

## BOOK REVIEW

## Reinventing Authoritarianism: The Digital and the Donald

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In *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, communication and media scholar Christian Fuchs plunges into the depths of new media with an eye for the reemergence of authoritarianism, albeit in a refashioned form, and armed with a rich tradition of well-articulated critical theory. Fuchs presents a clear and explicit question to arm his analysis, namely: What is authoritarian capitalism and how is it communicated through social media? Using the contemporary parameters of the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump, along with the complex phenomenon that is its supporting ideology, he explores the relationship between political communication and new nationalism to expose the dangerous marriage between authoritarianism and capitalism in prominent positions of power. This review charts Fuchs's unique journey through critical theory and digital texts while responding to its ambitions both as a revitalized account of the critical theory tradition and as a cautionary tale of contemporary political movements. I primarily present his book as a sobering examination of the problematic entanglement of radical capitalism, authoritarian politics, and rapid communication strategies while remaining optimistic that it will influence several scholars to apply his theories as a potential strategy for positive liberation and/or contestation moving forward.

**Keywords:** Authoritarianism; Critical theory; Capitalism; Donald Trump

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As waves of individuals in a globalized market become emboldened through their creative use of digital technologies, so do various political leaders. Despite the endorsement by many, the oft-considered liberating force of social media might possibly be less of a medium championing independent or innovative thought, and instead, be yet another communicative iteration that reinforces old ideologies through charismatic individuals and brands. In *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, communication and media scholar Christian Fuchs plunges into the depths of new media with an eye for the reemergence of authoritarianism, albeit in a refashioned form, and armed with a rich tradition of well-articulated critical theory. Fuchs's ambitious project does a masterful job of infusing Marxist theory and Frankfurt School critical theory with the digital phenomena of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the surging dominance of neoliberalism. The result of his efforts is a sobering examination of the problematic entanglement of radical capitalism, authoritarian politics, and rapid communication strategies.

The questions and objectives of his text are delineated rather clearly and explicitly. Fuchs asks: What is authoritarian capitalism and how is it communicated through social media? He further provides the purpose and desired reception of his inquiry: "It formulates the foundations of a contemporary critical theory of right-wing authoritarianism and authoritarian capitalism. In doing so, it updates the Frankfurt School's critical theory of authoritarianism."<sup>1</sup> He presents the fear that history will likely repeat itself without a modernization of critical theory, arguing that authoritarian ideologies are experiencing a resurgence of popularity and celebrated success through new media formats: a phenomenon he identifies as "nationalism 2.0."<sup>2</sup> He is concerned that the proliferation and strategic use of digital technology will continue to empower dangerous right-wing authoritarian movements, as the domination of uninformed charisma and spectacles tarnish public discourse. He responds to this fear with an extensive analysis and critique of these forms of communication, advocating for types of "slow media" and more thought-provoking content. Alongside of his theoretical ambitions, Fuchs advances a primary argument: "Trump stands for an authoritarian form of capitalism."<sup>3</sup>

Fuchs's book maintains a fine balance between a focused spotlight on President Donald Trump's communication strategies and the larger theoretical objectives of the project. His analysis is organized as a careful conceptual progression: it builds from authoritarian ideology towards the phenomenon of Trump. His project simultaneously begins by planting its roots in the rich tradition of critical theory and navigating the crucial definitions of ideology, nationalism, and fascism before shifting to an introduction of conventional understandings of right-wing authoritarianism and Fuchs's new interpretation of authoritarian capitalism. These diverse explanations are drawn from an incredibly vast number of theorists and provide the reader with an informed but not necessarily settled understanding of these concepts before moving towards the content of the text. The majority of the book is, rightfully, spent on the provocative content: Trumpism (the shifting state under Donald Trump's presidency), Trumpology (Trump's ideology), and Trump's use of Twitter. Fuchs concludes with an insightful synopsis of authoritative capitalism and fast-paced digital media that includes alternatives to the problematic trends he conveys in his account.

Those interested in the conceptual exchange within critical theory and Marxism may benefit greatly from Fuchs's theoretical discussion. One of the many strengths of this book is its incredibly dense and rich overview of the multiple conversations within these traditions, with particular attention dedicated to the subject of nationalism. He critically and accurately explores the work of theorists such as Marx, Gramsci, Lukács, Horkheimer, Adorno, Neumann, and Wallerstein without letting any particular position dominate or control the momentum of the analysis. The result is a collection of brief accounts of each theorist, dedicating only enough space to charitably articulate their positions and contributions to the project. This strategy creates an incredibly deep analytic experience for the reader properly tuned to or generally aware of these traditions, but may prove less accessible to those who are unfamiliar with Marxist theory and the Frankfurt School. Fuchs offers brief generalizations of ideology, nationalism, and fascism before unpacking them through the selected theorists: a move that seems to adopt a pluralistic approach rather than resolve them under unitary definitions.

Within this conceptual variability, there are several significant notes that clearly inform Fuchs's perspective and method moving forward. For instance, he writes that "Ideology critique is the deconstruction of falsehood, of knowledge that is presented as truth but is deceptive."<sup>4</sup> This clear nod towards a critique of "post-truth" politics allows Fuchs to offer social moral realism as a viable opponent to authoritarian capitalism based on a presumption of successfully navigating social realities. Further, he presents nationalism as essentially *fictive* and *banal*: collectives associate themselves together based on an imaginary identity attached to posterior interpretations of the group *as if* they had come together in the past, and then reproduce

and reinforce this idea through commonplace symbols and activities.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of nationalism also correctly addresses the inherent racial relations attached. Nationalism, by these terms, informs a hyper-politics of conservatism and exclusion. Regarding fascism, Fuchs presents a rather radical claim: "Fascism is always capitalist in character, it presupposes capitalist rule."<sup>6</sup> In a Marxist move, he claims that fascism targets the fears of working-class individuals and deflects attention away from inherent class conflict by appealing to the fictive differences established by nationalist ideologies. Points such as these encourage the reader to anticipate the painfully obvious consistencies seen in the digital expressions of Trumpology.

Fuchs's account of "Trumpism" is a thorough analysis of institutional alterations focused on a "changing of the guard" of United States capitalism under the Trump administration. He examines the demographics of the alleged right-wing authoritarian base while also appealing to varying voter motivations such as political anxiety and fear, (de)industrialization, and alienation, which is a further application of Marxist theory. The rise of Trump in the U.S. is explained and navigated well despite being such a recent phenomenon, and Fuchs advances this move quite admirably towards the more authoritarian bureaucracy he observes in the current administration. Authoritarianism and capitalism in this section begin to blend more transparently, as the aggressive imposition of neoliberal policies become more profound under Trump. This includes further allocation of public funding for privately restricted infrastructure<sup>7</sup> and a series of cabinet appointments and decisions that "represents the interests of capital and not of labour."<sup>8</sup> Additional attacks on healthcare, education, and the environment provide more evidence of an authoritarian capitalist stranglehold on politics. Fuchs concludes this analysis by once again moving back to theory in an attempt to answer the lingering question: "Is Trump a Fascist?"<sup>9</sup> He does not explicitly provide an answer, but it may be easily implied from his evaluation.

Utilizing his expertise as a communications scholar, Fuchs puts these considerations into conversation with Trump's usage of new media, particularly television and Twitter. He appeals to the political instrumentality of these media for Trump, who "organises politics like a media spectacle."<sup>10</sup> These apparatuses allow someone like Trump to "perform" their brand and hyper-individualism as a constant consumable product. In an age of post-truth, this consumable image/product proves more desirable to a base than do facts or debate. Fuchs effectively covers the phenomenon of Trump as a television sensation, but more impressively articulates the reasons behind the president's admiration for Twitter:

Twitter is the best medium for the emotional and ideological politics of outrage, scapegoating, hatred and attack because its ephemerality, brevity and speed support spectacles and sensationalism. At the

same time, the custom of liking and retweeting on Twitter appeals to Trump's narcissistic side, allowing him to indulge his status as a celebrity, brand and political leader.<sup>11</sup>

Fuchs supports each claim for Trump's authoritarian capitalism with an intense collection of Tweets and statements along with descriptions of their capacities for reception and mobilization. This strategy allows a reader to effortlessly follow each claim that Fuchs makes alongside of the relevant content of the analysis, with clean charts made available for easy reference or critique.

Fuchs's account should be enticing for anyone interested in his self-proclaimed themes: "right-wing authoritarian consciousness, psychology, ideology, movements, organisations and society, Right-wing authoritarian thought and right-wing authoritarian society."<sup>12</sup> These ideas are heavily determined by the modes of communication, dramatically affecting the influence and reception of those who use such methods to propel capitalist methods through an authoritarian perspective. Those interested and/or well-versed in Marxist theory and Frankfurt School critical theory should take notice of Fuchs's interpretation as he tries to update these approaches to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Time will tell if his revitalized account of critical theory will maintain its merit in application; yet, its relevance to contemporary processes of neoliberalism appears more than apparent and desirable. His navigation of digital media trends and popular rhetoric remain transmutable for other phenomena and movements appealing to these same methods. Overall, *Digital Demagogue* is a gratifying and informative read that takes the reader on a dense theoretical journey of the contemporary rise of authoritarian capitalism and

new-age fascism. Though these trends will likely be discouraging to many, Fuchs does save room for alternatives and optimism that one might take away if they hope to combat such trends. As he suggests quite simply: "for society to flourish and avoid authoritarianism and fascism, it is essential that humans treat each other in a social and human manner."<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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