**We Are All Caesars:**

**Variations of Authoritarianism in the Interregnum of World Order**

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**Introduction**

The *Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci have been a great source of theoretical insight and serve as the jumping off point for many rigorous studies of politics, political economy, sociology and history. Nowhere is this truer than in the realm of international politics, where prominent scholars of international politics have used Gramsci’s prison notebooks as foundational material for the development of an entire critical theoretical tradition in international relations theory.[[1]](#footnote-1) This approach alongside other conceptual traditions with more critical orientations feature a more historical sweep to their vision and often serve ably in the task of giving sophisticated accounts of significant change in global politics. The current era of crisis and discombobulation certainly qualifies as one of these moments of significant upheaval and change in global politics. Chief among these is the rising power of China and the leading indicators that show Asia as the new center of gravity in the making of world order.[[2]](#footnote-2) The invasion of Ukraine by Russia also suggests a world order where the moral and political authority of US hegemony has less purchase that in previous decades. Beyond the discourse focused on great power politics, developments pertaining to the growing volatility of global finance, the increasingly severe impacts of climate change, the struggle to confront and contain the COVID-19 show the inability of the structures and institutions of contemporary global governance to meaningfully address these planetary challenges and the lack of leadership shown by the United States in confronting these problems.

Most curious, however, has been the emergence of a new breed of demagogue riding multiple waves of populist anguish and discontent brought about by these various crises to positions of power and rule. After what appeared to be an unstoppable wave of liberalization and democratization in places like Russia, China and the Middle East, autocrats like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Prince Mohammed bin Salman and several others of lesser stature now rule their respective states with little recourse to democratic mechanisms or institutions. In more developed democracies, populist leaders flirt with authoritarian power and show little interest in constitutional procedures or historical precedent. Donald Trump is the most prominent example of this, but one can see Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Viktor Orban of Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey in the same light.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even if overtly authoritarian leaders are not occupying the highest offices, movements rooted in sentiments of exclusion and isolation, such as Great Britain’s decision to leave the European Union in 2016 testify to a desire to embrace exclusion and isolation reject traditional liberal principles. Of greatest interest, especially in the age of the revolution in digital media capabilities, is the rise of the “tech-lords” of Silicon Valley and other hubs of digital information and commerce. Individuals like Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Peter Thiel have access to information tools that make them arguably more powerful than any of the other political leaders already mentioned.

This leads to the question of what precisely the Gramscian mode of analysis of international politics offers as a way of understanding the reasons for the current upheaval and discombobulation in world order. The answer begins with the following infamous line from the *Prison Notebooks*: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In this passage, Gramsci develops and deploys three concepts that provide an interpretative framework for analyzing upheaval and disarray in the world that center on three key terms: crisis, interregnum and “morbid symptoms.” In the case of the term “crisis, Gramsci refers to the idea of an “organic crisis,” (one of a number of ways the term “crisis” could be conceptually deployed) which denoted a moment when the inherent tensions and contradictions contained in any structure of world order become manifest with the outbreak of social and political conflict between an established hegemonic class and an upstart counter-hegemonic movement. Sometimes the organic crisis could be resolved in a way that leaves the balance of status quo forces in charge after making a strategic concession or managing to co-opt some element of the counter-hegemonic faction. At other times, the forces of the status quo are toppled from power in dramatic fashion and replaced by a counter-hegemonic force able to seize key institutions and rapidly recreate a new assemblage of power that quickly gains its hegemony by forging a new social network of consensus and ruthlessly putting down potential reactionary retaliations. There is also a third option: the interregnum.

Interregnum, the second key concept contained in the quotation above, denoted a period of transition between one historical period dominated by a particular configuration of material capabilities, social institutions and widely held intersubjective ideas often supervised and protected by a state with global capabilities and a fledgling configuration of power with its own version of these same elements and their own state sponsor. However, with the old configuration in decline and too atrophied to maintain its legitimacy and hegemony and the new configuration still too new and “radical” to acquire widespread acceptance, the ensuing interregnum was a period of upheaval and uncertainty as space opens up for ideas, institutions and material capabilities that in an era of stability would be regarded as fringe, extreme, partisan and problematic. In this absence of a hegemonic concentration of power, opportunities exist for a wide selection of ambitious, populist, charismatic and Machiavellian personalities to seize the reins of power in an authoritarian manner and provide temporary rule and restoration of order. The rise of these “men of destiny” are what Gramsci primarily had in mind when he speaks of the third key concept: morbid symptoms. Though he does not mention it specifically in the quote from Notebook 3, the morbid symptom that is of most interest to Gramsci is Caesarism.

This paper will deploy the concept of Ceasarism to understand the different forms of authoritarian and illiberal political phenomena taking shape in the contemporary world. Caesarism is defined by Gramsci as a “static equilibrium” where a “charismatic leader” which “alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off mortal danger” and is the ultimate expression of a “morbid symptom” for a world order not only in crisis but also a period of political interregnum.[[5]](#footnote-5) Applied to the level of international politics, the concept of Ceasarism explains why the first quarter of the twenty-first century has been a time of great upheaval and uncertainty, as the increasingly aged liberal international order loses legitimacy around the world without a coherent alternative framework of global power to replace it. The rise of authoritarian forms of government, autocratic demagogues, and a stifling paralysis in the face of grave global challenges are all indications that no consensus exists on the proper configuration of ideas, institutions and arrangements of material production to guide the world through the rest of the twenty-first century. Until some kind of consensus is reached on this problem, the disarray and disquiet will continue and the appeal of charismatic leaders who promise easy solutions to these various problems in exchange for fewer limits on their power will continue to be a feature of the age.

Several examples of Caesarism in the digitized world of the twenty-first century will be chronicled here. As Gramsci argued, Ceasarism comes in different forms and does not conform to a single model or understanding. With this in mind, we will look at four possible manifestations of Caesarism in the twenty-first century. The first form are the Caesars who derive their power from control of a powerful state. Though they still may enjoy popular support, the source of their power is their ability to control often large coercive capacities tied to state military and police forces. Many authoritarian regimes around the world would be examples of this form of Caesarism, but leaders Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China are the best examples. A second form of Caesar focuses on demagogues whose power comes from their control of the so-called “soft power” capabilities of digital media and information. Examples here include the Silicon Valley tech-lords who may not exercise sovereignty over natural space, but certainly exercise a dictator-like authority over key swathes of digital space. In the case of A third category of Caesar derives its power at the head of a mass popular movement and may not actually control any state or media institutions. Often, their power comes from the ability to capture and manipulate coercive and persuasive capability than enjoying an abundance of access to it. The radical religious terrorist movements that exploded onto the global stage on September 11th, 2001 led by such figures as Osama bin Laden of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and have maintained a lingering presence in the seams and cracks of today’s global configuration of power are the example of interest here. Finally, there are the Caesars located largely in the western advanced democracies epitomized by the figure of Donald Trump in the United States who have access both to coercive and populist resources of power. The review of all these Caesars is not intended to be a rigorous analysis of authoritarianism and related phenomenon, but rather a simple sketch of their key features and how they can be understood as “morbid symptoms” of an interregnum between the decaying world of the liberal order and the first components of a new digitized assemblage of power.

***Authoritarian Caesars***

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February of 2022 highlighted in a profound way how the liberal international order had lost its legitimacy as the third decade of the twenty-first century began. Precipitous actions like the invasion that may have been prevented or deterred in the past out of fear of strong sanctions and reprisals from international economic institutions or threats of the use of force from hegemonic state like the United States are now more frequent. Moreover, a new variation of illiberal authoritarianism has emerged amid the current interregnum that allows autocrats the ability to rule without the checks and balances of a traditional liberal state while still maintaining the appearance of a liberal rule of law. Kim Lane Scheppele uses the term “autocratic legalism” to describe a process where “a charismatic new leader comes to power, propelled by the growing impatience that the electorate feels when things are as they are” and uses this popular mandate to make substantial constitutional changes “to consolidate power and entrench themselves in office for the long haul.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Scheppele cites Hungary since 2010 as her “archetypal case” but also includes discussion of similar phenomena occurring in Russia and Turkey (among others). The methods of autocratic legalism include rewriting major portions of the state’s constitution, transforming election laws, passing restrictions on media freedom and rearranging the tax code.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The rise of illiberal states and authoritarian leaders speaks to the lost legitimacy of the liberal international order that seemed unthinkable after the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the great hope in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union was that concentrated doses of liberal “shock therapy” (especially in its economic libertarian form) would transform the former communist juggernaut into a compliant liberal state, the failure of these policies combined with endemic corruption in Russian society contributed to a disenchantment among the poorest and most vulnerable in Russia of western-style economics and democracy.[[8]](#footnote-8) Out of this discontent rose the ruthless and charismatic autocrat Vladimir Putin. The Russian strongman reveled in his role as the disruptor of the best laid plans of western heads of state and gleefully defied efforts by the United States to bring Russia back into the fold of liberal world order while simultaneously offering a solemn and grand vision of Russia as the center of a new Eurasian empire that conjured the spirit of Peter the Great and the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Yet these new illiberal forms of government by themselves may not have been sufficient to undermine the liberal high associated with the “end of history.” The rise of digital technologies—also something seen as a great boon to the forces of liberal expansionism—also turned out to be potent weapons in the arsenal of the authoritarian. In the case of Russia, Putin represents the application of an infamous form of online behavior known as “trolling” into the realm of international politics and state foreign policy. While one behaving in way designed to intentionally stir the ire of those around them is not unique to the internet, digital trolls represented a particular potent form of disruptive behavior that was more difficult to control in the early days of the online universe. According to digital anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, “trolls try to upset people by spreading grisly or disturbing content, igniting arguments, or engendering general bedlam. The chaos of feuding and flaming can be catalyzed by inhabiting identities, beliefs, and values solely for their mischievous potential…”[[10]](#footnote-10) Yet what makes trolls and their activity particularly difficult to control and eliminate is their lack of any obvious material gain. Under the pseudo-concealment of digital anonymity, trolls engage in their hacks and hijinks in pursuit of “lulz”—a kind of visceral amusement and delight felt when the things that give other people great personal meaning or pleasure are impugned or destroyed.[[11]](#footnote-11)

By 2015, trolling went from the purview of small pockets of digital activist tricksters to a form of foreign policy engagement by great powers, and the platforms for political trolling expanded from the shadows of the internet to the full array of global media. Of particular note was the rise of so-called “pro-Kremlin” trolls informally organized by the Russian government for the purposes of upsetting the function of local and national political and economic institutions in rival nations as well as the smooth functioning world order in general. Unlike the traditional trolls who engaged in their knavish craft to trigger spasms of anger in their victims for the lulz, the trolls deployed by Russian-affiliated organizations had the more instrumental goal of undermining the trust and confidence their targeted populations had in the veracity of the information they were accessing. “The outcome…is that the audience becomes disoriented and begins to perceive politics in general as a realm of irreconcilable contradictions and moral filth.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Trolls in this vein are not inventing their “fake news” stories per se and then implanting them in the public sphere of US politics, but rather taking the tendency of speculation, innuendo and outright fabrication that is the hallmark of the media environment in the digital society of the spectacle and amplifying it in a way that accomplishes the aforementioned goal of spreading confusion, misunderstanding and false belief among the general population. The 2016 US presidential election is the most famous example where this type of work is believed to have had substantive (though not necessarily decisive) impacts but journalists and scholars that study cybersecurity and disinformation argue there are plenty of indications such trolling was present in the online discourse over COIVD-19 and human rights.[[13]](#footnote-13)

These acts of internet trolls in service to Russian foreign interests turn out to be only one component of a much larger disinformation methodology that was a key role in the formation of power that kept Vladimir Putin in power in Russia. Behind the trolls was a new approach to authoritarianism that eschewed the usual top-down commands from the presidential palace to the armed agents of the state to a capacity to “climb inside all ideologies and movements, exploiting and rendering them absurd.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Rather than merely subverting discourses and stirring controversies in online fora, Russian “political technologists” would choregraph a complete pageant of conflict and intrigue with the end goal of depicting a social environment in the midst of uncertainty and chaos. This included sponsoring neo-Nazi rallies, providing financial assistance to Russian human rights campaigners and in some cases, assisting political parties opposed to President Putin. Yet in reality, the prevailing assemblage of Russian power, along with its charismatic “man of history” heroically depicted as trying to bring it to heel, is never in any mortal danger. As one journalist put it, “the Kremlin’s idea is to own all forms of political discourse, to not let any independent movements develop outside of its walls. In Moscow it can feel like an oligarchy in the morning and a democracy in the afternoon, a monarchy for dinner and a totalitarian state by bedtime.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

At its most “refined,” trolling takes the form of what now has the label of “non-linear warfare” that Russia and a small handful of other states have utilized with some success. Though the term has no widely accepted definition, the basic idea can be summed up as a “blurring (of) the lines between states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.”[[16]](#footnote-16) While traditional military power remains important, non-linear warfare prioritizes the use of alternative capabilities to bring about the same outcomes by disseminating uncertainty and confusion. “In NLW (non-linear warfare), instead of tanks doing all the work, propaganda, political and social agitators and cyberattacks do most of the forcing.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Successful applications of non-linear warfare for Russia include the deployment of “little green men” into the disputed areas of Ukraine amid the political turmoil of 2014 as well as the erratic engagements of the Russian military in Syria, where Russia was always probing and prodding many of the parties there (Turkey, the Kurds, ISIS) without fully articulating its foreign policy goals for the region. Among the more notorious actions of the Russian military has been the shelling of Syrian cities for no apparent military purpose resulting in speculation that the real goal is less about destroying ISIS or armed insurgents of the Assad regime but creating waves of refugees that flood European borders and undermine the stability of Russia’s European rivals.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Russia is not the only state that has deployed the tools of non-linear engagement. China has developed brigades of so-called “wolf warriors” who have become “China’s most effective messengers on Twitter (and) have proven skillful at capturing audience share through viral content, mixing Beijing-friendly messaging with clickbait content meant to attract followers, from viral memes to panda videos.”[[19]](#footnote-19) At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, these wolf warriors worked to sow confusion and controversy over the debate about the best measures to contain the outbreak by amplifying media content that featured conspiracy theories about the virus’s origins and effectiveness of vaccines or challenged the advice of public health authorities. Exchanges of social media vitriol and efforts to mutually undermine the ability to communicate with national constituencies has become a new front in the on-going conflict between India and Pakistan. Both nations have digital armies in the thousands who use the full array of social media tools to launch propagandistic salvoes via the platforms of Twitter, Facebook and Tiktok.[[20]](#footnote-20) Of course, it is the United States itself which may be the most effective troll of them all given the tendency of US foreign policy in the past to instill its own form of non-linear warfare in bringing about regime change in foreign countries and sowing confusion in states where local populations seemed too accommodating to socialist political parties or traditional diplomatic overtures from the Soviet Union.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Trolling and the eclectic forms of statecraft that spring from it illustrate the new forms of material engagement brought about by the twenty-first century advances in digital information and communications technologies and how they potentially empower the select “men of history” Gramsci referred to a century earlier. The question remains, however, whether a sustainable world order be built on these novel capabilities and the states that find themselves empowered by them? Does the ability to effectively deploy misinformation and sow confusion around the world contribute to a counterhegemonic assemblage of power that could supplant the passing liberal international order and replace with it with some viable alternative?

When a world under is under duress due to what Antonio Gramsci called a “legitimation crisis,” it signals the possibility that an alternative assemblage of global power is perhaps waiting in the wings, ready to supplant the current hegemonic framework. The question in looking at Russia is whether the invasion of Ukraine represents Russia’s attempt to assert this “counter-hegemonic” assemblage of global power and usher in a new historical period led by Russian hegemony. The short answer briefly elaborated below is: No. The components of a global assemblage of power include a set of economic relationships governing global material production, a form of state that creates stable political actors and a framework for global interaction centered on shared ideas and institutions. On top of this is a leading state that accepts and performs a supervisory role including the punishing and discipline of rogue elements. Russia is certainly familiar with playing the role of the rogue agent, but it is difficult to see how its performance as illiberal malcontent sets it up to lead a counter-hegemonic assemblage of power.

In the first instance, Russia does not offer the world an alternative political economy built around a new set of productive relations. The most common refrain with regards to the Russian economy is the inability to maximize its economic potential and engage in a more ambitious program of development. A recent World Bank report stated, “Russia continues to face relatively low potential growth which, unless addressed, will impede its ability to achieve high-level development goals and, raise incomes and living standards.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Russia’ economy as recently as 2019 had a gross domestic product of about 60% of France, 40% of Germany and 8% of the United States.[[23]](#footnote-23) For most of the post-Soviet period, Russian demographics were in a state of crisis with very little consumer spending outside of the major metropolitan areas, little prospect for professional employment for individuals with college degrees, little industrial growth outside of its oil and gas extraction industries and an enormous hinterland filled with residents whose lifestyle shared much in common with the great peasant masses of centuries past.[[24]](#footnote-24) Some of these trends were starting to turn in 2022, but even on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine Harvard economist Jason Furman referred to the Russian economy as “basically a big gas station” and not having much of an economy beyond fossil fuel production.[[25]](#footnote-25) All of this speaks to an economic structure that is still heavily reliant on the already existing liberal economic order and not able to stand on its own system of material production, much less offer different arrangements for alternative assemblage if global power. The old Soviet Union of the twentieth century had the virtue of being able to genuinely offer an alternative framework of economic production, even if it proved to be flawed. The new Russia of the twenty-first century does not.

Still, perhaps there are other components of an alternative world order on offer in Russian power that could serve as an alternative to globalized liberalism. Russia, like many states that have deployed the new digital technologies for the purposes of disruption, has shown that authoritarianism for select “men of destiny” still has a place in the twenty-first century. The numerous autocrats that rose to prominence since 1999, while perhaps not strictly emulating Vladimir Putin, nevertheless follow “a model of successful market authoritarianism that can be imitated around the world,” including Venezuela, Hungary, former Soviet republics in central Asia and scattered other budding despots on five continents. In this sense, Russia is the main contributor to a renewed and streamlined form of exportable kleptocracy that can interconnect itself just enough with global capitalism to generate sufficient wealth to fund a national hegemonic ruling apparatus that sustains its legitimacy through discourses of populism, xenophobia and military jingoism. This alterative form of state certainly appears to provide a solid foundation for a possible counterhegemonic bloc that could fill a potential gap global power left by an unraveling liberal international order. Yet a closer examination of this model shows some fatal flaws, including a government that is almost always at war with some faction of its constituency, flat or declining outcomes on a number of social health indicators including government corruption, rates of higher education, public health and protections of civil rights. On a number of indexes measuring state performance, Russia never ranked above the middle of the pack, with most other authoritarian states congregating at the bottom of the lists.[[26]](#footnote-26)

If the authoritarian model of the state does not hold much appeal for the rest of the world, a world order built on such principles would stand far worse. A world order needs a hegemonic state to stand at the center of it and neither Russia nor any other state that takes after it is powerful enough to assume this role. It is difficult to see how a nation whose most effective foreign policy strategy has been online trolling could rally the world’s states to its cause in the halls of the United Nations or, assuming the UN is an obsolete relic of the twentieth century, create alternative institutions of its own. Authoritarian states often criticize the “rule-based” order of liberal internationalism, but usually cannot offer any viable alternative framework for state interaction. Even the one core principle that authoritarian states could emphasize—sovereign autonomy—was thrown out the window the moment the first Russian tank crossed the border of Ukraine in February 2022.

Yet one should not dismiss the prospect of an authoritarian world order too quickly. Russia has developed a working relationship with China in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has shown it can create viable, if tenuous bonds with other authoritarian states. Indeed, when China is added to the picture and Russia assumes the role of a possible junior partner, a very different picture emerges. It is not clear if Vladimir Putin’s vision of a Russian Empire for the twenty-first century includes substantial accommodation to Russia’s Asian neighbor, but a shrewd Machiavellian operator (as Putin is often portrayed to be) would realize that a viable world order centered around Russian power and hegemonic influence is not possible if Russia acts alone. Russia partnered with China, however, does provide the three basic elements of a global assemblage of power. In this sense, despite the focus on Russia and its future in world order given its invasion of Ukraine, China remains at the center of analysis if the study is of a possible competitor for the liberal world order. This more plausible form of genuine world order with China at its core will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

***Caesars of Silicon Valley***

A competing set of “men of destiny” representing the global interregnum in world order are the billionaire tycoons of the high tech and financial services industries. In this understanding, the ebbing of the international liberal order yields an interregnum where the various grandiose schemes, utopian visions and cynical plots hatched by the “great minds” of the digital revolution offer a number of positive alternative models of world order that are embraced by leading “intellectuals” of the media and business world and enjoy a significant groundswell of support among an enthusiastic and engaged cross-section of the general population. Among these billionaire intellectuals are the most infamous tech gurus including Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Larry Ellison as well as the key titans of finance like Jamie Dimon, Lloyd Blankfein and Warren Buffet who together control or own the balance of the world’s wealth and assets. The power of this elite cadre of individuals rivals the power most states in the world can bring to bear. As *Time* magazine said in 2022:

At some point, these figures get simply too large to be curbed by government and stand aside

heads of state as power players in their own categories. No labor regulators have proven

capable of matching Bezos’ near-monopoly on e-commerce, and campaign finance

regulations could not counter the power of social media in recent elections. Musk says he

wants to steer capital away from government and into private hands that, in his view, can do

more good than any bureaucrat.[[27]](#footnote-27)

As with the other morbid authoritarian symptoms, the autocracy of money and information draws its power from the loss of credibility with present-day components of the global historic bloc. The activities of Elon Musk provide a good example. With an inherited fortune from a family mining business in the era of apartied South Africa, Elon had access to flows of capital that enabled him to purchase or fund fledgling start-up companies, including the digital payment platform Paypal. The windfall from Paypal gave Musk the ability to fund other “futuristic” endeavors, including the electric car company Tesla, the space exploration firm SpaceX and the tunnel-making firm The Boring Company. In these and other endeavors, Musk oversees companies that perform functions that were executed by dominant centralized corporations and bureaucracies of yesteryear—Tesla was able to open and expand the electric vehicle market as the dominant world automakers showed great reluctance in pursuing a mass-market for this technology. Space X has largely replaced NASA in terms of operating a human space exploration program. The Boring Company maneuvers itself as the provider of solutions to the problem city governments seem unable to address—massive urban traffic congestion. Musk’s most recent endeavor came with his purchase of the social media platform Twitter. While there is much contempt and cynicism around Musk’s various activities, Musk has nevertheless positioned himself as a messianic figure who could solve the political and social problems of the twenty-first century much more effectively than either government agencies or legacy multi-national corporations.

A closer review of Musk’s activities and comments, however, reveals the broad outlines of an advanced form of Caesarism that draws its legitimacy from the promise of highly intelligent technocrats using data and technology to create a more efficient and libertarian society. In the recent debate over passing Joe Biden’s national infrastructure package, Musk commented that he did not support the plan, and indeed that all forms of government subsidy were problematic and contributed to an out-of-control federal budget. “Just delete them all” was his sage advice when asked to comment.[[28]](#footnote-28) In lieu of the old institutions, which risk driving humanity into a species-destroying conflict, Musk often speaks eloquently for the need for human settlement on the moon, Mars and other celestial bodies. These communities, by Musk’s own description, would feature a mix of wealth and adventurous spirit that would be necessary to endure the difficult challenges of living in outer space.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In recent years, however, Musk has taken an interest in the more earthly events with his recent comments about the war between Ukraine and Russia and allegations that he was in contact with Vladimir Putin himself before sending out social media posts suggesting ways the war might be brought to a peaceful resolution.[[30]](#footnote-30) As most of the world diplomatic community rejected his suggestions, Musk abruptly announced he would no longer be able to pay for the Starlink internet access Ukraine was relying on for battlefield communications that Musk made available at the start of the conflict.[[31]](#footnote-31) That a single man could insert himself into such an event in this way and be able to influence the direction of the conflict speaks to the space that exists for Caesar-like figures to impact world order and the loss of power and influence on the part of nation-states and traditional international institutions. Whereas in the past, an organization like the United Nations and its staff of professional diplomats would play the role of go-between and peacemaker, now it is billionaire social media personalities playing this role and the United Nations has been rendered completely superfluous.

Another variation of the digital men of destiny is Mark Zuckerberg. Once the socially awkward T-shirt wearing co-founder and CEO of Facebook, Zuckerberg has re-oriented his company toward re-constituting reality by promoting an alternative Web 3.0 digital realm of reality he dubs the “Metaverse.” In his video introduction to the metaverse, Zuckerberg hints at some of the ways the metaverse would impact the daily lives of its users.[[32]](#footnote-32) One’s living space in the metaverse (or “homespace”) is an elaborate customized patch of virtual reality where one can generate almost any imaginable living arrangement—luxurious mansion festooned with opulent ornamental furniture, quaint lakeside bungalow with a calm lake visible out the window, rustic cabin with electronically generated wildlife meandering by, urban condominium with a famous skyline in the background, or whatever else would make the user feel at home. In Zuckerberg’s video, the Meta CEO appears to attend a meeting in a room on an orbiting space station—complete with the effects of zero gravity. But the physical environment is not the only thing malleable in the metaverse—the users themselves can assume any form they wish as they maneuver through this electronic realm. We see Zuckerberg going through various costume choices for his avatar ranging from his standard jeans and hoodie to an assortment of exotic costumes. When he arrives at his meeting on the space station, it appears one of his colleagues/friends has assumed the identity of a large robot. As with the landscapes, the only limit on what form the user can take is limited only by that user’s imagination.

To the casual observer, this has the appearance of a rather novel and visionary form of social engagement. The video goes on to detail how the metaverse could be the new way to organize workplaces and offices, with employees able to remain physically home to do their work but still reporting to their offices in the metaverse and continuing to engage in faux face to face contact with their fellow workers and bosses. Beyond the workplace, Zuckerberg’s metaverse is also primed to open-up a completely new dimension of video gaming experiences with players able to interact with immersive competitive environments with players from around the world. Gaming would be only one of a panoply of recreational opportunities in the metaverse—one might imagine a program where a subject would be able to place themselves in an ultra-realistic historical simulation from the early nineteenth century taking charge of Napoleon’s armies during the Battle Austerlitz then fast-forwarding a century and a half and be walking on the moon for the first time as Neil Armstrong. And since the metaverse can create its own unique and original worlds, one now has the ability to enter into unexplored cyberscapes simulating lost continents on earth or planets and galaxies of the extraterrestrial world. Zuckerberg even suggests the world of science, medicine and academic research could get a boost from the metaverse and its endless applications.

Lost in all of this utopian fantasizing, however, is the troubling fact that Zuckerberg’s metaverse is still tethered to the realities of the actually existing world. Whatever one wishes to call Zuckerberg’s company, it still epitomizes the business model of most other large Silicon Valley technological pseudo-monopolies and their functional imperatives to maximize the platforms’ interaction with mass audiences from around the world and collect that user data and process it so as to allow Facebook’s (or Meta’s) clients to generate ads and promotions for the metaverse’s consumers. Stated another way, everything that is problematic about current social media platforms will be exponentially enhanced and intensified in the metaverse. Indeed, when one considers that the average young American adult spends on average 28.5 hours per week staring at a screen, then the metaverse represents more of a quantitative change in how people consume social media than a qualitative one.[[33]](#footnote-33) The metaverse is already here—all Zuckerberg is really proposing here is a Metaverse 2.0 (withing a larger Web 3.0 paradigm) and when one realizes this then one can quickly grasp how the metaverse does not represent a new form of human interaction or an alternative to the social norms and institutions that already exist, but a platform poised to exacerbate all the contradictions and absurdities already present in the society of the spectacle.

For Musk and Zuckerberg, as well as other tech gurus, the entrance into politics and the machinations of power is often done reluctantly and with no overt policy agenda other than the preservation of their own ambitions. With Peter Thiel, a more aggressive element is added to the mix with the advocacy of technical innovation as the *summum bonum* of the twenty-first century society. As stated by Max Chafkin, Peter Thiel, more than any other of the Silicon Valley “men of destiny,” “has been responsible for creating the ideology that has come to define Silicon Valley: that technological progress should be pursued relentlessly—with little, if any, regard for potential costs or dangers to society.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Indeed, when one looks at some of the most influential digital platforms and technologies of the past twenty-five years, Thiel was often involved somehow in the development of that technology, from the beginnings of the digital payment service PayPal (where he worked alongside Elon Musk), to a primary investor in Facebook to US government data contractor Palantir. Thiel has also been a big booster of Web 3.0 technologies like cryptocurrencies and insists it will soon replace the more obsolete national currencies managed by traditional financial institutions, arguing at one point that “central banks are corrupt” and “we are at the end of the fiat money game.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Thiel has not been shy about providing material and monetary support to political actors who share or support his technology-centered vision, with the billionaire donating millions of dollars to politicians and political action committees devoted to the interests and expansion of high-tech capitalism.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In terms of offering alternative elements of a coherent world order, Thiel is not short of suggestions. As one might expect of a tech billionaire, his preferred space for creating the foundations for a new world is in the realm of cyberspace. In 2019, Thiel argued that “(b)y starting a new Internet business, an entrepreneur may create a new world. The hope of the Internet is that these new worlds will impact and force change on the existing social and political order.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet cyberspace was a realm of great limitations and, perhaps anticipating some of the criticisms associated with alternate cybernetic realities like Zuckerberg’s Metaverse, suggests humans explore the possibility of permanently settling the ocean through floating or underwater cities as well as echoing Musk’s call for space exploration and colonizing worlds beyond Earth. In the creation of these alternatives, Thiel insists in a manner befitting a Caesarist environment, that creative and entrepreneurial individuals will light the way forward and not the forces of the status quo: “Unlike the world of politics, in the world of technology the choices of individuals may still be paramount. The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

It is clear that Thiel’s vision is not so much a coherent vision of a new world order but a narrower agenda that envisions wealthy, intelligent technocrats being freed from the old constraints of representative democracy and being given the space and power to construct and impose their techno-utopias on society. When asked if Thiel had a coherent ideology around which some kind of world order existed, Thiel biographer Max Chalkin responded, “I think there are real questions about whether or not there even is a coherent ideology. It could just be a collection of random contrarian impulses.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Like the other Caesar-like figures discussed in this chapter, Thiel’s power and influence stems less from the quality of his ideas or political skill, but rather the absence of any popular faith or confidence in existing political and social formations of power that would relegate the eclectic musings of an aggrieved billionaire to the margins of public discourse. In this absence of this public faith, the ability of individuals like Thiel to present the merging of authoritarianism and techo-utopianism as a plausible alternative to the decay of the status quo becomes possible.

***Terrorist Caesars***

Once considered a minor nuisance amid the more seismic backdrop of the Cold War, acts of terrorist violence perpetrated by subscribers to a narrow and extreme interpretation of Islamic principles entered the global consciousness with the shocking attack of September 11th in the United States. “What made the incident of September 11 so traumatic,” according to Robert Cox, “was that it demonstrated a capacity on the part of those who totally rejected established order to strike at its very heart.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In this way, the attacks served as the first signal of an organic crisis in the liberal international order that could not be readily solved through the usual technocratic solutions and indicated that certain basic assumptions about the virtue and legitimacy of the contemporary world order were compromised. In addition, changes in material capabilities brought about in part by advancing digital technologies were empowering marginalized groups with alternative ideas and social institutions in a way the established order did not anticipate. As a result, the usual recourse to cooptation and consensus-building was by-passed in favor or more coercive and repressive measures.

Though not organized from a central operational hub, many jihadist movements at the turn of the last century in all their regional and local variants took their cue from the rogue Saudi Arabian national Osama bin Laden and his small vanguard of Islamist brand managers who adopted the title of Al Qaeda.[[41]](#footnote-41) Other prominent figures included Ayman al-Zawahiri as bin Laden’s right-hand man, the 9-11 “mastermind” Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and Al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. As these individuals were pushed from the scene due to killing, capture or hiding, the Islamic State (often referred to as ISIS) group and their informal leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed the position of an ostensible counterhegemonic formation of power. Regardless of which individual or which group occupied the central role, the violent confrontation of radical jihadist against the symbols and infrastructure of western states and interests served as the first signs of an unraveling of the liberal international order and a possible alternative world guided by the ideas and beliefs of a harsh interpretation of Islam.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The digital information revolution played a central role in raising the position of Islamism broadly understood and radical jihadist movements more specifically from a marginal concern contained to the areas of the Middle East to a global threat against liberalism and a possible challenger to western world order. While it is true that most political agents that deployed the types of violent acts that can loosely be labeled as “terrorism” understood media exposure to be a crucial motivating factor for the willingness to embrace violence, it was groups associated with global jihadism that were the first to see how the new digital technologies could greatly empower add to their capabilities.[[43]](#footnote-43) This explains why, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Al-Qaeda were intent on terror attacks that were more “epic” in their scale and ambition. Spectacular acts of violence and destruction, like the attacks of September 11th, were ideal ways of capturing the first institutions associated with the tidal wave of information that digital media platforms were ushering, starting with the 24-hour cable news stations thirsting for constant streams of captivating news and imagery. In this new era of decentralized digital media, a less “top-down” media capability made possible by social media platforms that rely more heavily on user-generated content means abundant spaces exist for political groups and movements not sanctioned by the prevailing global status quo to propagandize, recruit, and otherwise realize their political goals. The media apparatus that could only be accessed via a well-planned and staged event that had the sanction of media gatekeepers is now readily available to anyone with a smartphone and a wireless connection.

An in-depth report by the *Washington Post* in November of 2015 testifies to the extent to which ISIS harnessed the power of digital media capabilities to its own devious ends. “Cameras, computers and other video equipment arrive in regular shipments from Turkey” are “delivered to a (ISIS) media division…whose production skills often stem from previous jobs they held at news channels or technology companies.” These tools are then used to create and distribute large quantities of online content, ranging from the trademark “snuff” videos of ISIS operatives killing prisoners to more “hearts and minds” oriented videos that show the tranquility of daily life in area under the control of the Islamic State to recruitment videos inviting foreigners to make the journey to Syria and Iraq and participate in history. The importance of the power of the spectacle to ISIS is revealed when one learns that, according to one ISIS defector, the “media people are more important than the soldiers…Their monthly income is higher. They have better cars. They have the power to encourage those inside to fight and the power to bring more recruits to the Islamic State.” This effort at cultivating a unique ISIS “brand” has had devastating results, as evidenced by the attacks in Paris in November, which “were carried out by militants who belonged to a floating population of Islamic State followers, subjects who are scattered among dozens of countries and whose attachments to the group exist mainly online.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

The stalwart institutions and actors of the liberal world order, including the United States and its western allies, habituated to being masters of traditional media spectacle, found themselves at a loss to counter ISIS on a terrain over which it was used to exercising domination and for much of the twentieth century had been a primary source of its power. Already struggling to come up with an effective media strategy for their counterterrorism goals when Al-Qaeda enjoyed paramountcy of the jihadist movement, the success of ISIS fusing their media operations together with their terrorist actions left leading members of the State and Defense Department bewildered.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Thus, there is no question that jihadist terrorism and the men who are in its vanguard are taking full advantage of the legitimacy crisis in the contemporary liberal international order. The question remains, however, whether the ideas and institutions behind this movement are sufficient to constitute an alternative assemblage of power that could supplant the teetering status quo? The case of the rise of ISIS perhaps gives the best answer to this question. The Islamic State emerged out of the power vacuum left by the besieged Assad regime in Syria and the withdrawn US military forces in Iraq.[[46]](#footnote-46) Inheriting an active jihadist movement focused on removing the presence of the US military in Iraq and the larger Middle East, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a new caliphate in the lawless areas in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq and began to take over the daily administration in those areas, including the large cities of Raqqa (Syria) and Mosul (Iraq). It philosophical approach to governing centered on an extreme interpretation and application of Shari’a Law akin to the Wahhabist principles found in Saudi Arabia. These principles were enforced with relentless energy and brutality, with the Islamic State taking particular delight in meting punishments for religious transgressions that would be considered too extreme even in Saudi Arabia.[[47]](#footnote-47) The new caliphate was especially adept at using this extreme brutality disseminated through social media platforms as a signature around which it could build a global brand to attract adherents from foreign locations and set up affiliates in other regions of the globe. Indeed, before it had formally declared itself a caliphate, the now iconic black flag of ISIS was being adopted by other extremist jihadist movements throughout the Middle East and Africa, including Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia.[[48]](#footnote-48)

With an ostensible state and a capacity for spreading its ideology and iconography to other regions of the world, the pieces appear to be in place for a genuinely alternative framework for world order. The central caliphate would be the hub of power from which a *Pax Islamica* might spread outward from the Middle East as western liberalism retreats. Secular governments in the Levant and the Islamic Maghreb would either adopt the Islamic State form of government of become provinces of the central ISIS government. Trade and commerce would still take place, but the rules of exchange would be reoriented to take place under an Islamic framework that would likely not prioritize ease of movement or profit maximization. Other activities within this world order would be subject similar restrictions and the near-term consequences would likely be an economic contraction and global depression as economic rules are reconfigured. It is not clear what the social relations of production might be in such a caliphate but the traditional antagonisms between owners and laborers would likely take on a new dynamic with the right to own property tied to some kind of religious test. Of note here is the observation that extreme interpretations of Shari’a Law such as practiced by the Islamic State permit the keeping of slaves and other forms of indentured labor, introducing an avenue of labor exploitation largely absent in the current liberal model. Such severe restrictions would also extend to the status of women and other groups of individuals living lifestyles that strict interpretations of Islamic law would label “deviant.”

Nevertheless, the fate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria suggests that while radical jihadism is most certainly a morbid symptom of the faltering liberal world order, it does not represent a plausible alternative. No matter how skillfully Islamic information warriors took advantage of the United States and other nations’ poor understanding of changes brought about by the digital communications revolution of the twenty-first century, their media jujitsu alone could not generate the kind of mass support, ideological innovation or institution-building necessary to fully supplant the infrastructure of US power and the liberal world order that it sponsors. However clever the keyboard warriors of the Islamic State were in bolstering their fledgling movement, their capabilities in the material world remained vastly inferior and ISIS military capacities never surpassed the level of an irregular militia or ragtag motorized infantry unit. The sustained presence of the United States, Russia, Turkey and other foreign nations in the area demonstrated that having an impactful presence in the realm of cyberspace means little if it does not translate in the capability in the terrestrial world of economic and military capability.

Moreover, the brief existence of a formal caliphate saw no attempts to radically reorganize economic production to provide material sustainability for the newly formed state nor were any substantial financial resources available to invest in the creation of such infrastructure. In terms of raising money, the best the Islamic State could do was seize the wealth of the territories it had conquered, pool the donations of its volunteers and foreign supporters or sell the small quantities of oil it was able to extract on the black market.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Even in those areas where it showed strength and innovation, ISIS (and the digital media operations of radical jihadism generally), operated from a position of profound weakness. The key platforms that the information operatives of jihadism were able to exploit, ranging from the 24-hour cable news networks to social media, remained under the control of dominant states and institutions that have long controlled the global media infrastructure. In the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, Osama bin Laden expressed frustration that the videos he made to capitalize on the success of the attacks took months via courier to reach satellite cable broadcasters like Al Jazeera and then were heavily edited when broadcast—if they were even broadcast at all.[[50]](#footnote-50) Social media platforms like Twitter began to actively filter out any material that came from accounts associated with ISIS or other radical jihadist groups, forcing the propaganda arms of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS to utilize older methods of online information dissemination including online magazines.[[51]](#footnote-51) Without their own digital media infrastructure, there would be precious few places for jihadist groups or nascent states to speak to the global masses.

Perhaps the biggest problem for groups and organizations seeking to establish an alternative framework of power under the auspices of political Islam was that such institutions already existed and, in many cases, thrived within the purview of the *Pax Americana.* The strongest manifestations of political Islam remained those traditional states that are integrated into the liberal global economy and can build and deploy large-scale military force or can ally itself with powerful outside foreign actors that enter partnerships for state security. The Gulf emirates on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain provide an excellent example of this. The regional non-governmental organization Forum For Promoting Peace In Muslim Societies stated in 2016:

Our greatest concern is to shed light on the political outcomes that stem from the distortion of

the Islamic Sharia (…) interpreting the teachings of our religion out of their original context

has given the necessary pretexts to forces threatening social peace in Muslim societies,

specifically those who are still trying to recover from regime change, meanwhile other forces

have even attempted to reshape international order and replace the nation state with their self–

declared ‘Islamic Caliphate’. There is no parallel in these entities’ usurpation of religious

symbols and terminology.[[52]](#footnote-52)

As Panos Kourgiotis argues, the purpose of this passage is to demonstrate to the world that the idea that “non-militant Islamist parties committed to democracy, elections and socio-political reform are easily equated with Osama bin Laden, the Taliban or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” is false.[[53]](#footnote-53) While many elements of the liberal international order, such as the ostensible preference for democratic forms of government and cultural pluralism are not fully embraced, the goal of most Gulf states is to establish a “narrative of modern traditionalism that allows the nation to exist in a state of perpetual duality, as Western and non-Western, as innovative and technology driven, yet simultaneously defined by a rich cultural heritage steeped in old-world authenticity.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Saudi Arabia represents the most profound example of this. The regime enforces a strict interpretation of Sharia Law on its citizens that include harsh penalties and punishments for violating this legal code. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia remains a member of good standing the liberal world order and has suffered only minor sanction for its harsh religious codes and ostensible violations of internationally recognized human rights. Though the regime briefly endured harsh criticism and censure for the killing of Saudi-born US journalist Jamal Khashoggi, relations have retuned to normal and the US has even granted immunity to the Saudi leadership for any prosecution to come from the Khashoggi investigation.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Thus, radical jihadism represented by certain “men of destiny” like Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is a morbid symptom of an interregnum in world order rather than a coherent counter-hegemonic assemblage of power with the potential to form a distinct historic bloc of world order. This is not to deny the fact radical jihadism remains a potent force within the larger region of the Middle East and North Africa. To be sure, one ought not rule out the possibility of the tabooed versions of extreme Islam represented by Al Qaeda and ISIS mixing and merging with those variations of Islamism that have been integrated into the liberal international order and possibly creating a more politically and economically viable version of jihadism that would stand a better chance of being part of a configuration of power in a world where international liberalism has faded and spaces exist for counter-hegemonic blocs to emerge. Nevertheless, the ability of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS to broaden their appeal beyond their digital followers and parley this support into coherent forms of political, economic and institutional power remains limited. The embrace of brutality, violence and terrorism and their presence on social media platforms represents not a growing consensus upon which a bloc of power can be built but a scream for recognition among a marginalized band of extremists who have not been able to access the more powerful cadres of elite decision-makers in the structures of political Islam that have already been integrated into the global economy and international order.

***Populist Caesars***

The kinds of charismatic demagogues found in the west fit into their own category due to their greater reliance on the institutions of civil society for support (as opposed to a reliance on the power of the state for the more authoritarian Caesars discussed above) and their connection to the latent power embedded in the world order of the fading liberal international order. Figures like Donald Trump benefit from the fact that US hegemony with its leading role in international commerce (especially with regards to the central role the US dollar continues to play in international finance), strings to control major international institutions and global military reach gives access that being the autocrat of an isolated authoritarian state cannot match.

Both forms of authoritarianism spent the early years of globalization on the margins of the dominant liberal mainstream discourses with the real possibility of slipping into obscurity. Non-democratic forms of government were taboo with the United States and its invasion of Iraq took place for the specific purpose of hunting down one brutal dictator and putting all others on notice they could be next. Even as this project to democratize the Middle East faltered by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the liberal zeitgeist manifested perhaps its most profound event with the election of Barak Obama in the United States in 2008. Much of the world hailed this momentous occasion and recognized it as a symbolic keeping of the unspoken promise at the heart of liberalism that equality, freedom and peace would arrive in due time if you conform to the liberalism’s principles. Upon Obama’s victory, no less a luminary than Nelson Mandela stated, “Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Yet by the time Obama’s terms of office were complete, both the illiberalism of states like Russia and China as well as a reanimated alt-right political movement in the United States and in other western countries were entering numerous halls of power around the world.

As with the online trolls in Russia and the jihadist of the Islamic State’s digital caliphate, this alt-right resurrection came up through inhabiting the dark spaces of the internet and mastering the dark arts of social media and other Web 2.0 platforms. Congregating in clandestine chat rooms, cryptic Reddit fora and the absurdly grotesque image boards of 4chan, a ragtag assortment of mostly young white men animated by an incoherent mash-up of xenophobia, libertarianism, neo-fascism and disdain for women and minority groups created an array of mostly image-based messages they shared with each other and disseminated out in the “normie” discourse through social media platforms.[[57]](#footnote-57) Out of this digital militia of meme warriors emerged a rogue’s gallery of alt-right intellectuals that, following Gramsci’s observations about the important contributions of thought and discourse leaders in forming a coherent configuration of power, helped transform the ostensible agenda of the alt-right worldview into a political program that capture brick and mortar institutions like the White House and the US Congress.[[58]](#footnote-58) As Angela Nagle observed: “Although the tactics of the online right are updated to a digital age, it is hard to think of a better term than Gramscian to describe what they have strategically achieved, as a movement almost entirely based on influencing culture and shifting the Overton window through media and culture, not just formal politics.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

Out of this newly ascendant culture and ideology came the movement’s own “men of destiny” that included an eclectic mix of fringe politicians, policy wonks long marginalized to the fringe of DC Beltway society and a regiment of young financiers and bankers looking to disrupt the traditional workings of mainstream US capitalism.[[60]](#footnote-60) These included a new foreign policy agenda that would see the United States relinquish its role as the sponsor of the liberal international order by either reducing its presence in key international institutions or withdrawing from them all together. Corresponding with this disavowal of the rest of the world for US greatness was a similar rejection of the place of immigration in US society and economic growth in favor of a more “Fortress America” approach that would at best place additional restrictions on those seeking residency in the United States and at worst see the banning of certain groups from being able to enter the United States for any reason. Swirling underneath these policy prescriptions was an unapologetically prejudicial worldview that saw the United States and its culture as foundationally white Anglo-Saxon and its society incompatible with any members of non-white communities that sought to enter the US. Accompanying this viewpoint was a feared “Great Replacement” wherein swarms of non-white immigrants would enter the US and liquidate the white majority of the population.[[61]](#footnote-61) This belief was the motivation for a number of mass shootings and murders in the United States and around the world.[[62]](#footnote-62) In the candidacy of Donald Trump, the alt-right had their ultimate “man of destiny” tailor-made for the twenty-first century society of the spectacle.

As Trump began to articulate political positions that had long been relegated to the obscure spaces of online political discourse and publicly castigated representatives of mainstream US conservatism in the 2016 primary debates, media executives and key figures in digital technology were beginning to notice a distinct popular momentum building behind the Trump phenomenon. The Chairman of the CBS television network said in 2016: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS… Man, who would have expected the ride we’re all having right now?...The money’s rolling in and this is fun…I’ve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Meanwhile, Donald Trump’s timeline on Twitter proved to be one of the most popular sites on the entire platform before it was removed by Twitter executives in the wake of the January 6th attempted putsch. Social media journalists remarked how he was “transforming political Twitter to become one of his most effective (not to mention free) campaign tools.”[[64]](#footnote-64) While it is true that Trump’s poll numbers were never all that spectacular throughout his rise to prominence and throughout his presidency, they never dipped below a certain level and were always consistently higher than his conservative competitors.[[65]](#footnote-65)

For those that consider themselves aligned with Trump, their loyalty to him ranged from committed to fanatical. Trump was also able to speak to segments of the US population that had a visceral disgust of mainstream politicians and a lost faith in the dominant social institutions to address the pressing issues in the twenty-first century. Often given the label of “populism,” this phenomenon had historically been a source of strength for socialist-oriented movements during the early and middle portions of the twentieth century who used discontent among the laboring masses to access important positions of power in the national and international architecture of power. Beginning in the 1980s, however, with the rise of Thatcherism in Great Britain and Reaganism in the United States, this Caesarist wellspring of power slowly began to ooze in a more right-wing direction.[[66]](#footnote-66) In response, the left-leaning parties of the hegemonic states of the liberal international order adopted a more centrist and technocratic tone, and in doing so, “…gave up the ‘battle for socialist ideas,’ like job security, fair wages and universal access to resources of social dignity, and consequently failed to magnetise working-class voters.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Into this breech came the marginalized parties trafficking in white racial grievance and xenophobia that served as a mass foundation for the new alt-right populism of the twenty-first century.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that it is almost exclusively poor and lower middle -class whites who are the driving force behind the numerous right-wing populist movements in the western world. In the United States, one of the most crucial factions of the bourgeois ruling class that animates much of the base for alt-right figures like Donald Trump are what Patrick Wyman calls the “American gentry”—a widely scattered class of local millionaires and high-income earners that exercise local reign over scores of small and medium sized metropolitan areas across the landscape of the United States. As Wyman writes,

When he (Donald Trump) crowed about his “beautiful boaters,” lauding the flotillas of

supporters trailing MAGA flags from their watercraft in his honor, or addressed his devoted

followers among a rioting January 6 crowd that included people who had flown to the event

on private jets, he knew what he was doing. Trump was courting the support of the American

gentry, the salt-of-the-earth millionaires who see themselves as local leaders in business and

politics, the unappreciated backbone of a once-great nation.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Coming largely from industries like agriculture and construction, this local gentry class shares a common ideological affinity for the virtues of liberal economics with its more globe-trotting cosmopolitan elite operating out of the world’s hubs of industrial and financial power. Yet their presence in more rural settings where traditional institutions like churches and high school football games were central to the mythos of American greatness often placed them in an antagonistic relationship with their more internationally oriented counterparts who often found such tokens of Americana quaint at best.

These were the groups that formed the legions that helped deliver the White House to Trump in 2016. Nevertheless, was this motley crew of conservative and alt-right factions led by the telegenic Trump sufficient to constitute a coherent historic bloc consisting of a unique form of state, a viable mode of economic and military power and a grouping of global institutions providing a shape to an alternative world order?

The alt-right certainly posits a state more in keeping with a protectionist and garrison-oriented disposition, with significant curbs on immigration (especially in terms of regulating movements of people according to racial and ethnic categories) and trade. The most coherent policy position of Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency was the construction of a border wall along the entirety of the southern US frontier with Mexico and the banning of all nationals from seven predominately Muslim countries.[[69]](#footnote-69) Alongside of this was the placing of substantial trade restrictions on goods from China that marked the beginnings of a low-level “trade war” between the two nations after two decades of a relatively open and symbiotic economic relationship.[[70]](#footnote-70) A similar rethinking of US trade policy also took place among the three major NAFTA signatories, though here the consequences were “mostly a cosmetic refreshing of NAFTA, not a wholesale replacement.”[[71]](#footnote-71) In making these policy changes, Trump was defying several years of US trade and economic policy that ostensibly prioritized a state that facilitated and expanded the scale and intensity of trade in the world and advocated for the mutual benefits it created. Several observers even suggested that these and other Trump policies were harbingers of a new world order.[[72]](#footnote-72)

A possible “Trumpian” state would also be a state more eager and willing to embrace the tools of coercion to create order in both domestic and international contexts. In this sense, the alt-right Trump state shares a number of commonalities with the authoritarian state already discussed in a previous section. In these actions one can see a resemblance to efforts by the Trump Administration and the organizations outside of government that supported his presidency. Major initiatives are currently underway in the United States by Trump’s Republican Party to artificially create a conservative majority in the US Supreme Court (a task that was accomplished when Amy Coney Barrett replaced Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the waning days of Trump’s term in office), place a number of restrictions on voting protocols and provisions and attempt to regulate how social media companies monitor and manage content on their sites.[[73]](#footnote-73)

If an alt-right ideology can create the grounding for its own state, can it also constitute its own social relations of production and world order? Here the evidence is less compelling. The social relations of power and production remain largely the same as one would find in liberalism. Powerful agents of finance, production and trade would remain in dominant positions in society with the working and service classes not gaining any new leverage other than the shallow satisfaction that immigrants and foreigners are no longer able to participate in a meaningful way in the local and national economy. A notable example of how this plays out is already observable in Great Britain in the wake of Brexit. With the restrictions on foreign labor taking hold once the final separation agreement was finalized in 2020, Great Britain quickly found itself struggling with shortages of key goods, including groceries and gasoline for motor vehicles. While the effects of the pandemic were a contributing factor to these supply issues, a much bigger role was the absence of qualified workers to perform basic supply chain tasks like drive transport vehicles from wholesale and distribution points to retail outlets.[[74]](#footnote-74) Immigrant labor has been a key component in the productive apparatus of the liberal economic order with different states setting up various formal and informal ways of ensuring labor was able to get to where it was most in demand. Placing restrictions or eliminating these systems without some viable alternative set up to replace them suggests that a world order rooted in alt-right principles would see a dramatic reduction in the scale and scope of the global economy, possibly resulting in global recession and stagnant growth. In these circumstances, the factors that led to the rise of alt-right populism in the first place would only be exacerbated.

***Conclusion***

The wide variety of global problems and challenges that feature in the present context of world order are taken by many to be examples of what Antonio Gramsci called “morbid symptoms” of a past regime of power in a state of decline. The impacts of frequent natural disasters, social unrests and civil wars, and outbreaks of international conflict certainly point to a fraught time. Nevertheless, these events by themselves do not point to an interregnum in world order where many morbid symptoms appear and define an age in transition from one form of world order to another. The specifics Gramsci gives as to what constitutes a morbid symptom is the emergence of Caesarism: the rise of popular “men of destiny” who ride waves of populist fervor into a position of power and manage to rule in lieu of a legitimate formation of hegemonic power. The period of Caesarism, however, is not the “new world struggling to be born” to replace the faltering configuration of rule, but rather thrives in spaces of non-hegemony that exist in the transition of one assemblage of power to another.

In the early twenty-first century, when US hegemony has abated but no gathering configuration of material forces, ideas or institutions have put together a viable alternative to the fading status quo, several different outbursts of Caesarism have become visible around the world. This chapter has identified four of the most prominent examples: self-declared prophets proselytizing a radical Islamic extremism, illiberal authoritarians calling for the purging of immigrants and “deviants” from their societies and return to traditional values, the rise of Donald Trump in the United States promising to “make America great again,” and Silicon Valley billionaires seeking to socially re-engineer western society along more high-tech libertarian lines. While none of these “men of destiny” offer viable alternatives to the contemporary order, they none the less in the chaos of the status quo’s collapse occupy temporary positions of power and influence and can hatch grandiose agendas for the accumulation of political power that would be relegated to the margins in previous decades.

All of these examples of Caesarism present in the current epoch feature the presence and use of digital technologies and the ideologies and institutions they shape and shift in some important way. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that they alone bring about the kind of authoritarian Caesarism rising-up in various corners of the globe. Religious extremism that sanctions acts of terrorism, the rise of illiberal forms of governments around the world and inside the waning hegemony of the United States and the false promise of billionaire gurus may all have digital technology as part of their populist eruption, but are not birth pangs of a new world struggling to be born. For that, the focus needs to turn the different ways material capabilities, ideologies and institutions brought about by the digital revolution merge together to form novel social relations of production, forms and hybrids of state and sovereign power and world orders or structures of international authority. Until the content of these elements of world power are fully constituted, we are all going to continue to live in a world of Caesars.

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