancelling threats to the dominant social class.

Chapter Four, "No, Trump Did Not Win Because of Twitter: The Real Impact of Social Media on US Voters during the 2016 Presidential Elections," evaluates the role of social media and social networking services in spreading news and information during the 2016 United States presidential election and the politics of the spectacle. News organizations reported in-depth on Trump's antics on the campaign trail. His online presence shocked the public, especially on the microblogging and social networking service Twitter. In addition, he effectively used social media and social networking services to discredit his opponents. As a result, journalists regularly reported on Trump's controversial comments. However, "new media," like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, did not change the election outcome. Despite their "democratic" reputations, social media platforms can harm democracy by exhibiting new media spectacles. Instead, "old media," such as television, radio, and even newspapers, influenced public opinion since most Americans still prefer television for the latest breaking news. So, I analyze the impact of social media and social networking services and their potential to encourage or hinder political participation by focusing on their role during the 2016 US presidential elections.



The impact of the mass media on public opinion and societal norms is well known. However, it is essential to note that news media coverage has had a significant role in the growth of far-right beliefs in Western society. This has led to ultraconservative, chauvinist, and authoritarian ideas becoming more acceptable to the public and increasing support for specific political figures. It is crucial to examine whether the capitalist media encourages the development of far-right beliefs and, if so, how. Exploring the relationship between ideology and news organizations' role and influence in society is crucial.

Consequently, I examine the power dynamics between politics, media, and economics using a political economy approach. I investigate the impact of power dynamics on news content and how it affects the public. My analytical framework, "open cultural Marxism," reveals how news organizations function as a site of ideological struggle and can influence other beliefs, such as anti-socialism, racism, sexism, and political apathy. Ultimately, this project corroborates and reinforces the Marxist concept of ideology. Thus, I go beyond analyzing commercial media and the emergence of the far right and critique the capitalist mode of production. Liberalism and post-fascism are considered opposites, but this is a common misconception. I argue that both ideologies aim to maintain and promote capitalist social structures, often working together to achieve this goal. The supposed hostility between the two is an ideological false antagonism.<sup>108</sup> The mass media plays a role in spreading this false narrative. Through my analytical framework, I show how after many years of catastrophic neoliberal policies and austerity measures, the capitalist media uses the commercial media as a "safety net," an ideological tool to prompt far-right groups and undermine radical left-wing political parties and movements during capitalist crises. Voters are left with only two options: Progressive or reactionary neoliberalism.

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<sup>108</sup> Rockhill, Gabriel. "Liberalism and Fascism: Partners in Crime." *CounterPunch*, 14 Oct. 2020. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/10/14/liberalism-and-fascism-partners-in-crime/>.

## Chapter One: How the Capitalist Media Altered Our Epistemology and Led to the Rise of the Far Right

### *Introduction*

Even with the emergence of new media, broadcast news remains an important platform for news consumption.<sup>109</sup> However, television's cultural and economic logic is widespread and continues to influence mainstream media and news production. Today, all media resemble television programs, from newspapers to web pages. To explain the influence of broadcast news media, I reference the ideas of Neil Postman, an American media theorist, cultural critic, and educator, who argues that "television is the paradigm for our conception of public information."<sup>110</sup> I maintain that this statement is still valid. Television news plays a significant role in shaping how journalists and reporters produce news and information.

Furthermore, it determines how audiences react to it. As a result, Postman says that "in presenting news to us packaged as vaudeville, television induces other media to do the same so that the total information environment begins to mirror television."<sup>111</sup> For example, the highly popular American newspaper, *USA Today*, is fashioned precisely on the format of news broadcasting. This point has not been a secret either. When the newspaper first appeared, its newspaper boxes resembled television sets. Like news broadcasting, the stories are concise and include multiple visuals, such as pictures, charts, graphics, and colours. These attention-grabbing strategies have been highly successful.<sup>112</sup> This business model has helped Gannett become the

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<sup>109</sup> Forman-Katz, Naomi, and Katerina Eva Matsa. "News Platform Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*, 20 Sep. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>.

<sup>110</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Penguin Books, 2006, p. 111.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

United States' largest newspaper publisher.<sup>113</sup> Today, *USA Today* is the top-selling newspaper in the country. As a result, more news organizations have sought to emulate this model.<sup>114</sup>

Likewise, other media formats, like online platforms, have also started to emulate television news. However, this format is not without its critics. Postman points out that “journalists of a more traditional bent have criticized it for its superficiality and theatrics, but the paper’s editors remain steadfast in their disregard of typographic standards.”<sup>115</sup>

News organizations are subject to internal and external pressure. This pressure has resulted in journalists turning their backs on long-standing journalistic standards and practices for more market-friendly and profit-oriented news and information, or, instead, infotainment. Owners and top managers want to boost profits, so the easiest way to increase ad revenue is to improve daily TV ratings and reviews. As a result, newscasts start to blend information and entertainment. Simultaneously, they avoid angering their sponsors and advertisers, who often meddle in the editorial process, with news stories potentially harming their business interests, so they avoid discussing specific topics. Political and religious advocacy groups also pressure news organizations. As a result, newsrooms adopt an even more conservative editorial position since refusal to do so may impact ratings.

Journalists look towards more “appropriate” sources, such as conservative think tanks, for expert knowledge. These sources will unlikely “rock the boat.” Simultaneously, they interview professionals who often take a right-wing and conservative position on social and economic issues. As a result, the audience is often oblivious to alternative views and opinions.

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<sup>113</sup> Uberti, David. “Gannett and the Last Great Local Hope.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Spring 2017. [https://www.cjr.org/local\\_news/gannett-usa-today-joanne-lipman.php](https://www.cjr.org/local_news/gannett-usa-today-joanne-lipman.php).

<sup>114</sup> “Top 10 US Daily Newspapers.” *Cision*, 4 Jan. 2019. <https://www.cision.com/2019/01/top-ten-us-daily-newspapers/>.

<sup>115</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. pp. 111-112.

The outcome is more entertaining and, in some cases, highly reactionary since these sources often express anti-socialist ideas and beliefs. Television news strives to be fun, uncontroversial, and, in some cases, openly conservative. For example, 24-hour television news channels, such as Fox News or TheBlaze, have late-night talk shows that try to be entertaining, albeit with varying degrees of success. As a result, news broadcasting has reshaped people's consciousness and how they interpret their social surroundings.<sup>116</sup>

Media concentration, soft news and tabloidization, and the power differentials in commercial media facilitate an environment that benefits specific individuals and social groups.<sup>117</sup> So, news organizations often focus on superficial and one-dimensional news stories that simplify reality and do not sufficiently engage with the causes of social and economic issues. They also increasingly spread far-right ideas and beliefs.<sup>118</sup> The problem is that neoliberalism has created bitter social divisions but fails to deliver solutions that improve people's material conditions. If anything, it results in options that endanger democracy and liberal values. Christian Fuchs argues that neoliberal capitalism has "backfired against itself in a negative dialectic that has called forth the emergence of new far-right movements and the consolidation and growth of existing ones."<sup>119</sup> As the war between capitalist markets and democratic politics wages on, neoliberalism seemingly begins to collapse under its weight, crushing the principles of liberalism and transforming democratic capitalism. Nonetheless, working-class movements and socialists are always worried about the Political Right overthrowing democracy to save capitalism.<sup>120</sup> Today, however, the capitalist media exacerbates the situation by communicating the far-right's

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<sup>116</sup> Sienkiewicz, Matt, and Nick Marx. "A Downward Tour Through the Right-Wing Comedy Complex." *Vulture*, 10 May 2022. <https://www.vulture.com/article/thats-not-funny-right-wing-comedy-complex-book-excerpt.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. p. 215.

<sup>118</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 272-273.

<sup>119</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. p. 240.

<sup>120</sup> Streeck, Wolfgang. "The Crises of Democratic Capitalism." *New Left Review*, vol. 71, 2011, pp. 5-6.

ideology and politics in place of radical ideas and beliefs that oppose the dominant ideology, thus functioning as a safety net for the capitalist class.

### *Epistemologies of Television News*

Television news has caused irreversible damage, so much so that people can no longer take society seriously. Significant social and economic issues begin to appear superficial and one-dimensional. This damage is worse still on Millennials and, to some extent, Generation Z, who, growing up, trusted television almost exclusively to make sense of the world. As a result, they interpret the world rather unemotionally. These youngsters grew up in front of a tv, so news broadcasting has impacted them more than any other mass media, even the Internet. Postman argues that younger viewers “are drawn into an epistemology based on the assumption that all reports of cruelty and death are greatly exaggerated and not taken seriously or responded to sanely.” Thus, children are made less sensitive.<sup>121</sup>

Furthermore, he says, “embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anti-communication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction.”<sup>122</sup> This development explains the limits of human compassion. People are lousy at sympathizing with millions or billions of other human beings. So, when the mass media regularly reports on tragic news and events, some desensitization occurs, and people begin to show a callous indifference to human suffering. So, for example, it is not surprising that six out of 10 Americans backed Trump’s Muslim ban that kept out refugees or that legislators are not horrified by austerity measures and privatization schemes that have

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<sup>121</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 105.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

plunged families into poverty. But, oddly enough, large numbers cannot express the harm or loss caused to people or societies. So, as the number of victims grows, people's compassion drops.

This psychological phenomenon is known as “psychic numbing.”<sup>123</sup>

Anti-communication and a lack of compassion also allow authoritarianism to take hold. Far-right political candidates and public officials seem unable to understand and sympathize with other people's feelings. Their views regarding religion and race, environmental issues, refugees and migrants, gender norms and sexual behaviours, and the traditional family reveal that they have an empathy deficit. The normalization of this toxic political discourse in the mass media reinforces the global rise of post-fascism and the public reaction to the limitations of liberal capitalist democracy.<sup>124</sup>

Althusser believed that the education system is the most significant ideological state apparatus. He argues that it superseded the earlier dominant institution, the Church. Althusser believed that “no other ideological state apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the children's totality in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven.”<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, much had changed since 1970 when he published *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*. Today, the mass media is responsible for countless children's education. Unlike elementary and secondary schools' limited hours, broadcast programming never ends. Television and social media addiction is a real problem, so it does not have to be compulsory, unlike most primary and secondary education. Therefore, children watch educational children's television series before they even step foot in a classroom.

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<sup>123</sup> Resnick, Brian. “A Psychologist Explains the Limits of Human Compassion.” *Vox*, 05 Sep. 2017. <https://www.vox.com/explainers/2017/7/19/15925506/psychic-numbing-paul-slovic-apathy>.

<sup>124</sup> Keane, John. *The New Despotism*. Harvard University Press, 2020, pp. 8-9.

<sup>125</sup> Althusser, Louis. “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*.” *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Verso Books, 2012, pp. 117-119.

It does not end there. People rely heavily on the mass media to get news and entertainment to improve their lives. So, this alternative point of view is not groundbreaking. But on the contrary, it is in line with Gramsci's theories, which argued that the most influential institution in civil society is the mass media, specifically the press.<sup>126</sup> However, the capitalist class's domination of a constantly changing media system has significantly affected our contemporary understanding of the media and society. Therefore, we must reconceptualize the role of media in the changing configuration of the media landscape.

To use Althusser's terminology, the "communications ISA" is the ruling institution. All ideological state apparatuses strive for the same outcome, to reproduce the relations of production. Every one of them is partially responsible for this shared goal. However, they have relatively different functions. The capitalist media floods the public with a daily fix of nationalism, fanaticism, neoliberalism, and moralism using newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, and websites. These reflect the ideas and beliefs of the ruling social class. Nonetheless, there are, on occasion, contradictions.<sup>127</sup>

Althusser argued that the "mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the school, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology." He said that this is "an ideology which represents the school as a neutral environment purged of ideology."<sup>128</sup> This is no longer the case. Today, the press has taken the place of education and emerges as an objective and impartial environment free from ideology. This fact is apparent in journalistic ethics and standards.

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<sup>126</sup> Forgacs, David, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and William Boelhower. *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Cultural Writings*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 289-290.

<sup>127</sup> Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." pp. 117-118.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

The mass media has become the most important means of communication through which the ruling social class disseminates its ideas and beliefs.<sup>129</sup> Television has replaced education and is a “curriculum.” Postman says a “curriculum is a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence, teach, train, or cultivate the mind and character of youth.” Consequently, “television does exactly that and does it relentlessly,” and “it competes successfully with the school curriculum.”<sup>130</sup> Although the public is not a passive group of individuals, uncritically consuming all they read, listen, and watch, the audience cannot control the “curriculum.” A handful of corporations and wealthy individuals own the most influential news organizations, so the capitalist class wages class warfare against subordinate social classes and groups in a media propaganda frenzy.<sup>131</sup>

Like schools, the capitalist media shapes people’s understanding of society, but news organizations do not do this haphazardly. It is wrong to assume that propaganda includes flooding the public with fake news, misinformation, stereotypes, or religious and political symbols. State propaganda does not have to involve the state setting the daily news agenda, as it occurs in authoritarian regimes such as Turkmenistan and North Korea. Such blatant methods of media control are not usual in liberal democracies. Liberal propaganda is much more refined. For example, Stephen Harper quotes Henry Giroux, who argues that propaganda in the United States is “more nuance, less theatrical, more cunning, and less concerned with repressive modes of control than with manipulative modes of consent.”<sup>132</sup>

The United States is probably “the best entertained” yet the “least well-informed” nation. The negative correlation between entertainment and information has long-term consequences on

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<sup>129</sup> Harper, Stephen. *Beyond the Left: The Communist Critique of the Media*. Zero Books, 2012, p. 19.

<sup>130</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. pp. 145-146.

<sup>131</sup> Harper, Stephen. *Beyond the Left: The Communist Critique of the Media*. pp. 19-20.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.



society, such as the development of right-wing authoritarianism. In addition, broadcast television is changing the definition of “being informed” by producing information labelled “disinformation.” Disinformation does not relate to “false information,” such as fake news. Instead, it involves “misleading information... That creates the illusion of knowing something, but which leads one away from knowing.”<sup>133</sup> However, this does not mean that journalists intentionally mislead viewers. Instead, it suggests this is the effect of mass media and its organization. By prioritizing entertainment, it relegates other issues to the margins and overlooks more pressing concerns, issues, and problems in the social realm.<sup>134</sup>

The development of new information technology is partially to blame. The shift from print to broadcast media demonstrates how public discourse has become a shadow of its former self. Society was much better off when the printing press was dominant. It was “coherent, serious and rational.” Now that television is much more influential, it is “shrivelled and absurd.”<sup>135</sup> These overlap with sweeping neoliberal and social changes.

When the media presents itself as necessary for public discourse, problems emerge about deliberations and political engagements regarding power and violence in society. Yet, regardless of its original function, every media type and format is more than just that. Because it makes us organize our thoughts and integrate our life experiences, it considerably impacts our consciousness and social institutions. For example, the capitalist media articulates views about morality and aesthetics, erasing or ignoring ethical issues and forcing communities and social classes to the margins. What is more, it influences the way people describe the truth. As a result,

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<sup>133</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 106-107.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 107-108.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-24.

Postman says that “as a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it.”<sup>136</sup>

As a result, our views concerning truth and knowledge changed during the twentieth century and continue to change.<sup>137</sup> In addition, new media types and formats modify are “influencing our brains and cognitive processes.”<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, they change the “structure of discourse.” The outcome is “new forms of truth-telling.” Whereas some media institutions fade into obscurity, other forms of mass communication survive. Take, for example, reading and writing. Different media types and formats have transformed society forever. In this sense, Postman tells us that “electronic media have decisively and irreversibly changed the character of our symbolic environment.” He continues, “we are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word.”<sup>139</sup>

There should be a clear distinction between the encoding and decoding of media texts. The encoding process is the final step of the news production process, and it refers to how consciousness shapes media texts. Social, political, economic, and ideological forces impact news production, but micro-sociological forces in news organizations also play a role. However, audiences and readers must decode these media texts to consume them, but there is no clear understanding between the encoders’ meanings and the decoders’ interpretations.<sup>140</sup> So, this distinction emphasizes the ability of people to produce different interpretations and understandings, decode media texts in surprising or negative ways, and accept or reject the “preferred” meanings that support the dominant ideology.<sup>141</sup> However, even if different

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-24.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-28.

<sup>138</sup> Firth, Joseph, et al. “The ‘Online Brain:’ How the Internet May be Changing Our Cognition.” *World Psychiatry*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2019, p. 126.

<sup>139</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, pp. 26-28.

<sup>140</sup> Nesbitt-Larking, Paul. *Politics, Society, and the Media: Canadian Perspectives*. Broadview Press, 2001, p. 336.

<sup>141</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. “Introduction to Part I.” p. 115.

audiences react differently or interpret news stories in ways the journalists and reporters might not have guessed or planned, the capitalist media still promotes certain information, ideas, and epistemology of the world.<sup>142</sup>

### *Television News and Entertainment*

Broadcast media may shape “information, ideas and epistemology.” Yet, multiple factors determine news production. Specifically, commercial interests motivate the capitalist press. As a result, the outcome is that news coverage reinforces the dominant ideology.

The shift from news to entertainment impacts how the capitalist media deploys news broadcasting to reorganize and order society. Television thrives in a capitalist society. It satisfies different segments of the population with varying types of programming. It requires very little to understand and, more importantly, targets passions. Even the advertisements are visually striking, engaging, and supported by the hottest pop music. Television is dedicated almost exclusively to entertaining audiences. For example, it makes everything seem thrilling. It brings the world to people, distorting their views and opinions. The issue is not that it entertains audiences but that everything appears entertaining. As a result, Postman says that “entertainment is the supra ideology of all discourse on television.”<sup>143</sup>

Nonetheless, the news is not supposed to be entertaining. Instead, it is supposed to be valuable and informative. There are things that the public should know whether they like it or not. Journalists are supposed to provide citizens with the information they need to make

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<sup>142</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko, John Wiley & Sons, 2009, p. 439.

<sup>143</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 87.

reasonable decisions and become informed citizens.<sup>144</sup> However, this has yet to be the case. Regardless of the news organization, the content is entertaining. Specific dominant ideas are organized in a particular form to ensure that they emotionally and epistemologically draw in the audience. Some of these ideas become common sense to the extent that audiences take them for granted. For example, people eagerly tune in when they know newscasts cover disasters and catastrophes. Postman says, “one would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights.” Instead, audiences “accept the newscasters’ invitation because we know that the news is not to be taken seriously, that it is all fun.”<sup>145</sup> Everything around the production process, from the attractive anchors to the catchy music and the entertaining commercials to the gripping videos, demonstrates that television news programs are a “format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis.”<sup>146</sup>

“News” is “history in its first and best form, or the stuff of literature, or a record of the condition of a society, or the expression of the passions of a public, or the prejudices of journalists.”<sup>147</sup> However, at worst, “it is mainly filler, a come-on, to keep the viewer’s attention until the commercials come on.” Journalists understand that to entertain the public, they produce a “television commercial show,” sporadically disrupted by news and information, if in name only, by avoiding hard news, i.e., politics, foreign affairs, and economics replacing it with celebrity news and gossip. In other words, they view newscasts as another way of making money.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, something else is also happening. Audiences are also oriented, if not trained, in a certain way to be workers and citizens. So, as they consume TV news, they are slowly de-politicized and transformed into passive consumers.

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<sup>144</sup> Postman, Neil, and Steve Powers. *How to Watch TV News*. Rev. ed., Penguin Books, 2008. pp. 9-10.

<sup>145</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 87.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>147</sup> Postman, Neil., and Steve Powers. *How to Watch TV News*. pp. 25-26.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

Everything about news and current affairs programs reassures viewers that there is no reason to worry about society's social and economic issues. Furthermore, it also, in some ways, reassures them about their future, for example, the job market. So, it is ideology par excellence because it reorients audiences from active citizens to mere spectators. Instead of new media and communication technologies being used to broaden and strengthen a critical consciousness, the capitalist press uses these technologies to reduce even fundamental "rights" among their users, thereby reducing the social base for exercising fundamental democratic rights, i.e., who has the right to vote. So, even though the capitalist media is supposed to entertain, not educate, it does. It does by co-constituting itself as a site of education enacted through entertainment.<sup>149</sup>

The mass media determines how to frame the world and the role of the subjects within it. Entertainment directs all discourse on television programs, affecting how the audience should judge political processes and performances, including everyday life beyond the mass media. For example, the printing press formulated the "style of conducting politics, religion, business, education, law and other important social matters." Today, television determines how to frame social matters.<sup>150</sup>

A media personality or newscaster's credibility determines if a statement is true or false. Professionalism no longer denotes trustworthiness. "Credibility" relates to the "impression of sincerity, authenticity, vulnerability or attractiveness conveyed by the reporter."<sup>151</sup> This development is crucial since it refers to truth and knowledge. When an "impression" replaces reality, politicians do not have to concern themselves with facts and statistics since their behaviour generates a sense of accuracy influencing political opinions. As a result, television news appears as a staged performance that amuses viewers. While conciseness does not

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<sup>149</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. pp. 87-88.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., pp. 101-102.

necessarily imply insignificance, in this instance, it does. It is impossible to communicate an important message in less than 60 seconds. Television news purposely does not focus on consequences because that would require audiences to think critically about what they just witnessed.<sup>152</sup>

Media personalities and newscasters often need to put more thought into what they read, but viewers would get upset. Surprisingly, some journalists even appear excited while reporting on disturbing events. On the other hand, the audience wants news presenters to play their part and take their roles seriously. Conversely, they do not want them to go into a frenzy. Nevertheless, they know that advertisements will soon follow, no matter how terrible the news may seem. Thus, Postman argues that “this is a key element in the structure of a news program and all by itself refutes any claim that television news is designed as a serious form of public discourse.”<sup>153</sup>

As a result, newscasts prioritize soft news instead of hard news. In addition, news broadcasting uses a variety of “classic tabloid gimmicks” to seduce audiences. For example, it focuses heavily on scandals, crises, and conflicts. The outcome is infotainment, “a major technique of turning news into entertainment and entertainment into news.”<sup>154</sup>

The news as entertainment is a phenomenon that has been around for a while. It has been controversial since the start of mass media. There has been tension between informing and educating people and entertaining audiences. The emergence of infotainment is related to broadcast journalism, particularly a steady decline in viewership for the evening news and the rise of network television in the United States. We can trace this transformation to two specific

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-104.

<sup>154</sup> Kovach, Bill., and Tom. Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Three Rivers Press, 2007, p. 192.

dates: “1969, the historical peak of nightly news viewership,” and “1980, the launch of the cable news network CNN.” This development led to a plunge in viewership and advertising revenue, which obligated large media companies to adjust to a new multi-channel broadcasting system. As a result, several news organizations adopted a new technique, infotainment. These sensationalized news stories attracted larger audiences. Soon enough, media personalities and newscasters frequently neglected vital topics, such as political policies and social issues, and focused more on lifestyle, celebrity, entertainment, and crimes, ignoring politics and foreign affairs. What is more, news organizations started to report more on scandals. After that, there was an emphasis on human interest and quality of life stories.<sup>155</sup>

The commercialization of the mass media in the United States, but, in North America and Western Europe, in general, has led to a long, steep drop in journalistic standards and practices. Furthermore, news organizations started to hire marketing agencies to help produce newscasts. Their suggestions included more soft news stories, emotional displays, graphics, and young, good-looking female newscasters. Commercialism has ruined television news, and television news destroyed young viewers. Hence, it reshaped people’s consciousness. In addition, the pessimism in the newscasts concerning social and political issues cultivated pessimism among audiences. Finally, the commercial nature of the mass media and the rise of right-wing populism transformed how the public receives news and information and engages with political and economic issues.<sup>156</sup>

Profit-oriented mass media and the attempt to control and influence information drastically changed news agendas.<sup>157</sup> Today, most news organizations have adopted this technique. However, this resembles more of a business strategy than an acceptable journalistic

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<sup>155</sup> Thussu, Daya Kishan. *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment*. Sage, 2008, pp. 15-28.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

practice. In addition, research reveals that hard news is not a profitable business strategy in the long run. If audiences only have access to nonsense and celebrity news, they will lower their expectations or ignore serious issues. This emerging development pertains to people uninterested in current events or who need more time or money to access reputable news sources.<sup>158</sup>

People in capitalist society need more time to stay informed about public issues, let alone engage in politics actively, but they are constantly busy. Moreover, the feeling of having too many things to do and needing more time to do them limits their ability to foster human connections and improve their communities. So, constantly being actively engaged or feeling occupied is alienating since it distracts people with never-ending tasks and pointless news and information. As a result, it damages their emotional and psychological well-being and ability to think critically and learn. In addition, Jackie Smith and Joyce Dalsheim say, “the modern economy extracts attention and energy from the public sphere, reducing our capacity to hold political leaders accountable to publicly-defined priorities and norms.”<sup>159</sup>

This condition results in widespread political apathy and nonengagement. Moreover, the capitalist media are often propagandistic and, occasionally, dangerous to society. For example, the press depicts politics as plagued by scandals, causing the audience to reject political institutions or feel hapless. This negativity creates widespread cynicism, pushes people away from political participation, and often bewilders them so much that they do not vote or even care to learn about politics and governance.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Kovach, Bill., and Tom. Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. p. 194.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, Jackie, and Joyce Dalsheim. “Why Busy-ness is so Damaging.” *openDemocracy*, 07 July 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/why-busy-ness-so-damaging/>.

<sup>160</sup> Harwood, Richard. “The Alienated American Voter: Are the News Media to Blame?” *Brookings*, 01 Sep. 1996. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-alienated-american-voter-are-the-news-media-to-blame/>.



Infotainment also harms a news organization's credibility. Many media institutions no longer report on complex news stories and push away those who want them. This problem affects many local news stations as well. Ultimately, the infotainment approach is problematic because news organizations cannot compete with mass media companies specializing in entertainment. As a result, newscasts will rely more on cheap spectacles. Infotainment draws sizable numbers of people and is cheap to produce, and it creates a superficial, disloyal audience because it does not rely on substance. People constantly look for the next best thing because it depends exclusively on excitement. This development results from market logic in news production. Infotainment is related to the commodification of news and information, or what McChesney calls the "age of hyper-commercialism."<sup>161</sup> Although some companies are willing to advertise on serious shows, they typically avoid programs focusing on controversial topics because they want viewers glued to their screens to increase ratings and profits.<sup>162</sup>

### *The Spectacle in the Twenty-First Century*

French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre noticed something disturbing in the early sixties regarding the role of television. He said that with "radio and, even more so, television, the sudden violent intrusion of the whole world into family and 'private' life, 'presentified' in a way which directly captures the immediate moment, which offers truth and participation, or at least appears to do so."<sup>163</sup> Lefebvre argued that radio and television attempt to mislead their listeners and viewers, respectively. Furthermore, "television allowed every

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<sup>161</sup> Thussu, Daya Kishan. *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment*. p. 32.

<sup>162</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1994, p. 18.

<sup>163</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, and Michel Trebitsch. *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 1: Introduction*, Verso Books, 2008, p. 41.

household to look at the spectacle of the world, but it is precisely this mode of looking at the world as a spectacle which introduces non-participation and receptive passivity.”<sup>164</sup>

So, what is the spectacle? How does the spectacle introduce non-participation and contribute to this widespread deception? Lefebvre heavily influenced Guy Debord,<sup>165</sup> a French Marxist theorist and filmmaker who believed that the spectacle is a characteristic of capitalist societies. He argued that technologically advanced societies are “dominated by modern conditions of production.” Moreover, “life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” Therefore, the spectacle consists of images. These images “merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo world that can only be looked at.” Nevertheless, “the spectacle is not a collection of images.” On the contrary, “it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.”<sup>166</sup>

Images are essential to the spectacle. William A. Gamson et al. focus on “the production of images rather than facts or information.”<sup>167</sup> They argue that focusing on the difference between transmitting images, information, and facts is not helpful. On the contrary, they “take on their meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame.” Therefore, Gamson et al. say, “the term ‘images’ is useful in reminding us of the importance of the visual, of attention to verbal imagery, and other modes of conveying a broader frame.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II by Henri Lefebvre*. Verso Books, 2002, p. 76.

<sup>165</sup> Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. “Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle.” *SubStance*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1999, p. 130.

<sup>166</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>167</sup> Gamson, William A. et al. “Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 18, 1992, p. 374.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

As a result, Debord argued that the emergence of the spectacle is far from a simple “visual excess produced by mass-media technologies.” Instead, “it is a worldview that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective.”<sup>169</sup> Therefore, reducing everything to mere representations unveils the spectacle’s impact on modern society.

The spectacle is in the service of the ruling social class, dominating all facets of everyday life. Debord said it is the “nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, and its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life.”<sup>170</sup> Mass media technologies, both old and new, make this possible. It is worth pointing out that the mass media is in the hands of wealthy corporations and individuals seeking to further their class-based interests. As a result, the spectacle “keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence.”<sup>171</sup>

Italian Marxist theorist and founder of the Communist Party of Italy, Antonio Gramsci, sheds further light on the function of the spectacle, though he did not write about the spectacle per se. His most significant contribution to Marxist political theory is the concept of hegemony. Like Lefebvre and Debord’s work, it focuses on a ruling class’s ownership of the mass media and its ability to control subordinate social groups. Gramsci argued that the capacity to influence public opinion was the essence of political hegemony.<sup>172</sup> However, it is worth pointing out that “public opinion,” i.e., the collective opinions and attitudes of people in a society, is a construct related to the effects of mass media.<sup>173</sup> The ruling social class and groups achieve permanent recognition by implanting their idealizations in every part of society. The most crucial aspect of

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<sup>169</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. p. 7.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>172</sup> Nanabhay, Mohamed, and Roxane Farmanfarman. “From Spectacle to Spectacular: How Physical Space, Social Media and Mainstream Broadcast Amplified the Public Sphere in Egypt’s ‘Revolution.’” *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2011, p. 576.

<sup>173</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” p. 435.

Gramsci's theory is that it helps us understand how the ruling social class can dominate the masses without resorting to brutal force. As a result, hegemony concerns persuasion, not coercion. Nevertheless, oppression remains an all-important component of the state's power since it is always present. Therefore, "in the long run, it is more productive to seek hegemony, as, without political hegemony, a state's power is constantly challenged."<sup>174</sup>

Similarly, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that the spectacle maximizes profits, reinforces the dominant social class's power, and helps solve a legitimization crisis. As a result, instead of the lower social classes and groups directing their anger against exploitation and inequality, they are focused on and subdued by the latest cultural products, inadequate social services, and meagre minimum wage hikes. Best and Kellner maintain that "in consumer capitalism, the working classes abandon the union hall for the shopping mall and celebrate the system that fuels the desires it ultimately cannot satisfy."<sup>175</sup>

The spectacle is the personification of ideology. It contributes to a "state of unconsciousness," establishing the ruling class's legitimacy and allowing it to control subordinate social classes and groups without violence. This "state of unconsciousness" is achieved, among other things, through the mass media and, more specifically, the press. Lefebvre said the "news" overwhelms audiences with uninteresting and insignificant information without an actual social function. It is dangerous because it blunts the working class's senses. The development of mass communications spells an overflow of pointless news and information,

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<sup>174</sup> Nanabhay, Mohamed, and Roxane Farmanfarmanian. "From Spectacle to Spectacular: How Physical Space, Social Media and Mainstream Broadcast Amplified the Public Sphere in Egypt's 'Revolution.'" p. 576.

<sup>175</sup> Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. "Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle." *SubStance*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1999, p. 134.

so “when communication becomes incorporated in private life to this degree, it becomes non-communication.”<sup>176</sup>

As a result, Kellner says that culture industries have “multiplied media spectacles in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life.”<sup>177</sup> The Web has developed new, technologically advanced spectacles to promote, reproduce, circulate, and sell commodities. As a result, new communications technologies redirect the public. The mass media frequently produces more technologically advanced spectacles to grab the public’s attention, bolster the ruling class’s power, and increase profits. News slowly blurs the lines between information and entertainment. Thus, tabloid infotainment culture has become more popular.<sup>178</sup>

Scholars consider infotainment to be a significant threat to democracy. For example, An Nguyen says that “the ‘dumbing down’ of news, i.e., the increasing prevalence of entertainment-oriented news and the marginalization and trivialization of public affairs has been a perennial problem of many, if not most, advanced democracies of the world.”<sup>179</sup> This “infotainment culture” is associated with the commodification of news and information. Furthermore, this has had a terrible impact on journalistic practices. Journalism slowly becomes tainted by the market. Pamela Taylor Jackson says, “journalism represents a right to public interest news and information. It is embedded in the domain of political rights and has significance in the non-market social order.” As a result, the “commodification of news is a development naturally oriented to the creation of profit over the pursuit of the public interest.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Volume II by Henri Lefebvre*. Verso Books, 2002, p. 76.

<sup>177</sup> Kellner, Douglas. “Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle.” *Razón Y Palabra*, no. 39, 2004, p. 58.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>179</sup> Nguyen, An. “The Effect of Soft News on Public Attachment to the News: Is “Infotainment” Good for Democracy?” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 13, no. 5-6, 2012, pp. 706-717.

<sup>180</sup> Jackson, Pamela Taylor. “News as a Contested Commodity: A Clash of Capitalist and Journalistic Imperatives.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, vol. 24, no. 2-3, 2009, pp. 149-151.

The commodification of news and information augmented media spectacles. These spectacles consist of media and artifacts representing capitalist society's fundamental ideals. Simultaneously, they attempt to convince individuals that there is no alternative to laissez-faire economics. Kellner says that "under the influence of a multimedia image culture, seductive spectacles fascinate the denizens of the media and consumer society and involve them in the semiotics of an ever-expanding world of entertainment, information, and consumption, which deeply influence thought and action."<sup>181</sup>

The spectacle finds its way into social media and social networking services. As a result, Kellner says that "new multimedia that synthesizes forms of radio, film, TV news, and entertainment, and the mushrooming domain of cyberspace, become spectacles of techno culture, generating expanding sites of information and entertainment while intensifying the spectacle form of media culture."<sup>182</sup>

### *Corporate Interests Dominate Old Media and New Media*

The commodification of news and information is apparent in both old and new media. Technology drives the capitalist media. The Internet has reshaped audiences and users.<sup>183</sup> However, all media types are dependent on market forces. For example, Stephen Harper says several genres and formats "emerge, converge – and sometimes disappear – with bewildering rapidity, as capitalists seek to develop products for niche audiences against a backdrop of falling profits and market saturation."<sup>184</sup> Nevertheless, new media technologies rarely, if ever, threaten

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<sup>181</sup> Kellner, Douglas. "Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle." p. 59.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>183</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. Beacon Press. 2004, p. 2.

<sup>184</sup> Harper, Stephen. *Beyond the Left: The Communist Critique of the Media*. p. 98.

the dominant ideology or the societal organization. Therefore, we should be cautious of claims that new communications technologies will democratize the media and encourage more citizen participation. On the contrary, the World Wide Web has created new opportunities. So, all political parties and social movements utilize new communications technologies, including extreme right and right-wing populists.<sup>185</sup> Thus, it challenges the logic that new media will strengthen democracy and protect human rights since it can easily undermine them.

Corporate interests quickly colonized the Internet as sponsors and partners and moved their money from traditional media to new media, thus, changing the relationship between society and the state. This development is apparent from the emergence of online advertising and digital content. Nevertheless, today, the mainstream media controls many successful websites. The boards of directors consist almost entirely of the same political and economic elites who control the most popular news websites.<sup>186</sup> Many of these media companies dominate in more than one area. Herman and Chomsky say that “this trend toward greater integration of the media into the market system has been accelerated by the loosening of rules limiting media concentration, cross-ownership, and control by non-media companies.”<sup>187</sup>

None of these mass media companies are involved in only one industry. Instead, their corporate strategy is to own as many assets as possible in the entire media, from websites and newspapers to radio and tv stations. As a result, media companies have more communications power than any dictator or regime in recorded history. A single company can be involved in multiple industries. For example, it can control the supply of numerous media products and services. Media conglomerates are a perfect example of an oligopoly. This development means

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., pp. 98-101.

<sup>186</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. St. Martin's Press, 1993, p. 46.

<sup>187</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. pp. 5-8.

that they can impact the market. Media conglomerates participate in cartel-like behaviour, but some competition exists. The ambition to be the first is natural for many companies.

Nevertheless, a small group of related businesses now dominate the media people depend on for news and information.<sup>188</sup>

These groups maintain the status quo because their wealth and class position depends on it. They exercise power by setting the media outlet's goals and appointing senior management. In addition, the large banking and financial institutions and investors behind the culture industry maintain close-knit relationships with the corporate world through boards of directors and class and social relations.<sup>189</sup> Unlike other sectors, the culture industry depends on more powerful and influential businesses. As a result, senior management cannot ignore the economic interests of wealthy investors.<sup>190</sup>

The capitalist media has established a peculiar relationship with the government. For example, media companies often require government licenses and are subject to government control or regulation. Despite media freedom, the government often disciplines news organizations threatening the established order. Simultaneously, the mass media protects its interests by lobbying, establishing political ties, and applying pressure on governments, political parties, and social movements to influence public policy and decision-making. Like most economic sectors, the culture industry depends on the government for support, so media companies are interested in corporate taxes, regulations, employment and labour laws, and enforcing antitrust laws.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. pp. 3-6.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>190</sup> Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. pp. 122-123.

<sup>191</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 13.



The capitalist media threatens democracy in North America and Western Europe.<sup>192</sup> This changing media landscape has primarily served conservative and right-wing political parties at the expense of left-wing politics, such as communists, democratic socialists, and even reformists, such as social democrats. Large media outlets have historically supported right-wing and conservative policies since their interests coincide. The power of the culture industry has been an essential part of people rejecting progressive political, social, and economic policies. For example, this has resulted in “a new, more extreme brand of conservative policies.”<sup>193</sup>

These political, social, and economic policies benefit the dominant social class. Although the mass media appears diverse, it consists of an incredibly rigid workplace culture and undemocratic institutions that share many ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, the ideological perspective of these media institutions is relatively the same. Thus, the “free market of ideas” is a “misleading metaphor.” The “market” implies a wide range of products and services. However, Parenti argues that the actual “market of ideas” is “oligopolistic, standardized, and most accessible to those who possess vast amounts of capital, or who hold views that are pleasing to the possessors of capital.”<sup>194</sup>

News organizations often need to pay more attention to counter-hegemonic groups. Still, the owners and top managers refuse to broadcast or publish critical points of view, especially from communists, democratic socialists, and even social democrats. The mass media is simultaneously class-dominated but also subject to market pressures. While news organizations are not supposed to be businesses, they are. Furthermore, the capitalist media are crucial in ideological control and power. For example, Parenti says that “their role is to reproduce the

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<sup>192</sup> McChesney, Robert. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New Press, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>193</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. pp 10-11.

<sup>194</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. pp. 30-31.

conditions of social and class stability, to carry out the monopoly management of image and information, but in such a way as to engineer an appearance of class neutrality and an appearance of independence from the corporate class that owns them.”<sup>195</sup>

Economic power is only part of it. We cannot overlook it, but most things are cultural and economic simultaneously. For example, advertisements belong to both categories. As a result, economic power only sometimes leads to cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, it makes achieving it much more likely.<sup>196</sup>

### *Government and Corporate Sources*

The capitalist media ensures that the news will be profitable and not question the dominant social class’s political and economic interests. Journalists do not deliberately pursue this goal. Quite the opposite, they usually seek sources that will supply them with the best information to guarantee that the news is fair and balanced. However, sources are often purposely misleading. Often, they merely want to advance their class interests. The capitalist media knowingly allows this. News organizations forge a symbiotic relationship with powerful news sources because it serves their economic and political interests.<sup>197</sup>

Journalists require around-the-clock, trustworthy sources of information for the news since they have such strict deadlines that they need to meet, but news organizations have a limited number of journalists who report some issues. Since mass media companies are profit-oriented, economic interests urge them to manage their limited resources better and direct them

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>197</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 18.

where news often breaks and press conferences occur. For example, the White House, the Pentagon, and the US State Department are appropriate news sources in Washington, DC. On a regional basis, journalists and reporters regard the municipal government and the police department as reliable sources of information. Large companies and business associations are also suitable. These civil services produce a large amount of material that meets news organizations' needs. Furthermore, government and corporate sources are "recognizable and credible."<sup>198</sup>

Journalists and reporters rely on official sources to seem "objective" or devoid of ideology. They want to appear fair and balanced and shield themselves from perceptions of bias and libel suits. Therefore, they require reliable information or sources that seem trustworthy. However, there is also an economic incentive behind this decision. Official sources help cut costs. Relying on official sources reduces the need for research, whereas information from unreliable or controversial sources demands expensive and rigorous fact-checking and time-consuming research.<sup>199</sup>

Both governments and corporations possess communications and public affairs departments that work with the media to inform the public. These institutions make up a significant source of information for many news organizations. However, only large corporations can create public information and propaganda on par with government departments and agencies. Nevertheless, they try to make things as easy as possible for media institutions to equip journalists with the means to report the news. For example, they provide them with advanced copies of speeches and studies, consider deadlines, produce press releases, and organize news

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

conferences and photo shoots. In addition, communications officers help news organizations every step of the way.<sup>200</sup>

Furthermore, governments and corporations back news organizations by lowering their expenses and giving them exclusive access. This results in a symbiotic relationship. So, powerful institutions become regular sources of information and have privileged access to the mass media. On the other hand, alternative sources must grapple for access to the press, and gatekeepers frequently ignore them without consideration. Moreover, citizens support government departments and agencies. So, ironically, the public pays to be propagandized by special interest groups such as political parties and corporate groups.<sup>201</sup>

These special interest groups appeal to connections, intimidations, and rewards to sway or threaten journalists. Journalists often feel pressured to cover questionable news stories and silence criticism rather than offend their sources and jeopardize their relationships. Herman and Chomsky observe that “it is challenging to call authorities on whom one depends on daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers.”<sup>202</sup> On the other hand, they say that “critical sources may be avoided because of their lesser availability and higher cost of establishing credibility, but also because the primary sources may be offended and may even threaten the media using them.”<sup>203</sup>

### *Experts and Charlatans*

Official sources use their leverage to prevent critics from accessing the media. Government and corporate sources frequently abuse this dependency to manipulate news organizations. They

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-22.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

flood the media with information, sometimes serving special interest groups or killing a damning news story. The relationship between special interest groups and sources stretches beyond the mass media and public relations departments. This relationship also includes the role of “experts.”<sup>204</sup> However, the role of experts is somewhat dubious. For example, Slavoj Žižek says that experts are “the servants of those in power: They do not think, they just apply their knowledge to problems defined by the powerful.” He does not hold these so-called “experts” in high regard. Instead, Žižek believes that “the vast majority have no idea what they are doing.”<sup>205</sup>

Nonetheless, governments and corporations regularly employ experts. They serve as consultants and set up think tanks that use them to spread their message. As a result, Herman and Chomsky say that “bias may be structured, and the supply of experts may be skewed in the direction desired by the government and the market.” They argue that “creating the needed body of experts has been carried out on a deliberate basis and a massive scale.”<sup>206</sup>

Herman and Chomsky argue that scores of intellectuals work day and night for these think tanks. These research institutes support the experts’ studies and pass their findings to the mass media to spread their ideas and beliefs. This unbridled corporate backing has not impacted the intellectuals’ trustworthiness. Quite the opposite, this exposure catapulted many of them to fame, and they are celebrities. So, news organizations often employ “experts” who reproduce the dominant class’s ideas and beliefs.<sup>207</sup> For example, major newspapers, both conservative and liberal, such as *The Washington Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, trust experts from think tanks. Although they usually rely on research institutes that reflect their

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>205</sup> Tolokonnikova, Nadezhda, and Slavoj Žižek. *Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadya and Slavoj*. Verso Books, 2014, p. 38.

<sup>206</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 23.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

political preferences, broadcast journalists frequently report on conservative think tanks' research.<sup>208</sup> As a result, competition between news organizations demands more audience-friendly coverage, which requires experts' help. So, because of journalism's low public trust, journalists try to offset such distrust by depending on experts to boost their credibility.<sup>209</sup>

A particular group of experts called upon by the right are former progressives and radicals who openly acknowledge that they were misguided. Nevertheless, different reasons make people renounce their one-time ideas and beliefs. For the mainstream media, this conversion is plausible since the ex-progressives and radicals finally understand the error of their ways, i.e., that there is no alternative to the neoliberal order.<sup>210</sup> In many circumstances, it is also profitable. Examples include the American philosopher and founding editor of the conservative magazine *National Review* James Burnham,<sup>211</sup> English-American author, essayist, and columnist Christopher Hitchens,<sup>212</sup> and American neo-conservative commentator David Horowitz.<sup>213</sup>

The apostates are essential to the ruling social class's propaganda since they debunk counter-hegemonic struggles. Herman and Chomsky say, "it is interesting to observe how the former sinners, whose previous work was of little interest or an object of ridicule to the mass media, are suddenly elevated to prominence and become authentic experts."<sup>214</sup> These one-time radicals are catapulted to fame quickly once they slam their past ideas and beliefs. So, this

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<sup>208</sup> Lewis, Justin, and Stephen Cushion. "Think Tanks, Television News and Impartiality: The Ideological Balance of Sources in BBC Programming." *Journalism Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2019, p. 485.

<sup>209</sup> Albaek, Erik, Peter Munk Christiansen, and Lise Togeby. "Experts in the Mass Media: Researchers as Sources in Danish Daily Newspapers, 1961-2001." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2003, p. 938.

<sup>210</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. pp. 24-25.

<sup>211</sup> Packer, George. "Turned Around." *The New Yorker*, 15 Feb. 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/22/why-leftists-go-right>.

<sup>212</sup> Southan, Rhys. "Free Radical." *Reason*, Nov. 2001. <https://www.reason.com/2001/11/01/free-radical-2/>.

<sup>213</sup> Campbell, Duncan. "Right Turn." *The Guardian*, 30 May 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/may/30/socialsciences.highereducation>.

<sup>214</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. pp. 24-25.

“steady flow of ex-radicals from marginality to media attention shows that we are witnessing a durable method of providing experts who will say what the establishment wants.”<sup>215</sup>

### *Protests and Campaigns Against the Mass Media*

Numerous groups oppose news organizations. Some are more influential than others. They organize protests and campaigns that can be harmful and expensive to media companies. Soon enough, sponsors start to complain or, worse, back out since advertisements mainly concern consumer goods that can easily be subject to an organized boycott. As a result, they are constantly worried about offending the audience or at least a specific segment. So, news organizations try to avoid controversial opinions that provoke the public or, at least, certain social groups. When these groups organize protests and campaigns against media outlets, they produce flak. Herman and Chomsky define flak as a “negative response to a media statement or program.” This backlash takes on the “form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action.” Moreover, “it may be organized centrally or locally, or it may consist of the entirely independent actions of individuals.”<sup>216</sup>

The ruling social class, i.e., the wealthy and powerful who own the means of production and employ labour, is usually the only one that can generate flak. This development is closely associated with the market’s impatience with the mass media. It can pressure news organizations by complaining to shareholders and top managers, producing scathing advertisements, and financing right-wing and conservative organizations or think tanks that denounce specific news organizations. They may also support political parties and social movements which will try to

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

stomp out the opposition in the media. Furthermore, some organizations' task is only to produce flak. These often complain about the media's alleged left-wing or liberal bias.<sup>217</sup>

The allegation concerning a liberal or left-wing political bias is so popular that it is practically the "official opposition to the media status quo." Furthermore, the conservative crusade against the "liberal media" drives reporters to tolerate, if not advocate, right-wing and conservative policies.<sup>218</sup>

Conservative ideas and beliefs have changed considerably over time. For example, in the nineteenth century, conservatives opposed free trade. However, right-wing politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were enthusiastic supporters of the free market and laissez-faire economics. Although conservatism and neoliberalism conflict, this is no longer the case. Today, those who support neoliberal beliefs usually identify as conservatives, and we associate the free market with conservatism.<sup>219</sup>

Thus, the press cannot merely disregard socially conservative citizens' complaints or wealthy and influential conservative groups that push right-wing policies. As a result, journalists come under pressure to change their tunes. First, they could ignore negative responses, but these are very influential individuals. Alternatively, they can consider some of their critiques and be more cautious not to let their liberal views and opinions influence their work. Otherwise, they can end the accusations by giving the conservative groups what they want.<sup>220</sup>

News organizations are reorienting themselves toward more conservative positions. The attack on the press started by criticizing and rapidly changing the news industry. Today, this attack involves financing the education of conservative and pro-business reporters at post-

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>218</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. pp. 56-57.

<sup>219</sup> Nakano, Takeshi. "Neoliberalism and Conservatism." *Beyond Global Capitalism*, edited by Satoshi Fujii, Springer, 2015, pp. 67-69.

<sup>220</sup> Alterman, Eric. "What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News." p. 26.



secondary institutions, establishing a right-wing mass media to provide training, funding conservative think tanks to overwhelm news organizations with pro-business sources, and pressuring any media company critical of right-wing interests as being biased. Then, transforming the mass media took ushering right-wing ideas and beliefs into the mainstream and leading conservative political parties into government. Today, the political right is no longer on the defensive. Instead, “a well-organized, well-financed, and active hardcore conservative coterie is working to push the news media to the right.”<sup>221</sup> For example, Charlie Kirk, the founder and president of *Turning Point USA*, Ben Shapiro’s *The Daily Wire*, and American conservative radio talk show host Dennis Prager’s *PragerU* have successfully promoted right-wing propaganda.<sup>222</sup> As a result, since news production already reflects the dominant ideology, this negative backlash often makes news and information empty of almost all critical thinking. So, if anything, it generates even more conservative news.

### *The Mass Media and the Conservative Common-Sense Revolution*

The myth that the press is biased results from endless repetition without meaningful opposition.<sup>223</sup> The conservative media has had two long-lasting effects on politics. First, they pushed society to the right of the political spectrum. Today, even the political centre leans to the right. So, centre-right liberals and social democrats in name only are the new normal. Second,

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<sup>221</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. pp. 62-63.

<sup>222</sup> Robinson, Nathan J. “Why Left Media Needs Your Support.” *Current Affairs*, 23 Jan. 2023, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2023/01/why-left-media-needs-your-support>.

<sup>223</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. p. 63.

centre-right and centre-left political parties and social movements are much more conservative or, instead, neoliberal than in previous decades, especially on most economic issues.<sup>224</sup>

This development relates to the capitalist media's efforts to create a "conservative mood." News organizations control "opinions about public opinion." However, what people think about an issue and what journalists report are not necessarily the same. Parenti argues that "the media cannot mould every political feeling we have, but they can fill the air with pronouncements about what our feelings allegedly are." He says the media "may not be able to create a conservative mood within us, but it can repeatedly announce that a conservative mood exists, thereby doing much to create the impression of such a mood and encouraging conservative forces to come to the fore."<sup>225</sup> Thus, right-wing ideas and beliefs grow popular. For example, limited government, free markets, deregulation, privatizations, and traditional social values are widespread. Liberals support some of these, as well. Today, they become "common sense" values.<sup>226</sup>

Nonetheless, some individuals will reject these ideas and beliefs. The media often, willingly or unwillingly, deceives people. News organizations produce a false impression about public opinion that usually performs a significant function in shaping the public agenda than actual public opinion.<sup>227</sup> Large media companies dominate society because they determine what issues are newsworthy and not. Agenda-setting is the "ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" – the first step in controlling public opinion in determining an issue's relevance. Although several issues struggle to gain recognition, only a few will attract public attention. As a result, news organizations significantly impact the most crucial social, political,

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<sup>224</sup> Alterman, Eric. "What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News." pp. 32-37.

<sup>225</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 89.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

and economic topics.<sup>228</sup> However, Justin Lewis argues that the “agenda-setting” phenomenon is not “ideologically innocent.” He says, for example, “an agenda dominated by crime, immigration and taxes is easier for right-wing politicians to exploit.”<sup>229</sup>

The commercial media reports on some stories while ignoring others. In that case, people who depend on television for their news and information are likelier than others to reference these stories to make sense of the world. “Cultivation analysis” reveals that many people use that news and information to form opinions. Moreover, the audience tends to reference symbolic representations and reproduce particular views. Soon enough, even controversial ideas become normal. Therefore, the mass media has a “mainstreaming” effect and seems to have a hand in urging audiences to adopt specific attitudes. However, its social impact appears to have more to do with opposing social change than promoting it. So, news media shapes public opinion by depicting the world in specific ways and choosing to broadcast or publish some news stories while rejecting others.<sup>230</sup>

Setting the news agenda and exposing audiences to certain media is crucial in communicating conservative ideas and beliefs. So, the capitalist press moves the political agenda to the right and repeatedly claims that these ideas and opinions are more popular than they are to make them palatable to citizens. Parenti says, “by crediting conservative policies with popular support they did not have, the press did its part in shifting the political agenda in a rightward direction.” He argues, “if the media keep telling us that times are favourable for conservative politics, people begin to believe it and act accordingly.”<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> McCombs, Maxwell, and Amy Reynolds. “How the News Shapes Our Civic Agenda.” *Media Effects*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, Routledge, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>229</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” p. 437.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., pp. 437-443.

<sup>231</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. pp. 93-94.

Media outlets unsurprisingly support issues that are important to conservatives. Furthermore, right-wing and conservative political parties and social movements will not threaten the economic interests of the dominant social class. On the contrary, they will defend the large media companies because they share their free market fundamentalism.<sup>232</sup> However, they constantly attack the “liberal media,” i.e., the idea that the news organization displays an inherently “liberal” bias,<sup>233</sup> but that could not be farther from the truth. For example, the “liberal media” is more willing to support the right than the left since its owners and top managers share the right’s views concerning free trade, capitalism, communism, the labour movement, and US imperialism. Although, they do not always agree on some policies and specific cultural issues. Furthermore, the right has the funds to purchase airtime, whereas the left usually does not.<sup>234</sup>

The right-wing and conservative media results in the appearance and development of “echo chambers.”<sup>235</sup> Although research hints that more media choices should create a public debate, better access and more choices often result in selective exposure to ideologically-friendly news content, resulting in “echo chambers.” These could increase violent extremism and political polarization.<sup>236</sup> However, echo chambers do not just concern the audience. Media personalities and newscasters build careers in these “bubbles of right-wing thought.” Their viewers rarely, if ever, question their opinions. As a result, they are often clueless about alternative views and opinions. Furthermore, they appear to be in disbelief when people challenge them.<sup>237</sup>

This unique situation influences the rest of the mass media. As a result, other news organizations adopt a much more conservative standpoint. Soon enough, even rival news

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>233</sup> Croteau, David. “Examining the ‘Liberal Media’ Claim.” *Fair.org*, 01 June 1998. <https://fair.org/press-release/examining-the-quotliberal-mediaquot-claim/>.

<sup>234</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 107.

<sup>235</sup> Alterman, Eric. “What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News.” p. 33.

<sup>236</sup> Barberá, Pablo, et al. “Tweeting from Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?” *Psychological Science*, vol. 26, no. 10, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>237</sup> Alterman, Eric. “What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News.” p. 33.

organizations start to resemble one another. For example, Eric Alterman says in the United States, “we have got Fox News, and you have got CNN. But of course, if you listen to CNN, you know that CNN is nothing like Fox News.” Yet, “CNN is more conservative than liberal, but certainly not anywhere near as liberal as Fox is conservative.”<sup>238</sup> The literature often focuses on the differences between conservative and liberal media outlets. Still, these are shifting categories that support and shape the current rise of the far right, whose politics are conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian. As a result, these media outlets’ coverage often provides dangerous legitimacy to right-wing populist political interventions.

This shift is apparent in the choice of sources. The mainstream media turns to right-wing and conservative think tanks for expert opinions.<sup>239</sup> News organizations claim to select think tanks because of their “nonpartisan, non-profit, research institute status.” Meanwhile, journalists and reporters regard special interest groups, professional associations, and labour unions as self-serving special interest groups. So, they tend to avoid them. It is worth mentioning that these organizations frequently challenge the dominant social class’s interests. Initially, think tanks attempted to tackle urgent social, economic, and political issues. Today, they usually promote their research findings and policy proposals. This model is evident among right-wing and conservative think tanks.<sup>240</sup>

Right-wing and conservative think tanks hire media consultants and public relations specialists whose sole responsibility is to market research, promote opinion pieces, and supply a list of experts ready to provide their services at a drop of a dime. They are wealthier than centrist and left-wing think tanks, so naturally, they draw considerably more attention from news

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>240</sup> McDonald, Lauren. “Think Tanks and the Media: How the Conservative Movement Gained Entry into the Education Policy Arena.” *Educational Policy*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2014, pp. 852-853.

organizations. Media personalities and newscasters cite right-wing and conservative think tanks more often than their liberal and socialist counterparts.<sup>241</sup> They contribute to a neoliberal project whose presuppositions are free markets, private ownership, and deregulation. However, they often adopt conservative stances on social and cultural issues.

Conservatives contend that the mass media has an anti-business bias. This view is another myth.<sup>242</sup> Wealthy businesspeople use their power to influence news production. As a result, the news tends to problematize the political left's projects, including trade unions, anti-war movements, environmental groups, socialist political parties, and social movements.<sup>243</sup>

If the mass media were as left-wing as conservatives maintain, news organizations would be referring to business and financial news as labour news. Furthermore, journalists and reporters often censor themselves and avoid using loaded language. They tend to control their prejudices to dodge criticism.<sup>244</sup> As a result, news organizations stopped using politically charged terms that aggravated conservatives. For example, the term "class" is missing from mainstream media discourse. Instead, journalists talk about "ordinary" rather than working-class people. Centrists, right-wing political parties, and social movements have also dropped the phrase from their lexicon, favouring neutral expressions such as "marginalization" and "social exclusion." In addition, terms such as "capitalism," "exploitation," "domination," and "inequality" are noticeably absent.<sup>245</sup>

Some journalists appear progressive compared to most owners and senior-level executives. Nevertheless, news organizations rarely question the capitalist mode of production.

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., pp. 853-854.

<sup>242</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 27.

<sup>243</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 109.

<sup>244</sup> Alterman, Eric. "What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News." p. 36.

<sup>245</sup> Harper, Stephen. *Beyond the Left: The Communist Critique of the Media*. p. 7.

Although from time to time, they report a news story that uncovers the shortcomings of the free market, they almost always cover corporate crimes as isolated events. As a result, the capitalist media excuse the systemic features that produce corruption.<sup>246</sup> On the other hand, conservative news outlets never blame the systemic failures of neoliberal capitalism. If anything, they defend free markets, private ownership, and deregulation and, instead, blame “big government.” So, they often accuse liberals and socialists of meddling in the economy. Oddly enough, it is not uncommon to see conservative journalists make false and unsubstantiated accusations of liberals being socialists since they consider this an offensive slur. The idea that liberals are destroying society with socialist economic and social policies is unrealistic but resonates with conservatives. So, the right often demonizes liberals by depicting them as “hapless tools of the extreme left,” insisting they cannot resist pressure from socialists.<sup>247</sup>

They argue that extending regulatory power, strengthening, or creating environmental rules, consumer protections, and workplace health and safety rules will negatively affect society. But, more importantly, markets and the bottom line, i.e., profits. The political right peddles the view that we need “less government.” However, this only benefits the wealthy and corporations.<sup>248</sup> So, the capitalist media often helps demonize ideas that challenge neoliberal hegemony because it allows the ruling social class to preserve its power.

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<sup>246</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 109.

<sup>247</sup> Abcarian, Robin. “Column: When Will Republicans Learn that Demonizing Liberals as ‘Socialists’ Doesn’t Work?” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Jan. 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-01-27/republicans-socialist-slurs-democrats>.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

## *Liberalism and Socialism are Not the Same Things*

American conservative media personalities and newscasters often portray prominent liberal politicians such as Bill and Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden as indistinguishable from Bolsheviks. News organizations ignore the political left, especially in the United States. The mass media even snubs leading American left-wing intellectuals who are well-respected overseas. Nevertheless, there is a reason for this outlandish claim. Conservatives can associate Democrats with socialists because of their primary criteria for what constitutes a liberal. They look at social issues, like supporting LGBTQ rights, women's rights and gender equality, abortion, civil and political rights, and affirmative action. Admittedly, several journalists and reporters share similar views and opinions on these matters, with many of those to their left.<sup>249</sup>

The dominant social class has always been hostile to socialist political candidates and public officials. It resorts to experts to prove the accusations against socialist states. As a result, charlatans prosper. Journalists always look for sources to quote or feature in a news story, so they flock to these experts. However, they are often "highly unreliable, if not downright liars."<sup>250</sup> In rough times, news organizations depict a Manichean world divided into good capitalists and evil socialists. This coverage is acceptable, and reporters can defend capitalism. As a result, the mass media propels anti-socialists to fame.<sup>251</sup>

The evidence suggests that the fear of socialism declines when anti-socialist propaganda does, unsurprisingly. The capitalist media launches these smear campaigns to benefit the dominant social class rather than put an end to the public's concerns. Nevertheless, historically, the "Red Scare" was not simply a craze of the mass media. Its goal was to stir up widespread

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<sup>249</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. p. 59.

<sup>250</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. pp. 29-31.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31.



confusion only. It also allowed the US to export capital and expand its economic territory. So, America attempts to promote international development by emphasizing free markets, private ownership, deregulation, and reducing government expenditure, i.e., globalization. Anti-socialism often produces negative stereotypes, but on its own, it is not an absurd concept.<sup>252</sup>

It serves the dominant social class's economic interests domestically and abroad. This imperialist and capitalist project demands a foreign policy with greater ideological consistency. However, I argue that now that neoliberal globalization is under scrutiny for its incapacity to establish a free market utopia for the working class, the far right is changing its role in ensuring that this American empire endures. It produces an atmosphere that suppresses the labour movement and radical and anti-capitalist positions at home and abroad. The capitalist media carefully shapes this ideology. So, just because anti-socialist propaganda is often nonsense, it does not mean that the propagandists do not know what they are doing and that news organizations are entirely innocent. On the contrary, this manufactured threat plays a valuable role in curbing the labour movement, diverting the public's attention from capitalism's crises by focusing on domestic and foreign opponents, mustering support for expensive military expenditures, giving law enforcement extra powers, and supporting military interventions that serve corporate interests.<sup>253</sup>

The dominant social class believes in these threats, so they are not necessarily lying, although, in some instances, anti-socialists purposely mislead the public. Instead, they support interests, privileges, and power relationships that reinforce capitalist social relations.

Unsurprisingly, many political and economic elites are fervent anti-socialists. The bourgeoisie despises socialism because it threatens their power and control. This fact is enough to persuade

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<sup>252</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. pp. 125-126.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

them that they are dealing with a severe problem. Therefore, the dominant social class adopts a specific ideology, such as anti-socialism, to uphold the neoliberal project.<sup>254</sup> But, simultaneously, it shields their class interests by mobilizing specific working-class groups against counter-hegemonic groups.<sup>255</sup> It does not matter if journalists unintentionally report on this propaganda. Instead, the important thing is that they spread these ideas and beliefs to the public, thereby influencing mass consciousness and restricting political discourse.<sup>256</sup>

Today, like throughout the Cold War, the mass media overlooks how socialism betters countless people's lives in poverty-stricken societies and how the free market breeds scarcity and inequality, which has only worsened under neoliberal globalization. When reporting on the Global South, journalists and reporters often transform dictators and usurpers, such as Augusto Pinochet, Juan Guaidó, and Jeanine Áñez, into influential leaders and grassroots and anti-fascist movements into sinister anti-government groups. The capitalist media sometimes scrutinizes America's foreign policy but never describes it as "American imperialism" or "Western imperialism." Thus, news organizations will promptly defend the United States and its allies. They will deny any hostility towards socialist or radical left-wing governments and quickly brand such allegations as "anti-American" propaganda.<sup>257</sup>

On the other hand, journalists will often excuse Western aggression. They will argue that their actions are necessary for homeland defence or the protection of democracy. Although at the same time, governments in North America and Western Europe claim that foreign intervention is needed to preserve Western interests overseas, journalists and reporters will rarely demand to know why or whose interests. Therefore, there is no mention of class interests whatsoever.

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>255</sup> Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. Penguin Books, 2006, p. 63.

<sup>256</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 187.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., pp. 187-188.

Instead, they argue that the global south is impoverished because it is overpopulated, or the problems with their land, culture, or temperament make them vulnerable. The political and economic elites blame the victims for their misfortunes but ignore the global systemic factors of poverty.<sup>258</sup>

News organizations often ignore the positive developments for working-class people. Instead, they often focus on or exaggerate the negative results concerning socialist and social-democratic policies. In addition, they often oppose left-wing political candidates and public officials and accuse them of mismanaging and interfering with what used to be a robust free market. As a result, the capitalist media considers any attempt to question or reform the capitalist mode of production an anathema. Whatever threatens the interests of the dominant social class is represented as damaging to the whole nation. Moreover, the dominant ideology considers any attempt to reform capitalism as an attack on Western civilization,<sup>259</sup> thus, legitimizing the far right's claim that they are simply protecting Western civilization from foreign threats.

### *Conclusion*

News broadcasting has profoundly impacted people's consciousness. Although disasters and corruption dominate the 24-hour news cycle, it has drawn audiences into an epistemology based on the belief that human tragedies are not serious matters. As a result, viewers have been made less sensitive to human suffering.<sup>260</sup> This psychological phenomenon is known as "psychic numbing."<sup>261</sup> Since news broadcasting prioritizes entertainment, it concentrates on disasters and

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., pp. 188-190.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-198.

<sup>260</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 105.

<sup>261</sup> Resnick, Brian. "A Psychologist Explains the Limits of Human Compassion."

corruption because they often amuse viewers.<sup>262</sup> Paradoxically, people's enjoyment of "mindless sensationalism" and "rampant infotainment" diverts their attention from important social and political issues.<sup>263</sup>

Furthermore, infotainment serves as a "ritual transmitter." The mass media operates as an intermediary between the state and society. It connects people to their community and allows them to situate themselves in a "mediated society." It teaches people how to behave while reaffirming cultural values and answering complex questions, but it also makes the important appear unimportant.<sup>264</sup> So, infotainment is a specific ideology.

Infotainment is associated with the commercialization of news broadcasting. The growth of 24-hour television news channels, the benefits of broadcasting to a global audience, and the reliance on advertising revenue have encouraged newsrooms to step away from hard-hitting news to more market-friendly "soft news," highlighting scandals, sports, and entertainment. As a result, news organizations are less interested in politics and current affairs and more in ratings and reviews.<sup>265</sup>

Although "new media" have tremendous potential and many scholars and observers argue that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, reshape global media production, distribution, and consumption, news media, i.e., journalism, is still the most influential for news production and information. For example, the rise of international 24-hour English-language news channels, such as Russia Today, France 24, and Al-Jazeera, reveals that states and corporations have developed global communications strategies. Although these news

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<sup>262</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 105.

<sup>263</sup> Chang, Wei-yuan. "Logics of Enjoyment in Tabloid Discourse." *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>265</sup> Thussu, Daya Kishan. "Infotainment Inc.: The Ascent of a Global Ideology." *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, edited by Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Routledge, 2011, p. 68.

channels have adopted a commercial model, states use these media outlets to bolster their global power and influence.<sup>266</sup> So, for many media companies, global expansion functions as a means for “ideological uniformity and cultural imperialism.”<sup>267</sup> As a result, the differences between national media systems, news organizations, and journalistic standards and practices are fading. Instead, today, a global media culture based on the “liberal model,” i.e., the American media system driven by the market, is taking shape. States and corporations embrace the liberal model because it has been highly effective, and globalization continues to spread neoliberal ideas and beliefs. As a result, news broadcasting transforms into a commodity bought and sold. This changing media ecology forces journalists and reporters to produce infotainment.<sup>268</sup>

A significant development is the concentration of media ownership by a handful of individuals and corporations whose chief interest is in the entertainment industry. This development has forced media personalities and newscasters to zero in on TV ratings and reviews. Infotainment drives viewership numbers and keeps production costs down. News organizations compete for audiences and, more importantly, paid advertisements. But infotainment does not simply “dumb down” audiences. Instead, it redirects people’s attention away from the harsh realities of neoliberal capitalism and supplies television news programs with a slew of soft news and other light-hearted content. As a result, news organizations fail to inform and educate their audiences with important news and information.<sup>269</sup>

There is a dialectical relationship between mass media’s cultural and economic aspects. For example, the dominant ideology shapes the culture industry, but the culture industry is also an inseparable part of the free market system. Infotainment distracts attention from significant

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>267</sup> Lewis, Justin. “Television and Public Opinion.” p. 434.

<sup>268</sup> Thussu, Daya Kishan. “Infotainment Inc.: The Ascent of a Global Ideology.” pp. 68-69.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71.

social and economic issues, such as a handful of private media companies controlling the flow of news and information, and it overlooks alternative viewpoints essential for a healthy, inclusive, and prosperous democracy.<sup>270</sup>

Far-right ideas and beliefs, such as anti-socialism, anti-immigrant policies, and militaristic attitudes, to name a few, are perfectly acceptable and consistent with the dominant neoliberal ideology because they do not threaten capitalist social relations and power dynamics. The individuals who control and finance the mass media often compel newsrooms to defend neoliberal positions, such as support for free markets, deregulation, and privatization, because they benefit the dominant social class. In addition, they flood the news with conservative social and economic views since they offer a radical alternative, albeit a non-threatening one. So, for example, news organizations disproportionately report on far-right political candidates and public officials because they appear to challenge the status quo. Slowly, these far-right ideas and beliefs become widespread to the point that they become common-sense ideas. As a result, the capitalist media functions as a safety net for the dominant social group since it supports the far-right as an alternative to neoliberal globalization instead of socialism.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>271</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. pp. 62-63.

## Chapter Two: The Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

### *Introduction*

Right-wing populism is on the rise in Western Europe and North America. Populist political candidates and public officials often mobilize their supporters using “us versus them,” anti-elitist, or Manichaeian appeals.<sup>272</sup> Right-wing populist political candidates and public officials believe that “the people” are at the heart of politics rather than any specific social class, ethnic group, or nation, although particular social groups frequently overlap. Right-wing populists frame politics in polemical terms. They argue that the needs or interests of the people are irreconcilable with those in power, whom populists usually label “the elites.” However, before the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union (EU) and Americans installed a reality TV star in the Oval Office, Rodrigo Duterte’s election as President of the Philippines in May 2016 kicked off the beginning of what Simon Tormey dubs the “populist explosion.” It was not uncommon to see populists running for office, and, on occasion, they would enjoy minor victories, but they were relatively insignificant. They were more often doomed to live on the fringes of the political scene. Nevertheless, there was something different about Duterte. The Filipino politician who pledged to end drug trafficking did not mince his words, and he brazenly advocated the extrajudicial killing of dope peddlers and small-time criminals.<sup>273</sup>

Once in office, the new President of the Philippines followed through. According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Duterte said he was ready to be held accountable for the thousands of deaths under his administration’s watch, adding that he was willing to face criminal charges that could land him behind bars for atrocities during the war on drugs. Law enforcement

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<sup>272</sup> Barr, Robert, R. “Populism as a Political Strategy.” *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos de la Torre, Routledge, 2018, p. 47.

<sup>273</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner’s Guide*. Simon and Schuster, 2019, pp. 1-2.

officers in the Philippines reported approximately 6,000 murdered drug suspects, but human rights organizations think the number is much higher.<sup>274</sup>

This was just the start of a global phenomenon. There has been a frightening, yet not unsurprising, political realignment in recent years. The populist far-right has emerged under specific social and economic conditions with the help of institutional mechanisms responsible for producing society's dominant ideas and beliefs. In addition, the capitalist media overlooks ideas that challenge free-market orthodoxy and realigns individual behaviour with new dangerous values. The 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum soon happened, and the decision sent shock waves through the "Common Market." Brexit was a significant moment in the "populist explosion" because it stood as a triumph for the far-right, and it inspired populists all around the globe. At this moment, Aeolus's bag opened.

Along with the major political parties, the mainstream media were shocked to see that British voters opted to leave the EU after four decades. Still, the UK had a long history of Euroscepticism.<sup>275</sup> England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland stood by and watched for 16 years before joining the European Economic Community (EEC) after its foundation in 1957 and almost instantly, many Brits believed they ought to leave. Eventually, Conservative Prime Minister John Major signed the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, also known as the Treaty on European Union, which advanced integration and established the EU. Nevertheless, the same Euroscepticism stopped the UK from adopting the Euro in 1999. Soon after, when eight Eastern European states joined the EU in 2004, millions of migrants moved to the country.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Associated Press. "I'm the One: Philippines President Takes Responsibility for Drug Killings." *The Guardian*, 20 Oct. 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/im-the-one-philippines-president-takes-responsibility-for-drug-killings>.

<sup>275</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner's Guide*. p. 2.

<sup>276</sup> Hutton, Robert, "The Roots of Brexit." *Bloomberg*, 31 Jan. 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/will-uk-leave-eu>.



The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford found that in 2019, over 3.7 million EU citizens resided in Britain. This figure also included 320,000 Irish citizens, a social group with a long-established history in the UK. European Union-born citizens shot up from about 167,000 in 2004 to 1,686,000 in 2017. However, the number has not stayed the same since Brexit.<sup>277</sup> Before the EU referendum, migrants moved to Britain, searching for new opportunities since the economy grew twice as fast as the Eurozone.<sup>278</sup> The British economy boomed from 1973, when the UK joined the EU, to 2016. Until Brexit, 45 percent of the country's exports went to other EU member states.<sup>279</sup>

Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Leader of the Conservative Party David Cameron caved to the Eurosceptic Tory MPs and agreed to hold a referendum shortly after Nigel Farage's Eurosceptic right-wing populist UK Independence Party (UKIP) secured 13 percent of the vote in the 2015 general election. In addition, the number of immigrants in the country impacted the EU's popularity since the free movement of EU citizens is a fundamental part of EU law. Therefore, politicians such as Nigel Farage, a former Member of the European Parliament, argued that leaving the Common Market was the only way for the UK to control the number of migrants entering the country.<sup>280</sup>

Groups such as "Vote Leave" and "Leave.EU" manipulated the fear concerning asylum seekers and migrants. They falsely claimed that low-skilled, low-pay workers stole jobs from British workers to generate a populist reaction against Europe's political elite, ignoring Brexit's repercussions on the UK's economy. Nevertheless, the campaigns advocating a "Leave" vote

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<sup>277</sup> "EU Migration to and from the UK." *The Migration Observatory*, 02 Oct. 2020.

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

<sup>278</sup> Hutton, Robert, "The Roots of Brexit."

<sup>279</sup> Hendry, David, Doyne Farmer, and Max Roser. "How did the UK Economy do Since Joining the EU?" *Institute for New Economic Thinking*, 06 June 2016. <https://www.inet.ox.ac.uk/news/brexit/>.

<sup>280</sup> Hutton, Robert, "The Roots of Brexit."

asserted that the EU is becoming a large and powerful state encroaching on national sovereignty. They also argued that the UK does not need the EU's economic support and can negotiate better trade deals independently.<sup>281</sup>

This global political realignment also started on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where the US Presidential Election was in progress. Initially, it appeared that the former first lady and secretary of state, Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, would defeat Trump, a real estate developer and reality TV star.<sup>282</sup> Before his election, Trump had zero political or military experience. Instead, his claim to fame was questioning President Barack Obama's birthplace and pushing conspiracy theories. For years, ABC News reported that the Republican presidential nominee was the driving force behind the "birther" movement. Then, after a strong showing at the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Trump said he thought of running for president. Shortly afterwards, he started appearing on talk shows demanding that Obama make public his birth certificate and prove that he was born in the United States.<sup>283</sup>

Trump never hid his contempt for minorities. When the former host of *The Apprentice* officially declared that he was throwing his hat into the ring on 16 June 2015, he accused Mexican immigrants of being "criminals" and "rapists."<sup>284</sup> According to ABC News, Trump said that "when Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner's Guide*. pp. 2-3.

<sup>283</sup> Abramson, Alana. "How Donald Trump Perpetuated the 'Birther' Movement for Years." *ABC News*, 16 Sep. 2016. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-perpetuated-birther-movement-years/story?id=42138176>.

<sup>284</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner's Guide*. pp. 2-3.

rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>285</sup> On multiple occasions, Trump double-down on his controversial statements and criticized the Mexican government for sending criminals.<sup>286</sup>

At first, Trump hardly resonated with Republican voters, much less the wider public. His 2016 presidential campaign was well-known for its aggressive tactics and violent rhetoric. However, this soon changed. Shortly after, no one was safe from Trump and his supporters. Democrats and, surprisingly, even fellow Republicans felt their rage. They regularly shouted slogans such as “Lock Her Up!” and “Build the Wall” during campaign rallies. At the same time, Trump pledged to “Make America Great Again” by luring back outsourced factory jobs, slashing corporate taxes, increasing defence spending, and renegotiating international trade agreements that he claimed did not best serve the United States’ social, political, and economic interests. What is more, Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign rejected democratic civility. Instead, the billionaire businessman swapped the polite discourse that we ordinarily associate with liberal democratic politics for abusive language and brazenly threatened his opponents.<sup>287</sup>

Trump’s accomplishments and Britain’s withdrawal from the EU were just the beginning. Right-wing populist political parties and social movements’ support increased dramatically in Western Europe in the ensuing years. They made some impressive gains and, as a result, dominated news cycles and public discourse. Nationalist and xenophobic forces have been operating for some time now. However, political actors in the European Union were less concerned about the rise of these parties and social movements and more about their impact on the Common Market since one or more of the larger economies, like France, Germany, or Italy, could potentially elect a Eurosceptic head of state. Furthermore, they showed little interest in

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<sup>285</sup> Winsor, Morgan. “What Donald Trump Has Said About Mexico and Vice Versa?” *ABC News*, 31 Aug. 2016. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-mexico-vice-versa/story?id=41767704>.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner’s Guide*. pp. 3-4.

improving working-class people's material conditions.<sup>288</sup> The EU's commitment to privatization and austerity measures reveals that European officials cared more about maintaining free market fundamentalism, i.e., free markets, deregulation, and privatization.

Neoliberalism, the ideology behind the Great Recession, environmental degradation, and the success of Trump, threatens to disassemble liberal democracy. As a result, people in North America and Western Europe now reject fundamental liberal values and principles, such as civil rights, equality, and pluralism, while keeping faith in "the market." Even the freedom of the press is under fire. Nevertheless, the capitalist media has severely affected democratic rule and politics. The press's almost unwavering support of neoliberal ideas since the late seventies reinforces Margaret Thatcher's erroneous claim that "there is no alternative." Mainstream media coverage has produced an environment where people think deregulation, privatizing public services, and constraining the labour movement's power is essential for a prosperous nation.<sup>289</sup> This position is now under intense ideological pressure and increasing opposition from the political left and right. However, it is worth noting that it would be wrong to presume that all far-right political parties and social movements oppose neoliberalism.<sup>290</sup>

Nevertheless, the relationship between the state and the capitalist media reveals that economic restructuring and opposition to the welfare state is their primary goal. So, as the financial crisis triggered a political crisis, the outcome was the disempowerment of the working class as centre-right and centre-left political parties and movements embraced the same neoliberal policies. This disempowerment leads to disenfranchisement.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>289</sup> Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems." *The Guardian*, 15 Apr. 2016. [theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot).

<sup>290</sup> Cornelissen, Lars. "The 'New Right' is Not a Reaction to Neoliberalism, but its Offspring." *openDemocracy*, 16 July 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/the-new-right-is-not-a-reaction-to-neoliberalism-but-its-offspring/>.

<sup>291</sup> Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems."

Neoliberals distrust democracy and identify grassroots movements and other forms of direct participation with authoritarian ideologies, such as fascism or communism. Democratic backsliding, however, is an integral part of the neoliberal project. Attacking democratic processes and structures deepens anti-establishment sentiment and diminishes public participation in liberal democracy. In addition, the rejection of formal politics alongside growing social and economic inequality and poverty has created a situation where political parties and social movements that challenge the status quo have blossomed. These inequalities have increased through implementing harsh austerity measures, arguably the principal political and economic policies to reduce public debt in response to the 2008 financial crisis. So, there is a correlation between neoliberalism and the appearance of anti-politics. As a result, neoliberal projects induced anti-political and depoliticizing changes through an anti-popular commitment to free markets, deregulation, and privatization, replacing economics for politics and advancing economic freedom instead of political freedom. Anti-politics is related to dwindling trust and participation in representative democracy, which also brought about Trump's tenure as president of the United States, the withdrawal of the UK from the EU, and the rise of the far-right, particularly in North America and Western Europe.<sup>292</sup>

Far-right political candidates and public officials built their support from members of the white working class who felt ignored by the "elites." Still, they would never consider supporting radical alternatives since the media depicts socialism as much worse.<sup>293</sup> It is also worth noting that, rather than demanding power from the elites, right-wing populists often cede control to

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<sup>292</sup> Beveridge, Ross, and David Featherstone. "Introduction: Anti-Politics, Austerity and Spaces of Politicisation." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2021, pp. 437-439.

<sup>293</sup> Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems."

them.<sup>294</sup> Thus, the international emergence of authoritarian democracy is related to the production of ideas necessary for the social reproduction of social structures and, above all, global capital. Right-wing populism offers the working class an allegedly counter-hegemonic alternative but does not seek to transform society's social system and organization. For example, the far right's commitment to free markets, deregulation, and privatization but opposition to immigration, minority rights, and socialism does not hinder capital accumulation. As a result, it does not threaten the dominant social class's power. If anything, it maintains it since it redirects the working class's anger away from the elites who exploit them under capitalism. Therefore, the capitalist media's news coverage is a safety net for the dominant social class since it overlooks the systemic reasons behind important social and economic issues and offers systemic solutions, i.e., pro-capitalist solutions. For example, the mainstreaming of the far right partially results from disproportionate news coverage.

### *What is Populism and Where Does it Come From?*

Populist politicians depend on nostalgia for their rhetoric. They often articulate their ideas about the past with rose-tinted glasses when things were seemingly much better. It is part of their appeal. For instance, in the United States, Trump convinced voters that he would "Make America Great Again," and Eurosceptic politicians vowed to "Take Back Control" in the UK. Millions of people bought into these promises. However, these were not just catchy bumper stickers. These slogans were convincing because almost everyone can project their experiences onto them. They evoke memories of the "good old days" for the "white working class." As a

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<sup>294</sup> Slater, Dan. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 23.

result, they gravitate towards populists because they promise to return to the way things were. For instance, some people liked it better when their country was ethnically and culturally homogeneous, while others looked back with fondness when conservative social values were the norm. Some white working-class people admire their countries' military achievements, while others glamorize their imperial and colonial past.<sup>295</sup>

They are nostalgic for a bygone economic era where their compatriots were supposedly prosperous and happy. This promise is a significant factor in populism's recent success.<sup>296</sup> The "white working class" refers to white, high-school-educated blue-collar workers who mostly live in rural North America and Western Europe. They resent people experiencing poverty and minorities whom they believe "leech" off the system. Still, they also despise the educated and professional-managerial class who earn more money than them and consider "arrogant" and "smug." However, they admire and respect the rich. Moreover, these straight white males believe in traditional gender roles. So, they measure masculinity by "the size of a paycheck." They prioritize economic development and job creation over racial and cultural issues, so they hate political correctness. Finally, this social group feels nostalgic for a bygone time when "men were men and women knew their place."<sup>297</sup>

Across the pond, the European debt crisis erased many years of economic and social development and exposed the shortcomings of the European Union's economy and the failures of the free market. It revealed a dangerous double standard that outraged Europeans. It showed that politicians put profits before people. Europe's banking system owned tremendous US debt. The outcome was financial ruin. Predictably, politicians tried to rescue the banking system

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<sup>295</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Harvard University Press, 2018, p. 216.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>297</sup> Williams, Joan C. "What So Many People Don't Get About the US Working Class." *Harvard Business Review*, 10 Nov. 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/what-so-many-people-dont-get-about-the-u-s-working-class>.

instead of allowing it to go bankrupt. The EU and European Central Bank (ECB) poured billions of euros into reviving their countries' "zombie banks." Soon after, private debts became public. Simultaneously, the financial institutions rejected all attempts to regulate their industry, clinging to the same failed neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, the EU and ECB bailed out the irresponsible European banks instead of stimulating economic recovery and growth after the crisis. As a result, the working class suffered immensely, and their distrust of dominant political parties grew.<sup>298</sup>

Austerity measures resulted in a sharp decline in Europeans' standard of living. Shortly, the financial crisis gave rise to a social crisis. The working class faced mounting unemployment, social exclusion, economic precarity, and deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances, which led to a growing distrust of political and economic elites. It is worth noting that the crisis did not impact everyone equally. The negative growth and rising unemployment disproportionately affected Southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Some Western and Northern European nations, like the Republic of Ireland, also felt the brunt of the crisis. Tensions escalated on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, and conflicts broke out between racial groups and social classes.<sup>299</sup> The white working class's backlash fuelled the far-right's rise.

Considering the financial hardships that working-class people endured after the financial crisis broke out, it is not unreasonable for them to worry about the future.<sup>300</sup> The mass media triggers moral panics. For example, television news regularly reports disturbing stories regarding the global financial crisis and its social impact. As a result, audiences watch a series of spectacles, such as demonstrations and political violence, with little to no context about the

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<sup>298</sup> Neather, Andrew. "The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy by Yanis Varoufakis - Review." *Evening Standard*, 23 July 2015, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/books/the-global-minotaur-america-europe-and-the-future-of-the-global-economy-by-yanis-varoufakis-review-10411471.html>.

<sup>299</sup> Arechavala, Noelia Somarriba, Pilar Zarzosa Espina, and Bernardo Pena Trapero. "The Economic Crisis and its Effects on the Quality of Life in the European Union." *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2015, pp. 323-324.

<sup>300</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. p. 217.



structural issues at work. The outcome is the “desire to retreat from the world into a more comfortable insularity, consumption, or nostalgia for a fondly reimagined version of the past.”<sup>301</sup>

So, nostalgia is about more than money but the absence of hope, which leads to desperation. Although North Americans and Western Europeans are much better off than their grandparents were at that age, their grandparents were optimistic about the future of humanity because they grew up penniless. Though later in life, they were comparatively well-to-do, they assumed that their daughters and sons would do even better. They were right. However, their grandchildren face an uphill struggle. Income and wealth inequality is on the rise. Living conditions have steadily declined in North America and Western Europe.<sup>302</sup> Millennials are worse off than their mothers and fathers. CNN reported that people born between 1981 and 1996, also known as Generation Y or Gen Y, in the United States would be the first generation not to surpass their parents concerning employment status or wages. By the time they had reached adulthood, the global financial crisis (GFC) was in full swing. The 24-hour cable news channel reported that people born between 1981 and 1996 struggle to surpass or even meet their parents’ employment status and way of life. One study discovered that approximately half of the millennials earned less money than their parents when they were 30 years old, compared with 92 percent of the people born in 1940.<sup>303</sup>

Many millennials stated that they could not secure well-paying jobs, while others noted that housing prices were unreachable, student loans were predatory, and the cost of living was getting increasingly more expensive.<sup>304</sup> There needs to be more social optimism about the future,

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<sup>301</sup> Potts, John. “Journeys through the Past: Contempt, Nostalgia, Enigma.” *Media and Nostalgia*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 213-214.

<sup>302</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. pp. 216-217.

<sup>303</sup> Luhby, Tami. “Many Millennials are Worse Off than their Parents – A First in American History.” *CNN*, 11 Jan. 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/11/politics/millennials-income-stalled-upward-mobility-us/index.html>.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

but that is not the case. For example, a 2022 poll discovered that 42 percent of Americans do not believe that young people will have a better life than their parents. Furthermore, it found that optimism is down 18 points from 2019.<sup>305</sup>

The 2008 financial crisis has made working-class people increasingly suspicious of the current socioeconomic system.<sup>306</sup> Nevertheless, mainstream parties, the mass media, think tanks, and economics departments consider the “invisible hand of the free market” the most profitable and ethical way of organizing the world economy.<sup>307</sup> Neoliberalism suggests that private enterprise can ensure people’s happiness within an institutional framework of free markets, deregulation, and privatization. Neoliberals argue that the state’s limited role is to create and maintain the institutional framework that enables such practices. They believe that governments ought to keep economic interventionism to a minimum. For example, neoliberals argue that the state should be involved with the “quality and integrity of money.”<sup>308</sup> Furthermore, it must also “set up those military, defence, police and juridical functions required to secure private property rights and to support freely functioning markets.” Finally, “if markets do not exist, they must be created.”<sup>309</sup> As a result, the state redirects public resources to secure neoliberal projects and focuses mainly on the free market and market-based solutions to social issues.

Neoliberals consider competition as the distinctive feature of social relations. George Monbiot says, “it redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised

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<sup>305</sup> Brennan, Megan. “Americans Less Optimistic About Next Generation’s Future.” *Gallup*, 25 Oct. 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403760/americans-less-optimistic-next-generation-future.aspx>.

<sup>306</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. p. 217.

<sup>307</sup> Malhas, Majeed. “Neoliberals Oppose Market Intervention – Unless the Market Is Screwing US Corporations.” *Jacobin*, 03 Nov. 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/11/neoliberals-market-intervention-corporations-biden-administration-oil-production-opec>.

<sup>308</sup> Harvey, David. “Neo-liberalism as Creative Destruction.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2006, p. 145.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency.”<sup>310</sup> These policies have severely impacted the material success of working-class “consumer citizens.” Far-right political candidates and public officials exploit people’s fears regarding these declining material conditions articulating a particular project without condemning the structures and power dynamics that cause economic failures and social exclusion in the first place. Chris Hedges argues that the far right builds its “base, not from the politically active but the politically inactive, the ‘losers’ who feel, often correctly, they have no voice or role to play in the political establishment.”<sup>311</sup> So, the lower classes often feel betrayed by the state and embrace far-right views. The capitalist media plays a crucial role in framing and circulating these ideas.

States include various institutions. Randall Hansen says they are “made up of the legislature, executive, bureaucracy, courts, and army.” Moreover, the state “is the final arbiter of disputes, holds a monopoly over violence and is responsible for protecting, regulating, and redistributing property.”<sup>312</sup> Some states are losing control of these political institutions, considering international financial institutions tend to influence, if not dictate, how they ought to function. However, it is not that they are simply losing control. The state has made numerous compromises to the relations of labour and capital, so now the “invisible hand of the free market” has emerged as the key institution to solve social issues. This development has been the plan of neoliberal restructuring. As the welfare state is diminishing, and power and resources are shifting to help corporations and financial institutions, people find themselves powerless with less social support. The state is no longer supporting working-class people but guaranteeing

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<sup>310</sup> Monbiot, George. “Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems.” *The Guardian*, 15 Apr. 2016. [theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot](http://theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot).

<sup>311</sup> Hedges, Chris. “The Revenge of the Lower Classes and the Rise of American Fascism.” *Truthdig*, 09 Aug. 2016. <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-revenge-of-the-lower-classes-and-the-rise-of-american-fascism-2/>.

<sup>312</sup> Hansen, Randall. “State Controls: Borders, Refugees, and Citizenship.” *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh et al., Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 253.

certain elites' power and extending capitalism's lifespan at the expense of the lower social classes. There is also a shift in what voters believe outside economic and political forces can do to shape their future.<sup>313</sup>

These destructive social and economic transformations are related to neoliberal globalization. The state challenges the labour movement and attacks free and fair collective bargaining, which results in lower wages. Furthermore, it removes regulations resulting in the deterioration of the environment, poor working conditions, outrageous interest rates, and toxic investments, to name a few. Finally, the state lowers taxes for billionaires and corporations, whom they refer to as "Job Creators," resulting in chronically underfunded social services for people in need. Mainstream parties, the mass media, think tanks, and economics departments disregard the connection between neoliberalism and these catastrophic transformations. However, they seem invested in a specific analysis supporting and evading criticism of these neoliberal policies and their consequences. If anything, they argue that "there is no alternative." So, they continue to back a capitalist project that takes resources away from the lower classes and supports substantive social and economic changes.<sup>314</sup>

Rather than focusing on the international flow of capital, the white working class concentrates on the impact of immigration on the job market. The far right knows that labour is at the forefront of this. So, it singles out the flow of people, i.e., migration from the Global South, instead. However, the public needs to be better informed about this issue. The capitalist media fails to do this since it prioritizes profits, so there is a preference for sensationalism, tabloidization, and infotainment. The news media, one of the institutions articulating and

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<sup>313</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. p. 217.

<sup>314</sup> Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems."

circulating far-right views, redirects and even thwarts people's analytical approaches and hinders them from making informed decisions.<sup>315</sup>

News production is crucial in spreading reactionary views, such as negative attitudes towards refugees and migrants.<sup>316</sup> For example, studies revealed that the positive coverage of these groups often results in pro-immigration sentiments. Conversely, negative portrayals have the opposite effect. In the last 20 years, anti-immigration rhetoric has become widespread in North America and Western Europe. As a result, debates over migration policies on both sides of the Atlantic, like the 2015 European migrant crisis and Mexico-United States border crisis, were highly polarizing. The negative portrayals of refugees and migrants in the mass media cultivate bigotry and suspicion toward immigrants. In addition, it increases the probability of supporting far-right political parties and movements.<sup>317</sup> The capitalist press is responsible for popularizing the far right because it ignores the links between inequality and globalization but embraces xenophobia. Therefore, the rise of right-wing populism is only partly the result of nostalgia.<sup>318</sup>

When people shout, "Make America Great Again" or "Take Back Control," they demand higher wages and a sense of security. On the other hand, people lack confidence and no longer feel safe in a drastically changing world. So, the dominant ideology reorients them to adopt extreme political views unless they can ease their worries about the future. These ideas and beliefs are grounded in nostalgia and, more importantly, ignore the inherent issues in the system. The white working class wants to know that their jobs are safe, that they can control their destiny, and will live in relative comfort and safety. Finally, they also want to ensure their

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<sup>315</sup> Otto, Lukas, Isabella Glogger, and Mark Boukes. "The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication: A Comprehensive Framework Model of Sensationalism, Soft News, Infotainment, and Tabloidization." *Communication Theory*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2017, p. 136.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>317</sup> Conzo, Pierluigi, et al. "Negative Media Portrayals of Immigrants Increase Ingroup Favoritism and Hostile Physiological and Emotional Reactions." *Scientific Reports*, vol. 11, 2021, p. 16407.

<sup>318</sup> Otto, Lukas, Isabella Glogger, and Mark Boukes. "The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication: A Comprehensive Framework Model of Sensationalism, Soft News, Infotainment, and Tabloidization." p. 136.

children and grandchildren will get the chance to exceed them. As a result, the lower classes wish to decide for themselves and shield their community's weakest members regardless of the transformations brought about by neoliberalism and globalization. Yascha Mounk argues, "unless we can make some progress on all these fronts, nostalgia for a simpler past will reliably translate into votes for the populists who promise to recreate it."<sup>319</sup>

There is little doubt that Britain's decision to leave the EU, Trump's controversial presidency, and a long list of populist political candidates and public officials in Europe, South America, and Asia ignited the mass media's interest in populism. But populist political parties and movements are not something new. They have been an integral part of liberal democracy and have gone through many shifts and changes over the years. More recently, there has been a proliferation of right-wing populist parties and their views about social relations, the economy, and the world, which circulate through the mainstream media. Populism, however, is a somewhat contentious term. So, what is it? Is it an ideology, a syndrome, a political movement, a discourse, a strategy, or a political style?<sup>320</sup>

This confusion results from many populist political parties and social movements that appeared over the last years. Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde says there are two widely known descriptions of populism. The first regards populism to be the politics of "the pub." It is a profoundly emotional and oversimplified discourse aimed at the masse's "gut feelings." The second description claims that populism describes opportunistic policies that aim to satisfy voters' demands instead of making the best decisions.<sup>321</sup> Populists understand that most people want to improve their material conditions drastically and are angry with the lack of political

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<sup>319</sup> Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. pp. 217-218.

<sup>320</sup> Bryant, Octavia, and Benjamin Moffitt. "What Actually is Populism? And Why Does it have a Bad Reputation?" *The Conversation*, 05 Feb. 2019. <https://theconversation.com/what-actually-is-populism-and-why-does-it-have-a-bad-reputation-109874>.

<sup>321</sup> Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, pp. 542-543.

efficacy, so they make promises they know they cannot keep.<sup>322</sup> For example, Trump promised “The Wall” to keep migrants out of the US. However, architects argued that the \$25 billion, 1,954-mile-long border wall along the Mexico-US border would be nearly impossible to build.<sup>323</sup> Thus, “demagoguery” and “opportunism” are better descriptions. Nevertheless, Mudde maintains that populism is a “thin-centred ideology” that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of ‘the people.’”<sup>324</sup>

Although this is debatable, and there is an ongoing academic discussion on how to classify the concept correctly, most scholars and writers accept that populism has two key features: First, it expresses the general, or, rather, manipulated, will of “the people,” and second, these people ought to oppose “the elites.” Populist political parties and social movements combine these central tenets in various ways. For example, left-wing populists’ understanding of “the people” and “the elite” regularly relate to social and economic criteria. In contrast, right-wing populists usually focus on social and cultural matters like nationality and migration. Thus, “the people” and “the elite” have different meanings. So, since they are vague, they are open to interpretation.<sup>325</sup>

The concept of “the people” is a “fictitious entity.” It is not real but imagined. Along with “the people,” there is also the construct of a “virtual image of the popular will.” Populist political candidates and public officials generally equate their plans and policies with the masses’ will.

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<sup>322</sup> Spruyt, Bram, Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck. “Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?” *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2016, pp. 335-336.

<sup>323</sup> Garfield, Leanna. “Trump’s \$25 Billion Wall Would be Nearly Impossible to Build, According to Architects.” *Business Insider*, 14 Jan. 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-wall-impossible-build-architects-2017-1>.

<sup>324</sup> Mudde, Cas. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” pp. 542-543.

<sup>325</sup> Bryant, Octavia, and Benjamin Moffitt. “What Actually is Populism? And Why Does It have a Bad Reputation?”

This arrangement allows them to identify their supporters as “the people.”<sup>326</sup> These concepts are being co-constituted to conceal class distinctions with the term’s neutrality.

Whatever the case may be, at the heart of populism is “the people.” Populism can mesh with ideologies such as communism, environmentalism, nationalism, or socialism. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that all parties are populists. Most mainstream parties are not. They remain pluralists. However, populists are reformists because they do not want to replace the social and economic system but merely change their situation. Since they claim to represent the people, they want to improve their lives but do not want to replace their values or make significant lifestyle changes. Today, populism is primarily associated with the far-right. Conservatives and right-wing populists concentrate on the nation. So, the collapse of “the nation” to “the people” is easily conflated in the hands of specific political candidates and public officials on the far-right, who seem to deploy it all in the name of patriotism.<sup>327</sup>

Populism is a “thin ideology” for two reasons: First, Benjamin Krämer says it does not possess an elaborate theory like other political ideologies. Second, it deals with a few social and political issues and requires other political ideas and beliefs to produce something that resembles a proper political ideology. However, right-wing populism is slowly becoming a “full-fledged lived ideology” because political actors and ordinary people adhere to and practice populist ideas and beliefs regarding everyday life that distort how things genuinely are under neoliberal capitalism.<sup>328</sup>

Historically, the appearance of the far right, stretching back to fascist and, presently, alt-right and right-wing populist political parties and social movements, often results from the angst

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<sup>326</sup> Eco, Umberto. *Turning Back the Clock*. Harcourt Books, 2007, p. 130.

<sup>327</sup> Mudde, Cas. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” pp. 544-545.

<sup>328</sup> Krämer, Benjamin. “Populism, Media, and the Form of Society.” *Communication Theory*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2018, pp. 445-461.



of the lower classes. For example, working-class people start to worry about moral decadence. Instead of engaging with the project of capitalism and its effects on different strata of society, political populist rhetoric usually attacks the Marxists, foreigners, and so-called social justice warriors (SJWs) instead of social and economic problems and concerns. Yet, right-wing populist political candidates and public officials wholeheartedly back destructive neoliberal policies while attacking “globalization” and multiculturalism. Therefore, they often take a hard line on immigration and crime since they believe they are inseparable. Ultimately, they want to preserve institutions or, more appropriately, social constructs, such as the nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and the purity of the nation.<sup>329</sup>

This racist anti-immigrant attitude reflects a deranged version of working-class angst or the manipulation of their disappointment with a social and economic system that does not appear to work for them. Workers are conditioned to see foreign labour as threatening their job security. Thus, instead of grappling with the fundamental problem of capitalism and profit maximization, the white working class focuses on secondary issues, such as mass migration, which keeps workers’ demands under control and wages low.<sup>330</sup>

The rhetoric focuses on mobilizing the white working class against “the elites” without ever explaining that social relationship and how and in what ways social, political, and economic institutions and policies support them. So, the new wave of right-wing populism has focused mainly on the harm done by the “elites,” even though many political candidates and public officials who adhere to these ideas and beliefs belong to the dominant social class. This antagonism has led to the erosion of a more substantive conversation concerning democracy, including the role of democratic institutions in ensuring and securing the support of the “working

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid., pp. 449-450.

<sup>330</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Verso Books, 2009, p. 267.

class.” Instead, right-wing populists envision a “segmented” and “hierarchical” society based on racial and ethnic lines. As a result, right-wing populist political parties and movements stress racial, cultural, and gendered divisions.<sup>331</sup>

Right-wing populists believe that common sense regarding ordinary affairs and shared values and traditions unify society. Thus, they ought to preserve them at all costs. This mutual support concerns the ingroup, usually at the expense of minorities and other marginalized groups. Therefore, they maintain that their ideas and beliefs are right and just. Additionally, they consider the demands and complaints of outgroups as unmerited, whereas their feelings, such as suspicion of the elite and minority groups, are warranted and reasonable. Right-wing populists also believe that “the people” should and would back them if “the elite” did not corrupt or indoctrinate the masses. As a rule, the paternalistic attitude of the far-right maintains that they must shield “the people” from “the elite” and minority groups because they do not know any better.<sup>332</sup>

Right-wing populist political candidates and public officials want to confer rights only to “the people.” The ingroup is often encouraged to express its opinions, usually confrontational to “political correctness,” but, on the other hand, outgroups are supposed to remain silent. Oddly enough, even though right-wing populists declare their unwavering support for freedom of speech and “being critical,” criticism should involve “the elites,” minority groups, and opposing ideologies or foreign cultures. In contrast, criticism concerning the party leader is unacceptable as it is considered an attack on “the people” they claim to serve and, therefore, undemocratic.<sup>333</sup>

Granted that most notable examples pertain to right-wing populist political candidates and public officials, some scholars and writers maintain that it can also be left-wing. For

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<sup>331</sup> Krämer, Benjamin. “Populism, Media, and the Form of Society.” p. 450.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., p. 450.

example, left-wing populist parties and social movements often blend democratic socialism with a populist discourse. However, this is entirely different.<sup>334</sup> Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe has a favourable opinion of populism, particularly “left-wing populism.” She argues that it is not always associated with “demagogy” and “opportunism.” On the contrary, it is compatible with numerous political ideas and beliefs since it is the politics of constructing a political identity by articulating a chain of equivalences aiming at an “expansive hegemony.” As a result, her notion of populism, she argues, can play a catalytic role for change that supports differently positioned and marginalized individuals since it does not focus on a single “privileged agent,” such as the proletariat, but on multiple social agents and their struggles concurrently.<sup>335</sup>

Mouffe believes that the rise of modern populism, both left-wing and right-wing, is a reaction to economic liberalism and free-market capitalism. She says neoliberal globalization offers people no alternative, so political issues become simple technical problems requiring technocrats. As a result, voters have limited options and few political projects to choose from that, ultimately, resemble one another, so their sole purpose is to approve the technocrats’ policies. Mouffe argues that this “post-political” situation led to citizens refusing to vote and disliking democracy,<sup>336</sup> resulting in depoliticization and anti-politics.

This development is unsurprising since most mainstream political parties, both center-right and center-left, belong to the extreme center and share the same neoliberal ideas and beliefs. For example, British writer Tariq Ali argues that they “share an authoritarianism that places capital above the needs of citizens and upholds a corporate power rubber-stamped by elected parliaments.”<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Mudde, Cas. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” pp. 544-545.

<sup>335</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism*. Verso Books, 2018, pp. 2-3.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>337</sup> Ali, Tariq. *The Extreme Centre: A Second Warning*. Verso Books, 2018, pp. 3-4.

These mainstream politicians do not have close relationships with the working or lower classes but close ties with powerful bankers and businesspeople, journalists and reporters in the mainstream media, and different advisors and consultants. They make their decisions based on statistics and focus groups. Their association with ordinary, working-class people is minimal except during election campaigns. Public relations managers and media specialists construct a public persona with little to do with their true selves. In government, they are over-suspicious, despise criticism, and rely more on spin doctors who treat them like superstars. Because there are no longer any fundamental differences between center-right and center-left political parties and candidates, Ali argues that “power becomes an end in itself and a means to acquire money and well-paid consultancies after leaving office.” As a result, he labels these compliant and self-serving politicians who strive to maintain the neoliberal hegemony as the “extreme centre.”<sup>338</sup>

The 2008 global financial crisis exposed the nature and contradictions of neoliberal globalization. As a result, various left-wing and right-wing counterhegemonic movements started to gain momentum. Mouffe refers to this as the “populist moment.”<sup>339</sup> However, these counterhegemonic movements often have entirely different aims and values. For example, the far right only pretends to provide an alternative to the radical centre.

On the other hand, Mouffe argues that left-wing populism represents the politics required to improve democracy.<sup>340</sup> Examples of left-wing populism are Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Furthermore, several Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, elected left-wing populist governments during the “Pink Tide.”<sup>341</sup> She says the “populist moment” signifies a “return of the political.” At best, it can restore democracy, but at worst, it

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>339</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism*. pp. 4-5.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>341</sup> Venizelos, Giorgos, and Yannis Stavrakakis. “Left-Populism Is Down but Not Out. *Jacobin*, 22 Mar. 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/left-populism-political-strategy-class-power>.

can lead to “authoritarian solutions.”<sup>342</sup> Nevertheless, the achievements of the far right and the radical left’s failure to gain mass support demonstrate that the status quo will remain unaffected. Instead, the “populist moment” demonstrates that right-wing populist ideology, i.e., far-right ideas and beliefs, deter the white working class from thinking about real social and economic change.

Most politicians, journalists, and scholars agree that populism evokes negative thoughts. It is somewhat apparent how they use the term and how it has evolved into a slur directed at fascists and socialists since they seem to threaten the dominant social class. Furthermore, it is not a self-definition, and no one labels themselves as a populist.<sup>343</sup> Well, almost no one. For example, Trump’s one-time adviser and the former executive chairman of the far-right American news website *Breitbart News*, Steve Bannon, told *The Guardian*’s Paul Lewis that he is “a populist, an American nationalist.”<sup>344</sup>

Politicians usually describe their opponents as such. So, at worst, “populist” is an insult. At best, it is only “a term of disparagement.” If very few political candidates and public officials label themselves populists, the term should reveal more about the people who hurl the slur instead of the stigmatized individuals. As a result, it is a valuable hermeneutic tool for recognizing and describing those political candidates and parties that brand their enemies as populists.<sup>345</sup> It is worth noting that even Mouffe acknowledges that populism has a bad reputation. But, unsurprisingly, she rejects the broadly accepted derogatory meaning made famous by the press to dismiss political actors who question the status quo.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism*. pp. 6-7.

<sup>343</sup> D’Eramo, Marco. “Populism and the New Oligarchy.” *New Left Review*, vol. 82, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>344</sup> Lewis, Paul. “Steve Bannon: I Want to Drive a Stake through the Brussels Vampire.” *The Guardian*, 21 Nov. 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/21/steve-bannon-i-want-to-drive-a-stake-through-the-brussels-vampire-populist-europe>.

<sup>345</sup> D’Eramo, Marco. “Populism and the New Oligarchy.” p. 8.

<sup>346</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *For a Left Populism*. pp. 10-11.

Populism did not always have a negative meaning. Until the mid-twentieth century, many candidates proudly referred to themselves as populists. That all changed during the Cold War when the West christened itself as the “free world,” whereas the Eastern Bloc lay claim to the terms “people” and “popular.” This reassigning was problematic in North America and Western Europe, especially in pro-capitalist rhetoric, since “popular” was related to the Soviet Union. For example, Marco D’Eramo says many politicians would happily label themselves a populist until the nineteen-fifties. However, in the US, political actors have avoided the term “people” in political discourse ever since.<sup>347</sup>

A lot has changed since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and three decades of neoliberal globalization sharply moved the left-right political axis toward the right. Today, centre-left parties have embraced the free market. As a result, the centre is where the right used to be. Candidates seldom, if ever, mention class in their speeches. Political platforms and programs no longer reflect different social groups’ material interests.<sup>348</sup>

Most mainstream political parties claim that their social and economic policies reflect popular opinion, but the free market dictates them. As a result, an oligarchic regime emerged in North America and Western Europe after the Cold War. Simultaneously, income and wealth inequality skyrocketed. As a result, the ruling social class grew and continues to grow wealthier and wealthier. In addition, the bourgeoisie is not subject to the same legal constraints as the working class. For example, they pay significantly fewer taxes. Thus, North American and Western European governments brazenly apply different laws in various socio-economic and political situations. Widespread resentment unsurprisingly balloons. The ruling social class quickly labels divergence from the “centrist etiquette,” i.e., neoliberal globalization, as “thuggish

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<sup>347</sup> D’Eramo, Marco. “Populism and the New Oligarchy.” pp. 8-14.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

and violent.” Political actors on the left and right are labelled sexist, racist, and homophobic.<sup>349</sup> For example, Jeremy Corbyn’s opponents branded him an antisemite,<sup>350</sup> and Bernie Sanders faced allegations of sexism.<sup>351</sup> Liberals quickly conflate far-right and left-wing political parties and social movements by identifying them as populists to delegitimize their well-founded criticisms, albeit criticisms that reflect entirely different values. Historically, however, the capitalist media has been more hostile to socialists. Nevertheless, the ruling social class allows positions that do not challenge the dominant ideology.<sup>352</sup>

Whoever criticizes the dominant social class, corporate bailouts, privatizations, tax cuts for the super-rich, and wage cuts for the working class is suddenly a “populist.” The capitalist media smears political candidates and public officials who oppose deregulation, privatization and free trade and labels them populists. This news coverage delegitimizes and weakens the radical left. For example, Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis call attention to “new types of ‘anti-populist’ discourses aiming at the discursive policing and the political marginalization of emerging protest movements against the politics of austerity, especially in countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal.”<sup>353</sup> However, this is a growing trend on both sides of the Atlantic.

It is worth noting that some scholars and writers reject the claim that “left-wing populism” even exists, or, at least, that it does not apply to every single anti-capitalist political candidate or public official. Instead, they argue that the capitalist media is partially responsible for this collapse of the two. For example, American political theorist Jodi Dean maintains that

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-26.

<sup>350</sup> Al Jazeera Investigative Unit. “What Really Happened During Labour’s ‘Anti-Semitism Crisis’.” *Al Jazeera*, 25 Sep. 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/25/what-really-happened-during-labours-anti-semitism-crisis>.

<sup>351</sup> Chiu, Allyson, and Katie Shepherd. “A Woman Can’t Win? Alleged Comment Reopens Feminist Grievances Against Bernie Sanders.” *The Washington Post*, 14 Jan. 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/01/14/sanders-warren-debate/>.

<sup>352</sup> D’Eramo, Marco. “Populism and the New Oligarchy.” pp. 24-26.

<sup>353</sup> Stavrakakis, Yannis, and Giorgos Katsambekis. “Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA.” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2014, pp. 133-134.

during the 2016 United States presidential election, “populism” allowed news organizations to compare Trump, the Republican Party presidential candidate, with his progressive rival, Senator Bernie Sanders. As a result, the press often presented them as two versions of anti-establishment politics. Dean says this comparison nullified Sanders’s “identification as a Democratic Socialist and his socialist politics history.” Moreover, it overlooked “the difference between a politics that targets the capitalist system and an amorphous deployment of nativism, racism, sexism, and anti-elitism.”<sup>354</sup>

Most “left-wing populists,” like their right-wing counterparts, do not want to shake things up, and since they function within a given framework, they do not attempt to replace it. So, this is the fundamental difference between socialism and populism. Whereas socialists want the state to wither away, populists seek to maintain it. Therefore, this attempt to compare the two conceals hostility towards socialist politics. Besides, Dean holds that a “left,” such as left-wing populists, satisfied with capitalism is not radical left but “progressive neoliberalism.”<sup>355</sup>

Nancy Fraser says “progressive neoliberalism” refers to a powerful alliance between two unlikely partners shaping global politics. For example, in the United States, this alliance consists of, on the one hand, mainstream liberal social movements, such as feminists, antiracists, proponents of multiculturalism, environmentalists, and LGBTQ rights activists, and, on the other, the most vibrant financial sectors of the economy. Moreover, this unlikely alliance is held together by a peculiar combination of “distribution and recognition.” The progressive-neoliberal bloc combines “an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic

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<sup>354</sup> Dean, Jodi. “Not Him, Us (And We Aren’t Populists).” *Theory & Event*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2017, p. 42.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.



politics of recognition,”<sup>356</sup> becoming consolidated as a hegemonic bloc dominating Western politics.

Therefore, although “progressive neoliberalism” extols “diversity,” “meritocracy,” and “emancipation,” at the same time, it dismantles the welfare state and allows capital to plunder the lower social classes and groups. Furthermore, it outlines “emancipation” in market terms.<sup>357</sup> The mass media often extols the merits of progressive neoliberalism. Nevertheless, in most cases, contemporary populism is not “progressive,” but it is related to racial hatred, ethnocentricity, and anti-politics. Moreover, this type of populism is reactionary and anti-democratic. Hence, it usually sparks a reaction from more liberal democratic forces.<sup>358</sup> The close relationship between populism and authoritarianism threatens societies characterized by political democracy and social stability. In countries with solid democratic institutions, populist ideas and beliefs coexist with other political ideologies and struggle to attract voters. Populist political parties and social movements deliberately undermine the same democratic norms and institutions that sustain them. Its inclinations toward the far-right make them a threat to democracy.<sup>359</sup>

Historically, the petite bourgeoisie supported populist political candidates and public officials. However, there is growing support from working-class voters in North America and Western Europe. Although the economy is seemingly booming, their quality of life is declining quickly, and with neoliberalism and the politics of austerity stripping down the welfare state, they feel abandoned.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Fraser, Nancy. *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*. Verso Books, 2019, pp. 10-12.

<sup>357</sup> Fraser, Nancy. “Contradictions of Capital and Care.” *New Left Review*, vol. 100, 2016.  
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii100/articles/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care>.

<sup>358</sup> Mazzoleni, Gianpietro., et al. *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis*. Praeger, 2003, p. 1.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>360</sup> Alvares, Claudia, and Peter Dahlgren. “Populism, Extremism and Media: Mapping an Uncertain Terrain.” *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, p. 47.

Populism is undoubtedly a significant characteristic of the present-day social and political situation. However, the real problem is not populism but instead right-wing populism. Populism emerges during a crisis with “near-revolutionary rhetoric.” It does not aim for revolutionary social transformation but favours reformism with relatively poor results. Right-wing populist political parties and social movements are openly hostile to parliamentary democracy, but, at the same time, they make every effort to be elected. As a result, they can distance themselves from the intricacies linked to parliamentary democracy and focus on appeals to emotion.<sup>361</sup>

For right-wing populists, “the people” signify the nation or a particular part of it. This detail is significant for understanding the current upsurge of populism. Nevertheless, it is more important to understand the dynamics of right-wing populism. Today, populism essentially adopts a far-right character in North America and Western Europe, and “the people” are associated with the white working class, anti-globalization, and xenophobia.<sup>362</sup> So, the far-right embraces white identity politics. Regardless, it is worth noting that identity politics is not a new phenomenon nor a purely left-wing approach.<sup>363</sup>

Today, because it looks as if there is no real opposition, and the differences between political parties and their leaders are superficial, but, most importantly, there are no alternative proposals for divisive social issues, such as immigration and multiculturalism, many people feel angry and betrayed. So, the far-right seizes the opportunity and offers an alternative that challenges that status quo.<sup>364</sup> Therefore, “radical right-wing populism” characterizes right-wing political parties and social movements that reject individual and social equality. These groups

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-52.

<sup>363</sup> Malik, Kenan. “Racism Rebranded: How Far-Right Ideology Feeds Off Identity Politics.” *The Guardian*, 08 Jan. 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/08/racism-rebranded-how-far-right-ideology-feeds-off-identity-politics-kenan-malik-not-so-black-and-white>.

<sup>364</sup> Alvares, Claudia, and Peter Dahlgren. “Populism, Extremism and Media: Mapping an Uncertain Terrain.” p. 52.

advocate far-right ideas and beliefs while they appeal to “the people” and promote “common-sense” solutions. Their ideology incorporates “authoritarian, nativist, and populist elements.”<sup>365</sup>

There is a strong relationship between the far right and contemporary populism. For example, Gianpietro Mazzoleni labels this “neo-populism” or “new populism.” Far-right political parties and movements take advantage of widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties on the centre-right and centre-left and rapidly changing socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions. Unlike most established conservative political parties, the radical right supposedly supports a radical departure from the socio-economic and socio-cultural status quo while targeting minority groups. Moreover, these political parties and social movements combine their far-right ideology with authoritarianism. For example, they advocate the concentration of power, paternalistic policies limiting citizens’ choices seemingly for their well-being and often without their consent, and reject participative democracy, pluralism, and compromise between conflicting groups. Mazzoleni says that modern-day populism is related to the radical right. However, he distinguishes “neo-populism,” “new populism,” and other extreme right-wing populist political parties and movements from “classic” fascism.<sup>366</sup>

### *From Right-Wing Populism to Post-Fascism*

The emergence of “right-wing populism,” i.e., “neo-populism,” is a terrifying feature of the contemporary world. Far-right political parties and movements recently formed governments in several European Union member states. Although somewhat less successful, these political

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<sup>365</sup> Akkerman, Tjitske, Sarah L. de Lange, and Matthijs Rooduijn. “Inclusion and Mainstreaming? Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in the New Millennium.” *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe?*, edited by Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange and Matthijs Rooduijn, Routledge, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>366</sup> Mazzoleni, Gianpietro., et al. *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis*. pp. 3-4.

parties also attracted broad support in major EU countries like France, Italy, and Germany. Trump shocked the world when he was elected the president of the United States, and the far-right has been growing more powerful and influential across North America and Western Europe ever since. For most people, this situation was unknown. Italian scholar Enzo Traverso says that “the world had not experienced a similar growth of the radical right since the 1930s, a development that inevitably awakens the memory of fascism.”<sup>367</sup>

Right-wing populism traces its roots to earlier far-right ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, some right-wing extremist groups, such as the now-defunct Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi political party in Greece, and the far-right Brothers of Italy, continue to embody those traditions. However, today, new far-right political parties and social movements are different from “classic” fascist groups.<sup>368</sup>

Then, to explain this development, we must consider fascist ideology. The term “fascism” stems from the Latin word “fascis,” meaning “bundle.” The Roman fasces was an axe bounded by a bundle of wooden rods symbolizing the state’s power and unity. Initially, this symbol was associated with the Left. However, at the end of the First World War, Benito Mussolini, a former socialist, co-opted the fasces and created “fascism” to describe his nationalist veterans and pro-war syndicalist insurgents. The fascist program was an odd mix of patriotism and socialism, albeit “national socialism.”<sup>369</sup>

Mussolini’s movement embraced extreme violence, advocated anti-intellectualism, rejected compromising, and hated the established social and political order. These sentiments echoed his early supporters’ ideas and beliefs – war veterans, pro-war syndicalists, and Futurist intellectuals. The Futurists were an Italian movement of artists and writers who adopted Filippo

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<sup>367</sup> Traverso, Enzo. *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*. Verso Books, 2019, pp. 3-4.

<sup>368</sup> Alvares, Claudia, and Peter Dahlgren. “Populism, Extremism and Media: Mapping an Uncertain Terrain.” p. 52.

<sup>369</sup> Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Vintage, 2007, pp. 3-7.

Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism*, first published in France in 1909. His followers rejected the "cultural legacy of the past" and celebrated "speed and violence." Similar groups appeared in postwar Europe, separately from Mussolini's fascism. These groups adopted comparable ideas and beliefs regarding nationalism, anti-capitalism, voluntarism, and violence against the bourgeoisie and socialists.<sup>370</sup> The contemporary far right, like classic fascism and other related movements, also draws on the working class's economic challenges. So, it also capitalizes on widespread anger and frustration.

Fascism is an ideology. Robert O. Paxton argues that the leaders of fascist political parties and social movements reaffirmed that they were pushing an idea. As a result, a fascist is an individual who advocates a fascist ideology – this is more than just ideas and beliefs, but a whole system of thought tied to a world-shaping project. Paxton says that fascism appeals mostly to emotions by practicing rituals, organizing ceremonies, and adopting strong rhetoric. As a result, fascism does not rely on a philosophical system but on "the people's" feelings.<sup>371</sup>

### *Fascism is an Indispensable Part of Capitalism*

How do reactionary ideas and beliefs emerge? Marxist scholars argue that a crisis of capitalism produced fascist ideology. Unable to expand markets, increase access to resources, and secure cheaper labour via Western democracy and free markets, the ruling social class found new ways to access these by force. It is worth noting that others associate the crisis with the shortcomings of liberalism. Liberal institutions and political culture could not tackle pressing social, economic,

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-7.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-17.

and political issues.<sup>372</sup> However, prominent liberal scholars such as A. James Gregor, Zeev Sternhell, and Stanley Payne argue that fascist ideology resulted from an anti-enlightenment revolt, which included new and unusual ideas that questioned positivism, rationalism, and liberal democracy. Furthermore, they say that fascist ideology emerged from nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism,<sup>373</sup> a working-class movement hostile to socialism in Europe before the First World War.<sup>374</sup> These scholars argue that syndicalism stems from orthodox Marxism. So, they reinforce the connection between socialism and fascism.<sup>375</sup> This approach implies that right-wing populism and socialism also share a common ancestor.

German philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer say that modernity and the Enlightenment already possessed fascist tendencies that capitalist social relations unleashed. They believed that domination, cruelty, and barbarism were the repressed truths of the Enlightenment. The rise of fascism challenged the Enlightenment's claims that it gave rise to human maturity, freedom, and autonomy. Instead of moral progress, it spawned other features of modernity, such as cruelty, nationalism, and violence – characteristics of fascist ideology. The Enlightenment had posed as freeing humanity from myth and delusion, but this was far from reality. As a result, even countries at war with fascism slid back into barbarism during World War II. Instruments of ideology and control, such as the mass media, science, and technology, made this possible.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>373</sup> Roberts, David D. "How Not to Think about Fascism and Ideology, Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000, pp. 187-189.

<sup>374</sup> Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. p. 5.

<sup>375</sup> Roberts, David D. "How Not to Think about Fascism and Ideology, Intellectual Antecedents and Historical Meaning." pp. 188-194.

<sup>376</sup> Jeffries, Stuart. *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. Verso Books, 2016, pp. 231-236.

Liberal scholars insist that fascism is not an integral part of capitalism but an abnormality.<sup>377</sup> Nevertheless, far-right political parties and movements appeared in almost every capitalist country in one form or another between the First and Second World Wars.<sup>378</sup> Today, all around the world, the far-right is gaining ground. Liberal theorists still focus on social, political, and intellectual aspects, such as the rejection of the parliamentary system, the admiration of strong leadership, and the denial of science while overlooking the international political economy and class warfare. Therefore, liberal theorists concentrate on secondary phenomena and neglect social totality. However, it is the latter that explains these aspects. Fascism is not an abnormality. Instead, it is deeply rooted in capitalism.<sup>379</sup>

Fascism is integral to the current mode of production since it seeks to maintain it along with its rigid class relations. For example, Michael Parenti says, “fascism is nothing more than a final solution to the class struggle, the totalistic submergence and exploitation of democratic forces for the benefit and profit of higher financial circles.”<sup>380</sup> As a result, Gabriel Rockhill argues that capitalism depends on two forms of governance that adopt the “good cop/bad cop.” When the “good cop” cannot convince the public to embrace capitalism, the “bad cop” of fascism will do it one way or another. The latter seems to be different from the “good cop” because the dominant social class convinces society of hostility between them, which hides that they work in tandem toward a shared goal: Preserving the ruling class’s power. He argues that

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<sup>377</sup> Rockhill, Gabriel. “Fascism: Now You See It, Now You Don’t!” *CounterPunch*, 12 Oct. 2020. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/10/12/fascism-now-you-see-it-now-you-dont/?fbclid=IwAR2FTw-sOuVvjDVvaqddajHRa0sq6L5V3Z2xlJas6Hay228zaWuPNjYCCEU>.

<sup>378</sup> Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. p. 55.

<sup>379</sup> Rockhill, Gabriel. “Fascism: Now You See It, Now You Don’t!”

<sup>380</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. City Lights Books, 1997, p. 19.

although it is much better to deal with the “good cop” instead of the “bad cop,” it is essential to recognize them as partners.<sup>381</sup>

Rockhill believes that the United States is on the road to fascism. He argues that the bourgeoisie manages every major institution, controls labour, and has established the most extensive network of law enforcement agencies in any police state. The strong-arm tactics of the dominant social class in the process toward authoritarianism and, ultimately, fascism cannot be understated or compared to any other country on the planet today or in the past.<sup>382</sup>

Capitalism has authoritarian tendencies that surface when the far-right gains a voice, visibility, and broad popular support during a crisis. The appearance of authoritarian capitalism threatens liberal democracy but not the mode of production. Authoritarianism is an ideology that emphasizes strong leadership, ultra-nationalism, law and order, militarism, and violence. More importantly, Christian Fuchs says it “takes on the ideological role of deflecting attention from the real causes of social problems and class conflicts by constructing and blaming scapegoats and presenting workers and capital as unified in a national community whose existence is under threat by dark forces.”<sup>383</sup> This threat would be unattainable without the support of major institutions. For example, the capitalist media often supports authoritarianism by deflecting attention from the root causes of social and economic issues, such as neoliberal globalization, instead of focusing on immigration and crime.

Fascism is a close relative of right-wing populism since, much like authoritarianism, it deliberately ignores the problems inherent in the capitalist mode of production and focuses on

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<sup>381</sup> Rockhill, Gabriel. “Fascism: Now You See It, Now You Don’t!”

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. Pluto Press, 2018, pp. 79-80.



the foreigners who allegedly abuse it. So, for example, they condemn insider trading but not capitalism. Thus, this is another reason why fascism is a type of populism.<sup>384</sup>

Far-right ideologies and populist strategies become central to the bolstering of capitalism. Thus, the far-right's actions and practices are a safety net to protect capitalism from its limits. Like National Socialism in Germany, today's extreme right offers disgruntled voters a seemingly radical alternative. This artificial antagonism between authoritarianism and liberalism is an ideological approach that aims to transform an ally into a so-called enemy who lures dissatisfied citizens away from the radical left. Fascists have no real plan to help the working and lower social classes. Parenti notably argues that the far-right advanced a "false revolution." Therefore, they misrepresent their ideological positions and practices. They construct popular politics and a revolutionary style without encouraging revolutionary ideas and beliefs. They promote a so-called "New Order" while serving the same hegemonic bloc.<sup>385</sup>

Politicians, journalists, and academics want to transform the subordinate social classes' worldviews and convince them that the "good cop" and the "bad cop" are opponents.<sup>386</sup> Nevertheless, far-right political parties and social movements ultimately do not genuinely oppose the status quo but only appear so. Despite the inflammatory rhetoric, they propose no solutions to overturn the dominant social class or the dreaded elites. Therefore, all indications reveal that the far-right enjoys the elites' support because they share the same real enemy, the radical left.

The differences between populist political candidates and public officials and their forerunners during the Interwar Period are substantial. Nevertheless, the comparisons seem almost inescapable, as does their shared function. However, the concept of fascism appears at the same time inadequate and sufficient for understanding the recent success of the radical right.

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<sup>384</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. p. 279.

<sup>385</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. p. 17.

<sup>386</sup> Rockhill, Gabriel. "Fascism: Now You See It, Now You Don't!"

Thus, Traverso refers to the contemporary era as “a period of post-fascism.” Moreover, he argues that “this concept emphasizes its chronological distinctiveness and locates it in a historical sequence implying both continuity and transformation.”<sup>387</sup> This development exhibits that fascism does cut across not only borders but also time. So, there exists a connection between “classic” fascism and neo-populism or right-wing populism.<sup>388</sup>

*“Classic” Fascism and Right-Wing Populism: Kindred Spirits*

In a different vein, Argentine historian Federico Finchelstein believes that populism and fascism are reactions to liberalism and socialism. More importantly, he sees a connection between the two. Populists and fascists are incredibly hostile towards other political parties and social movements since they believe they do not serve “the people” and accuse them of treason. This unwillingness to acknowledge the opposition’s legitimacy usually ends in insults and accusations. As a result, their antagonists are transformed into villains only in rhetoric to sway the public. Nevertheless, Finchelstein argues that if populists shift from these verbal attacks to full-out physical violence against their enemies, it can transform into fascism.<sup>389</sup>

A return to fascism is always likely, albeit rare, but when it occurs, and neo-populism grows increasingly authoritarian, it amounts to fascism. Fascism is totalitarian, while neo-populism is not. Fascism often resorts to political violence, whereas populism, at least, formally renounces it. Neo-populism is a kind of “authoritarian democracy,” whereas fascism is an “ultraviolent dictatorship.”<sup>390</sup> Finchelstein maintains that “populism is an authoritarian form of

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<sup>387</sup> Traverso, Enzo. *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*. p. 4.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>389</sup> Finchelstein, Federico. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. University of California Press, 2019, pp. 5-6.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

democracy that emerged originally as a postwar reformulation of fascism.” However, “it was after fascism left the world stage that populism became for the first time a regime.”<sup>391</sup> Neo-populism, or right-wing populism, is not synonymous with fascism, but there is no doubt that they belong to the same genealogy.

Before the appearance of fascist dictators like Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, populism was a popular political style. However, after World War II, fascism vanished, and populism gradually re-entered the political scene to take its place. Today, it has become an authoritarian leadership style, notably, an effective way of ruling the state with a tight grip devoid of a right-wing dictatorship. Like fascists, right-wing populist political candidates and public officials claim to speak for the people. Though, ordinarily, they do not look to the overthrow of an existing government violently.<sup>392</sup> But this is not always the case. Hence, why, on 06 January 2021, the insurrection at the US Capitol building exposed the thin line between right-wing populism and fascism. President Donald Trump urged his supporters to overturn the 2020 United States election results. So, according to CNN, instead of conceding, he delivered a “militant speech” and encouraged his supporters to “fight like hell” and stop Congress and Vice President Mike Pence from certifying the election results. This call to arms led to a massive rally and thousands of supporters attacking the Capitol.<sup>393</sup> So, although Trump might not fit the description of a fascist, his attempt to overturn President Joe Biden’s victory resulted in a coup attempt. This incident illustrates how his ideas and beliefs overlap with fascist ideology and can easily lead to violence.

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>393</sup> Cohen, Marshall. “Timeline of the Coup: How Trump Tried to Weaponize the Justice Department to Overturn the 2020 Election.” *CNN*, 05 Nov. 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/05/politics/january-6-timeline-trump-coup/index.html>.

Right-wing populism is not simply the democratic guise of fascism but a new political phenomenon for the post-war era. Though contemporary populism traces its origins to the Cold War and, much like Italian fascism and National Socialism, usually surfaces during a political and social crisis. Accordingly, fascism and authoritarianism are critical components of populism's long history. Finchelstein labels the far-right populism sweeping North America and Western Europe as "neoclassical populism of the right and extreme right." Far-right politicians such as Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and far-right political parties and social movements formed coalition governments in countries like Austria, Italy, and Finland. Opposition parties, both past and present, include Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party and, later, Reform UK in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, the banned ultranationalist Golden Dawn in Greece and the movements like Pauline Hanson's One Nation in Australia and the Religious Zionist Party in Israel, to name a few. However, this appears to be a global phenomenon, so neoclassical populism of the right and radical right also includes the governments of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, and Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala.<sup>394</sup>

There is a connection between traditional fascism and right-wing populism. Finchelstein says, "modern populism is a reformulation of fascism in the context of post-war democracies."<sup>395</sup> Moreover, he argues that political candidates and public officials such as Trump, Le Pen, Orbán, and Erdogan are akin to Hitler and Mussolini since they share numerous ideas and beliefs. At the same time, they also represent a significant rupture with "classic" fascism. It is worth noting that modern populism developed as an authoritarian anti-communist, albeit democratic, project during the Cold War. Hence, suddenly, by "democratizing" fascism, or, instead, right-wing

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<sup>394</sup> Finchelstein, Federico. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. pp. 99-102.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

populism, as we know it, develops. Since it formally recognizes democratic institutions, although it seeks to undermine them at every turn, right-wing populism becomes socially and politically tolerable.<sup>396</sup>

In North America and Western Europe, right-wing populism usually targets foreigners and maintains that the West is on the verge of civilizational collapse. This development represents a reaction to the global financial crisis, growing inequality and poverty, and the subsequent turmoil over political representation related to the increase of unelected experts, i.e., technocrats. For example, the Eurosceptic UKIP harnessed this outrage and played a significant role in the British referendum on EU membership in 2016. However, this is a far-right response to neoliberal globalization. So, although Brexit was a crowning moment for UKIP, most right-wing populist political parties and movements that are not part of the government operate like simple protest parties. That does not suggest that they are no less influential. The growing popularity of the far-right reveals its ability to develop ideas that defy “the elites” and shape the political agenda, such as opposing immigration, criticizing the mass media, and, most importantly, cultivating racism and nationalism.<sup>397</sup>

### *Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Inverted Totalitarianism*

More and more Americans are embracing authoritarian beliefs.<sup>398</sup> For example, Peter Bloom and Carl Rhodes argue that during the 2016 United States presidential election, voters had to decide between two authoritarian options, “Clinton and oligarchy or Trump and fascism.” These

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-165.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-169.

<sup>398</sup> Taub, Amanda. “The Rise of American Authoritarianism.” *Vox*, 01 Mar. 2016.  
<https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

candidates represented different authoritarian structures and differing ideologies of neoliberalism. Ultimately, liberalism and fascism support the same rigid class structures and power dynamics. The capitalist media implied that “Clinton and oligarchy” are the lesser of two evils and, despite their shortcomings, are still democratic or, at least, less authoritarian. Peter Bloom and Carl Rhodes say this “false dichotomy masks just how profoundly authoritarian and anti-democratic existing liberal democracies have become.”<sup>399</sup>

Mainstream political parties are gradually adopting authoritarian policies. For example, the Republican Party is becoming more and more reactionary. Trump’s frequent comments concerning ethnic and religious minorities on the campaign trail shocked the world. Furthermore, he embraced racism somewhat straightforwardly.<sup>400</sup> This offensive behaviour echoes a growing authoritarian corporatized culture. Nevertheless, the GOP did nothing to reprimand him. On the contrary, it supported this sharp far-right turn because it captivated the white working class. So, for example, Trump is a sign of America’s creeping authoritarianism.<sup>401</sup>

Trump’s successful presidential election recast the United States as the global epicentre of right-wing populism. Instead of tackling social and economic issues, the far-right in North America and Western Europe concentrates on cultural issues and political correctness. Furthermore, it began to combine white identity politics with “corporate culture.” So, it adapted quickly to its new socio-economic environment.<sup>402</sup>

Right-wing populists often denounce neoliberal globalization, growing dependence on the global economy, and foreign competition, but the far-right and free-market fundamentalists

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<sup>399</sup> Bloom, Peter, and Carl Rhodes. “Corporate Authoritarianism and the New American Anti-Democracy.” *Common Dreams*, 23 Oct. 2016. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/10/23/corporate-authoritarianism-and-new-american-anti-democracy>.

<sup>400</sup> Finchelstein, Federico. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. p. 169.

<sup>401</sup> Bloom, Peter, and Carl Rhodes. “Corporate Authoritarianism and the New American Anti-Democracy.”

<sup>402</sup> Finchelstein, Federico. *From Fascism to Populism in History*. pp. 169-170.

share numerous characteristics. These two often bolster one another or pave the way for the other to arise. For example, in the US, the free market was an essential element of the Tea Party movement's fiscally conservative agenda, and the link between right-wing populism and neoliberalism was clear during Trump's presidency. The "invisible hand" is an integral part of many Western European right-wing populist political parties and movements, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). However, more importantly, neoliberalism and right-wing populism both have authoritarian leanings. As a result, scholars speak of the emergence of "authoritarian neoliberalism." For example, since they tend to support one another, right-wing populism and neoliberalism make it easier for an authoritarian regime to emerge and threaten democracy in North America and Western Europe.<sup>403</sup>

Authoritarian elements are already present in our social and political system. Sheldon Wolin argues that we live in a time of "inverted totalitarianism." This system is only nominally democratic since it is simply a "managed democracy." Corporate entities exercise much power and seek to keep the working and lower classes docile and compliant.<sup>404</sup> The two primary forms of social control are access to easy and cheap credit and affordable, mass-produced consumer goods. If these are no longer easy to obtain, he says that the rise of fascism is a possibility.<sup>405</sup> However, a significant difference exists between inverted totalitarianism and traditional fascism.

On the one hand, the far right mobilized popular support. On the other, the inverted regime depoliticizes its civilian population. So, whereas Fascists and Nazis aimed to give "the people" a sense of empowerment, today, a managed democracy fosters collective weakness and

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<sup>403</sup> Pühringer, Stephan, and Walter O. Ötsch. "Neoliberalism and Right-Wing Populism: Conceptual Analogies." *Forum for Social Economics*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2018, p. 200.

<sup>404</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Democracy Incorporated*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

<sup>405</sup> Hedges, Chris. "Donald Trump: The Dress Rehearsal for Fascism." *Common Dreams*, 17 Oct. 2016. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/10/17/donald-trump-dress-rehearsal-fascism>.

mass meaningless, resulting in mistrust in democracy, political apathy, and the privatization of the self in modern society.<sup>406</sup> Therefore, inverted totalitarianism already has far-right tendencies. The 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent events prove this with the worldwide rise of right-wing populism. So, as politics become a spectacle, tension rises, and fear grows, violence becomes the main form of social control.<sup>407</sup>

The most startling aspect of the structure of inverted totalitarianism is its similarities to Nazi propaganda, albeit nowhere near as violent. For democracy to flourish, citizens should be well-educated and have access to different sources of news and information. However, education has taken an unexpected turn in recent years. For example, post-secondary education institutions have simultaneously become linked with corporate interests and people who produce propaganda, such as conservative think tanks and research institutes.<sup>408</sup> One common characteristic of the “neoliberal university” is its focus on economic objectives, transforming students into customers.<sup>409</sup> Consequently, critical thinking and analytical skills are under attack.<sup>410</sup>

Moreover, much like the Nazis’ control of the mass media, the most disturbing development in North America and Western Europe has been the disappearance of alternative voices in the press. The concentration of media ownership produces either pervasive or blatantly conservative ideas and arguments. As a result, Wolin argues that “the net effect of the

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<sup>406</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought-Expanded Edition*. Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 592

<sup>407</sup> Hedges, Chris. “Donald Trump: The Dress Rehearsal for Fascism.”

<sup>408</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought-Expanded Edition*, p. 594.

<sup>409</sup> Taylor, Nik, and Zoei Sutton. “‘Battered and Broken. I Must Get Out’: What Staff Told Us about Teaching and Working in Universities Today.” *The Conversation*, 25 June 2023. <https://theconversation.com/battered-and-broken-i-must-get-out-what-staff-told-us-about-teaching-and-working-in-universities-today-208179>.

<sup>410</sup> Wolin, Sheldon S. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought-Expanded Edition*, p. 594.



concentration of media ownership is to enclose the civic mind within the equivalent of a hermetically sealed dome.”<sup>411</sup>

The working and lower classes recognize that the “corporate establishment” is taking unfair advantage of people and destroying their way of life. Given these conditions, the far-right effectively mobilizes these people and builds a movement around a shared heritage or culture to fight back. In addition, the elites, including members of the capitalist media, increasingly gives political legitimacy to far-right political candidates and public officials to safeguard their legitimacy. The more these elites benefit, and the electorate sees their lives falling apart, the more the white working class supports the far right. Of course, the dominant social class would prefer a mainstream party in office, but they have no concerns about working with the far right. The dominant social class knows that authoritarian regimes will not hamper their profits. On the contrary, in such a state, corporations and financial institutions will be even more successful in halting the attempts of the labour movement to push for better wages and working conditions. As a result, capitalism does not require democracy to work.<sup>412</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Trump’s victory does not represent the end of neoliberal hegemony. Neither does the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s referendum defeat in 2016, and the growing support for far-right political parties, such as the National Rally (RN) in France, the Brothers of Italy (FdI) in Italy, Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden (SD), and the Party for Freedom (PVV) in

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., p. 594.

<sup>412</sup> Hedges, Chris. “Donald Trump: The Dress Rehearsal for Fascism.”

the Netherlands. These victories, though, signal a new global challenge. Despite different ideas, concerns, and expectations, these surprising electoral upsets share a common denominator. They are, on the surface, all opposed to globalization, neoliberalism, and “the elites” who promote them. Nancy Fraser argues that “voters are saying ‘No!’ to the lethal combination of austerity, free trade, predatory debt, and precarious, ill-paid work that characterize financialized capitalism today.” Moreover, she says that “their votes are a response to the structural crisis of this form of capitalism, which first came into full view with the near-meltdown of the global financial order in 2008.”<sup>413</sup>

It is more accurate to classify this as a response to the “progressive neoliberal hegemony.” Hence, people accept the free market since they cannot picture any alternative but reject “globalism.” This development explains the election of Trump and the recent success of far-right political candidates and public officials in North America and Western Europe. By rejecting globalization, the voters renounce the liberal cosmopolitanism commonly associated with it, but not necessarily free markets and free trade. Some white working-class voters blame their deteriorating situation on women, racialized people, and sexual and gender minorities, yet, again, not austerity measures, widespread deregulation, and privatization schemes.<sup>414</sup>

The growth of right-wing populist political parties and social movements results from increasing disillusionment with the political and economic elites that supposedly control the government. Right-wing populists argue that the elites overlook the difficulties “the people” face. So, they promise to improve their material conditions. Political candidates and public officials such as Trump, Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Jimmie Åkesson, and Giorgia Meloni are, much like the “classic” fascists who preceded them. These political opportunists attempt to exploit “the

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<sup>413</sup> Fraser, Nancy. “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism.” *Dissent*, 2 Jan. 2017.

[https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser).

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

people's" anger for their aims. Their struggle against the status quo, to which they regularly belong, is not a real plan for governing but rather a pragmatic strategy to win over voters in an election. They merely capitalize on whatever complaints they can find among the disenfranchised masses. Right-wing populists usually target angry white straight men with poor education, looking for scapegoats to blame and a strong leader who can articulate their grievances.<sup>415</sup>

Thus, self-victimization is an effective and characteristic far-right strategy for attracting new supporters. Playing the victim card is representative of both "classic" fascism and right-wing populism. Italian author and philosopher Umberto Eco argues that "persecution mania" is one of the several methods the far-right uses to build and maintain unity. However, the main point is to showcase that there are hostile outgroups. So, this strategy justifies shifting blame and oppressing migrant, minority, and marginalized social groups, instead of targeting the dominant social class. Furthermore, far-right political candidates and public officials can whine and complain about being persecuted by the press. Ironically, they are regularly on news and current affairs programmes expressing their controversial opinions and attracting new voters.<sup>416</sup>

Right-wing populism rejects the progressive features of the dominant neoliberal ideology, i.e., progressive neoliberalism, while adopting reactionary attitudes. This ideology helps strengthen market fundamentalism. The result is a hyper-reactionary neoliberalism that offers a radical alternative to social change while serving the political and economic interests of the dominant social classes. However, this would be impossible without the capitalist media since it routinely normalizes far-right ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, the mass media ensures the reproduction of the capitalist relations of exploitation by mainstreaming far-right political parties

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<sup>415</sup> Rose, Nikolas. "Still 'Like Birds on the Wire?' Freedom after Neoliberalism." *Economy and Society*, vol. 46, no. 3-4, 2017, pp. 309-310.

<sup>416</sup> Eco, Umberto. *Turning Back the Clock*. p. 135.

and social movements that were usually labelled “fringe parties.” The outcome is an authoritarian democracy. Hyper-reactionary neoliberalism, much like “classic” fascism before it, despite its anti-elite rhetoric, does not oppose the status quo but supports it, and, as a result, it helps preserve the dominant social classes’ power.

## Chapter Three: The Liberal Media Would Rather Support a Populist than a Socialist

### *Introduction*

American conservatives believe the mainstream media is beholden to the “Left.” They frequently complain that the country’s top news media companies indiscreetly support left-wing ideas and beliefs such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and MSNBC. As a result, they accuse them of media bias. But what do conservatives mean when they say the “Left?” In the United States of America, the term “liberal,” or rather the “left-wing of the Democratic Party,” is synonymous with the “Left.”<sup>417</sup>

It appears that conservatives are criticizing liberalism, not socialism. However, not everyone agrees that the “Left” refers solely to liberal ideas and beliefs, especially those with left-wing political views like socialists. According to the *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, the “Left” consists of socialists, anarchists, and communists. Unlike liberals, these groups seek radical economic, political, and cultural transformation, so the “Left” excludes left-wing liberals and reformers, such as the members and supporters of the liberal Democratic Party that believe that change does not require the end of capitalism or that an egalitarian society can come to fruition within the nation-state.<sup>418</sup> Conservatives equate liberals with left-wing politics and radical change to discredit them. They think this will damage their reputations.

Since the end of the 1960s, the American Left has rejected the term “liberal” and replaced it with “progressive.” This word is a much more appropriate description of their ideas and

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<sup>417</sup> Berkowitz, Peter. “The Liberal Spirit in America and Its Paradoxes.” *Liberalism for a New Century*, edited by Neil Jumonville, Kevin Mattson, and E.J. Dionne, University of California Press, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>418</sup> Buhle, Mari Jo, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas. *Encyclopedia of the American Left*. Garland Publishing, 1990, p. xi.

beliefs. Nevertheless, the term liberal still retains a progressive connotation. Thus, the two terms are somewhat synonymous in the United States.<sup>419</sup>

The American political right adds to the confusion. Republicans continuously accused the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nominee, Joe Biden and his running mate, Senator from California Kamala Harris, of being socialists during the 2020 United States presidential election. According to *Yahoo! News*, Vice President Mike Pence suggested Biden would place America “on a path of socialism and decline.” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said the former vice president under President Barack Obama is “hiding a socialist agenda.” Finally, President Donald Trump referred to Biden as a “Trojan horse for socialism.” For the record, neither Biden nor Harris are socialists.<sup>420</sup>

On the contrary, liberals are quick to distance themselves from socialism or gloat about how they “beat the socialist.”<sup>421</sup> However, this response is unsurprising since they do not consider themselves part of the “American Left.” Nevertheless, journalists often repeat these groundless allegations in their news coverage, intensifying the colloquial usage of the term “Left.”

Still, the liberal media’s treatment of anarchists, communists, and socialists differs considerably from that of Democrats and, oddly enough, their primary opponents, Republicans. This development raises many questions: How do left-wing, or, more appropriately, liberal media outlets cover the American Left, such as socialist candidates and political parties that challenge the Democratic and Republican Parties? Are they sympathetic towards them, or do

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<sup>419</sup> Berkowitz, Peter. “The Liberal Spirit in America and Its Paradoxes.” p. 14.

<sup>420</sup> Dalmia, Shikha. “Is Trump a Bigger Socialist than Biden?” *Yahoo! News*, 21 Sep. 2020. <https://news.yahoo.com/trump-bigger-socialist-biden-095001207.html>.

<sup>421</sup> Kaplan, Thomas. “Biden’s Response to Voters Concerned about Socialism: ‘I Beat the Socialist.’” *The New York Times*, 14 Oct. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/us/politics/bidens-response-to-voters-concerned-about-socialism-i-beat-the-socialist.html>.

they deem them a potential threat to the dominant and hegemonic ideology, i.e., neoliberal globalization? What choices determine the liberal media's news coverage? I will attempt to answer these questions by examining Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont's news coverage during the Democratic Party nomination for the 2016 and 2020 United States presidential elections and comparing it to his opponents in both major political parties, especially Hillary Clinton and, to a greater extent, Trump. Sanders, a lifelong democratic socialist and progressive, and his supporters were the target of a slanderous media campaign in 2016 and, particularly, 2020. His experiences during the primaries uncover the aversion of the liberal media towards the American Left. First, this warrants a brief history of the American Left, such as socialist candidates and public officials who dare question the dominant neoliberal ideology, such as free trade agreements, privatization schemes, and austerity measures. This position also challenges the mass media's anti-socialist propaganda. However, this demonstrates that the liberal media is relatively conservative in its outlook, mainly on matters about fiscal policies. Thus, as the progressive neoliberal order seems to be collapsing, the mainstream media in North America and Western Europe increasingly offer authoritarian solutions, such as reactionary neoliberalism, even at the detriment of liberal democratic institutions.

The capitalist media's news coverage of Sanders' unsuccessful presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 is a reminder that political parties and social movements that oppose or even seek to reform certain free market features are usually ignored and, at worst, described as dangerous extremists. More interesting is the disproportionate media coverage of far-right political candidates and public officials, authoritarian figures such as Trump, who threaten democracy and human rights. Analyzing the capitalist media through the theoretical lenses of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model, Michael Parenti's critique of the press and how news

production distorts reality, and Eric Alterman's rejection of the widespread conservative belief that the news media in the United States has a liberal bias, I seek to develop a critical framework for understanding how the capitalist media's biased news coverage of the socialist left benefits the populist right, thus, how the capitalist media offers political legitimacy to far-right political candidates and public officials who seek to preserve the current social structure and power dynamics, ultimately for the benefit of the capitalist social class.

The American press has held a staunchly anti-Left stance for the longest time. Examining how major news organizations operate is necessary to better understand this position. Herman and Chomsky developed the propaganda model to explain news production. They argue that the mass media's purpose is to entertain and inform but, more importantly, familiarize people with the ideas, beliefs, and codes of conduct that will integrate them into society's institutional structures. They say this demands propaganda. This model determines what media outlets will broadcast or print. It is worth noting that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is as relevant as when they conceptualized it at Reaganism's pinnacle. However, this model also guarantees that right-wing and conservative ideas, such as austerity, deregulation, and privatization, are not openly challenged and that alternative opinions and beliefs appear out of the question. The ruling social class dominates the media with the help of five news filters. Hard-working journalists convince themselves that they report the news without fear or favour based on professional beliefs and values that characterize their journalistic ideology, such as objectivity. So, the news coverage only appears fair and balanced within the filter constraints. These mechanisms are so powerful that alternative ideas and beliefs seem almost utopian.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1994, pp. 1-2.



*Anti-Communism Was a Popular Ideology, and It Still Is*

Conservatives often complain about an alleged left-wing or liberal bias in the news. Opposition to the mass media is one of conservatism's fundamental elements. Hostility toward the press is a "conservative tradition." How did this "conservative tradition" start? The idea of a biased "liberal media" emerged in a "conservative counter sphere" during the height of the Cold War. Mark Major says the "conservative counter sphere" is a "partisan discursive space for right-wing activists and thinkers."<sup>423</sup>

The origins of the "liberal media" developed from white Southerners' opposition to Black liberation and the civil rights movement's media coverage. This enmity intensified anti-communism in the United States. As a result, Southern conservatives criticized the mass media for being pro-civil rights and supporting communism, organized labour, and other radical social movements. As a result, anti-communism also played a crucial part in establishing the conservative critique of the press.<sup>424</sup>

Historically, the mass media in North America and Western Europe has aligned itself with the free market and capitalist state, supported US hegemony, and defended imperialism. So, this ideological position also explains the negative news coverage of the former Eastern Bloc, such as the Soviet Union, Cuba, China, and other allied states. Today, Latin American left-wing governments are considered embodiments or advocates of socialist projects.

Herman and Chomsky's fifth and final filter is the "ideology of anti-communism." Communism has constantly threatened the dominant social class and its interests.<sup>425</sup> Anti-

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<sup>423</sup> Major, Mark. "Why the South Prevailed: Civil Rights, Anticommunism, and the Origins of the 'Liberal Media.'" *New Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2020, pp. 19-20.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>425</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 29.

communism in the mass media is not something shocking. On the contrary, it has a long history in the American press and is an entirely acceptable outlook.<sup>426</sup> A lot has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The threat of communism during the Cold War seems to be a thing of the past, especially with the dominance of liberal democratic capitalism. Moreover, the alleged accomplishments of Reaganomics and Thatcherism have seemingly proven all other economic systems null and void.

Anti-communism, or its current manifestation, anti-socialism, runs rampant in the press. It is a perfectly acceptable viewpoint. Thus, the shortcomings of neoliberalism require an ideology that redirects people from radical democracy and class struggle. Political, social, and economic philosophies within socialism that support gradual social and economic reforms, such as social democracy and democratic socialism, are seen as unfavourable.<sup>427</sup> The capitalist class loathes revolution. It is of little consequence if it is a peaceful or violent transition of power. But, on the other hand, even mild reforms threaten their class privileges so that revenues will suffer, and profits will decrease. As a result, the bourgeoisie sees no real difference between reformism and revolution.<sup>428</sup>

The conservative media frequently hurls allegations at liberals of being socialist sympathizers or at least not adequately anti-socialists. They are always defensive, even though anti-socialism is part of their worldview and ideology. Despite that, most liberal media outlets are under immense pressure to prove their loyalty. As a result, this prompts them to act like ultraconservatives. So, journalists adopt more right-wing values. Thus, the liberal media's relationship with left-wing political parties and candidates, even tepid social democrats, usually

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<sup>426</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. p. 113.

<sup>427</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 29.

<sup>428</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. City Lights Books, 1997, p. 29.

breaks down because liberals are too hard on social movements that support political and social reforms that benefit marginalized communities.<sup>429</sup>

News organizations depict a Manichean world divided into good capitalists and evil socialists. This worldview is an entirely acceptable journalistic practice for reporters to defend capitalism. As a result, they turn their back on concepts such as objectivity and impartiality. Anti-communist ideology remains a powerful control mechanism that allows the dominant social class to maintain its privileges.<sup>430</sup> The mass media considers any effort to transform economic arrangements that impede the free flow of goods, services, and investments between countries to be dangerous. Whatever threatens the interests of the dominant social class is seen as a threat to the entire nation-state. Furthermore, the ruling social class quickly labels any attempt to criticize the free market as an attack on Western culture.<sup>431</sup>

Many Americans have a lousy opinion of left-wing ideas and beliefs such as communism and socialism. Most of socialism's critics refer to Venezuela and Cuba as countries where it was unsuccessful. However, supporters with favourable opinions mention various Nordic countries, such as Finland and Denmark. According to the Pew Research Center, 55 percent of Americans had an unfavourable opinion of "socialism," whereas 42 percent expressed a favourable opinion. However, roughly two-thirds said they had a good impression of "capitalism." A third had the opposite view.<sup>432</sup>

Other studies discovered comparable results. According to global analytics and advice firm Gallup, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll revealed that 53 percent of Americans

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<sup>429</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. p. 29.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>431</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. pp. 197-198.

<sup>432</sup> "In Their Own Words: Behind Americans' Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism.'" *Pew Research Center*, 07 Oct. 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/07/in-their-own-words-behind-americans-views-of-socialism-and-capitalism/>.

disapproved of socialism, whereas only 19 percent had a favourable opinion. In addition, a Monmouth University poll discovered that 57 percent of Americans thought socialism did not fit American values.<sup>433</sup> Pew Research found that some of socialism's critics believed it endangers capitalism, whereas people with the opposing view argue that it improves capitalism. Some have a favourable opinion of socialism but prefer a mixed economy. Republicans are more likely to have a negative attitude toward socialism. Pew Research found that, on the one hand, most conservatives embrace capitalism and reject socialism.<sup>434</sup>

On the other hand, Democrats are more likely to have an open mind and positively view both concepts. Nevertheless, many participants refused to explain their position, but some reasons include the recent past, other countries' experiences, personal experiences, and their knowledge of the concepts when providing the reasons behind their views of socialism and capitalism.<sup>435</sup> In addition, Gallup discovered that there is also a significant generational gap. For example, a study determined that 49 percent of millennials and Gen Zers view socialism favourably, compared with 39 percent of Gen Xers and 32 percent of baby boomers who have a negative opinion.<sup>436</sup>

Most Americans do not see eye to eye on the meaning of socialism. Frank Newport says it is a broad concept, and they understand it differently. For example, some Americans believe socialism involves "government ownership of the means of production." Whereas even more believe that socialism refers to "equality, the provision of social services and benefits to the population and getting along socially with other people."<sup>437</sup> However, they rejected these values

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<sup>433</sup> Newport, Frank. "Public Opinion Review: Americans' Reactions to the Word 'Socialism.'" *Gallup*, 06 Mar. 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/287459/public-opinion-review-americans-word-socialism.aspx>.

<sup>434</sup> "In Their Own Words: Behind Americans' Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism.'"

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Newport, Frank. "Public Opinion Review: Americans' Reactions to the Word 'Socialism.'"

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

during their recent presidential election. A poll by Suffolk University revealed that 67 percent of Americans said they would not be happy with a president who wants to steer the country toward a more socialist direction.<sup>438</sup>

There is no single explanation for why most Americans have a negative opinion of socialism. Almost 19 percent of participants stated that socialism undermines people's ambition and industriousness, making them too dependent on government assistance. Others argue that it hinders freedom of choice. Approximately 18 percent of participants pointed to how socialism was unsuccessful in other countries, such as the USSR and Venezuela. Seventeen percent believed that socialism was undemocratic or unsuitable for the United States.<sup>439</sup>

Since the beginning of the Cold War, there has been sweeping anti-socialist propaganda in the mainstream media, the education system, and political rhetoric. However, notwithstanding the continuous, yet generally fictitious, accounts regarding states with ruling communist or socialist parties, propagandists never discuss their socio-economic policies. This crucial detail explains why, despite many years of anti-socialist propaganda, most Americans, including many who consider themselves well-informed, are clueless about socialist states' social and economic policies.<sup>440</sup>

This unfavourable opinion of socialism results from decades of negative news coverage. Many years after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, anti-communism, or anti-socialism, is still a powerful control mechanism. Instead, it is intensifying under late-stage capitalism. The capitalist media frequently criticizes democratically elected left-wing governments in the Global South. This unfavourable news coverage is a cautionary tale in North America and Western Europe. Soon, audiences discover that socialism always leads to disaster. However, it is only helpful if

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> "In Their Own Words: Behind Americans' Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism.'"

<sup>440</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. p. 25.

the press produces anti-socialist propaganda and the public embraces it. Therefore, it is no surprise that the media continue to make this propaganda, and most Americans vehemently reject socialism. Throughout the years, Sanders, a democratic socialist, has been the target of staunch anti-socialist propaganda in the press for going against the dominant ideology, such as opposing the commodification of health care and the privatization of higher education. In addition, since he announced his presidential bid, the press often portrayed him and his supporters as “sexist, racist, and un-American.”<sup>441</sup> This news coverage reveals the highly ideological, if not reactionary, character of the liberal media.

### *The Liberal Media and the Horseshoe Theory*

Funny enough, “sexist, racist, and un-American” ideas characterize Trump’s platform and policies. Likening socialist and fascist political actors is common in mainstream media. This argument stems from the so-called “horseshoe theory” of political movements. When examining the entire political spectrum from left-wing to right-wing, Jean-Pierre Faye considered a non-linear order where far-left and far-right views resemble one another more than the political center.<sup>442</sup>

During the mid-twentieth century, a significant transformation occurred in the United States. The so-called “Cold War liberals” started to re-interpret the history of nineteenth-century American populism as a proto-fascist movement and, slowly but surely, established the negative meaning of populism, promoting it in the mass media and eventually in political forums. The theory that fascism and communism are opposites but comparable since they are “totalitarian”

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<sup>441</sup> Handler, Heinz. “European Identity and Identitarians in Europe.” *Policy Crossover Center: Vienna-Europe Flash Paper*, vol. 1, 2019, p. 4.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

emerged for the first time. As a result, liberal scholars and academics introduced the idea in the 1950s that the far-right was a populist movement and that early American populism included fascist elements.<sup>443</sup>

The notion that fascism and communism are somehow related is nonsense but helps discredit left-wing candidates. For example, the British press was relentless with the former leader of the UK Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. They hurled numerous accusations at him, including an unwillingness to condemn authoritarian and theocratic regimes and a soft stance on anti-Semitism in his party. In France, a smear campaign also unfolded during the 2017 French presidential election. Several liberal pundits condemned the defeated left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon for not endorsing the centrist Emmanuel Macron. The mainstream media accused him of not confronting the far-right Front National, and many experts argued that many of his supporters were casting their votes for Marine Le Pen in the second round.<sup>444</sup> Even Sanders, who is Jewish and lost family members during the Holocaust, has been compared to Nazis on more than one occasion. For example, an MSNBC host compared Sanders' triumph in Nevada to the Battle of France, when the Nazis conquered the country in 1940.<sup>445</sup>

These accusations are baseless. Proponents of the horseshoe theory denote a long history of cooperation between fascists and communists. They usually refer to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Nevertheless, it is absurd to compare Joseph Stalin to contemporary democratic socialists such as Corbyn, Mélenchon, or Sanders.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> D'Eramo, Marco. "Populism and the New Oligarchy." *New Left Review*, vol. 82, 2013, p. 16.

<sup>444</sup> Wade, Peter. "Blowback Hits MSNBC After Chris Matthews Compares Sanders' Win to Nazis Conquering France." *Rolling Stone*, 23 Feb. 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/msnbc-chris-matthews-bernie-sanders-nazis-956967/>.

<sup>445</sup> Choat, Simon. "'Horseshoe Theory' is Nonsense – The Far Right and Far Left Have Little in Common." *The Conversation*, 12 May 2017. <https://theconversation.com/horseshoe-theory-is-nonsense-the-far-right-and-far-left-have-little-in-common-77588>.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

On the face of it, the far left and far right share contempt for neoliberalism and its elites, but their solutions for improving people's lives are vastly different. For example, they disagree on fundamental questions such as which group constitutes "the elites," why they are a problem, and how to react toward them. On the one hand, progressives argue that globalization allows capital to run amuck, deepening social and economic inequalities. Their reaction is to regulate capital and permit people to have the same privileges of movement enjoyed by capital, goods, and services. On the other hand, they desire an "alternative globalization."<sup>447</sup>

The far-right maintains that the trouble with neoliberal globalization is that it allegedly threatens the nation. As a result, their answer is isolationism, the defence of national capital, and curbing immigration. The far right is a line of protection for the ruling social class. Nonetheless, there is a shared ideological characteristic between socialism and fascism. Both reject liberalism, but again, for entirely different purposes and with completely different outcomes in mind. For example, the left supports internationalism and wealth redistribution, but the far right rejects individualism favouring the nation.<sup>448</sup> Thus, socialists seek to safeguard and promote fundamental liberal ideals, such as freedom and equality, including freedom of the press, whereas far-right populists continue to undermine those values.

Marxist critiques of liberalism draw attention to its inability to correct structural inequalities. What is more, it ignores its past wrongs. Socialists and communists argue that liberal concepts such as equality and freedom can cement the ruling social class's domination over lower classes and groups. Conservatives and reactionaries warn that historically marginalized populations abuse equality to undermine the dominant group's privileged status and traditions. Furthermore, left-wing and right-wing critics of liberalism say that centrists

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.



overlook how power functions. Socialists and communists claim that liberal ideas and beliefs maintain social and economic disparities. Conservatives and reactionaries assert that by disregarding differences concerning power and control, dominant groups are vulnerable to having their privileges violently stripped away and, therefore, unfairly forced to share power. Jason Stanley says the far right argues that equality is “the Trojan horse of liberalism.” If liberalism is the enormous wooden horse, Jews, members of the LGBT community, Muslims, feminists, people of colour, and non-whites play the role of the Achaeans. The far-right believes that individuals who support liberal ideas and beliefs, such as equality, are fools, brainwashed by the concept of freedom. Fascists argue that liberals and socialists promote so-called liberal views, such as equality and freedom, to the dominant group’s members, leading them to relinquish their power and control.<sup>449</sup>

So, what is the real reason behind the horseshoe theory’s popularity? Why do so many liberal pundits insist on perpetuating this flawed theory? First, it enables liberals to smear communists and socialists while denying their connection with fascism. In the past, centrists supported the far-right’s rise to power because they would prefer to have a fascist in government instead of a socialist. As a result, centrists deliberately support the far-right. When liberals repeat the far-right’s opinions on Muslims and immigration mindlessly, many individuals believe fascism sounds reasonable. When liberals enact policies that worsen people’s social and economic conditions and harm democracy, fascism appeals to many people. Simon Choat says, “if liberals genuinely want to understand and confront the rise of the far-right, then rather than smearing the left, they should perhaps reflect on their own faults.”<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Stanley, Jason. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. Random House, 2018, pp. 85-89.

<sup>450</sup> Choat, Simon. “‘Horseshoe Theory’ is Nonsense – The Far Right and Far Left Have Little in Common.”

Liberals prefer to ignore their mistakes and label all criticism as detrimental. Instead, they draw on philosophers like Hannah Arendt, who saw no difference between far-left and far-right. For example, Arendt said, “totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship.”<sup>451</sup> She maintained that totalitarianism develops regardless of “national tradition” or “ideology.” So, during the beginning of the Cold War, Arendt juxtaposed Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism. She noticed many similarities and reinforced the notion that the far-right and the far-left are kindred spirits by pointing to Hitler’s admiration for the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin.<sup>452</sup>

This approach serves as the base for the horseshoe theory. The radical center unjustifiably argues that the left and the right are two sides of the same “totalitarian” coin. On the other hand, conservatives often equate liberals with socialists. This tactic seemingly discredits liberals and pushes them to adopt more anti-socialist policies. It also creates the illusion that conservatives and liberals have entirely different social, political, and economic philosophies while seeking to maintain the same class structures and support the same neoliberal hegemony. So, this is misleading since socialism is the only real option between the three. Far-right political ideologies, such as fascism or right-wing populism, likewise try to maintain the same class structures violently and are a symptom of liberalism’s incapacity to deal with its systemic issues and the ensuing rise of the radical left.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Mariner Books, 1968, p. 460.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>453</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. Verso Books, 2009, p. 75.

### *The “Propaganda Model” and the “Liberal Media”*

It is worth pointing out that when most people accuse the mass media of liberal bias, they ordinarily mean the “mainstream media.” These are the large, influential corporate media outlets in major urban centers. More importantly, these news organizations determine a country’s political agenda. Nevertheless, liberal bias is a myth. On the contrary, most news organizations lean towards the right.<sup>454</sup>

News media companies will support important issues to conservatives and not endanger the interests of the ruling social class because they share their ideology. The so-called liberal media is bound to the ruling class, so they are more sympathetic to conservatives than socialists since the corporate elites share conservatives’ attitudes concerning free trade, capitalism, socialism, the labour movement, protest movements, and US hegemony. They might not always agree on specific social policies and cultural issues, but this will not drive a wedge between them. Additionally, conservatives can buy media exposure, whereas socialists ordinarily can and do not.<sup>455</sup>

The mainstream media, or, more commonly, the journalists and media personalities working in these news organizations, sometimes appears left-wing compared to most owners and executives. Strangely enough, some of these wealthy individuals believe that the mass media is under the thumb of liberal elites. Although news organizations rarely question the free market, journalists occasionally report a rather candid story. But unfortunately, the media whitewashes the inherent systemic features that allow such injustices by covering corporate crimes as isolated

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<sup>454</sup> Alterman, Eric. “What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News.” *Sacred Heart University Review*, vol. 22, no.1, 2002, pp. 25-42.

<sup>455</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*. St. Martin’s Press, 1993, p. 107.

events of a system that serves society.<sup>456</sup> In addition, news organizations are full of conservative commentators who tirelessly complain that the “Left” controls the news media.<sup>457</sup>

Even if a journalist is slightly liberal, news organizations reflect the owners’ and executives’ ideas and beliefs. For example, Eric Alterman argues that most journalists are merely open-minded. He says they are well-educated, urban elites who share relatively liberal opinions on gun control, LGBTQ rights and affirmative action. Nevertheless, these opinions are balanced by reporters’ professional ideology and by the influence of the conservative lobby. Nonetheless, most journalists are fiscal conservatives. He argues that those views are further pushed to the right by their needs or desires and the media outlet’s economic structure.<sup>458</sup>

Reporters are liberal on some topics, mainly social and cultural issues, but far from radicals on economic matters. On the contrary, they are inclined to support the status quo. To the degree that their social background and training determine news production, it is doubtful that they would promote liberal attitudes, let alone socialist ideas and beliefs. If anything, they will go above and beyond to prove that they are fair and balanced by covering left-wing politicians and candidates in a way that expresses disapproval.<sup>459</sup>

### *The Liberal Media Cannot Get Enough of Trump*

In 2016, Sanders, who was nearly unknown to most Democrats and not a considerable threat to the ruling class, attracted enormous attention from most news organizations when he challenged the former First Lady of the United States and Senator from New York. As a result, his news

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p 109.

<sup>457</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. NYU Press, 2008, p. 65.

<sup>458</sup> Alterman, Eric. “What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News.” p. 39.

<sup>459</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. p. 60.

coverage for the Democratic Party nomination was surprisingly positive. The mass media played a significant role in Sanders's success. The press connected him with a broader audience and portrayed him as the underdog. In the meantime, Clinton endured more negative news coverage because of a controversy surrounding her use of a private email server as secretary of state instead of using official email accounts maintained on federal servers. Furthermore, she could not clear the air and interact more productively with the press.<sup>460</sup>

The news coverage of the democratic socialist candidate was somewhat positive until the end of the race. What is more, Sanders never experienced a period of intense scrutiny, similar to some Republican candidates.<sup>461</sup> A Harvard University study confirms that Sanders enjoyed the most favourable news coverage among all candidates from both major parties. Nonetheless, Trump drew the most attention during the presidential race.<sup>462</sup>

This excessive coverage is beneficial for far-right populists such as Trump. Several studies determined that populists do much better when the press covers them. For example, the public became aware of the former reality television star because of the disproportionate media coverage. Studies show that negative media coverage does not necessarily hurt populists during elections. In reality, it benefits them. More news coverage seems to help populists' political candidates and public officials' nominations. Negative media coverage lets populist candidates portray journalists as "the elite" while protesting media bias.<sup>463</sup> It is worth noting that Sanders has also been critical of the mass media but has not carelessly categorized the press as "the elite." Instead, he has referred to the biased news coverage of his agenda as "political gossip" and

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<sup>460</sup> Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 99-103.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>462</sup> Patterson, Thomas E. "Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump's Rise, Sanders' Emergence, Clinton's Struggle." *HKS Working Paper No. 16-023*, 2016, pp. 5-12

<sup>463</sup> Moffitt, Ben. "Populism and Media in Western Europe." *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, edited by Carlos De la Torre, Routledge, 2018, pp. 236-237.

accused the capitalist media of ignoring the major issues that the working- and lower-class face. His protests involve corporate influence on politics and media consolidation.<sup>464</sup> So, it is not just about the quality of news coverage but the quantity.

Continuous coverage of Trump legitimized far-right ideas and beliefs. Victor Pickard argues that “the qualitative and quantitative differences in campaign coverage were stark.” He says the study “calculated that in 2015 Trump received 327 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage, compared with Clinton’s 121 minutes and Sanders’ 20 minutes.”<sup>465</sup>

In comparison, Sanders’s so-called positive coverage appears trivial. News organizations want to seem fair and balanced, but entertainment and commercial values instead of political values motivate their decisions.<sup>466</sup> News values usually determine what current events and news stories to report, i.e., what is “newsworthy.”<sup>467</sup> Ultimately, however, what makes up the news is the result of selectivity.<sup>468</sup> Still, the capitalist media aims to generate profits. Shareholders and owners urge media companies to set and reach their business goals. Therefore, they aim to increase market shares and earnings.<sup>469</sup> Media outlets care more about increasing profits than satisfying the sensibilities of liberals, conservatives, or any other social group, for that matter. As a result, they are likely to support capital.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Heintz, Paul. “I’ve Reported on Bernie Sanders for Years. A Free Press Won’t Give Him What He Wants.” *The Washington Post*, 26 Feb. 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/26/ive-reported-bernie-sanders-years-free-press-cant-give-him-what-he-wants/>.

<sup>465</sup> Pickard, Victor. “Media Failures in the Age of Trump.” *The Political Economy of Communication*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, p. 118.

<sup>466</sup> Patterson, Thomas E. “Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump’s Rise, Sanders’ Emergence, Clinton’s Struggle.” pp. 5-6.

<sup>467</sup> Boyd, Andrew. *Broadcast Journalism: Techniques of Radio and Television News*. Focal Press, 2001, pp. 23-205.

<sup>468</sup> Nesbitt-Larking, Paul. *Politics, Society, and the Media: Canadian Perspectives*. Broadview Press, 2001, p. 337.

<sup>469</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. pp. 5-7.

<sup>470</sup> Bergman, Tabé. “American Television: Manufacturing Consumerism.” *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*, edited by Pedro-Carañana, Joan, Broudy, Daniel. and Klaehn, Jeffery, University of Westminster Press, 2018, p. 164.

Reporters prefer new, strange, and melodramatic news stories because these sorts of stories captivate and attract large audiences – Trump ticks all the boxes. For example, Thomas E. Patterson says, “Trump is arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee.” He argues that “although he subsequently tapped a political nerve, journalists fueled his launch.”<sup>471</sup> Trump’s media coverage in eight mainstream media outlets cost approximately \$55 million. Therefore, the businessman and former television personality secured about \$16 million in advertisement space just in *The New York Times*, which was more than what he paid on campaign advertising in all media in 2015. Furthermore, the study focused only on eight news organizations, neglecting Trump’s free advertisement on the entire news media covering his nomination. Texas Senator Ted Cruz may be right when he said that Trump’s media coverage was equivalent to around \$2 billion in political ads.<sup>472</sup>

Journalists usually offer two justifications when scholars blame the mainstream media for fuelling Trump’s startling rise. First, they argue that they were in “watchdog mode” and that Trump’s coverage was mostly negative or that the “bad news” was far more than the “good news.” Their second excuse is that Trump’s victory resulted from cable television. Journalists blame broadcast television networks that reported on “Trump all the time,” while print media showed much restraint. However, the evidence backs neither of these claims since Trump’s news coverage was positive in all the news organizations Patterson analyzed.<sup>473</sup> The eight influential media outlets covered in the Harvard University study include print and broadcast media, such

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<sup>471</sup> Patterson, Thomas E. “Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump’s Rise, Sanders’ Emergence, Clinton’s Struggle.” pp. 5-6.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NBC, CBS, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, Fox News, and *USA Today*.<sup>474</sup>

All five publications are popular and rank among the top 10 daily newspapers in the United States by circulation.<sup>475</sup> On the other hand, Fox News attracted the most viewers in the country, followed by CBS and NBC in the second and third places, respectively.<sup>476</sup> However, most of the eight media outlets analyzed in Patterson's study appeal to a liberal audience. This development mirrors the news organizations' editorial stance since most foster a liberal bias in their news coverage. On the one hand, *The New York Times*,<sup>477</sup> *The Washington Post*,<sup>478</sup> NBC,<sup>479</sup> CBS,<sup>480</sup> and *The Los Angeles Times* tend to have a left-of-center bent, and *USA Today* is the closest to the center.<sup>481</sup> On the other hand, Fox News is well-known for its right-wing political stance,<sup>482</sup> and *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial pages and opinion pieces exhibit a conservative attitude.<sup>483</sup>

According to a Pew Research Center study, liberals and conservatives in the United States seek out vastly different news sources concerning politics and government. The study

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>475</sup> "Top 10 US Daily Newspapers." *Cision*, 04 Jan. 2019. <https://www.cision.com/2019/01/top-ten-us-daily-newspapers/>.

<sup>476</sup> Joyella, Mark. "Fox News Makes History as Most-Watched TV Network All Summer." *Forbes*, 10 Sep. 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2020/09/10/most-watched-network-in-america-all-summer-is-fox-news-channel/>.

<sup>477</sup> Orkent, Daniel. "The Public Editor; Is The New York Times a Liberal Newspaper?" *The New York Times*, 25 July 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/25/opinion/the-public-editor-is-the-new-york-times-a-liberal-newspaper.html>.

<sup>478</sup> Howell, Deborah. "Deborah Howell on Remedying Perceptions of Media Bias." *The Washington Post*, 16 Nov. 2008. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/14/AR2008111403057\\_pf.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/14/AR2008111403057_pf.html).

<sup>479</sup> Marcetic, Branko. "MSNBC Is the Most Influential Network among Liberals – and It's Ignoring Bernie Sanders." *In These Times*, 13 Nov. 2019. <https://inthesetimes.com/features/msnbc-bernie-sanders-coverage-democratic-primary-media-analysis.html>.

<sup>480</sup> Sauter, Van Gordon. "The 'Liberal Leaning' Media Has Passed Its Tipping Point." *WSJ.com*, 25 May 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-liberal-leaning-media-has-passed-its-tipping-point-11590430876>.

<sup>481</sup> Groseclose, Tim, and Jeffrey Milyo. "A Measure of Media Bias." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 120, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1191-1221.

<sup>482</sup> Gramlich, John. "5 Facts About Fox News." *Pew Research Center*, 8 Apr. 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/five-facts-about-fox-news/>.

<sup>483</sup> Vernon, Pete. "Unpacking WSJ's 'Watershed' Trump Editorial." *Columbia Journalism Review*, 22 Mar. 2017. [https://www.cjr.org/business\\_of\\_news/wsj\\_trump\\_editorial\\_opinion.php](https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/wsj_trump_editorial_opinion.php).



concluded that 47 percent of conservatives overwhelmingly trust Fox News as their primary source of information. In comparison, liberals are less loyal to a single news organization. As a result, multiple media outlets attract readers, viewers, and listeners that fall to the left of the center of the political spectrum.<sup>484</sup>

Journalists report on the most popular nominees. These are usually the candidates who currently hold an office or position. Candidates who can afford the most political advertisements also garner significant media attention. However, popularity and fame among voters are substantial advantages.<sup>485</sup> This development demonstrates the relationship between media content and political and economic power. Journalists produce four types of news stories: a candidate is either “leading,” “trailing,” “gaining ground,” or “losing ground.” During this time, Trump was gaining ground. As a result, the press focused on his rapid rise during the campaign. According to the study, just 12 percent of the news coverage discussed his political views. Most stories in 2015 related to his presidential campaign or how he became the Republican front-runner. These news stories made up 56 percent of Trump’s coverage. Of them, 79 percent were positive.<sup>486</sup>

Not everything reported on Trump’s qualifications, or political opinions was critical. But, according to the study, more than 40 percent of the news coverage was favourable, usually relating to ordinary citizens who supported his platform or condoned his outrageous behaviour. For example, immigration worked in Trump’s favour. Even though most news stories denounced his position, they included comments from Republicans who backed him up. What is more,

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<sup>484</sup> Mitchell, Amy, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Katerina Eva Matsa. “Political Polarization & Media Habits.” *Pew Research Center*, 21 Oct. 2014. <https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>.

<sup>485</sup> Lefevere, Jonas, and Régis Dandoy. “Candidate Choice in Political Advertising: What Determines Who Gets Attention?” *World Political Science*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2011, pp. 5-14.

<sup>486</sup> Patterson, Thomas E. “Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump’s Rise, Sanders’ Emergence, Clinton’s Struggle.” pp. 7-8.

journalists framed the issue as the one helping him move up in the polls.<sup>487</sup> This overwhelmingly positive media coverage convinced many Americans to vote for Trump, even at the expense of their party. According to the *BBC*, nine percent of registered Democrats voted for the Republican candidate in 2016.<sup>488</sup>

Despite the favourable news coverage, Trump had a tumultuous relationship with the press. During the campaign, the property tycoon scolded journalists during canvasses and other campaign events, clashed with reporters he considered hostile toward his nomination, and showed preferential treatment toward more supportive journalists. Trump even vowed to reform libel and slander laws when elected.<sup>489</sup> The mass media are supposed to hold politicians responsible when their actions do not match their words. They highlight dubious policies, questionable behaviour, and broken promises. As a result, right-wing populists such as Trump tend to undermine the press.<sup>490</sup> However, this antagonism works in both parties' favour and maintains the current power structures. For example, as a candidate and possible commander-in-chief, Trump already produced large profits and assured a particular material value for capitalist institutions.

Trump singled out the media as a political opponent, attacking it more than the other nominees. *Politico*'s Jack Shafer says that he mocked journalists and called them "sleazy," "extremely dishonest," "a real beauty," "unfair," and "not good people." On occasion, the attacks were personal. For example, he ridiculed a journalist with a physical disability and referred to political analyst Brit Hume and *The New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Maureen Dowd as "dopes." He even singled out entire news organizations, such as CNN and *The New York Times*,

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>488</sup> "Reality Check: Who Voted for Donald Trump?" *BBC*, 09 Nov. 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37922587>.

<sup>489</sup> Pickard, Victor. "Media Failures in the Age of Trump." p. 118.

<sup>490</sup> Tormey, Simon. *Populism: A Beginner's Guide*. Simon and Schuster, 2019, p. 77.

and hurled unproven accusations at the “mainstream media” on several occasions.<sup>491</sup> Trump argued that the press was determined to overlook his opponents’ blunders while highlighting his own. According to *The New York Times*, he said that journalists are “the lowest form of humanity.”<sup>492</sup> Nevertheless, he was a cash cow for the commercial media for all his insults. Broadcast television networks reportedly made \$2.5 billion throughout the 2016 United States presidential election.<sup>493</sup>

Pickard says that Trump was “the gift that kept giving.” For example, the former chairman and CEO of CBS, Leslie Moonves, revealed that the former host of *The Apprentice* “may not be good for America, but it is damn good for CBS.” Furthermore, he unabashedly said, “the money’s rolling in, and this is fun... This is going to be a very good year for us... Bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”<sup>494</sup>

Despite the terrible relationship between Trump and the liberal media, his news coverage was overwhelmingly positive. Nevertheless, he branded them as crooked. It is worth noting that this hostile relationship with the press only pertains to some news organizations. For example, the relationship between Trump and Rupert Murdoch’s right-wing Fox News has been cordial since the Republican nominee declared his candidacy in 2015.<sup>495</sup>

Scholars disagree on “news bias” and its role. For example, Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo say that news bias is “more like a taste or preference.” Whereas others understand it as a

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<sup>491</sup> Shafer, Jack. “How Trump Took Over the Media by Fighting It.” *Politico*, 05 Nov. 2016.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/2016-election-trump-media-takeover-coverage-214419>.

<sup>492</sup> Burns, Alexander, and Nick Corasaniti. “Donald Trump’s Other Campaign Foe: The ‘Lowest Form of Life’ News Media.” *The New York Times*, 12 Aug. 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/us/politics/donald-trump-obama-isis.html>.

<sup>493</sup> Pickard, Victor. “Media Failures in the Age of Trump.” pp. 118-119.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-119.

<sup>495</sup> Bechtold, Eliza. “Fox News, Donald Trump’s Cheerleaders and the Journalists who challenged his Narrative.” *The Conversation*, 10 Nov. 2020. <https://theconversation.com/fox-news-donald-trumps-cheerleaders-and-the-journalists-who-challenged-his-narrative-149575>.

“matter of accuracy or honesty.”<sup>496</sup> News bias distorts reality, promoting an unfavourable opinion of marginalized groups, ignoring or exaggerating people’s or groups’ societal roles, and denouncing or advancing a specific political party or philosophy. In addition, news bias regularly involves lies, propaganda, or ideas that reinforce the dominant ideology.<sup>497</sup>

News bias was present during the coverage of the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries. It is only partially true that the press favoured Sanders. A notable example is *The Washington Post*. The newspaper published an astonishing 16 negative stories on Sanders in 16 hours. According to Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), “a national progressive media watchdog group, challenging corporate media bias, spin and misinformation,” these stories negatively portrayed his candidacy by depicting him as a “clueless white man incapable of winning over people of colour or speaking to women.”<sup>498</sup>

The founder and CEO of the multinational technology company Amazon Jeff Bezos bought *The Washington Post* in 2013. FAIR notes that Bezos had a close relationship with former-President Barack Obama and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Senator from Vermont has been critical of both.<sup>499</sup> The media watchdog group asserts, “*The Washington Post*’s editorial stance has been staunchly anti-Sanders, though the newspaper contends that its editorial board is entirely independent of both Bezos and the paper’s news reporting.”<sup>500</sup>

Sanders’s campaign and supporters continue to believe he was the victim of numerous “media sins” in 2016. Furthermore, they argue that he was under fire during the 2020

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<sup>496</sup> Groseclose, Tim, and Jeffrey Milyo. “A Measure of Media Bias.” p. 1204.

<sup>497</sup> McQuail, Denis. *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*. Sage Publications, 2010, p. 358.

<sup>498</sup> Johnson, Adam. “Washington Post Ran 16 Negative Stories on Bernie Sanders in 16 Hours.” *Fair.org*, 18 Mar. 2016. <https://fair.org/home/washington-post-ran-16-negative-stories-on-bernie-sanders-in-16-hours/>.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

Democratic Party presidential primaries.<sup>501</sup> If anything, the mainstream media's aggression appeared to have intensified. Like Trump, Sanders also had a tense relationship with the mainstream media. However, he has argued that the corporate media does not have the people's best interests at heart.<sup>502</sup> This position proved to be more damaging for the American Left.

### *The Liberal Media Declares War on Sanders*

Throughout the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries, the press regularly compared Sanders and Venezuelan politicians such as Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro. Journalists repeatedly questioned him about Venezuela's current socioeconomic situation. The assumption that his progressive policies would mirror Venezuela's is ridiculous. The fear regarding socialism, or rather the mobilization and manipulation of that fear by both conservatives and liberals, results from views that are already circulating in the American media. Michael Brooks and Ben Burgis point out that during the Democratic Party's third presidential debate, Mexican moderator Jorge Ramos, "the Walter Cronkite of Latino Americans,"<sup>503</sup> asked Sanders why he refused to label Maduro as a "dictator."<sup>504</sup> He also asked about the differences between his "kind of socialism" and "the one being imposed in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua." Sanders praised Canada's and Scandinavian countries' social programs and commitment to democracy. However,

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<sup>501</sup> Allsop, Jon. "Coverage of Bernie Sanders Suffers from a Lack of Imagination." *Columbia Journalism Review*, 11 Feb. 2020. [https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/bernie\\_sanders\\_media\\_new\\_hampshire.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/bernie_sanders_media_new_hampshire.php).

<sup>502</sup> Kludt, Tom. "Fox has been 'More Fair:' Why Bernie's Team has had it with MSNBC." *Vanity Fair*, 18 Feb, 2020. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/02/fox-has-been-more-fair-why-bernies-team-has-had-it-with-msnbc>.

<sup>503</sup> Calmes, Jackie. "Jorge Ramos, Voice of Latino Voters on Univision, Sends Shiver Through G.O.P." *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/24/us/politics/jorge-ramos-tv-voice-of-latino-voters-sends-shiver-through-gop.html>.

<sup>504</sup> Brooks, Michael, and Ben Burgis. "How Bernie Sanders Should Talk About Venezuela and US Intervention in Latin America." *Jacobin*, 30 Sep. 2019. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/bernie-sanders-venezuela-intervention-latin-america>.

he did not hold back and referred to Maduro as a “vicious tyrant.”<sup>505</sup> Nevertheless, Sanders faced harsh criticism for his alleged support of left-wing Latin American leaders such as the late Cuban revolutionary and politician Fidel Castro and Nicaraguan President and head of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) Daniel Ortega.<sup>506</sup> These sorts of comparisons piggyback off several years of anti-communist news coverage in the American mainstream media, dating as far back as the Cold War and as recently as the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America.

When journalists do not compare Sanders to Southern American socialist leaders they consider dictators, they usually snub him. Sanders’s campaign and supporters criticized the mainstream media because they believed journalists underestimated his impressive rise and overlooked his uncanny ability to draw in donors. A former journalist and staff member of Sanders’s presidential campaign, David Sirota, noted several examples in a newsletter. They included a *New York Times* push notification that compared the polling positions of former Vice President Biden, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg. Nevertheless, despite coming in second in the poll, it utterly ignored Sanders. Sirota also noted a CNN chyron that made the same supposed mistake.<sup>507</sup>

Unlike in 2016, Sanders was no longer an underdog and initially appeared to be a real contender for the presidential ticket. Many working-class Democratic voters embraced his policies, including “Medicare-for-All,” free college tuition, and the \$15 minimum wage.<sup>508</sup> Nonetheless, the Democratic establishment was worried about an outsider, a democratic socialist, at the top of the ticket. As a result, Sanders’ opponents often put their differences aside and

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Krieg, Gregory, Andrew Kaczynski and Em Steck. “Bernie Sanders has Praised Aspects of Leftist Regimes for Decades.” *CNN*, 25 Feb. 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/25/politics/bernie-sanders-praise-authoritarian-leftist-regimes>.

<sup>507</sup> Allsop, Jon. “Coverage of Bernie Sanders Suffers from a Lack of Imagination.”

<sup>508</sup> Otterbein, Holly. “Sanders Launches Second Bid for Presidency.” *Politico*, 19 Feb. 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/19/bernie-sanders-presidential-campaign-2020-1173598>.

rallied against him, claiming he was unelectable and labelling parts of his agenda politically extreme and misguided.<sup>509</sup> At the same time, several famous business figures slammed him and his policies. These “anti-endorsements” reflect Sanders’ longstanding struggle with corporate America. As a result, he said, “it should come as no surprise that corporate CEOs and billionaires have united against our movement. These people have a vested interest in preserving the status quo so they can keep their grip on power and continue to exploit working people across America. We welcome their hatred.”<sup>510</sup> Unsurprisingly, the political establishment and American corporations share the same contempt for Sanders since he blames them for growing income and wealth inequality and calls for his supporters to oppose them.<sup>511</sup> Sanders has also provoked the ire of the media establishment. The press went so far as to accuse him of “playing Trumpian politics,” as if supporting universal healthcare and cancelling student debt is anywhere near Trump’s authoritarian and racist policies.<sup>512</sup>

For example, the host of MSNBC’s weekly television news program *Meet the Press*, Chuck Todd, described Sanders’s online supporters as “digital brown shirts,” equating the Jewish politician’s followers to Nazis when he won the 2020 New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary. He languished over the class struggle against the super-rich the week prior. However, this was not an isolated incident. Todd once told Sanders that “the right will hammer and sickle you to death,” and he wrongfully called him “pro-NRA” after the 2015 Lafayette shooting. In addition, *Hardball* host Chris Matthews went on an anti-socialist diatribe, sounding the alarm

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<sup>509</sup> Lutz, Eric. “The Democratic Establishment is Melting Down Over Bernie’s Ascendance.” *Vanity Fair*, 24 Feb. 2020. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/02/the-democratic-establishment-is-melting-down-over-bernies-ascendance>.

<sup>510</sup> Marans, Daniel. “Bernie Sanders Touts New List of ‘Anti-Endorsements.’” *HuffPost*, 10 July 2019. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-anti-endorsements\\_n\\_5d261b21e4b0583e482af0d3](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-anti-endorsements_n_5d261b21e4b0583e482af0d3).

<sup>511</sup> Sanders, Bernie. “The US Has a Ruling Class – and Americans Must Stand Up to It.” *The Guardian*, 02 Sep. 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/02/the-us-has-a-ruling-class-and-americans-must-stand-up-to-it>.

<sup>512</sup> Uyehara, Mari. “Why Does Mainstream Media Keep Attacking Bernie Sanders as He Wins?” *GQ*, 12 Feb. 2020. <https://www.gq.com/story/mainstream-media-vs-bernie-sanders>.

about “executions in Central Park” and shouting, “I might have been one of the ones getting executed.” The American political commentator exclaimed, “I don’t know who Bernie supports over these years, I don’t know what he means by socialism. One week it’s Denmark... Well, what does he think of Castro? That’s a great question.” On *Morning Joe*, James Carville told former Republican Congressman Joe Scarborough and his co-host, Mika Brzezinski, that Sanders’ nomination would spell the end of the Democratic Party. Furthermore, Carville stated, “if we go the way of the British Labour Party, if we nominate Jeremy Corbyn, it’s going to be the end of days.”<sup>513</sup>

All of that was just on one television cable channel, MSNBC. Branko Marcetic, a writer at the left-leaning magazine *In These Times*, argues that MSNBC, the “forthright voice of liberalism on cable news,” reported on Sanders more negatively than his two principal opponents: Biden and Warren. He discovered that throughout August and September of 2019, six television news programs disproportionately focused their coverage on Biden, regularly neglecting Warren and Sanders. Sanders received the least news coverage, but it was primarily negative when he did. MSNBC’s coverage focused on poll results and electability.<sup>514</sup>

FAIR found that as the 2020 Iowa Democratic presidential caucuses approached, the major media outlets were particularly aggressive toward Sanders. Liberal media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *NBCNews.com* published opinion pieces comparing the democratic socialist candidate and Trump, thus reinforcing the “horseshoe theory.” For example, American economist and *The New York Times* opinion columnist Paul Krugman labelled Sanders “Trumpian,” *The Washington Post*’s Jennifer Rubin argued that

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Marcetic, Branko. “MSNBC Is the Most Influential Network among Liberals – and It’s Ignoring Bernie Sanders.”



Sanders was running a “Trump-like” campaign, and *NBCNews.com* compared Trump’s “MAGA Supporters” to “Twitter Bernie Bros.”<sup>515</sup>

### *The Liberal Media’s Obsession with Bernie Bros*

The mainstream media continuously portrayed Sanders’s left-wing supporters as teetering on the brink of fascism or willing to cast their vote for Trump instead of the Democratic nominee.

According to *NBCNews.com*, during the 2016 United States presidential election, approximately 216,000 voters in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin supported Sanders during the Democratic Party presidential primaries and Trump in the general election. The news website argued that Sanders’s voters were less prone to support Biden than other Democrats. In a poll conducted on Super Tuesday, the day when most states hold presidential nomination contests, NBC News discovered that “15 percent of Sanders voters said they were not committed to voting for the Democratic nominee, regardless of whom it was, compared to 10 percent of Biden voters who said the same.”<sup>516</sup> *USA Today* also reported that 15 percent of Sanders’s voters would vote for Trump. The daily newspaper claimed this represented a somewhat more significant defection than after the contest between Sanders and Clinton in 2016. According to ABC News, this number represented only six percent of registered Democrats and Americans who vote for the party.<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Hollar, Julie. “Corporate Media Are the Real ‘Sanders Attack Machine.’” *Fair.org*, 30 Jan. 2020. <https://fair.org/home/corporate-media-are-the-real-sanders-attack-machine/>.

<sup>516</sup> Pettypiece, Shannon. “Sanders Voters Helped Trump Win the White House. Could They Do It Again?” *NBCNews.com*, 03 Mar. 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/sanders-voters-helped-trump-win-white-house-could-they-do-it-145306>.

<sup>517</sup> Cummings, William. “Poll: 15% of Sanders Supporters Will Vote for Trump if Biden is Nominee; 80% Would Back Biden.” *USA Today*, 29 Mar. 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/03/29/bernie-sanders-supporters-vote-trump-over-biden-poll/2936124001/>.

These figures are minuscule compared to the millions of Americans who lost their right to vote or decided not to exercise it for numerous reasons. According to *The Guardian*, of the United States 250 million eligible voters, roughly 63 million Americans voted for Trump in 2016, and approximately 73.5 million voted against the real estate developer. About 65.8 million people cast their vote for Clinton. However, many citizens did not even vote. Mona Chalabi discovered that “136 million ballots were cast in total, meaning that 45 percent of adults who live in the US did not participate on Election Day.” Moreover, “the obstacles to voting disproportionately affect people of colour.”<sup>518</sup>

In 2016 and 2020, the liberal media focused on the small number of Sanders’s supporters who decided not to cast their vote for the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate as if they singlehandedly determined the election’s outcome. Reporter Jonathan Cook says that the Democratic Party’s leadership and those members of the media who willingly repeat its arguments tried to undermine Sanders and his supporters by claiming that his campaign appealed mainly to “angry, entitled white men.” Not unlike the white working-class men who supported Trump. Cook argues that this is how the “Bernie Bro” stereotype emerged. Since 2016, when Sanders challenged Clinton, the mainstream media painted Sanders’s supporters as “sexist, racist, and un-American.”<sup>519</sup>

During the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries, Clinton embraced the language of “intersectionality” and “privilege” and appropriated identity politics to undermine Sanders. Even though the Senator from Vermont was popular with many women, the Clinton campaign focused on and criticized Sanders’s male supporters. They also accused him of ignoring black

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<sup>518</sup> Chalabi, Mona. “Who Are the Three-Quarters of Adult Americans Who Didn’t Vote for Trump?” *The Guardian*, 18 Jan. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/18/american-non-voters-election-donald-trump>.

<sup>519</sup> Cook, Jonathan. “How ‘Bernie Bros’ Were Invented, Then Smeared as Sexist, Racist and unAmerican as Borscht.” *CounterPunch*, 12 Mar. 2020. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/03/12/how-bernie-bros-were-invented-then-smeared-as-sexist-racist-and-unamerican-as-borscht/>.

people's interests, despite the Democratic Party's adoption of neoliberal policies and its destructive consequences on countless black Americans' lives.<sup>520</sup>

News organizations promoted the negative stereotype. Warren, Clinton and *The New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens have backed the idea that Sanders' voters are mean-spirited, even though his policies are the most humane and compassionate. In addition, the mainstream media accused his supporters of being incredibly hateful on social media networks, but there is no proof to back up this accusation. Keith A. Spencer says the "evidence that Sanders supporters are uniquely cruel online, compared to any other candidates' supporters, is scant." Furthermore, "much of the discourse around Bernie Bros seems to rely on skewed anecdotes that do not stand up to scrutiny."<sup>521</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The notion of the "liberal media" is a right-wing myth with roots in the American conservative movement's hostility towards the news media's coverage of the Black Power movement, the labour movement, and other radical social movements during the Cold War. Today, conservative and right-wing ideas and beliefs heavily influence news organizations since they reflect the owners' and executives' interests. Therefore, to avoid being labelled biased, journalists will go above and beyond to prove that they are "fair and balanced" and dispel this accusation by disproportionately reporting on topics that matter to conservatives.

Large news organizations seem uninterested or antagonistic towards socialist political parties and candidates. Both liberal and conservative political commentators often identify

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<sup>520</sup> Haider, Asad. *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. Verso Books, 2018, p. 9.

<sup>521</sup> Spencer, Keith A. "There is Hard Data that Shows 'Bernie Bros' are a Myth." *Salon*, 09 Mar. 2020. <https://www.salon.com/2020/03/09/there-is-hard-data-that-shows-bernie-bros-are-a-myth/>.

anyone left of center who challenges the dominant ideology with the failures of socialism or, oddly enough, as indistinguishable from fascism. They focus on the Left's supposed authoritarian leanings.

Most people are ignorant about socialist social and economic policies because the capitalist media keeps them uninformed. The alternative press needs the tools to speak against specific projects but is often unable to do so. However, this is not a recent development. Many decades of media concentration and steadfast propaganda explain why most Americans have a negative opinion of socialism. Even if many Democrats have a somewhat favourable view, as opposed to Republicans, liberal media outlets will undoubtedly shape their ideas and beliefs since they adopt a staunchly anti-socialist position in their news coverage. American audiences and readers get a daily dose of anti-socialism from liberal and conservative news organizations. Despite all the discussion of being "fair and balanced," anti-socialism appears to be a somewhat uncontroversial, if not acceptable, point of view. If anything, journalists are encouraged by media owners and executives to be critical of radical positions. Unsurprisingly, approximately two-thirds of Americans said they would not support a socialist presidential candidate because they are ill-informed.

The capitalist media's news coverage bolsters far-right ideas and beliefs more than any far-right populist political party or candidate on the campaign trail. Even conservative media outlets such as Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal* appear less influential than their liberal counterparts. Not surprisingly, many Democrats ended up voting for Trump in 2016. The "liberal media's" favourable news coverage of Trump's presidential campaign, coupled with the downright hostility towards Sanders and his supporters in 2016 and, especially, 2020, when he threatened the Democratic Party establishment, contributed to the rise of the far-right. At the

same time, a group of young congresswomen known as “the Squad” were elected in 2018, and the group expanded in 2020. “The Squad” pursued progressive reforms, such as economic, social, and racial justice, the Green New Deal (GND), and advancing peace at home and abroad.<sup>522</sup> The bias towards Sanders and other progressive politicians only reaffirms that the “liberal media” would prefer to have a conservative, or even a far-right populist like Trump, in the White House instead of a democratic socialist who openly professes his admiration for social democracies like Denmark. Since both liberals and conservatives want to sustain capitalism, it is natural that the entire mainstream media would undermine the only presidential candidate with modest anti-capitalist political ideas.

The news coverage of Trump proved highly profitable. This development reveals that the liberal media seeks even greater profits at almost any cost, but it also shows the elite’s willingness to cooperate with the far-right. In 2016, this came at the expense of Clinton, the Democratic Party presidential candidate, who was the clear frontrunner for the longest time. However, in 2020, most mainstream media outlets shared the same outlook and supported Biden since Trump proved too divisive, and Sander’s popularity rose dangerously. So, it appeared that, four years later, the stakes were higher. As a result, the smear campaign against Sander intensified.

On the one hand, the ruling social class benefits by neutralizing potential threats from the radical left and, on the other, it generates enormous profits. This strategy has proved a win-win situation. As a result, the liberal media unveils its conservative leanings and again demonstrates that it is not very “liberal.” On the contrary, it is incredibly hostile to the American Left. In addition, it reveals that the capitalist media is not very supportive of liberal democratic

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<sup>522</sup> Nichols, John. “2020 Is a Great Year for #SquadPolitics. Just Ask Cori Bush and Rashida Tlaib,” *The Nation*, 06 Aug. 2020. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/cori-bush-tlaib/>.

institutions since their disproportionate coverage of far-right political candidates and public officials have contributed to the rapid rise of authoritarian political parties and movements that make no secret of their contempt for liberal democracy. This results in the gradual erosion of liberal democratic institutions.

## Chapter Four: No, Trump Did Not Win Because of Twitter: The Real Impact of Social Media on US Voters during the 2016 Presidential Elections

### *Introduction*

The 2016 United States presidential election attracted unparalleled media attention. News organizations reported on the related events with in-depth coverage. Unlike previous presidential elections, social media platforms were crucial in disseminating information. Furthermore, they also helped spark debates amongst voters. However, some media personalities and newscasters claimed that Donald Trump won thanks to social media.<sup>523</sup> Even the president believed social media contributed to his victory.<sup>524</sup> However, the role of social media in the 2016 election was greatly exaggerated. Instead, traditional media, especially television news, and their digital offshoots were far more impactful.

News organizations are responsible for normalizing and consolidating nationalism and far-right ideology. While denouncing right-wing populist political candidates and public officials for their scandalous behaviour and egregious statements, they ignored the social, political, and economic conditions contributing to the rise of the far right. As a result, the press catapulted them into the mainstream. In addition, news organizations focus on the ability to be entertaining by producing unique spectacular news content since this attracts large audiences and sponsors. For example, journalists disproportionately reported on Trump because he constantly created online and offline spectacles.<sup>525</sup> Modern media culture increasingly concentrates on

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<sup>523</sup> Khan, Laeeq. "Trump Won Thanks to Social Media." *The Hill*, 15 Nov. 2016. <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/technology/306175-trump-won-thanks-to-social-media>.

<sup>524</sup> Morin, Rebecca. "Trump says Social Media was Key to Victory." *Politico*, 11 Dec. 2016. [politico.com/story/2016/11/donald-trump-social-media-231285](http://politico.com/story/2016/11/donald-trump-social-media-231285).

<sup>525</sup> Kellner, Douglas. "Preface: Guy Debord, Donald Trump, and the Politics of the Spectacle." *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*, edited by Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano, 2017, University of Westminster Press, pp. 1-2.

technologically advanced spectacles to attract larger audiences and increase the capitalist media's power and profits. This results in infotainment becoming more popular than ever.<sup>526</sup> I argue that the proliferation of the media spectacle, coupled with the increasing reliance on social media as a news source rather than a new form of the public sphere, is crucial in understanding the rise of the far-right in the United States.

That is to say that social media platforms played a crucial role, but not the one many commentators have claimed. For example, Sam Sanders, a reporter and podcast host at National Public Radio (NPR), thinks they did more harm than good. He went as far as to question if social media and social networking services ruined the election. Instead, he argues that they have transformed the way we discuss politics. Sanders claims that “we do not just create political strife for ourselves; we seem to revel in it.”<sup>527</sup>

Social media rewards spectacles, but mainstream media truly allows those online spectacles to gain popularity. But this is no surprise. The capitalist press seeks out news stories that entertain audiences at risk of becoming increasingly politically disengaged. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that “reporting facts as human-interest stories, mixing information with entertainment, arranging material episodically, and breaking down complex relationships into smaller fragments – all of this comes together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticize public communication.”<sup>528</sup> Therefore, the mainstream media constantly reports on superficial and one-dimensional news stories that simplify reality and do not sufficiently confront society's social and economic issues.<sup>529</sup> However, I argue that this results in

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<sup>526</sup> Kellner, Douglas. “Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle.” p. 58.

<sup>527</sup> Sanders, Sam. “Instagram: The New Political War Room?” *NPR*, 03 Sept. 2015.  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/09/03/436923997/instagram-the-new-political-war-room>.

<sup>528</sup> Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. Pluto Press, 2018, p. 278.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272.-278.



strengthening far-right ideas and beliefs. So, instead of simply depoliticizing society and disengaging citizens, it radicalizes individuals and groups. Moreover, since the far-right ideology distracts “attention from class and social contradictions that underlie class society’s structure, stratification patterns and problems,”<sup>530</sup> the mass media serves as a safety net for the ruling class when it popularizes far-right ideas and beliefs.

Trump’s antics on the campaign trail were well-documented. His online presence also shocked the public, especially on the microblogging and social networking service Twitter. In addition, Trump effectively used social media to discredit his opponents. This behaviour prompts us to question if this “is the new normal” and if “political fights occur in any space now?”<sup>531</sup> Hollywood-style media spectacles have gone from “old media,” such as radio and television, to online spaces like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This development is closely related to the Web’s changing nature. Kerric Harvey says all technology begins with “one kind of organizational culture to it, some kind of virtual code of conduct and worldview.”<sup>532</sup> Nevertheless, this only lasts for a short time. After that, it never remains the same.<sup>533</sup>

Were “new media,” like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, capable of influencing the election? Or did “old media,” such as television, radio, and even newspapers, continue to influence public opinion? Did social media platforms encourage or hinder political participation during the 2016 US presidential elections? In addition, what was the role of the press? Most Americans still prefer radio and television for their latest breaking news.<sup>534</sup> Journalists produce multi-platform news content. Despite their “democratic” reputations, social media and social

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>531</sup> Sanders, Sam. “Instagram: The New Political War Room?”

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Hershey, Marjorie Randon. “Election Research as Spectacle: The Edelman Vision and the Empirical Study of Elections.” *Political Communication*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1993, p. 124.

networking services, like radio and television, can harm democracy by exhibiting new media spectacles. Ultimately, a symbiotic relationship between mainstream and social media deepens neoliberal integration. As a result, in the age of hyper-commercialism, the dominant social class maintains its power by controlling both “new” and “old” media.

### *Social Media Platforms*

Although television, compared to other forms of media, continues to be the primary source of news and entertainment for most Americans, some scholars and writers argue that there has been an abandonment of traditional media and a steady move toward new media by many individuals. However, considering the media spectacle’s digital presence, it is incredibly problematic if this is true.<sup>535</sup>

Social media, like most online spaces, evolved from traditional media spaces. For example, Sara A. Bly et al. define media spaces as “technologically-created environments that appeared from a concern for both the social and technical practices of collaborative work and from an effort to support those practices.”<sup>536</sup> These spaces combined various elements, including “video, audio, and computing technologies.”<sup>537</sup>

Networks are everywhere on the Web. Symeon Papadopoulos et al. say that “the most profound Web network is the Web itself comprising billions of pages as vertices and their hyperlinks to each other as edges.”<sup>538</sup> Social media platforms play a meaningful role in

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<sup>535</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>536</sup> Bly, Sara A., Steve R. Harrison, and Susan Irwin. “Media spaces: bringing people together in a video, audio, and computing environment.” *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 36, no.1, 1993, p. 30.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>538</sup> Papadopoulos, Symeon et al. “Community Detection in Social Media.” *Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2012, p. 516.

developing and enlarging new online networks. However, despite the significant differences among these websites, quite a few standard features exist. They signify a crucial source of information, seeing that they record, day after day, the online life of active social media users. By examining social media, we can better understand the social developments and activities around us.<sup>539</sup>

Social media have become increasingly popular and widespread, with many online users and researchers. As a result, new websites are constantly popping up. However, Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison say that since they first appeared, social media and social networking services like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have drawn in millions and, in some cases, billions of users. As a result, new users have incorporated these websites into their everyday lives. Hundreds of social media platforms support many online interests and activities. Although the technology that supports these websites is similar, multifaceted cultures tend to materialize. Boyd and Ellison say that most social media and social networking services allow people to interact to discuss common concerns, political views, and similar interests. For example, they argue that some websites “cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities.” Nevertheless, there are computing differences. Boyd and Ellison say that websites “also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo/video-sharing.”<sup>540</sup>

Boyd and Ellison say that social media and social networking services allow people to create a public or private profile within a closed platform, connect with other users, and interact with them within the system. The characteristics and terminology of these connections may

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p. 516.

<sup>540</sup> Boyd, Danah M., and Nicole B. Ellison. “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol.13, no. 1, 2007, p. 210.

differ from website to website.<sup>541</sup> Today, media spaces, mainly social media spaces, have changed significantly since their first appearance. For example, this change is evident in the new terminology that accompanies them – “cyberspace” is now “Web 2.0.”<sup>542</sup>

Payal Arora says this new conceptualization acknowledges that online spaces are not uniform structures but various social media and social networking services developed by their creators and users. Hence, she argues, “a growing demand to anchor these spaces in real-world infrastructures rather than accept the initial interpretation of such spaces as revolutionary, unprecedented, and novel.”<sup>543</sup>

Furthermore, there is a specific relationship between networks and culture. Arora says that “the virtual sphere is constituted by diverse social network spaces, each with their own cultural elements.”<sup>544</sup> Nevertheless, examining online social structures using their culture is not enough. She argues that paying particular attention to “actor nodes, social positions, relations, histories, mobilities, and communicative practices allows for a comprehensive outlook on cultural (re)productions that define and give specific virtual spaces their endemic character.”<sup>545</sup>

Arora says that “sentiment toward space is another important driving force that determines user behaviour.”<sup>546</sup> She argues that people decide to occupy or not specific social network spaces to some extent due to personal preferences. Frequently, mass media influences our decisions, both online and offline. As a result, Arora says that “with the tremendous choice online of sites to occupy and experience, the new browser becomes an online tourist, peripherally

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>542</sup> Arora, Payal. “Typology of Web 2.0 Spheres: Understanding the Cultural Dimensions of Social Media Spaces.” *Current Sociology*, vol. 60, no. 5, 2012, p. 600.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., p. 600.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., p. 612.

engaging and being entertained. The digital *flâneur* strolls through a range of sites, consuming space in a distant manner.”<sup>547</sup>

The word “flâneur” is French, usually translating into “stroller” in English. The flâneur is one of the “emblems of modernity.” David Macey says that French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire depicts the flâneur as the “ultimate consumer of the modern city who gathers fleeting but significant impressions as he strolls through the streets.”<sup>548</sup> French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord appropriates the flâneur to develop his “dérive” theory or “locomotion without a goal.”<sup>549</sup> Whereas “dérive,” also understood as “drift,” is associated with German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s image of the flâneur and surrealism’s “search for the encounter with the marvellous.”<sup>550</sup> However, Macey says that it differs from both concepts since exploring urban spaces is to examine their “psychogeography” and find places that are beneficial to particular emotions or resonate with a desire that can undermine the “society of the spectacle.”<sup>551</sup>

Social media spaces include online communities. Papadopoulos et al. say that these communities consist of numerous entities, such as “online users, content items and metadata associated with content, that revolve around particular topics or events of social interest.”<sup>552</sup> The connection between these entities affects social media and social networking services. Consequently, these websites comprise communities.<sup>553</sup> Therefore, social media and social networking services provide users with brand-new information and communication tools.

Nevertheless, they still need to live up to their expectations to a certain degree. Matthew Flisfeder argues that, in the beginning, the internet pledged to “give a voice back to the people,

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid., p. 612.

<sup>548</sup> Macey, David. *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin, 2000, p. 131.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>552</sup> Papadopoulos, Symeon et al. “Community Detection in Social Media.” p. 548.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., p. 548.

one that has been taken away from private media and entertainment.”<sup>554</sup> So, the enlargement and consolidation of modern computer networks have not strengthened democratic institutions. On the contrary, they have advanced something completely different, “communicative capitalism.” Jodi Dean, who coined the term, argues that this new variant of late capitalism creates “disconnections in the guise of community.”<sup>555</sup>

Dean argues that communicative capitalism encompasses the notion that the market is where the people’s democratic hopes and dreams unfold. The market is the site where their collective inclinations tend to materialize. As a result, communicative capitalism attempts to blend democracy and laissez-faire economics – to what extent this is feasible or desirable is up for debate. Nevertheless, it emphasizes the networks that bring these two separate components together. She says that “communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies.” Dean says, “ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications.”<sup>556</sup>

Rather than inaugurating radical change and marking the start of a socially progressive distribution of riches and power, rather than permitting the development of better living conditions and democratic institutions, the violent flow of spectacles inherent in it subverts the political possibilities for most of the world’s peoples. Dean says that “with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle.” In other words, she argues that “the standards of a finance- and

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<sup>554</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. “Enjoying Social Media.” *Zizek and Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Matthew Flisfeder and Louis-Paul Willis, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 229.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>556</sup> Dean, Jodi. “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics.” *Cultural Politics*, vol. 1, no.1, 2005, pp. 54-55.

consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today.”<sup>557</sup> Moreover, communicative capitalism creates divisions and integrates users into the capitalist system, so Flisfeder argues that “blogging and the use of social media, such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, facilitate the integration of users into the matrices of neoliberal capitalism.”<sup>558</sup>

### *The Move to Social Media*

The commodification of communication impacted the 2016 US presidential election. After the vote, Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow say that the centre of attention shifted from traditional media to new media, specifically television, to social media and social networking services. However, they argue that, unlike broadcast media, social media and social networking services platforms like Facebook and Twitter have a completely different structure than earlier media technology. Allcott and Gentzkow state that “content can be relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement, and an individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN or *The New York Times*.”<sup>559</sup>

Online users can determine the flow of information on social media and social networking services. Still, it is unlikely that individual users with no track record or reputation will change the world soon. Funny enough, traditional journalism dominates, even online. Stephen Harper argues that the most popular online news sources are the blogs and websites of well-established news organizations. In addition, most content creators are already well-known

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., pp. 55.

<sup>558</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. “Enjoying Social Media.” pp. 229-230.

<sup>559</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” p. 2.

journalists for their work in “old media.” Finally, he points out that political comments usually reproduce the dominant social class’s ideas and beliefs, even in free online encyclopedias, like Wikipedia.<sup>560</sup> So, the capitalist media has made a relatively smooth transition from traditional media to new media and continues to determine the news flow.

On the surface, social media and social networking services help spread information and connect individuals all over the globe. However, they are responsible for further isolating people under the ruling social class’s control. For example, Facebook caters to every user’s news feed and primarily connects like-minded individuals.<sup>561</sup> Sanders says, “at its core, it is a platform meant to connect users with people they already like, not to foster discussion with those you might disagree with.”<sup>562</sup>

Graham Meikle and Sherman Young tell us that Facebook combines “personal ephemera, news headlines, party photos, political announcements, attention-seeking, communion, and links.”<sup>563</sup> Friends, acquaintances, strangers, public figures, and credible and credulous news media outlets share this information. For that reason, Meikle and Young argue that popular social media and social networking services provide their users with a unique combination of “personal communication and public media.”<sup>564</sup>

As a result, social media and social networking services further isolate their users. Allcott and Gentzkow argue that “excess diversity of viewpoints would make it easier for like-minded citizens to form ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’ where they would be insulated from contrary perspectives.”<sup>565</sup> This aspect has broader implications for our political system. In many cases, the

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<sup>560</sup> Harper, Stephen. *Beyond the Left: The Communist Critique of the Media*. John Hunt Publishing, 2012, p. 102.

<sup>561</sup> Meikle, Graham, and Sherman Young. *Media Convergence: Networked Digital Media in Everyday Life*. Palgrave, 2012, p. 59.

<sup>562</sup> Sanders, Sam. “Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?”

<sup>563</sup> Meikle, Graham, and Sherman Young. *Media Convergence: Networked Digital Media in Everyday Life*. p. 59.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>565</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” p. 2.



isolationism associated with new communication technologies is responsible for hindering, instead of fostering, political engagement.<sup>566</sup>

Dean also argues that social media and social networking services can often be counterproductive. What is more, it benefits the dominant social class. She says, “instead of engaged debates, instead of contestations employing common terms, points of reference or demarcated frontiers, we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies.”<sup>567</sup> This fact has never been more accurate than in late capitalism. Instead of politically unconcerned, discouraged, and apathetic citizens, she believes that politically active citizens are confined to their “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” because of the new communication technologies.<sup>568</sup>

Social media and social networking services can also have positive consequences, but some scholars and writers exaggerate this. For example, Asef Bayat says that “the new information technology, in particular the current social networking sites such as Facebook, can bypass the medium of physical space by connecting atomized individuals in the world of the Web, and in so doing create a tremendous opportunity for building both passive and active networks.”<sup>569</sup> Although no one denies that social media platforms eliminate long distances between users, these online spaces will likely consist of like-minded individuals. As a result, social media and social networking services will not benefit any candidate except, perhaps, radicalize their existing supporters. Thus, the “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” will include members far and wide. However, “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” are not the driving force behind real social change.

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>567</sup> Dean, Jodi. “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics.” p. 53.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>569</sup> Bayat, Asef. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition*. University Press, 2013, p. 23.

*Trump: A Walking and Talking Spectacle*

Spectacles are the quintessence of ideology since they divert attention away from important social and economic issues.<sup>570</sup> British Marxist geographer David Harvey understands the relationship between public space, capitalism, and spectacle when discussing the “mobilization of spectacle.” This mobilization refers to capital moving to urban areas amid heightened market competition. This happened in resort cities famous for casinos, shopping malls, fine dining restaurants, entertainment venues, and nightclubs, such as Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Las Vegas, Nevada. Harvey shows that, ultimately, this mobilization conceals the “fundamentals of class relations, bringing as its final scene a thorough depoliticization of these spaces.”<sup>571</sup>

Modern-day politics is also full of spectacles. For example, these include everything from “daily photo opportunities, to highly orchestrated special events that dramatize state power, to TV ads, and image management for competing candidates.” Best and Kellner argue that elections, not just in the US but worldwide, transform politics into a “battle of images and a media spectacle with Hollywood-style campaigns for candidates’ intent on selling personalities more than political platforms.”<sup>572</sup> The capitalist media now report on political spectacles to attract larger audiences. So, during the 2016 presidential elections, news organizations regularly reported on Trump’s scandals. The former host of *The Apprentice* successfully blended numerous elements that characterize the spectacle in late capitalism, including “hyperbole,

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<sup>570</sup> Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. “Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle.” *SubStance*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1999, p. 133.

<sup>571</sup> Hall, Kira, Donna Meryl Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram. “The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, p. 91.

<sup>572</sup> Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. “Debord, Cybersituations, and the Interactive Spectacle.” p. 133.

casino capitalism, branding, simulacra, nostalgia, mediatization, excess, consumption, and vacuousness.”<sup>573</sup>

Undoubtedly, many of Trump’s better-known personal and business interests fall under the category of spectacle. For example, his building of kitschy hotels and casinos such as the Trump Taj Mahal and Trump Castle Casino, later renamed Trump Marina, both in Atlantic City, New Jersey, invokes French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s concepts of “simulacra and the hyperreal in post-modernity.” The 2016 Republican Party presidential debates were simulacra that Trump transformed into a mass-media spectacle comparable to what French philosopher Guy Debord observed as the growing influence of the mediated image on the development of social relationships in capitalism. Likewise, his association with Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) recalls French literary theorist, philosopher, and semiotician Roland Barthes’s essay on professional wrestling as “the spectacle of excess.”<sup>574</sup>

Trump, himself, is a commodity. The businessman and reality TV personality entered the political arena in a truly original fashion. Unlike other billionaire business tycoons and entertainers who sought public office in the past, Trump, a well-established commodity, made good use of the full extent of his brand. This feature contributed further to the spectacle surrounding him. Kira Hall et al. say that “his ability to bring previously distinct forms of semiotic extravagance together (reality television, beauty contests, wrestling matches) and insert them into his candidacy for the most powerful position in the world is precisely what makes Trump a never-ending spectacle.”<sup>575</sup> The media spectacle is pure ideology since it conceals class

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<sup>573</sup> Hall, Kira, Donna Meryl Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram. “The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle.” p. 91.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

relations and is anti-political and depoliticizing. Here, anti-politics refers to specific ways of constructing “the people” in populist terms. Additionally, it relates to nationalist and authoritarian ideas and beliefs that reject the social practices and institutions of liberal democracy.<sup>576</sup>

### *US Mainstream Media Coverage during the 2016 Presidential Elections*

The 2016 US presidential election was one for the history books. The Republican Party’s presidential candidate, Trump, possessed no previous experience in political office but dealt a gut-wrenching blow, first, to his opponents in the GOP and, ultimately, to the Democratic Party presidential candidate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. It was a victory that caught most, if not all, political pundits off guard. According to *The Financial Times*, a London-based financial newspaper, the electoral result “upended the predictions of most pollsters and investors.”<sup>577</sup>

Numerous scholars and writers have attempted to explain the “real reasons” behind the election outcome, albeit with varying degrees of success. For example, Doug Saunders, a reporter for *The Globe and Mail*, a nationally distributed Canadian newspaper, wrote that Trump’s election resulted from widespread racism. He argued that white nationalists rallied

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<sup>576</sup> Beveridge, Ross, and David Featherstone. “Introduction: Anti-Politics, Austerity and Spaces of Politicisation.” pp. 437-439.

<sup>577</sup> Sevastopulo, Demetri, Barney Jopson, and Robin Wigglesworth. “Donald Trump Seals Historic US Election Victory.” *The Financial Times*, 09 Nov. 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/1f58d530-a5a9-11e6-8898-79a99e2a4de6>.

behind the Republican nominee because his policies were “devoted largely to themes of ethnic nationalism and racial and religious intolerance.”<sup>578</sup>

However, not everyone saw the election result as exclusively the product of a “whitelash” – a term made famous by CNN commentator Van Jones on the night of the election to describe the discontent some white Americans were feeling about the “dramatic racial progress in America.”<sup>579</sup> NPR listed numerous reasons why Trump won the election, even though he lost the popular vote. These included the involvement of the Electoral College, significantly lower voter turnout, widespread dissatisfaction with the two major political parties, the Democratic Party’s failure to appeal to white working-class voters, and Clinton’s inability to connect with voters overall.<sup>580</sup>

Some disheartened liberals, who could not believe that someone like Trump would be heading to the Oval Office, pinned the blame on foreign involvement. News organizations such as CNN and MSNBC pinned Clinton’s defeat on the Russians, who allegedly hacked the Democratic National Committee’s (DNC) computer systems and leaked sensitive documents on a website titled *DCLeaks.com* and for example, *The New York Times* reported that American intelligence officials found that Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to smear Clinton and influence the election outcome.<sup>581</sup> The above explanations offer great insight into the reasons

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<sup>578</sup> Saunders, Doug. “The Real Reason Donald Trump Got Elected? We Have a White Extremism Problem.” *The Globe and Mail*, 20 Jan. 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/us-politics/the-real-reason-donald-trump-got-elected-we-have-a-white-extremism-problem/article32817625/>.

<sup>579</sup> Blake, John. “This Is What ‘Whitelash’ Looks Like.” *CNN*, 19 Nov. 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/us/obama-trump-white-backlash/index.html>.

<sup>580</sup> Montanaro, Domenico. “7 Reasons Donald Trump Won the Presidential Election.” *NPR*, 12 Nov. 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/12/501848636/7-reasons-donald-trump-won-the-presidential-election>.

<sup>581</sup> Sanger, David E. “Putin Ordered ‘Influence Campaign’ Aimed at US Election, Report Says.” *The New York Times*, 06 Jan. 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/us/politics/russia-hack-report.html>.

behind Trump's jaw-dropping electoral victory. However, one reason trumps the rest: The role of the mass media.<sup>582</sup>

As demonstrated earlier, the mass media extensively reported on the US presidential elections, both domestic and foreign. From the moment the candidates announced their intention to run in their respective party's presidential primaries and seek the presidential nomination until the final race for the White House, the media was present during the entire process. As a result, there have been countless discussions surrounding the part played by social media and their contribution to Trump's electoral success. The spread of fake news on various social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter dominated the conversation. However, some scholars and writers argue that they were not so important.<sup>583</sup>

### *Old and New Media during the 2016 Presidential Elections*

Before "new" communication technologies emerged, broadcast media, principally radio and television, had the most significant impact on the American public. These were the most influential media in the previous century. Their dominance troubled numerous observers who were cynical of their role in contemporary politics. Allcott and Gentzkow argue that there were fears that radio and television "would reduce substantive policy debates to sound bites, privilege charismatic or 'telegenic' candidates over those who might have more ability to lead but are less polished, and concentrate power in the hands of a few large corporations."<sup>584</sup> However, the recent numbers point to an increasingly disturbing reliance on social media and social

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<sup>582</sup> Warren, James. "Did Fake News Help Elect Trump? Not Likely, According to New Research." *Poynter*, 18 Jan. 2017. <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2017/did-fake-news-help-elect-trump-not-likely-according-to-new-research/>.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." p. 211.

networking services for information. According to Pew Research Center, roughly 62 percent of American voters rely on Facebook for their news.<sup>585</sup>

During the 2016 presidential elections, the popular social media platform spread many unverified and unsubstantiated news stories that many people presumed to be true. These fake news stories were more inclined to support Trump than Clinton. As a result, Allcott and Gentzkow say that “putting these facts together, a number of analysts and commentators have suggested that Donald Trump would not have been elected president were it not for the influence of fake news spread through social media.”<sup>586</sup>

Many analysts are wrong and overstate social media’s role in the elections. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow discovered that a month before the 2016 presidential election, the average American citizen spent “66 minutes per day reading, watching, or listening to election news. Of this, 25 minutes (38 percent) were on social media.”<sup>587</sup> Therefore, social media appears far from the most trusted news source. They argue that the “four most common responses are cable TV, network TV, websites, and local TV.” However, “social media platforms are the fifth most common response, with 14 percent of US adults listing them as their most ‘important’ news source.”<sup>588</sup> Television (cable, network, and local television) is the most important news source. In the top five slots, the complete absence of print media, both magazines and newspapers, is not shocking. It reflects the failure of the newspaper and magazine industries to adapt to the online age.<sup>589</sup> However, they do have an online presence.

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>589</sup> Herndon, Keith. *The Decline of the Daily Newspaper: How an American Institution Lost the Online Revolution*. Peter Lang, 2012.

*The New York Times* op-ed writer Ross Douthat also believes that contrary to popular belief, broadcast news played a more significant role in boosting Trump than the internet. He argues that mass media and popular culture persuaded millions of gullible Americans that Trump was a wealthy entrepreneur, notwithstanding his multiple bankruptcies, which granted him many hours of free publicity and media coverage of his political campaign and Twitter rants. He says that the news industry's business model exacerbates divisions and creates the perfect conditions for the emergence of a demagogue, such as Trump, who is also a famous person or public figure. Moreover, for older white Americans, i.e., Trump's base, television is more important than the internet regarding news sources.<sup>590</sup>

Far-right news organizations like Breitbart or Russian interference did not help Trump's candidacy. Instead, it was the mainstream media. He was popular among Americans who did not rely on the internet for news. So, Douthat is right when he states that, oddly enough, "all those tweets mattered mainly because they kept being quoted on TV" since it was the only way for his core demographic to see them.<sup>591</sup>

The numbers still point to a significant group of people who trust social media for their news and information. In an online post, Facebook's founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, argued that "whatever TV station you might watch or whatever newspaper you might read, on Facebook you are hearing from a broader set of people than you would have otherwise."<sup>592</sup> Zuckerberg also referred to studies that stated that more and more "young people are getting their news primarily from sites like Facebook." Furthermore, he said these young people believe

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<sup>590</sup> Douthat, Ross. "Trump Hacked the Media Right Before Our Eyes." *The New York Times*, 21 Mar. 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/opinion/trump-facebook-cambridge-analytica-media.html>.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

<sup>592</sup> Sanders, Sam. "Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?"



it allows them to see a “larger and more diverse set of opinions.”<sup>593</sup> The company’s COO, Sheryl Sandberg, bragged that Facebook was the reason for more than two million new voters. She said that the popular social networking service motivated Americans to register to vote in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>594</sup> Nevertheless, even if only 14 percent of American adults rely heavily on social media and social networking services for their daily news needs, their influence is growing. However, news on social media and social networking services is full of the politics of spectacle.

### *Conclusion*

Despite the widespread assumption that social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were responsible for Trump’s victory, they were not.<sup>595</sup> Even though many scholars and journalists believe that Trump would have lost the election to Clinton if it were not for the mountain of fake news spreading like wildfire on numerous social media platforms, the vast majority of Americans relied on old media such as radio and television for their news and information. Only 14 percent depended on social media and social networking services.<sup>596</sup> Therefore, the figures appear inflated, and notwithstanding a growing number of individuals who rely on social media and social networking services for their news, websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram did not determine the election’s outcome.

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> Warren, James. “Did Fake News Help Elect Trump? Not Likely, According to New Research.” *The Poynter Institute*, 18 Jan. 2017. <https://www.poynter.org/2017/did-fake-news-help-elect-trump-not-likely-according-to-new-research/445724/>.

<sup>596</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” pp. 2-10.

The capitalist media controls news production and misdirects its audiences using “old” and “new” media.<sup>597</sup> One way to reach its goals is through social media platforms. On the other hand, the ruling social class hopes to maintain its hegemony and uses them as a news source. However, it is improbable but not impossible that social media platforms will facilitate democracy and participation soon.<sup>598</sup> Social media can also be an unbiased news source and provide impartial information, so it can help the public make well-informed decisions. Therefore, it can be contested instead of exclusively being a source and site of domination. Consequently, the possibility of a different political project unfurling on social media that resists and challenges the ideological hegemony is real.

The media spectacle, though, keeps people in a perpetual “state of unconsciousness.”<sup>599</sup> The Internet has resulted in the production of new technologically advanced spectacles. Social media and social networking services contribute to the spectacle functioning like traditional media. If anything, they surpass print and broadcast media by intensifying the world as a spectacle by combining multimedia story elements. So, despite the Internet’s alleged techn-utopian values and commitment to liberal democracy, it does not live up to its reputation.<sup>600</sup>

On the contrary, the divisions between online users under a state of communicative capitalism intensify.<sup>601</sup> The large numbers of online viewpoints make it easier to formulate “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles.” This unfortunate development results from social media and social networking services’ ability to overcome large distances by connecting individuals with similar worldviews around the Web. As a result, communication between different sides breaks down.

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<sup>597</sup> Nanabhay, Mohamed, and Roxane Farmanfarman. “From Spectacle to Spectacular: How Physical Space, Social Media and Mainstream Broadcast Amplified the Public Sphere in Egypt’s ‘Revolution.’” *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2011, p. 576.

<sup>598</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II* by Henri Lefebvre. Verso Books, 2002, p. 76.

<sup>599</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bureau of Public Secrets, pp. 13-14.

<sup>600</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. “Enjoying Social Media.” pp. 229-230.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid., pp. 229-230.

The commodification of news and information deepens.<sup>602</sup> Consumer-driven entertainment influences news production, and new communications technologies result in a tabloid infotainment culture. However, journalism's purpose is not to entertain but inform.<sup>603</sup> The former US president epitomizes this. He successfully mixes several features that mark the spectacle in late capitalism, such as "hyperbole, casino capitalism, branding, simulacra, nostalgia, mediatization, excess, consumption, and vacuousness."<sup>604</sup> Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter played a considerable part in his presidential campaign because the commercial media frequently reported on his online antics.<sup>605</sup>

For example, people not on Twitter were suddenly aware of Trump's controversial views and opinions. As a result, he could get his point across to a wide range of voters. In addition, this contributed to the unparalleled media coverage he received during the election. So, television news was vital in reporting Trump's every move during the polls. Social media may have contributed somewhat, but not directly behind, Trump's victory. The Internet failed to live up to the hype. Tantamount to old media, new media could but does not accurately inform citizens about what is happening. Nor does it promote democratic engagement. Quite the opposite, it further isolates individuals into "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" that reaffirm their earlier ideas and beliefs. This unfortunate situation strengthens the dominant social class's grip on society.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>602</sup> Jackson, Pamela Taylor. "News as a Contested Commodity: A Clash of Capitalist and Journalistic Imperatives." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, vol. 24, no. 2-3, 2009, pp. 149-151.

<sup>603</sup> Kellner, Douglas. "Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle." p. 58.

<sup>604</sup> Hall, Kira, Donna Meryl Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram. "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle." p. 91.

<sup>605</sup> Sanders, Sam. "Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?"

<sup>606</sup> Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." p. 2.

## **Final Thoughts: Is the Capitalist Media Behind the Rise of the Far Right?**

The production of propaganda and ideology on organizing society and ordering power occurs through numerous institutions. However, the mass media is the most important for communicating what ideas are typically acceptable. On the one hand, the mass media offers the working class “radical” alternatives that, on the surface, challenge neoliberal globalization or at least question certain aspects of it. However, these alternatives belong to a set of far-right ideologies that hinder genuine class struggle for the benefit of the dominant social class.<sup>607</sup> Conversely, it curtails discussions involving even some of the most tepid reformist social and economic policies. So, anything that slightly questions market orthodoxy appears extreme. Today, most conversations concern identity politics and multiculturalism. Also, by refusing to engage with progressive ideas and beliefs, the mass media contributes to the gradual dismantlement of liberal democracy and reveals certain authoritarian tendencies. Thus, the capitalist media is facilitating authoritarianism.

This development is a reaction to the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism that started during the global financial crisis in 2008.<sup>608</sup> The crisis ultimately sparked the working class’s interest in the far-right, but only because the alternative appeared worse. As a result, right-wing populist political candidates and public officials increased their support from millions of disenfranchised white working-class people who felt betrayed by the economic and political “elites.” However, it appears that they never seriously considered supporting radical left-wing political parties and social movements because the capitalist media, for the longest time, has

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<sup>607</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*. City Light Books, 1997.

<sup>608</sup> Fraser, Nancy. “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism.” *Dissent*, 2 Jan. 2017.  
[https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser).

portrayed socialism as much more destructive.<sup>609</sup> The dominant ideology thwarts voting for left-wing political candidates and public officials, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Hence, it remains unimaginable for millions of white working-class voters since their ideas appear entirely foreign.

There is, without a doubt, a correlation between the capitalist media and the far right's strengthened emergence. Reactionary ideas and beliefs are closely related to the dominant ideology and often appear unopposed in the mainstream media. For example, journalists repeatedly depend on conservative think tanks to write and report news stories. These research institutes, however, usually adopt hardline positions on immigrants and refugees or minorities and gender issues. As a result, journalists often unwittingly spread the far-right's views and opinions under the guise of journalistic objectivity, a professional ideology that constitutes an obstacle to critical thinking. This outdated and harmful obsession with appearing "fair and balanced" is starting to backfire. So, the structural changes in the media system and three decades' worth of catastrophic neoliberal policies are beginning to take a toll.<sup>611</sup>

The political influence of the economic elites is indisputable. The propaganda model is essential for understanding cultural production, the concentration of media ownership and control and its relation to the emergence of the far-right. Concepts such as "media pluralism" and "free expression" are key features of liberal democracy, and they supposedly guarantee freedom of the press and a vibrant democracy, but this is rarely the case. Instead, newsrooms often follow specific unwritten rules prioritizing large profits and appeasing sponsors. Ultimately, the

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<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The New Media Monopoly*. Beacon Press, 2004, pp. x-xi.

influence of the market's invisible hand on news production is apparent and reveals how the dominant social class maintains corporate and state power.<sup>612</sup>

This daunting task, however, requires a well-run propaganda machine. So, first, a collection of news filters determines what is appropriate for publication or broadcast in a very conspicuous manner. Then, they predetermine the message and its interpretation and exclude counter-hegemonic ideas and beliefs that challenge the dominant ideology.<sup>613</sup> Since most reactionary views do no such thing, they are unsurprisingly usually permitted. As a result, people in North America and Western Europe are gradually rejecting liberal values while defending the free market. Not surprisingly, the capitalist media's staunch support of neoliberal ideas and beliefs for nearly three decades reinforces the notion that "there is no alternative." News coverage has created an atmosphere where more and more people support deregulation and privatizing public services while accusing the welfare states and the labour movement of numerous social and economic issues. Thus, the capitalist media plays a vital role in society's economic restructuring and opposition to social change.<sup>614</sup>

The capitalist media is reshaping society. Nevertheless, the press is not simply the plaything of the dominant social class. However, corporations treat the news like a commodity. As a result, this has caused irreversible damage to knowledge production.<sup>615</sup> News media also affects people's consciousness. For example, the 24-hour news cycle draws audiences into an epistemology based on accepting that systemic reasons are not responsible for human suffering.

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<sup>612</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. "Introduction to Part III." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 220.

<sup>613</sup> Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>614</sup> Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all Our Problems." *The Guardian*, 15 Apr. 2016. [theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot](http://theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot).

<sup>615</sup> Garnham, Nicholas. "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass-Communication." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, pp. 233-234

As a result, audiences are less compassionate.<sup>616</sup> This psychological phenomenon is known as “psychic numbing.”<sup>617</sup>

Since the capitalist media prioritizes entertainment, it focuses on catastrophes and corruption because they usually engage and draw large audiences.<sup>618</sup> “Mindless sensationalism” and “rampant infotainment” often misdirect people’s attention away from significant social and economic issues.<sup>619</sup> Notably, it draws people’s attention from the realities of neoliberal capitalism and supplies news programs with cheap, popular content. So, the press does not adequately inform and educate their audiences and readers with important news.<sup>620</sup> However, conservative and reactionary views and beliefs have become widespread in the news. Media outlets allow these ideas because they fit well with the “mindless sensationalism” and “rampant infotainment” inherent in commercial media. For example, this means reporting on confrontational right-wing populist political candidates and public officials regularly accusing the “liberal” media of being “fake news” because controversy attracts eyeballs.<sup>621</sup>

Because this transpires within a specific social and economic system, concentrating on the interrelationships between the state, society, and the market is essential to understand the mass media as representatives of the dominant ideology because it relates to the production and distribution of ideas.<sup>622</sup> The global rise of the far-right is associated with the production of ideas necessary to reproduce social structures and systems and, more significantly, international

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<sup>616</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Rev. ed., Penguin Books, 2008, p. 105.

<sup>617</sup> Resnick, Brian. “A Psychologist Explains the Limits of Human Compassion.” *Vox*, 05 Sep. 2017. <https://www.vox.com/explainers/2017/7/19/15925506/psychic-numbing-paul-slovic-apathy>.

<sup>618</sup> Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. p. 105.

<sup>619</sup> Chang, Wei-yuan. “Logics of Enjoyment in Tabloid Discourse.” *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>620</sup> Thussu, Daya Kishan. “Infotainment Inc.: The Ascent of a Global Ideology.” *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, edited by Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Routledge, 2011, pp. 78-79.

<sup>621</sup> McChesney, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. NYU Press, 2008, pp. 62-63.

<sup>622</sup> Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Douglas M. Kellner. “Introduction to Part I.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 18.

capital. These ideas concern power since the dominant social class exercises “ideological power.” Therefore, it can impose its ideology on subordinate social classes and groups because it controls the mass media and cultural production.<sup>623</sup>

The rise of right-wing populists and the surprising success of some left-wing political candidates and public officials is a backlash to neoliberal globalization and the weaknesses of liberal democracy, or “progressive neoliberal hegemony.” However, the far right has the upper hand. Hence, more voters seem to accept the “invisible hand of the market” since they cannot imagine any other economic order and reject progressive ideas and beliefs. For example, they have no qualms about the free movement of capital that has been so harmful to the working and lower classes but do not feel the same about people such as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. This development explains the recent success of far-right political candidates and public officials in North America and Western Europe, such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni or the UK voting to leave the EU. Therefore, by rejecting globalization, the voters reject the liberal cosmopolitanism generally associated with it, but not necessarily private property, the free market, and austerity politics. But ultimately, people continue to support the same social and economic policies that destroy their lives.<sup>624</sup>

Instead of attacking the capitalist class – the actual economic and political elites, right-wing populists set their sights on so-called internal enemies, such as minorities and other vulnerable groups. As a result, the capitalist media offers the white working class a far-right solution during the structural crisis of capital that competes with counter-hegemonic forces. Thus, it functions as a safety net for the dominant social class.

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<sup>623</sup> Williams, Kevin. *Understanding Media Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 147.

<sup>624</sup> Fraser, Nancy. “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism.”



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