

**Explaining and Opposing Populism, Fascism
and Multiple Crises across the Americas**

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We are living in a time of multiple and intersecting crises. A few weeks ago, a United Nations study warned that a million plant and animal species may soon become extinct, with devastating consequences for life on earth.² In 2016, almost 66 million people were forcibly displaced in the world; the highest number since World War Two.³ They fled warfare, racial and ethnic conflicts, climate disasters, violence, economic destitution, and/or political repression. The backdrop for all this is the obscene and ever-growing economic inequality within and between nations and people, the inevitable result of neoliberalism/capitalism.

The rise of right-wing movements, ideologies, and governments corresponds to and accentuates weaknesses of the Left and progressive movements. To advance, the Right needs to eliminate the forces that challenge it, hence the multiple attacks against people of color, the Left, unions, universities, feminists, LGBT people. In the

¹ This is the text of a presentation made at the Presidential Panel entitled “From Populism to Fascism? The Americas in the Era of Trump,” Latin American Studies Association Congress, Boston, May 24, 2019.

² “One million species face extinction, U.N. report says. And humans will suffer as a result,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 2019.

³ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/emergencies/refugee-and-migrant-crisis>

first decades of the twentieth century, fascists proclaimed themselves the antidote to modernity, liberalism, the Russian Revolution, the Depression, the emancipated woman, labor movements, and the Left. Today, in a changing and for some a scary world, one in which many live an increasingly precarious existence, the Right promises security and reassurance against some of those same enemies as well as some new foes.

How has the Right managed to convince so many people throughout the Americas it is on their side? Capitalism, in its current neoliberal incarnation, subsumes populism and fascism and is an *incredibly powerful system*. Capitalists control and deploy the vast majority of the world's wealth not only to perpetuate themselves in power and generate more profits but also to convince the majority of the population that capitalism is the best, indeed the only, viable economic system imaginable. They finance think tanks that spew out "studies" that confirm the wonders of capitalism; fund university departments and faculty to conduct research favorable to them; bribe political officials on all levels; bombard people with garbage and lies that reinforce these ideas and falsely promise poor and working-class people a way out of their precarious position by proffering the tantalizing allure of consumption. They tell the poor their situation is *their* fault or that of the enemy Other. And when those methods don't work, they imprison, torture, and murder their opponents or foster coups to overthrow governments that challenge or resist them. Yet, they are not omnipotent and resistance has been, is, and will be successful.

One specific issue I want to address is why some women identify with the Right.

Right-wing women see and project themselves as the moral guardians of their families and their nations.⁴ They frequently use a maternalist discourse to explain their activism and justify their actions by claiming their political engagement is an extension of their role as mothers, writ large. For many women, this is an appealing and comfortable identity that affirms their sense of who they are and who they are meant to be.

I recently interviewed pro-Trump women in Southwest Pennsylvania, where I grew up, and what struck me were some similarities between them and right-wing women in Chile. Both seek to transform what they perceive as their insecure present to one that resembles a safer, more comfortable, perhaps imagined, past; one in which

⁴ Margaret Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle against Allende, 1964-1973* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002).

they and other like them, felt secure. One in which they were and will be the “we” that defines the members of their community and nation. In Chile, right-wing women called on the military to overthrow Allende in 1973 and “redeem the nation” in opposition to the Popular Unity government. Today, right-wing women in Chile, some of them affiliated with the Partido Social Patriota, exalt a conservative form of nationalism that simultaneously opposes immigration; international trade agreements like the TPP; reproductive and LGBT rights, and feminism.⁵ This is a discourse that the populist right across the Americas repeats with variations based on local conditions.

One emotion many right-wing women exhibit is fear, physically represented by the Other. For Republican women in Southwest Pennsylvania, the frightful Other comes in the form of people of color: Black people, nonwhite immigrants, and Muslims.⁶ Right-wing Chilean women in the Partido Social Patriota seek to “protect and support the Chilean family, its national identity and traditions.”⁷ Their alien Others are Peruvian and Haitian immigrants and queer people who not only threaten biologically and God-designated gender roles, but also undermine the Chilean nation’s ability to reproduce itself, since of course LGBT people can’t or don’t conceive children, according to the Right. And if they do, they shouldn’t!!!

⁵ “Hoy la lucha es por tí,” www.socialpatriotas.cl, accessed May 5, 2019.

⁶ Margaret Power, “Trump, the Republican Party, and Westmoreland County,” *Political Research Associates*, August 12, 2018, <http://feature.politicalresearch.org/trump-and-westmoreland-county>.


⁷ “Hoy la lucha es por tí.”

HOY LA LUCHA ES POR TÍ

**EL PARTIDO SOCIALPATRIOTA
ESTÁ EN CONTRA DE LA
ELITE POLÍTICO-ECONÓMICA
QUE HA TRAICIONADO A
NUESTRA COMUNIDAD NACIONAL**

PROPONEMOS

- Proteger y apoyar a la familia chilena, su identidad nacional y sus costumbres.
- Restringir la migración descontrolada: Deportar a inmigrantes que hayan ingresado ilegalmente o que hayan cometido algún delito.
- Priorizar la contratación de mano de obra nacional por sobre la extranjera.
- Proteger los salarios: No se puede contratar a un extranjero por un sueldo menor del que gana un chileno o la media de mercado nacional.
- Cárcel efectiva a los delincuentes que hayan cometido delitos de corrupción en la política y puestos de servicio público.
- Cárcel efectiva para dueños de empresas involucrados en actos de colusión o prácticas que van a dañar directamente al ciudadano común.
- Restablecer la pena de muerte para los casos de pedofilia y violación.
- Llamar a votación popular para decidir la permanencia en tratados internacionales que no favorecen a todos los chilenos.
- Proteger los recursos naturales como el cobre, el litio, el agua, la pesca, entre otros, nacionalizando las materias primas y dejando una mayor ganancia en el país.
- Nacionalizar los servicios como la electricidad y las telecomunicaciones para evitar los abusos y malos servicios.
- Fomentar y apoyar la industria nacional por sobre la extranjera.



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Right-wing populists propound a nationalist agenda, but they are also part of transnational networks. They share similar discourses, which they adapt to local realities; and they receive ideas, inspiration, encouragement, and funding from outside sources. As I was reading an interview with Pedro Kunstmann, a leader of the right-wing Partido Social Patriota, I discovered that one of the individuals he holds responsible for the increasing visibility of LGBT people in Chile is none other than George Soros, one of the global rights' star villains! Kunstmann claims he funds MOVILH—the Movimiento de Integración y Liberación Homosexual in Chile.⁸ He implies, I suggest, that as a Jew Soros supports LGBT rights as part of a plan to undermine Christian civilization.

Populists/fascists/the right are dangerous, whether or not they take power as they have in Brazil or the United States. They enshrine an alter to capitalism and institute the gross distribution of money upwards, to the least needy and least deserving. They legitimize or attempt to legitimize fascist ideas and values, which uphold the worth of the few and the disposability of the many. They push the political discourse, imagination, sense of possibilities, and framework to the Right, which inevitably means a restriction of democratic rights and an increase in human rights abuses. They propound and enforce economic policies that favor the wealthy, which results in growing rates of poverty, lack of health care, education, housing, etc. for the majority. They are a cancer that infects the social body and attacks people's basic right to live a life of dignity and well-being. They must be opposed.

So, what can we do?

We need to valorize the importance of individual person-to-person contact in changing how people think about things. A recent study concluded that children who care about the environment and oppose climate change have had an impact on their conservative parents who had previously rejected the conclusions of the world's scientists.⁹ Probably all of us are aware of the sea change in social attitudes that has

⁸ Benjamín Miranda, "Entrevista a Pedro Kunstmann, vocero del Movimiento Social Patriota," *The Clinic*, July 28, 2018, <https://sergiomedinaviveros.blogspot.com/2018/07/conozcamos-mejor-las-caras-nuevas-del.html>, accessed May 7, 2019.

⁹ <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/WhctKJVRJCrBPHJJKclwVdnbQzFPCvSxDQ BnJqKKmDVxbDBpnVLIQQzWgNHfDDgtCpKbwl>

taken place in the United States and elsewhere as a result, in large part, of courageous Lesbians and gays coming out to family, friends, and people in general.

In this light, we all have a role to play as educators. We come into contact with hundreds of students, faculty, administrators, and we not only need to promote our ideas, we also need to model them by putting into practice the democratic values we uphold in our classrooms, departments, and institutions.

At the same time, I believe in organization and building movements that go beyond what we can do as individuals. We need to clearly set out a positive agenda that speaks to people's concerns and offers them concrete plans and solutions. We can and must provide a clear and progressive alternative that offers both our understanding of the problems and real solutions to them. Activists, which we all need to be, should be thoughtful, bold, and creative. We need to focus on specific issues and targets, and expose the underlying culprit, neoliberal capitalism. Most of all, we need to have faith in ourselves and our power to defeat the Trumps and the Bolsonaros of the Americas. As Henry Giroux wrote, "We need the language of militant possibility."¹⁰

In this light, I want to give a shout out to the successful forces, including the U.S. Network for Democracy in Brazil, that convinced the American Museum of Natural History to cancel the Brazilian-American Chamber of Commerce's event to honor Jair Bolsonaro as person of the year.

¹⁰ Henry Giroux, "Rethinking the Normalization of Fascism in the Post-Truth Era," *Tikun*, April 1, 2019. I thank Carlos Aguirre for sending me this article.