

Authoritarian neoliberalism and the rise of the extreme right in Spain and Catalonia

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<https://youtu.be/mrBf8mAleVA>

Thank you, and thanks to the Zetkin Forum for organizing such an important event. I'm Monica Clua Losada, and I work at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. I've also been invited here by the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, CUP, a movement of the independentist left in Catalonia.

I will go through some of the main issues in the rise of the extreme right, connecting it to authoritarian neoliberalism and examining the relationship between neoliberalism and the extreme right in Spain and Catalonia, but from a global perspective. The global perspective is necessary for two reasons: first, because one can't understand the current period without looking at it through the global dynamic; and second, because for the last 10 years, I've been living in the United States, and I've only recently moved back to Catalonia. I lived in one of the worst parts of the United States, the laboratory of fascism, which was Texas. I often say that, I come from a very dark future. Many of the things that we might see and might not fully understand are things that I have been living under for the past eight years of my life. Perhaps I see them in different ways.

The key argument I want to make at the theoretical level is that neoliberalism is actually a failed class project. We have been living under neoliberalism. People often say 40 years; that is because they forget Chile, so it's more like 50 years of life under neoliberalism as an unfinished hegemonic project. The reason I say it's a failed class project, is that Thatcher's dream of "there is no such thing as a society" never materialized. In those 50 years, they never managed to break us as a society, no matter how hard they tried to atomize us, to disintegrate societies, and to turn us all into what Thatcher wanted us to be—individuals and families. What we're doing right now is a perfect example of that failure to break our societies.

In light of that failure, after the 2008 crisis, neoliberalism reinvented itself. It reinvented itself with something called—or what many of us in academia, as well as in social movements, have called—authoritarian neoliberalism. For some people, this was a new thing after 2008. But if you talk to anyone from Chile, they'll say, "Was neoliberalism ever non-authoritarian? What are you talking about?" If you talk to

someone like me from Catalonia, they might also tell you, "Guess what? The Spanish state has always been authoritarian." I'm not sure there is anything different. There was, however, an authoritarian turn, particularly at the EU level, that we all witnessed: austerity politics, which took different shapes in different places. In Catalonia, for example, the political project behind this authoritarian neoliberalism was a now-defunct political party called Ciudadanos, which represented sections of Spanish finance capital with a very direct discourse against Catalan national aspirations, as well as embodying an authoritarian neoliberal class project.

What we're now seeing, particularly since 2014-15, is a reactivation of existing networks and the diffusion of US imperialism and not just at the level of political parties. We've been talking quite a lot over the last two days about the different parties—different brands of parties. I don't disregard the importance, but I don't think we will be able to understand what the far right, or the extreme right is doing. They're realizing a truthful grumpton project. They're not trying to win an election with a party; that is not really what's at stake here. What's at stake is changing society and fulfilling the initially failed class project. This time around, if society cannot be broken, they're trying to make society theirs. And they do that in many different ways, for example, through the evangelical church and the rise of the evangelical church in many places—the United States and in Latin America. Again, any Latin Americans here will say, "Well, this is not news. We kind of knew that for a long time." It's happening in the Spanish state as well. The evangelical church is the largest growing religious group for the last decade, by a long shot. The second element of changing our societies is the international reactionary tendency. This includes the conglomerate of all the different foundations. In the last two days, we've talked about things like the Heritage Foundation. I'll be talking a little bit about the Atlas Network and some others.

The third element is the micro-politics of the far right. Again, they're trying to change society from within. The intellectuals behind the far right project seem to not just understand Gramsci, but also increasingly understand a lot of the autonomous thinking of the past 40 years or so. It might be time that, since they are, in a way, copying us, we start understanding better what they're doing. It's a double strategy. For example, in terms of migration, we're seeing in the Spanish state context the demonization of migrants or certain migrants, particularly through methods such as Islamophobia. Simultaneously they are organizing other parts of migrant communities. In the case of the Spanish state and Catalonia, primarily Latin American communities. In this double strategy not all migrants are demonized equally. In fact, today [July 21, 2025], the Washington Post ran a full-length story about how many Latin American migrants are now prioritizing migration to Spain rather than to the United States due to the situation. It's a well-known fact that the upper class of Venezuela is migrating to places like Madrid and Barcelona, and they provide direct funding to far right news media, etc. So that is one of the things.

Why is that happening? And why, besides the fact that I'm from Catalonia, is it an interesting place to look at? I think it's an interesting place to look at because we're witnessing here a reaction or an attempt to discipline all the different movements that dared to dream dangerously over the last decade. Examples from different global

contexts include Occupy Wall Street and other different types of occupations in the Spanish state, like the 15M occupation of the squares, and the ultimate culmination of all the anti-austerity movements of that decade in Catalonia during the 1st of October referendum, with a whole set of dreams of emancipation attached to it, including, two days later, the 3rd of October, the largest general strike to ever happen in that region. We became dangerous. We weren't just dreaming dangerously. When in a country of 7 million people more than 2 million people actively disobey in the face of police violence, then it is dangerous. It wasn't just a few people; it was a very large number of the population. So how do we make sense of all of this?

The theoretical concept of authoritarian neoliberalism comes from an understanding of authoritarian statism according to Nicos Poulantzas and authoritarian populism, as coined by Stuart Hall. This connects, on the one hand, the constitutional changes or the changes in the legal apparatus in terms of isolating individuals, as Poulantzas mentions, and the constitution of the legal individual citizen, combined with Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism and the development of individual populism. This then gets coined by Ian Brough in 2012 in the journal *Rethinking Marxism* under authoritarian neoliberalism in order to explain the constitutionalization of austerity that was happening at the EU level.

In the context that we care about, how do we see the development of this new wave of authoritarian neoliberalism? We see it through the constitutionalization of previously democratic spaces. This happens throughout the EU. And it actually occurs through the budget constraints that are forced on EU member states to impose constitutionally mandated deficit caps, thereby imposing austerity for future generations, among many other things, including some of the memorandums of understanding for Greece, for example, and many other elements that we are aware of. That obviously applies in the Spanish state as well. In fact, the Spanish constitution is this thing that you cannot change, as Catalans know better than anyone. It's impossible to change, except, of course, if the Troika asks you to impose austerity for the next generations. In that case, change happens very quickly. Article 135, which was introduced in the Spanish constitution under a so-called socialist government, wasn't particularly difficult to implement. That happened very quickly, but anything else is untouchable.

That was connected with an increase throughout the previous decade in the judicialization of politics. The judiciary took on a very active role in the political sphere. The Constitutional Tribunal became very much an upper chamber. Any legislation that was being approved that was not to the liking of the Spanish state was very quickly stopped by the Constitutional Tribunal. The main focus of the actions of the Constitutional Tribunal during the last decade were twofold and very often connected. One was to re-centralize Spanish politics. The second, very clear aim was to defend capital. Examples of those bits of legislation include Catalonia approving quite an advanced law in terms of defending the right to housing and curtailing some of the consequences of the 2008 crisis and the amount of toxic assets that had gone to what was supposedly a toxic bank. Those were actually houses, but they were calling them toxic assets. The thinking went: Since that bank was created with public money,

perhaps those houses could be used for public housing. That was one of the many legislations turned down by the Constitutional Tribunal.

Something else was happening throughout that period, particularly in the Spanish Congress: The near elimination of parliamentary debates. That also wasn't new. In fact, I have an article in which we tracked the elimination of parliamentary debates as the manner of natural process in the Spanish Congress. We tracked it from 1977 to 2015. Depending on the legislature, you had more or less usage, but the average was over 40%. That continued. It didn't make a difference whether a party had a clear majority or not. Even in cases where a debate can easily be afforded because in a vote you had the numbers, you would win. The debate would pretty much be symbolic; you just let people speak. That wasn't less and less. It became very much the preferred tool for the creation of new legislative measures. But again, it wasn't necessarily something new connected to the crisis; it was part of the nature of the Spanish legislative process.

Of course, there was a reaction. And the reaction very much matched the imposed discipline. While we see, for example, in the United States, the kind of grassroots—or so-called grassroots—response to Occupy was the Tea Party. In the Spanish context, the reaction was, until recently, very much a reaction against Catalonia. That reaction, that fascist reaction, was “more Spain”. You see a lot of the demonstrations; this is one of the demonstrations soon after the 1st of October in favour of a unified, supposedly unified Spain, but ultimately one that was very much against any kind of emancipation of Catalonia. It was seen by global forces as an attempt to stop the emancipation process that had happened in Catalonia—a way of squashing the revolution that had happened. But that wasn't sufficient. All those things led to the eruption of parties like Vox or the Ciudadanos party that I mentioned before. And yes, they managed, to an extent, to try and divide society between those who might have been more pro-Spanish or felt more pro-Spanish and those who might have felt more pro-Catalan. But the problem remained. People still continued to dream dangerously, not just in national terms but also very much in terms of social emancipation. That was one of the issues.

Connected to another global issue is the genocide in Gaza. Not coincidentally, Catalonia is one of the strongholds in Europe and the world of solidarity with Palestine—not the only one. It so happens that another country with a history of national liberation and progressive struggles, such as Ireland, finds itself in the same situation. We have very clearly a genocide industrial complex that we don't always see in such terms, but it's very much there. I recommend visiting the Heritage Foundation website. As you probably all know, the Heritage Foundation is very much the think tank behind the current presidency of Trumpism. But it's not a new thing; the Heritage Foundation was a think tank behind Thatcher and Reagan. It's been around for a long, long time. They have a whole report and project on the importance of not just a special relationship with Israel, but a strategic partnership. That's why I'm talking about an actual industrial complex. The report is available on the website. I do highly recommend it.

Why am I saying this? Because, again, Catalonia has managed to be at that forefront with real, direct institutional implications. Not because Barcelona City Council is

particularly emancipatory—I probably would argue it hasn't been ever, but certainly not now. However, they felt the pressure from below to do something. When you have a huge tidal wave from below, institutions sometimes find themselves forced to do the things that they would otherwise not do. That's why social movements are actually a good thing in general. For example, Barcelona cut twin city ties with Tel Aviv over Israel's war on Gaza. The first story is from the Catalan government's website from 2024, where Catalonia appointed a representative for the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation to Palestine, thereby sending an actual legal representative to Palestine. When these things start happening and at the same time the Heritage Foundation proclaims that Israel's interest in destroying Gaza are essential for the world economy and world power, then you can see why we may want to start crushing some of these places.

In the current time we see a lot of ideological convergence among many different groups of people and interests that might not be as friendly to each other as we sometimes make them out to be. This perceived ideological convergence is full of contradictions. We're seeing it in the last couple of weeks playing out in the whole conflict between Elon Musk and President Trump.

What do I mean when I talk about the far right, the extreme right, and fascism in the 21st century? On the one hand, the good old authoritarian neoliberals: people like Carl Schmitt, Hayek, Friedman, and their descendants. The national conservatives in that sense. I think those are probably some of the most interesting ones because very often, those initially opposed the far right because they see their political spaces being lost to the far right, but they're very often the ones that actually provide the hegemonic strength to the far right by absorbing a lot of their discourse. Then we have the descendants of 20th-century fascism. When you talk about Mussolini, you can safely call him a fascist because that's what he was, and we can all agree on that. We have the Christian fundamentalists, the whole conglomerate around the evangelical church. In the case of the Spanish state, for example, Opus Dei, and all their links to parts of the financial sector and parts of the educational sector, among others. In certain contexts, Europe in particular, Islamophobia is also present.

So far, I've only mentioned two parties of the far right in Spain, Vox and Ciudadanos, but over the last few years, the last two years, Catalonia is now a proud member of the global far right dynamics. It was quite easy to be Catalan until two years ago, with all the difficulties. It was easy because the fascists were almost always the Spanish. As a Catalan, you lived your life with relative ease in being an anti-fascist because even those who, in other countries, would have been fascists or slightly friendly to fascists, in our case, for historical reasons, were pretty much all anti-fascists, even the Christian Democrats. That changed very quickly, and we now have our very own brand of fascism. We have a relatively small party with huge speakers in the media, characterized by extreme Islamophobia—absolutely extreme Islamophobia, much more than Vox. In fact, Vox is relatively light in those terms in comparison, and very much a project designed to break the Catalan emancipatory movement. It is a project fulfilling the prophecy they wanted, stating, "All Catalan attempts at independence are just

nationalist, identitarian, and ethno-nationalist. Guys, we told you so; you thought that they were doing some kind of revolutionary process; look at it; it's not."

Then we have the anarcho-capitalists. In Europe, they're a bit less important, or we think they're a bit less important, but as I mentioned, I come from that dark future. They were unimportant two years ago in the United States; they're not anymore, so we'll watch that space. Then there's the whole group that we very often don't think of as the far right, but that are part of that change in hegemony: the kind of new-age conspiratorialists, negationists, anti-vaxxers, eco-fascists—a big sack of nutters all put together in one place.

Behind these varied groups stands a lot of money. This money gets spread primarily through the Atlas Network, another foundation. The Heritage Foundation basically tries to create ideology and strategy; that's their purpose. The Atlas Network, instead, tries to organize society. The Atlas Network exists all over the world. I recommend that you look in your own countries at which foundations are part of the Atlas Network. They are absolutely everywhere, and they are well funded; there are a lot of different foundations I mentioned, and they're funded by a lot of different interests—oil, tobacco, pharmaceutical interests, banks, etc.

This is global data until 2015. The Atlas Network has grown exponentially since 2010 outside of the United States. We have them in Spain as well, and Spanish capital is very interested. Why? I've put here some of the groups that have had, at different points, direct links with either sharing people on their board, on the board of one of the Atlas Network foundations. As you probably know, everywhere—Spain is not different—there is real difficulty in tracking funding of foundations. One of the things to do is actually look at names. Who is on the board of such a place, and whether that name actually finds itself on the board of another place. Some of the ones you might know; I suspect you all know Santander Bank. Santander Bank represents the main interests of Spain's global and imperial financial interests. Among many things, Santander Bank is responsible for, for example, Puerto Rico's debt crisis of the previous decade. Grupo Eulén, which you might not have heard of, is the largest contractor of the public sector. If you ever find yourselves, I hope not, in a Spanish hospital, you will probably have your room cleaned by an employee of Grupo Eulén. You probably will eat in the canteen, and your food will have been cooked by someone from there. If you work at a university like I do, probably the person cleaning your office also works for them. Why would they be interested in the extreme right? Why don't they just interest themselves in making money? Because of what's been happening in the previous decade. It's not enough to influence politics on the street, but also institutional politics, especially at the municipal level. So, competing for the municipalization of services, money is being channelled through these entities. Similarly, FCC, which is one of the main construction companies and makes most of its money through the construction of infrastructures with public money. Whatever actually happens to that public money interests me.

In Catalonia, since we now have our very own fascists, we have, and again, it kind of connects with the whole Israeli thing, probably the most media face in the rise of the

extreme right is someone that many people wouldn't necessarily associate directly with that: the woman on the left side of the picture. She is someone that, if you ever visit Catalonia and decide to watch Catalan TV, it doesn't matter what time of the day you do so, you will probably see her at some point. She appears in almost every program, receiving a lot of money, talking about everything and anything because she knows about everything. She is self-recognized; this is no conspiracy, I haven't had to research this particularly hard. She is an Israeli lobbyist; she considers herself part of the global Israeli lobby. Surprisingly, she's now in Latin America as part of a public-private partnership development, but that's something else. The middle one is our very own fascist; she is now the mayor of Ripoll, a lovely little town in the Pyrenees, very idyllic until now. The town is known, perhaps unfortunately, because the guys who committed the terror attacks in Barcelona in 2017 were from that town. That has partly given rise to her. The other guy that you might not have seen before, the third guy, you might not have seen him, but if you have been to the Spanish state, you might have given him money. Juan Roig owns the largest supermarket chain in the Spanish state, Mercadona, and is a regular funder of far-right parties. Then we have our own Catalan Atlas Network group, the Institut Ostrom Catalunya, which actually tried to advance neoliberal policy, but is part of the Atlas Network.

In the Spanish context, you also have all these different intellectual constellations. The Spanish state has to be understood not in relation to the development of the European far right, but rather in relation to the triangle that's being prioritized by the Atlas Network. That triangle, as represented by the Forum Madrid, the map shows the connections between the United States far-right constellations with the Latin American constellations, and Spain as the connecting node between Europe, Latin America, and very much so, the Spanish-speaking communities in the United States.