

**PUTIN, MODI AND TRUMP:
UKRAINE AND RACIST RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

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The invasion of Ukraine is appalling. The resistance is heroic. The situation is moving fast, and each step is politically revealing. There remains a great deal of confusion about Putin and Ukraine in the United States and Britain. This long read aims to unpack some of that confusion and to explain Putin's rise, how he fits into the global racist right, and his reasons for invading Ukraine.

Americans are often puzzled by Donald Trump's admiration for Putin. The reason is that Putin is one of the two leading figures in new global movement of right-wing populists. Modi, the Prime Minister of India is the other. Trump too is part of that movement.

We start with an explanation of the politics of that movement, by looking at the masculinity of these three populist leaders: Putin, Modi and Trump. We explore the ways that each leader has mixed racism, sexual aggression, violent bullying and Islamophobia with working class pain and anger to support a right-wing project and a murderous fossil fuel future.

And though we do not take our discussion further here, these three are not alone. Their populism characterizes the governments of Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte of the Philippines and Netanyahu in Israel, among others – all men with ugly biographies of their own.

Along the way we aim to answer questions that may be of interest to you. For example, why do some American commentators say they supported Putin's invasion because he has done so much to stop the onward march of LGBT agenda? Why does a CBS reporter

make a deal about the whiteness of people in Ukraine? Why did so much of the Republican party support the invasion, as have others on the notional 'left'? What is it with Modi's 52-inch chest?

An exploration of masculine styles may seem an unusual way to unpack the new racist right. But this is what we do on *Anne Bonny Pirate*. In Part One, we look particularly at gender and sexuality, and we ask how this lens can illuminate politics, class and empire.

In Part Two of this long read, we outline our understanding of Putin's reasons for invading Ukraine. We look at the threats he sees in the global wave of uprisings for democracy. We look at how the threat of climate activism and the changing energy market have made his hold on power increasingly shaky. And we describe the changes in superpower politics after the American defeat in Afghanistan which led Putin to believe he could invade Ukraine with impunity.

We should make clear at the start that we are against Putin's invasion. We support the Russian protesters for peace. We believe the armed resistance of the Ukrainian army and civilians is the right and proper response to the invasion.

But we do not side with the governments of the United States or the NATO countries of Europe. They have invaded too many other countries and installed too many other dictatorships. They too are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Because there is a lot to unpack, we've also packaged this post as a pdf which you can [download here](#).

PART ONE: THE NEW GLOBAL RACIST RIGHT

The financial crisis of 2008-2009 shook the global economy. Barack Obama led his government and the most important central banks in the world in a massive stimulus plan. That stimulus only helped some countries though. And in the rich countries, as in the United States, Obama and the bankers rescued Wall Street and left Main Street to suffer.[\[1\]](#)

Obama and the central bankers restored order. The price was a slow collapse in public support for the ruling neoliberal political parties. The excluded, exploited and betrayed turned to a new politics on the right, or a new politics on the left.

The leaders of this new right are Putin in Russia, Modi in India, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in Philippines, Orbán in Hungary, Netanyahu in Israel, Salvini in Italy, and the Brexit process in Britain. The different movements draw on national conservative, fascist and racist traditions. But the leaders are also watching each other, and learning, and something new is being created.[\[2\]](#)

In almost all cases a central fact about the new right is just how terrible the governments of the center had been, how corrupt and contemptuous, and how much people have hated them. This is also a reason that many analysts of the center and left have such trouble understanding the appeal of racist populism. The analysts cannot bring themselves to admit how much people have suffered under the reformists in Russia, Congress in India and the Democrats in the United States.

This new racist right are often compared to the fascists in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. These comparisons can be confusing. In the 1930s Hitler, Mussolini and Franco led movements whose support rested mainly on the wealthy, office workers, small business

people and farmers. Few other workers supported the fascists. The project of those fascists was to reach power, consolidate a dictatorship, and to terrify the unions and the working class into submission.

Today the new far right now live in societies where wage workers are a majority. Their project is to seduce enough people from the working class to win elections. In power they move toward more authoritarian regimes, often with pogroms and extra-judicial killings. But trade unions, courts, parliaments and parts of the press continues. In many cases their leaders can be removed in elections.

The different leaders have built support in two ways. They stand as tribunes of the people against the elite. Simultaneously, they appeal to a variety of hatreds for oppressed minorities, working with the hatreds that come to hand. In Russia, it is Muslims and Jews; in Hungary, Romany and Jews; in the United States, Muslims, Blacks and Latinos; and in India, Muslims and Christians. In Brazil, Bolsonaro dare not attack the black and semi-black majority, so he focuses on hatred for LGBT and indigenous people. In Philippines, short of racial minorities, Duterte kills drug dealers and drug users.

A murderous hatred for Jews, politely called anti-semitism, is gaining ground in countries like the United States, where it had long been muted. The reason is that every far-right racist leader faces a dilemma. They have to persuade their working-class supporters that they hate the elites, at the same time as they fervently support capitalism and inequality. The leaders are anti-elite members of the elite, and conspiracy theories about Jews and other scapegoats, and conspiracy theories in general, are a convenient was of squaring that circle.

Central in every case is sexism, and a bullying masculinity. One of the ways these movements are close to the fascist tradition is in the importance of the leader. Donald Trump in the United States is perhaps the best known of these. But he is exceptional in his lack of

emotional control, ignorance and weakness. Vladimir Putin in Russia and Narendra Modi in India are, by contrast, serious, intelligent and innovative figures. Here we focus on Putin, Modi and Trump, each of whom has coupled a brutal racism with a macho style, while the other right-wing populists are each frightening in their own way.

Russia

To understand Putin's masculinity, and what is going on now, we have to begin with the crisis of the 1990s in Russia.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev began the process of opening up the old Soviet Union. That had two sides. One was *glasnost* – a moderate opening to human rights and some democracy. The other was *perestroika* – literally reconstruction. *Perestroika* was a response to the long decline in profits and growth with the Soviet state-controlled economy. The idea was to follow the path of neoliberalism and privatisation, and then Russia would take off economically, as 'the West' had done.

Those words 'the West' are important. No one in Russia imagined that their country would become a capitalist democracy like India, or much of Latin America. There was an unspoken, racist assumption that because Russians were white, they would follow the path of Europe.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, mass movements won democracy in the Soviet client states across Eastern Europe, and Gorbachev withdrew the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the USSR's Vietnam. In 1991 hardliners in the army attempted a coup. Boris Yeltsin, an opposition politician, called for resistance and the rear-guard Soviets melted away in the face of mass hostility. As this was happening, most of the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union were declaring independence.

The following year, 1992, came the shock of reform. This was neoliberalism on steroids. In a matter of months, government expenditure, social services and medical services were cut deeply. Large firms of heavy industry, steel, arms, coal, oil and gas were at the center of the economy. Many of these giant firms were privatised, but incredibly cheaply. This was partly corruption, partly factory managers selling the business to themselves, and often criminal, because only organised criminals had even the small amounts of money needed to buy the privatised companies.

At the same time, price controls and price subsidies were abolished. Prices rocketed, and wages did not keep up. Any plans to support failing companies were blocked by the neoliberal economists now in charge.

The consequence was catastrophe. By 2000, Russian GDP was 60% of what it had been in 1992. Manufacturing production was half what it had been. But the economic results for ordinary people were worse than those numbers suggest. One reason was rapidly increasing inequality, which meant that the average worker had a much smaller share in a smaller product. The other reason was mass unemployment as 'uncompetitive' companies closed.

And during the 1990s, Russia moved from a normal rate of incarceration to one that was almost as high as the extraordinary rate in the United States: 670 prisoners per 100,000 in Russia, 690 per 100,000 in the United States. Unlike the United States, in Russia, there was no expansion in the prisons, so overcrowding meant epidemics of TB and HIV tore through the prison populations.

And for all these reasons, men died. Middle aged men died the most. Life expectancy for men was 63.5 years in 1991. In the next three years male life expectancy fell to 57.6, a fall of 5.9 years. [\[3\]](#)

Life expectancy for women fell as well, from 74 to 71 years between 1991 and 1994. That was a smaller fall, from a much higher

starting point. By 2001, a decade later, life expectancy for Russian men was 13.5 years less than life expectancy for women, a gap greater than anywhere else in the world. The excess deaths were concentrated among men between forty and sixty. The reason, everyone agrees, was because of the economic collapse.

In every industrialised country, death rates for both men and women rise with poverty, and also with the level of social inequality. In Russia, both were rising fast. The main actual causes of death were respiratory disease, heart failure, cancer and suicide. Five percent of Russian men who died in the 1990s killed themselves, a staggering rate.

But alcohol was the big killer. Alcohol consumption had been climbing since Gorbachev abandoned his government campaign to discourage drinking in 1987. Most of the drinking was done by men, and by 1994 adult men were drinking an average of a bottle of vodka every two days. Because many were drinking little or nothing, those figures really mean that perhaps a third of adult men were drinking an average of a bottle of vodka a day each. They were drinking themselves to death.

We have not been able to track in detail the pathways of despair. But the process was of a piece of what neoliberalism was doing to men, particularly middle-aged men, in many parts of the world. A book Nancy co-edited in 2015, *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*, includes chapters by different anthropologists and sociologists on fieldwork in Russia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Morocco, Jamaica and Zimbabwe. In each case they tell a story of pain among men. In some cases, they cannot make enough money to feed a family. In others they cannot even make enough to contribute their share. This devastates their sense of manhood, and leaves many of them open to the call of the far right.[\[4\]](#)

Some feminists, but not others, say that what happens in this situation is that men feel demoralised and belittled by the growing

power of women. But this way of understanding relies on a zero-sum view of economy and society, in which when women benefit, men must lose out. But this is not necessarily what happens at all. It is entirely possible for men to be driven to suicide by despair, and for their wives and mothers to be driven to despair by their deaths.

What was happening in Russia was that most people, men and women, were losing. They were not just poorer and unemployed; they were living in a society in freefall. In this situation, some young men and women were able to fashion new lives for themselves. But middle-aged men are trapped in a masculine style that had once allowed most men, much of the time, to be adequate. In Russia, in 1994, many men just lost hope and died.

Putin's masculinity

In August 1999, Vladimir Putin was brought in by the men around Yeltsin to be prime minister. They thought he would be weak and easily bossed around. In this they were wrong. Over two weeks in September, three immense bombs went off destroying two apartment blocks in Moscow and one in southern Russia. There were 288 dead. Everyone assumed that Chechens had done it.

When communism fell, most of the republics in Central Asia and the Baltic countries left the USSR. But Russia had kept control a few smaller, and nearer, republics. Chechnya was one of those republics. The people rose up. They were majority Muslim and regarded by Russian racists as dark savages. The war was brutal.

In 1996 the Russian state and the Chechen rebels agreed an uneasy truce. In 1999, the journalist Masha Gessen was more than prepared to believe that Chechens had let off the bombs. Later she came to believe that the security services had probably let off the bombs as an excuse for war. The evidence is murky, and we cannot know. But whatever else, Putin, prime minister for only a month,

seized the moment, as Dick Cheney and George Bush were to do in September 2001.[\[5\]](#)

Putin ordered Russian troops to resume combat in Chechnya. He addressed the nation on television and said: 'We will hunt them down. Wherever we find them, we will destroy them. Even if we find them in the toilet, we will waste them in the outhouse.'

Gessen comments: 'This was the language of a leader who was planning to rule with his fist. These sorts of vulgar statements, often spiced with below-the-belt humor, would become Putin's signature oratorical device. His popularity began to soar.' [\[6\]](#)

The centrepiece of Putin's toughness is what he did to the Chechens. Putin was fashioning a public image. One thing everyone knew about him was that he had been an officer in the KGB, the old communist secret police. Many Russians had a good deal of nostalgia for the days when everyone had a job, and their country was respected in the world. However, most of them did not want to go back to the dictatorship. But Putin worked with what he had and leaned into his KGB history. He did it by painting a picture of himself as a tough, muscular, natural thug.

What he had done was to construct a bullying masculinity. That style constantly evoked the old Soviet Union, the army and the empire. But it was different too. No communist leader had been anything like as fit, or as snappy a dresser in tailored suits. Nonetheless, Putin's masculinity is a reminder of the *muzhik*, the solid peasant - the man who is stocky in build, canny and foul mouthed, the salt of the earth.

The Soviet Union had been a deeply sexist and racist society. Two things happened when the USSR fell. One was that the communist veneer was removed, and the bigotries became public. The other was that, in the words of the anthropologist, Jacob Rigi, all

sexual relationships became commodified. Rigi was exaggerating, of course, but not by very much.

Putin's was a reactionary masculinity, though, not a conservative one. There were no family values here. Putin did not display his family. He was divorced in 2013. There are rumours of a girlfriend. He has two grown daughters whose private lives are closely guarded, and two grandchildren about whom almost nothing is known.

In his first year in office, Putin commissioned a biography. In that book, Putin and his friends told of a small, thinly built, boy growing up in a brutal slum neighbourhood in what was then Leningrad. Putin fought all the time. Gessen again:

“If anyone ever insulted him in any way,” his friend recalled, “Volodya would immediately jump on the guy scratch him, bite him, rip his hair out by the clump – do anything at all never to allow anyone to humiliate him in any way.”[\[8\]](#)

In primary school an enraged Putin defied his shop teacher. In retaliation for that, and all the fist fights, the school management excluded him from the Young Pioneers, the official youth organisation. For three years he was the only boy in the school so excluded. His biographers could not quite believe that story. In 2000 they asked him:

“Why did you not get inducted into the Young Pioneers until sixth grade? Were things really so bad?”

“Of course. I was no Pioneer: I was a hooligan.”

“Are you putting on airs?”

“You are trying to insult me. I was a real thug.”[\[9\]](#)

Putin used criminal slang and talked as no other political leader in the world did back then.

Putin took his shirt off a lot for publicity shots. He clearly works out, and his abs are impressive. He has saved a group of journalists from a Siberian tiger 'by shooting it with a tranquilizing dart'. He has played ice hockey, and raced a formula One car, and been filmed 'braving rough seas to garner a skin sample collected with a crossbow from a gray whale.' He has taken his shirt off to go fishing, and most memorably to ride a horse.[\[10\]](#)

Notice, though, that he never actually kills things. He hits the tiger with a tranquilizing dart. He is helping the poor whale with his crossbow. This is of a piece with his total abstention from alcohol, an act with great meaning given what Russian men went through in the 1990s. That abstention is often mentioned by the women who stripped to their underwear or more in photographs, music videos and in groups in Red Square to declare, as part of his election publicity, how much they wanted to have sex with him. He was a strong man, they said, and reliable.

His image is closely connected to his economic policy. Putin moved decisively on that front during his first three years in power. He reversed the process of privatisation and broke the power of the oligarchs. Gazprom, the government gas company had been largely privatised. Putin had the oligarch in charge jailed and the government took overall control. The oligarch in charge of the second largest company, Yukoil, became a Putin client. The third largest, Rosneft, another oil company, came under public control. The large network of arms companies and heavy industry that had been threatened with closure were rescued and kept open.

Gazprom, Yukoil and Rosneft became the three largest corporations in Russia. As the price of oil and gas rose, the economy became ever more dependent on fossil fuels. Putin was corrupt, but the situation where oil income simply went to private capital had been stopped. Between 2000 and 2019, unemployment in Russia fell

from 14% to 4%. Rachel Maddow's *Blowout* is a good introduction to the oil and gas industry and the corruption involved.

Putin is often portrayed as a tyrant, and in some ways, he became one. But it is easy to forget that endemic corruption, police shootings, attacks on demonstrators and the assassination of political opponents are in fact long-standing features of many electoral democracies including the United States and India.

And it is important to remember that, until 2019, Putin won one election after another by wide margins. He replaced a terrible government that had presided over an economic and social tragedy and provided prosperity, jobs and growth.

The usual picture of Putin in Western Europe and North America ignores his immense popularity. That has waned but lasted for more than fifteen years. The Western version also ignores just how dreadful the neoliberals had been in power in the 1990s. For twenty years almost all the organised opposition to Putin came from neoliberals who wanted more democracy and human rights, but also wanted a return to privatisation and the market. This was why the opposition to Putin was for so long largely limited to professional people in Moscow and attracted so little working class or peasant support.

So Putin presented himself as tough, and as reliable, someone who could save the nation's honour and massacre Muslims. This was weaponised racism. It went with a foreign policy to restore Soviet power, by invading Crimea, Georgia and Syria. In that, he embodied state power and the old empire. But he also presented himself as a rebel. This enabled Putin to construct a politics where he represented the people against the elites, while at the same time being the leader of the elites. However, the whole project depended on a high price for oil and gas. That has now gone, and Putin's popularity has eroded over the past several years, and the neo-imperialist may well have just taken a risk too far.

Modi

Our second example is Narendra Modi, prime minister of India since 2014. Modi was a man of the people, from an oil presser caste in Gujerat, one of the 'Other Backward Castes' that held an official place in affirmative action. He graduated from high school but did not go to university.

As his followers comment endlessly, his father ran a tea stall where Modi worked as a young man. His is an entirely different class background from any previous Indian prime minister. He is unusual in having walked out of an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen and is celibate, as all organizers of the militia of the Hindu right, the RSS, are expected to be. And like Putin and Trump, Modi is teetotal. [\[11\]](#)

Putin had been a KGB officer. As a young man, Modi became a full timer in the RSS, which has a national membership of about five million men. The mission of the RSS for almost a century has been to create a Hindu-dominated India, and to intimidate or expel Muslims and Christians. In some ways the RSS in their khaki shorts have the aura of the Boy Scouts or the police. They put an emphasis on physical fitness, and recruit admiring boys to their public exercises. But they also assassinated Mahatma Gandhi for being soft on the Muslims. And they organise intimidation, beating and local massacres of Muslims.

Modi eventually became a politician in the BJP, the national political party of the right linked to the RSS. His national reputation is based on two aspects of his tenure as chief minister of the state of Gujerat from 2002 to 2014. There are debates about the details, but general agreement that on Modi's watch the state economy grew briskly to become part of what was called 'India Shining.'

The second was that Modi was a man who knew how to deal with Muslims. In this, he made his mark quickly.

Ten years before a right-wing Hindu mob had destroyed an ancient mosque, the Babri Masjid, in north India. Soon after Modi came to office in 2002, the BJP chartered a train for Hindu pilgrims to attend a march in favour of building a new temple at the site of the mosque. As the demonstrators returned to Gujarat, a crowd of working-class Muslims attacked the train and 45 Hindus were burned to death.

The days that followed established the contours of Modi's public masculinity in front of all India. The RSS and their allies called for revenge. They spread a rumour that the Muslims had gang-raped many Hindu women. The rumour was later proved untrue, but that was not the point. The point was that some 'communal riots' in India include a great deal of rape, some do not. In this case, the RSS and their allies were endorsing rape.

As tension grew unbearable, Modi addressed the state on television. Hatred of Muslims had been a staple of the Hindu right for almost a century, and there was a rich tradition of massacres by both Hindus and Muslims. But this was 2002, months after 9/11 and the War on Terror. On television, Modi made an innovative political leap. He redefined the enemy. He said the killings on the train had been the work of international terrorists, supported by Pakistan. They must be crushed. Everyone knew what he meant.

The state government ordered the police not to intervene in the killings that began. They obeyed orders.

After the killing was over an independent Concerned Citizens Tribunal took evidence. Three judges described what had been done to many women:

"Before they were finally killed, some were beaten with rods and pipes for almost an hour. Before or after the killing, their vagina would be sliced, or would have iron rods pushed inside. Similarly, their bellies would be cut open or would have objects

inserted into them. A 13-year-old-girl had a rod pushed into her stomach and was then burnt. A mother reported that her three-year-old baby girl was raped and killed in front of her, while elsewhere daughters reported on the rape of their mothers, now dead. Kausar Bano, a young girl from Naroda Patiya, was several months pregnant. Several eyewitnesses testified that she was raped, tortured, her womb was slit open with a sword to disgorge the foetus, which was then hacked to pieces and roasted alive with the mother."[\[12\]](#)

Naroda Patiya was a mostly Muslim, working-class suburb of Ahmedabad, where 97 people were killed in one night, many of them burned alive. There were also attacks on affluent Muslim families who lived in mainly Hindi neighbourhoods. People were killed there, but there was no rape or mutilation of women. Megha Kumar, in her excellent history, *Communalism and Sexual Violence: Ahmedabad since 1969*, suggests this was because the police and upper-class Hindus could not tolerate the idea of working-class Hindu men raping upper class Muslim women. Kumar estimates that between 150 and 200 women were “raped, gang-raped and mutilated” across Ahmedabad. Over 2,000 Muslims in all were killed.

India, though, was not a dictatorship. The BJP was not even in power centrally. What happened in Gujarat was not a secret. A cloud hung over Modi for a decade. Many of the BJP officials faced trial for the killings. The most senior person convicted was Maya Kodnani, former Minister for Women and Child Development in the state government.

If you want to understand Modi’s public masculinity, those gang rapes are the answer. That was in the background in most people’s minds when he ran for prime minister. His publicity machine emphasized the fact that he has a 52-inch chest. Unlike Putin, he did not take his shirt off. And the claim was difficult to

believe. But it showed how he wanted to present himself - as tough, and in no way a man of the elite. He won that election.[\[13\]](#)

Five years later, he tweaked his masculinity for another election, changing his twitter handle to 'Chowkidar Narendra Modi'. '*Chowkidar*' is a job, the name for a watchman who sits by the gate of the house of a well-to-do family. The protection they offer the rich is essential, and they are physically tough, in a country where police and security do not carry guns. But they are also servants, men of very low status.

Modi was explicit – he was the night watchmen protecting India, a working-class man. As he said on twitter, 'Everyone who is fighting corruption, dirt, social evils is a *chowkidar*.'[\[14\]](#)

Modi was a political innovator as prime minister. Until his time his political party, the BJP, had been dominated by the upper caste. He pulled off the extraordinary feat of uniting many people from the lower castes, Dalits and tribals, with the upper castes in a cultural war of Hindus versus Muslims.

Until he didn't anymore. In 2019 he faced protests by Muslims around the country, which were backed by Dalits from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Last year he faced massive protests in Delhi by farmers. This does not mean he will lose the next election. The main opposition, Congress, remains weak and widely reviled for corruption.

Trump

Donald Trump is different from Putin and Modi. Putin and Modi are major political innovators, extremely intelligent men with a strong and secure sense of self. They are the leaders of a global movement.

Trump certainly has an intelligence, even if it is narrowly focussed on his image and personal wealth and privilege. He has also been emotionally damaged by a toxic family and a brutal father. Though a bully, he can be flattered and easily played by stronger men.[\[15\]](#)

By the time Trump began seriously running for President, the movement of the racist right was established in many different countries. In the United States, it had been built over decades by a range of organisations and individuals – old style fascists, white supremacists, misogynist anti-abortion Catholics, racist evangelicals, cops, militia men, survivalists and frat boys. They had gradually come together, respecting each other's differences, united only in their racism.

This was a mass movement from below, and by 2015, a very large one. That movement created Trump, and not the other way round. Trump had a foundational commitment to racism, and he wanted to be president. What he did was he learned from the movement, and in the process built that movement.

Trump did it by speaking at rallies. That was something he was very good at. He listened to his audience, to where they clapped, and where they laughed and where the silences showed they were riveted and waiting. His genius was to learn from an audience. He spoke like a human being, and not like a teleprompter or a focus group. He wandered as he spoke, told a lot of jokes, worked the audience.

What he heard, and worked with, above all else was pain. Because Donald Trump understood pain, and the damage and the defences and the anger. In those audiences there was a rich vein of pain, because working class Americans were in pain. Literally, they were taking a lot of pain killers. The life expectancy of middle-aged white people was going down in those years. Men had it worse than women, but more women were dying too. These were deaths of pain,

mostly from alcohol, from overdoses of drugs that killed the pain, and from suicide.

It says a lot for the basic decency of Americans that more people die every year from shooting themselves than from shooting other people.

The causes of that pain were many. They were class causes, and economic fear, and the growing cruelties and loneliness of neoliberalism. We could tell stories all day and night. Another time, maybe. The main point now is just that the pain was there.

It was not only white people in pain, of course. And there was nothing all that special or different about white pain. It was manual workers above all, but white-collar workers and insecure professionals too. It was a country where everyone seemed angry at someone, but everyone was united in that they were angry.

But the white people in pain had a politics of hurt and rage available to them. Trump joined a populism built by Putin, Modi and millions of others around the world. Trump offered white working-class people in pain a strong mixture of white supremacy, swaggering sexism and bitter hatred of elites.

Some Latinos, particularly men, could access that mixture. African Americans were in just as much pain, on average probably much more, and many working class African American men caught by mass imprisonment were in a world of loneliness, shame and pain. But there was no political movement, and no national politicians, who spoke for their pain and anger. Their hurt was excluded from the racist right.

Moreover, African American politicians, almost to a man and woman, were utterly unwilling to join in the rage against the elites, the white and black people who ran the system and were devastating people's lives.

This is not to say that Trump's followers were all working class. Far from it. But as with Modi, the point was that he found a way to recruit enough working class people to join more affluent right wingers in attacking a part of the elite in order to strengthen the rule of the rest of the elite.

It's a good trick, but hard to pull off. Watch their hands, not their eyes.

To do all this, Trump constructed a certain kind of masculine performance. Look at his pictures before politics, and you see a tall man, thin and muscular, bending and moving, with clothes that fit beautifully. An operator, a frat boy, like a Yalie, although actually he went to Penn, another Ivy League school.

And then watch Trump the politician. He blends his business persona with a working class one. He wears a baseball hat, the symbol of American working-class men. He is overweight. His clothes don't fit, his shirt pulls out and you glimpse his belly. This in a man who can spend ten thousand dollars on a tailored suit any time he wants. And he adopts a certain style of self-assured working class masculine asshole, the kind other men sometimes hate and sometimes admire.

Trump and American Power

Trump's racism against Blacks, Latinos, Muslims and Chinese is flagrant and vicious. But he has a different structural relationship to the state and empire. Putin and Modi went with the grain in developing local imperialisms. Trumps' base wanted the opposite - relief from the burdens of empire. They want an end to NAFTA, the WTO and all trade agreements and the movement of jobs overseas, Wall Street's global commitments and all the overseas wars. Trump understands this, and in power has constantly tried to give his supporters what they wanted.

Most of Trump's advisers and staff had backgrounds in the military, the Senate, diplomacy, Wall Street, the CIA, Big Oil or the major corporations. Their working lives have been spent in defence of the American empire. That is a bedrock commitment, and they did everything they could to stop Trump when he was President from keeping his promises to his base. He was, as Sarah Kendzior says, 'the first anti-American president,' failing both the empire and his supporters.[\[16\]](#)

The global populist movement also explains something that kept puzzling liberals and the mass media in the United States. They were constantly bemused by Trump's friendship with Putin. Did Putin have some dirt on Trump? Was Trump a traitor to America's interests? Why was Putin trying to interfere with American democracy?

The answer to all these questions required no conspiracy. Putin and Trump were part of the same global movement. The leaders and activists of that movement across the world keep in touch with, and learn from, each other. Putin had the Russian state make heroic efforts to get someone with the same politics as him elected president. Trump admired Putin. He looked forward to seeing Putin, because of what he could learn. Putin was his teacher.

Putin's role as a leader of the global right went far wider than support for Trump. Russian intelligence has run sophisticated social media operations, with endless numbers of bots, pushing right wing and racist ideas and supporting racist candidates in many parts of the world. Those media operations have recently been key to spreading anti-vaxxer ideas in many countries, and to support for the truck convoy in Canada.

This does not mean that the global racist right is a conspiracy led by the Russian government and masterminded by Putin. This is a global grassroots movement of tens of millions around the world.

What it does mean is that Putin and the Russian government are an important part of that movement.

Trump said last week that Putin was a genius. And indeed, he is. Albeit a genius who seems to have made a very big mistake recently.

Putin and Modi cut with the grain of the ruling classes in Russia and India. Trump has been pitched into constant conflict with his ruling class. That, combined with his obvious emotional vulnerability, left him particularly exposed to the global mass movement against sexism that in the US became Me Too.

But here we want to tell a story about Trump the year before Me Too exploded. Part of this story is about how he performed his masculinity, how he worked and used it, and the importance of bullying.

But there is another lesson here too. It's about the way that Trump, Putin, Modi, Duterte and rest were able to build movements because the centre-left and the centre-right who had led their countries for so long were so appalling, so ruthless and had themselves caused such suffering.

Trump – Gendering the Backstory

Our story starts in the last weeks of the presidential election campaign in 2016. Bob Woodward has written an oral history of Trump's campaign and the first eighteen months of his presidency. Woodward reports that the low point for Trump's campaign was the outtake tape from an *Access Hollywood* TV show many years before. On that tape Trump boasted that he could grope and kiss any woman he wanted. 'When you're a star,' he said, 'they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy.'

Republican politicians rushed to dump Trump. The next morning his inner circle met at Trump Tower in New York. According to Woodward, the ship was going down. But this was Steve Bannon's finest moment. He was both an intellectual and a practical organiser. Over the years he had developed his website, *Breitbart*, into a major force on the white nationalist right. More than anyone else working in the campaign, Bannon understood how Trump could combine racism with the class resentment of many white working-class voters. And he understood the importance of fighting back hard at key moments.

Trump had been apologising on Twitter, and it had not worked. Bannon proposed a different strategy. The next televised debate with Hillary Clinton was coming up in St. Louis a few days later. Bannon arranged for four women to attend the debate: Paula Jones, Juanita Broaddrick, Kathleen Wiley and Kathleen Shelton.

Paula Jones had long said that Bill Clinton had exposed himself to her when he was governor of Arkansas in 1991. When she refused to have sex with him, he got her fired from her job with the state of Arkansas. Jones sued Bill Clinton for sexual harassment in 1994. In 1999, Clinton, then president, paid her \$850,000 in settlement of the suit. Much of the money came from a trust fund controlled by his wife.

Juanita Broaddrick had been a volunteer in Clinton's campaign for governor back in 1978. He invited her to visit his office and took her up to a hotel room. For privacy, he said. Afterwards, she told five friends and her lover that Bill Clinton had raped her. She had fought him all the way but lost. Broaddrick kept her silence for many years, afraid of what would happen to her when she came forward. It had happened in 1978, not 2018.[\[17\]](#)

When special counsel Kenneth Starr's office was investigating Clinton for lying over his affair with Monica Lewinsky, they got wind of Broaddrick's story, and interviewed her. Someone leaked that

interview to NBC, which refused to publish it until the impeachment process was over. Broaddrick, angry, talked to the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, 21 years after the alleged rape. It is possible she was lying. But given the evidence, we agree with the opinion piece by another *New York Times* journalist, Michelle Goldberg, entitled 'I Believe Juanita.'^[18]

The third woman, Kathleen Willey, said that Clinton had groped her and grabbed her breasts in the White House.

The fourth woman was Kathy Shelton. Her accusation was different, and the main facts are clear. Shelton was raped in Arkansas in 1975, when she was twelve. She walked into hospital later that day and reported the rape. The police arrested and charged the man she accused, and the court appointed a young lawyer named Hillary Clinton as his attorney.

Most young lawyers do such work, and Clinton did her best. She applied for a psychiatric exam of Shelton, writing to the judge that Shelton was a known fantasist. Soon after Clinton negotiated a plea bargain and reduced sentence, as happens now in 97% of American criminal trials. Clinton did what any competent lawyer in her position would have done. Which is the point.

Bannon arranged for all four women to hold a brief press conference alongside Trump before the debate. Juanita Broaddrick, a calm, middle-aged, white-haired woman, told the cameras: 'Mr. Trump may have said some bad words. But Bill Clinton raped me, and Hillary Clinton threatened me.'^[19]

The four women sat in the front row of the audience during the debate. The moderator, Anderson Cooper, asked Trump about the pussy-grabbing tape. Trump stalled a bit, and then announced that Kathy Shelton and Paula Jones were in the audience. Trump added: 'When Hillary ... talks about words that I said eleven years ago, I

think it's disgraceful and I think she should be ashamed of herself. [\[20\]](#)

Hillary's problem was not just that her husband was a predator. Many women had come forward to accuse him of assault, sexual harassment or infidelity. In each case she had stood by him, publicly. Privately, she had taken a leading role in discussions with him and his aides about how to support him. She had been party to strategies to accuse the women involved of stalking, fantasising, money grubbing and lying.

All that was known. And she must also have known, what most of us did not know until recently, about her husband's close connections to Jeffrey Epstein.

Another Democratic candidate for president could have destroyed Donald Trump that night in St. Louis. Hillary Clinton had no choice but to let it go.

Trump eventually won by a whisker. But everyone, his supporters and his opponents, knew he was a pussy grabber. That would come back to haunt him.

The sexism and racism also inspired resistance to Trump. First came the massive women's marches, and then the Me Too movement turned enough women against him to swing the elections for the House of Representatives in 2018. In 2020 the Black Lives Matter protests, the biggest mass movement in the country for half a century, galvanized enough black people to vote Trump out.

To sum up, racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism are central to the politics of all three men. So is misogyny and at the very least a tolerance of sexual violence. This combines with a barely contained rage and ambient threats of violence, and an end to the austerity of neoliberalism. The last consistent part of the package was the encouragement of working class rage against some "elites" in order to reinforce the control of the real ruling class.

PART TWO: THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

In Part One we explained something of the background to Putin's politics which are part of a global racist, right-wing movement. In Part Two, we outline some of the specific reasons why Putin invaded Ukraine this year. And as we go along, we also explore why and how the left is confused about the pressures on Putin and the ways the world is changing.

The Mass Movement for Democracy

The first reason Putin invaded his fear of a mass popular movement against him in Russia.

Since 2019 a series of mass protests and uprisings have spread across many countries in the world. They include mass protests against dictatorships in Algeria, Sudan, Myanmar, Thailand, Hong Kong, Belarus, Kirghizstan, Mauretania, Guinea and Burkina Faso. There was a mass revolt against the attempted right-wing coup in Bolivia. In countries with formal democracy, there have been mass movements for greater, more concrete democracy by people who feel they have no control over what the politicians actually do, in Lebanon, Iraq and Chile.

In India from 2012 onwards, there have been great protests against sexism, rape and rape cover-ups. And there were the massive protests by Muslims, supported by Dalits and students, against the Islamophobia of Modi's government in 2019. In 2020 and 2021 there were the mass protests of farmers marching on Delhi to protest Modi's new laws to open agriculture to global competition.

And let us celebrate the fact that in the United States the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 mobilised as many people as did Civil Rights in the 1960s.

Greta Thunberg's school strikes were part of this changing mood too. So was the resistance to the dictator in Syria, cornered but still fighting after eleven years of carnage. For years that resistance had stood up to Russian and Iranian military support for the dictator Assad, while the Taliban resistance in Afghanistan had fought and defeated an invasion by the greatest superpower in the world. An invasion, like colonialism in the old days, is a form of dictatorship by a foreign power – it was so in Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States, and in Chechnya, Crimea and Ukraine by Putin.

Rage and hurt about inequality and economic want fed into almost all these movements. But equally important in almost all cases was a bedrock commitment to democracy, to votes, to the end of dictatorship.

Mainstream commentators in western Europe and North America so often completely miss the scale and commitment to democracy of these mass movements. One reason is that these have been concentrated in the global south, where 80% of humanity live. And as Juan Cole has written, the blindness is caused by the racisms of those in the global North, the racism of the media personalities themselves and the racism of the audiences they address.[\[21\]](#)

The existing 'left', and much of the centre left too, often miss the central importance of democracy. There are several quite difference sources of such confused, and often pernicious, thinking.

First, there is a deep truth about democracy in countries with established elections and parliaments. The truth is that though elections remain open, the everyday power structures at work are dictatorial. This means that dictatorships at work structure every institution and every relationship.

Understandably, this leads many people on the left in electoral democracies to think that voting makes no difference.

Second, people proud of living in electoral democracies can nonetheless live alongside atrocities, targeted killing by brutal police forces, ethnic pogroms, suppression of some voters, general money corruption of politicians and endless lies. All these things happen, for example, in the stable and long-established democracies in India and the United States.

Understandably, this leads many people to say that there is no difference between such sham democracy and dictatorship.

Thirdly, the loud voices of the right and centre are ever present, shouting about democracy. Many on the left already despise Blair or Macron for other reasons, and they distrust everything those voices say.

Fourth, many on the left do not like the fact that majorities often elect the wrong people, and that the left often wins only a very small percentage of the vote. Better, they think, a system where the people they see as stupid cannot make those decisions.

Fifth is racism and Islamophobia. The code word for this is to say that support for democracy is Eurocentric. As if working class people in Asia, Africa and Latin America have not fought and died for the vote, and as if they are not fighting now. And as if Europeans have democracy because the capitalists gave it to them, when in fact the working class movements in Europe fought for democracy against the capitalists.

Islamophobia has recently become more important. Many feminists, and many supporters of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, have been persuaded of the idea that people should not be allowed to elect Islamist governments.

Racism works another way as well. Many people see that the Western media coverage of Ukraine cares about the people in that country because they are white. And they see that the countries like

Poland which welcome white Ukrainian refugees refuse to admit the many people of colour trying to flee the war.

Sixth, there are strong loyalties from old struggles. For example, some people support the government of Cuba because they stood up against the might of the United States. This becomes a reason for agreeing that the people of Cuba, who did the standing up, should not be allowed to elect a new government.

Seventh, the governments and public intellectuals of the NATO countries constantly confuse the difference between elected governments and dictatorships. They do this because they want to defend some dictatorships and not others. So they talk of human rights, but not of elections.

All these things mean that when people are angry about living in a corrupt, partial electoral democracy, it is easy to lose sight of the difference. But the difference between dictators and elections is real, and critical. We have lived in dictatorships. Everyone who has lived in a dictatorship knows. Even if they support the dictators, they know.

The people in the mass movements for democracy in Egypt, Belarus, Hong Kong, Chile, Myanmar, Thailand, Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan and Bolivia know the difference. That is why they fight.

One reason that people in Ukraine are fighting is that half of them remember what it was like to live under a dictatorship.

They know that to live under a dictatorship is to live in fear. There are different degrees of fear in different countries, at different times. But the boot is always on your face. Moreover, dictatorships are machines for defending inequality. It is fundamental to dictatorship that some people have more power than others. It is fundamental that inequality is kept in place by violence.

It is usual for these kinds of confusion to go together.

A good example is the key shift in political attitudes that came in 2013. That year an American-backed military coup in Egypt brought an end to the Arab Spring, that great revolt against a dictatorship and for democracy. Many people of the political left and centre-left defended that coup because the elected government were the Muslim Brotherhood.

Many people on the left and the centre outside the Arab world also felt that Egyptians should not be allowed to pick their own government. So did many secular leftists in Egypt and the Arab world, who preferred military dictatorship to Muslim democracy.

However, it is also absolutely true that electoral democracy is not enough. Winning the right to vote matters. But it is the place to begin the fight for full democracy. That is why the mass movements in Chile and Lebanon, for example, are fighting so hard for more democracy, and for more equality and less corruption.

There is one more process at work here as well. Right now very large numbers of people involved in mass struggles are moving left. But smaller numbers of people on the left are moving right. This is because the ideas of the racist right have been gaining ground among working class people in many countries. That creates a pull towards the right in unions, mainstream political parties, and on the left.

You can see this process of reconfiguration happening in the left wing people who backed a racist Brexit in Britain, in the leftists who are hostile to trans people, in support for Putin, support for Assad in Syria, in the argument that identity politics does not matter, in the dismissal of Me-Too as the concern of white celebrities and in the way New Age liberals in many countries have joined the anti-vaxxers.

However, this is not a simple process. Many people are moving one way on one issue, another on a different issue. Many are confused and torn inside their own heads. People change course, go

back and forth. In ten years time, and maybe less, it will be clear how the reconfiguration has worked, and who has ended up where. Now, for people on the left inside the process, it is immensely confusing. As George Monbiot has written in *The Guardian* (03/03/2022), 'Propaganda needs exposing - even from those we respect'.

But Putin is not confused. He is scared of democracy. The deep global movement for democracy is one of the main reasons Putin invaded Ukraine. Yet many commentators on the left, those from the mainstream centre and from the right have insisted that the main reason for Putin's invasion is his fear of encirclement by NATO.

But bigger than this is his fear of the threat of the popular uprisings spreading across the world reaching to Russia itself. And Putin is right to be scared. To understand why, we need to understand the context of energy and climate change.

Climate Change and Fossil Fuels

Putin's support in Russia has always rested on his rescue of an imploding economy. But that economic rescue has been built almost exclusively on fossil fuels – on oil and gas for export and coal at home. When the price of oil and gas falls and stays down, the regime suddenly looks rocky, because ordinary lives become rocky.

At the moment fossil fuel prices are high. Climate activists like us are rightly obsessed with the fact that all the powers of the world are colluding to avoid making the cuts in carbon emissions that are necessary. But our obsession can miss the pressures that bear down on Putin.[\[22\]](#)

The first pressure is that the global movement for climate action is steadily gaining support. Putin, and all the defenders of fossil fuels, are right to be afraid because of the strong resistance they will face sooner or later, and the extraordinary political and economic

changes they will have to make if they are to remain on top as class elites.

There is a shorter-term threat as well – electric vehicles. More and more countries are passing laws that will mandate that by a certain date all new cars must be electric. This will not eliminate, but will greatly reduce, the global market for oil.

You don't need a 50% fall in demand for oil to bring the price crashing down. A fall of 10% or 20% in demand can open up a gap where a lot of oil is chasing buyers who do not exist. And that can create a fall of much more than 10 or 20% in the price of oil.

This matters not just for oil, but for gas and coal too. The price of all three fuels tends to go up and down in concert, because they can be substituted for each other in a wide variety of ways.

Then there are the pressures on investment in fossil fuels. From 2014 onwards, the amount of global investment in oil, coal and gas began to go down. Investors in fossil fuels and in power stations typically have to wait forty years to get the full return on their money. Investors now know that in forty years, many of the power stations, oil fields and coal mines will have been closed by government action.

The recent rise in European gas prices is the result of rising demand for energy meeting falling investment in fossil fuels and gas infrastructure. For the moment, this keeps the price up. But it also increases the pressure for renewable energy.

For the moment, however, investment in renewable energy is being left up to the private sector, and all over the world government subsidies for renewable energy have been withdrawn. The result is a global fall in investment in renewables since 2017. But when supplies of gas for heating crash, there will be enormous pressure from ordinary people, and from industry, for government support for renewables.

On top of this, both the wave of democracy and the threat to fossil fuel incomes threaten Russia's control of the Central Asian states which were once part of the Soviet Union. Some of these states control large resources of oil and gas. Almost all are dictatorships. If the American defeat in Afghanistan is added to a Russian defeat in Ukraine, the people of those dictatorships may be heartened enough to rise up as well.

We should remember, however, that it is not only Russia which is addicted to climate change. The United States, China, and as Greta Thunberg keeps saying, all the leaders of the world have stopped the necessary action.

Moreover, as Bill McKibben has pointed out in *The Guardian*, the necessity of keeping the oil and gas flowing constrains Biden and NATO. The American government are holding back on their sanctions so that the price of oil and gas does not rise too high and hurt their economy. The German government too has been careful to tailor sanctions to make sure Russian gas keeps coming to Germany.[\[23\]](#)

The Decline of American Power

The third reason Putin invaded was the changing global balance of power. We mention this only briefly here but have recently written [about this elsewhere](#).[\[24\]](#)

Our starting point, though, is the decline of American power. The American defeat in Afghanistan marked a turning point. One reason was that the greatest military power in the world had been defeated by a guerrilla insurgency in a small and desperately poor country. Another reason was that working class Americans, on both the right and the left, have turned against any further foreign wars. The result is that the United States, for at least the medium term, is not a military power.

This is coupled with the long-term rise of Chinese industry and the decline of American industry. Moreover, the contrast between the appalling record of the American institutions in response to the pandemic and the serious response in China has eroded American soft power and reputation in the world.

The result is a continuing shift in the balance of global power. That's why Putin saw a window for an invasion of Ukraine. He was not foolish about this. He went to China, thus underlining where real power lies, to get the green light from Xi. Both Joe Biden and the German government were publicly very clear that they would not fight if Russia invaded, and that their sanctions would be limited. The stars were aligned, and Putin went for it.

In other words, great power politics really matters. The Russian invasion grows out of a long history of imperial rivalry between the United States and Russia that goes back to the Cold War and earlier. In that rivalry, both empires have committed invasions, practiced cruelties and supported dictatorships on a dizzying scale.

But what happened this time was not that the ring of superpower rivalry was closing on Russia. It was that Putin saw an opportunity in declining American power.

It begins to look like he miscalculated. An important impetus for his assault on Ukraine was the threat in the global movements against occupations and dictatorships. But he did not understand that that same movement would face him in Ukraine.

Putin has gone to war many times. But these have been 'Special Operations' in places like Chechnya and Syria. There the Russian armed forces have been able to overwhelm the local defenders, though even in those situations the wars have lasted years.

Of equal importance, Putin's forces - in Chechnya, or in supporting Assad in the proxy war in Syria - have been able to fight and bomb with overwhelming cruelty. The best example is the

devastation of the whole city of Grozny in Chechnya, an operation on the same scale as the American destruction in 2015 of the civilian population in the ISIS strongholds of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. In all these cases, the War on Terror and a global government commitment to Islamophobia allowed both Russian and American governments to do whatever they wanted.

The Return of the Repressed

We mentioned earlier Juan Cole's powerful article about racism in the media. The focus of that article was the moment when Charlie D'Agata, a CBS correspondent reporting from Ukraine, said that he felt more sympathy for the suffering people he was seeing now than he did in Afghanistan or Iraq because they looked like him. Many people have expressed rage at the racism of his remarks, quite rightly. But if you listen to D'Agata, you will hear something else as well.

He says, more than once, that the Ukrainians are more civilized than Afghans and Iraqis. That word is not accident. It echoes the 'Clash of Civilizations' theory that justified American invasions in 2001 and 2003. It seems to us that D'Agata is struggling with two truths. The first is that he did not see the suffering of Iraqis and Afghans because they were Muslims. The second is that he did not see the suffering because he was watching refugees displaced by Americans, grieving children whose parents had been killed by Americans and the remains of American massacres and still felt - my country right or wrong.

Or, more likely, he did see the suffering the first time, but was forbidden to report on it, and so made himself forget what he felt. So maybe for him it felt better to own up to the racism than to actively support massacres of men, women and children.

D'Agata was not the only Westerner coming to terms with the return of the repressed. With the invasion of Ukraine, suddenly everyone knew that when you invade a country, the people fight back. Suddenly they knew they had always known this.

Suddenly they knew too just what a long popular resistance would be like. They knew it would be a guerrilla war, and the main weapon would be home-made roadside bombs. You could watch people realizing this in real time on Twitter. And realizing that they knew how to the invaded resist now because they had seen people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and Yemen do it on television.

Suddenly they knew that when people are invaded, millions of refugees are created, and you should open your borders to those poor people.

It is tempting to be simply angry at their sudden revelations. But this is also an opportunity for learning. Europeans are joining the global community of people who understand invasions and resistance. They will generalise. The British football commentator Gary Lineker almost always gets the political tone just right. On Feb. 28 he posted a video of an interview with a Ukrainian child refugee on Twitter, and commented, 'Heartbreaking. This happens in many areas of the world. Let's try and be more empathic to all of them.'

But this case should remind us of something else. Solidarity with Ukrainians is a decent and necessary feeling. But be very careful not to let it slide over into support for Biden and NATO. Right now, as you read this, Biden is organizing financial sanctions that put 20 million Afghans at risk of starvation, and they have begun to die. The record of Western bloodshed is long, and it is not finished.

Putin's Difficulties

Putin clearly expected the Ukrainians to fold and for victory to come quickly. So did Biden and the NATO and EU governments. That did not happen.

One reason is the numbers. The Russian army has about 600,000 soldiers, of whom about 150,000 are on the Ukrainian border. Of those, about 100,000 have already been committed to the fight. The Ukrainian army has 200,000 soldiers.

Ukraine is also the second biggest country in Europe, after Russia. It has double the area of Germany and is about the same size as Texas. It's 1,200 kilometres wide and 600 kilometres tall. The population is 44 million.

Putin had assumed that his troops would reach Kyiv, the capital, quickly, and the Ukrainian government would surrender. But the numbers of soldiers on each side, and the size of the country, mean that as the Russian army advances their supply lines grow longer and more vulnerable.

But they do control the air. The Russian forces can control most of the country in the short term. That will require for massive, shock and awe, aerial bombardments that drive both the military and all civilians from very wide areas, many tens of thousands of dead and millions of refugees. The political cost of this will be very great, across Europe and inside Russia. But if Putin retreats at this moment, he is probably finished inside Russia.

For the other thing that Putin miscalculated was the spread of democratic and anti-war feeling could reach to Russia as well. It is not just the American working class who have been turning against foreign wars. Putin's attack on Crimea in 2014 won him immense support at home. But the people in Crimea did not fight, and many welcomed the Russians. And 2014 was not 2022.

The scale of resistance in Russia is extraordinary. We will not rehearse the details here. But it is important that this has been an uprising from below, and from the professional middle classes. But also, the oligarchs have begun to call publicly for peace.

One very telling thing is that the Russian media, which is under central control, is lying desperately about the scale of the war. Putin is trying to build support for something whose name he dares not say. Social media will expose this, even as much of Twitter and Facebook are shut down, and it matters that almost all Ukrainians have phones and almost all of them can speak Russian.

It matters too that President Zelenskyy of Ukraine is a Jew, the grandson of a man who fought in the Soviet army against the Nazis. It matters that his grandfather lost three brothers and his father in the Holocaust. Nothing in Zelenskyy's life until this moment has suggested he would be a hero. But if Putin has him killed, as is entirely possible, his Jewishness will change the politics of Ukraine for generations.

We cannot tell at this distance if the Ukrainian resistance will hold, or how deep and wide the Russian resistance to war will grow. We cannot demand of the Ukrainians that they fight, because the costs of such a course are immense. It is not just their own deaths that people have to consider, but the deaths of their grown children and the young ones.

But one lesson lies in the way that the Afghans defeated first the Russians and then the Americans. A war of resistance does not have to win. They only have to survive and wait.

The scale of resistance in Ukraine has also shifted the politics of the United States, Germany, NATO and the European Union. Those governments had accepted Putin's victory. Now they see a chance to shift the balance of superpower competition back in their favour. Suddenly, serious sanctions are in motion, and serious arms are available.

None of this means that anyone in power wants a war between NATO and Russia. We don't want it either. That way lies the possibility of nuclear war. The government of China sees the same

process. They have gone quiet and abstained on the issue in the UN Security Council.

Confusions

That is where we are. We cannot see the future clearly, but we can see the forces in motion. Now let's end by returning to where we started, and the confusions about Putin and Ukraine on the global left.

One of our friends put the matter fiercely and accurately in a Facebook post last week:

"Here is a handy check-list of all those who have been praising Putin - Trump ('Putin is a genius'); Modi (has ordered Indian banks to find ways of beating sanctions against Russia); Imran Khan's Pakistan ('so exciting to be here'); Xi's China; Cuba; Nicaragua; Bashar-Al-Assad; Myanmar's junta. For those who have been indulging in a spot of whataboutary ever since Putin started his carnage in Chechnya two decades ago, this bunch of murderous autocrats and Stalinists are your political family, whether you admit it or not."

What our friend is pointing to is that many people who have thought of themselves as left-leaning now find themselves in support of a conservative right-wing project, or maybe even worse.

Well, actually, yes, worse.

Before the invasion the people on this Stalinist left repeated the Russian government's talking points. They insisted, over and over, that there would be no Russian invasion. Then there was, and those of them who are not bots are publicly embarrassed and ashamed.

The fallback position of these hardcore Stalinists is to insist that this is now a war between NATO and Russia. They call now for

Russian withdrawal, but say also that the main enemy in the West is the NATO drive to war. They call for negotiations to end the war and ask people on also sides to protest against war.

Then there are the people on the left who are not Stalinists and have not repeated Putin's lies. But most of them also portray the war as a contest between NATO and Russia.

There is an obvious weakness to both arguments. NATO and Russia are not at war. They are not likely to go to war. Those of us in the reality-based community can see that at the moment Ukraine and Russia are at war.

Yesterday the Ukrainian socialist Volodymyr Artiukh wrote eloquently about how American socialists always assume that everything is about America. He argued that declining American power meant that Putin had his own agency, and his own reasons.[\[25\]](#)

Protests in Russia are good, everyone now says. But should the people in Ukraine be protesting against their troops fighting? Should all the civilians flee? Should they all surrender?

The answer is obvious. It is good they are fighting.

Because that answer would be obvious, much of the left cannot tolerate the question.

It's time for a different left. Maybe that old word is so encrusted with lies and betrayals we cannot use it. Maybe we will need new words to fight for old dreams.

The old far left, ourselves, the children of 1968, is withering all over the world, ageing and weak. Many of us are decent people, some not, but we are all mostly irrelevant. Those who have not offered solidarity to Ukraine will be weakened further. Some of those who have sided with Putin have already joined that path where the old left merges with the new racist right. Many will just be sorry.

But the world of resistance is on the move. Unevenly, and not broadly enough, with bloody defeats and endless confusion, in mass uprisings in some places and in other places in despair and apathy. But globally, the direction of travel is evident.

The ideas of these new movements are flawed. The best ideas of the old socialist and communist movements are hidden. The delusions of liberal, green and academic thought cloud minds. We have to learn old things again, and new things people have not thought before.

Ukraine may turn out to be a bitter defeat for Putin. If so, that will matter. But the racist right is not going to go away. Joe Biden, and many like him elsewhere, are doing nothing to improve the daily lives of working-class people. Most Americans, for example, can see that Biden sees their pain and does not care. That is a recipe for the return of Trump or worse. And of course it's not just the United States.

Increasingly, the centre cannot hold, and politics polarises. In this situation, any movements of resistance will be helpless unless we can do what the right can do – listen to, feel and mobilise the pain, suffering and anger of ordinary people.

On the whole we are all too often very bad about this. The Covid pandemic provides an example in many countries. The racist right had a good pandemic politically. They came out of the pandemic with a new base in many countries, and in some countries with angry and exciting convoys and occupations.

They seized on an environmental issue, Covid, the central issue in most people's lives for two years, and they constructed a politics that was full of lies, but that spoke to fear and helplessness. That politics was stoked by Russian government social media manipulation and politicians of the right in many countries. The

result in Britain, where we live, was an anti-vaxxer movement that was strongest among working class and black people.

Our movements, of the left, the centre-left, the unions, and the climate movement, did not rise up in anger at all the unnecessary deaths. With a few honourable exceptions we did not march and occupy and scream about the obscenity of vaccines denied to most people in the world.

Part of the reason was that many people of the left and centre-left had jobs that meant they could work from home. Instead, we followed the advice of whatever government was in power and scorned the people most at risk for being stupid.

We will pay for that. The global populist movement is not going away.

At least we can see some things clearly. Climate change frames everything. We need a movement of movements to win massive programs of climate jobs and green new deals, to cover the world with green energy and end fossil fuels forever, everywhere.

To do that, we will need a movement against all established power, prepared, if necessary, to change everything.

We need a movement of movements based on democracy, everywhere, without exceptions or special pleading. In Russia, in Cuba, in Myanmar and Syria, against proxy wars in Yemen and elsewhere. And we need a movement that rejects all invasions, all occupations, in Palestine as in Afghanistan, against all dictatorships, domestic and foreign.

We need to understand what the new racist right of Putin, Modi and Trump understand so well. Race, gender and sexuality are not distractions, they are not 'culture wars'. They are existential struggles about whether human beings deserve to be equal.

The global movements against femicide on the streets and sexual harassment at work are central to this. So is Black Lives Matter. But in the era of war and climate change, so is opposition to the new racism of Islamophobia. International solidarity should be, above all, about helping the Afghans facing climate change, and about helping the billions denied vaccinations and medications, and about helping all the frightened migrants in the backs of trucks or on small rubber boats.

And the fight for democracy will not avail if we do not also fight to extend democracy in the dictatorships that rule us at work. Trade unions matter for wages and job protection. But they matter above all because if they are strong enough, we can change the expectations in all human relationships.

It's instructive, too, how much the defence of trans people matters. You might think that is an all too typical niche for political correctness, culture wars and identity politics. But notice how much trans people matter to the new racist right. Really listen to the people who say that they support Putin because he can stop the gay agenda. And notice how the 'feminists' on the 'left' who tweet apologies for Putin also tweet that gender is biological and trans women are dangerous to other women.

Trans issues matter because trans lives matter. But they matter for another reason too. The lie that men and women are biologically fundamentally different, and therefore naturally unequal, has been a foundational argument for every kind of inequality since the invention of class society.

Trans people and gender fluidity point now to a future of equality. The open courage of trans people says to all of us, look in each other's eyes, and what you see there is another human being. What you see is that we are the same. That sameness is the foundation of all equality and solidarity.

The forces on the move make it possible to think in these ways. But there is a very big danger.

Many people, probably most people, in these movements assume that, on some level, we all have to choose between the ideas of the old left and the ideas of the mainstream centre. Both those choices are traps.

Ukraine, for instance, or Syria, can easily make you think of leaving behind the ideas of socialism and welcoming the local mainstream narrative, Joe Biden or Trump, or whatever you have available. It can feel like that makes sense.

But more and more, those centres cannot hold. Their leaders have all been complicit. Putin invades, as Obama and Biden, Bush and Clinton have invaded. The centres have all enabled the crushing inequalities of neoliberalism. A new left of some sort is growing. If that new left binds itself to the old cruelties of the centre, the pounding waves of human pain will only nourish the racist right.

The protesters in the streets of Lebanon had a slogan in their uprising. They shouted, 'All of Them Means All of Them'. They meant that they reject all the political leaders of every religion and sect, including their own.

We have written an article recently arguing that political leaders all over the world cover up and thus enable sexual violence. And we have written another piece arguing that political leaders all over the world have failed to take action to stop climate change. In both cases, All of Them Means All of Them.[\[26\]](#)

The path to rescue life from climate breakdown, and to build an equal and democratic world is hard to see. Before us the way seems full of fog and shifting shapes.

By contrast the path of the established centre-left is clear and well-lighted. All we have to do is keep doing what all the leaders of

the world have been doing for decades. And soon enough, we will arrive at the gates of hell.

So we have no alternative but to walk down the other path, the confused and twisting path, the path of love. And to hope that the growing movements of resistance can learn from each other and take a path that helps us make the world anew.

NOTES

In addition to these references, the best source for understanding both Ukrainian and Russian politics is the continuing coverage at [People and Nature](#).

[1] This story is brilliantly told in Adam Tooze, 2018, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, Penguin.

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[5] For Putin and gender see Masha Gessen, 2012, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, Granta; Valerie Sperling, 2015, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*, Oxford University Press.

[6] Gessen, 2012, Chapter 2.

[7] Jacob Rigi, Personal Communication.

[8] Gessen, 2012, Chapter 3.

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[11] Megha Kumar, 2017, *Communalism and Sexual Violence: Ahmedabad Since 1969*, Tulika; Harsh Mander, 2019, *Between Memory and Forgetting: Massacre and the Modi Years in Gujerat*, Yoda; Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012, *Pogrom in Gujerat*, Princeton University Press; Prita Jha, 2017, How Hindu Mobs Used Rape as a Weapon of War against Women such as Bilko Bano during the Gujerat Riots, *The Caravan*.

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[17] Caitlin Flanagan, 2017, Bill Clinton: A Reckoning, *The Atlantic*; Dylan Matthews, 2017, The rape allegations against Bill Clinton, explained, *Vox*, Nov. 14; Glenn Kessler, 2016, The facts about Hillary Clinton and the Kathy Shelton rape case, *Washington Post*, Oct. 11.

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[20] Woodward, 2018, 39-40.

[21] Juan Cole, 2022, Americans Shocked to See Ukrainians Treated Like Iraqis, even though they are White (Not the Onion), *Informed Comment*, Feb. 28.

[22] Jonathan Neale, 2021, *Fight the Fire: Green New Deals and Global Climate Jobs*, The Ecologist.

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[24] Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, 2022, [From Afghanistan to Ukraine](#), *Anne Bonny Pirate*, Feb. 22.

[25] Volodymyr Artiukh, 2022, US-plaining is not enough: to the western left, on your and our mistakes, *Commons*, Mar. 1.

[26] Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, 2022, Harvard, Sexual Politics, Class and Resistance, *Anne Bonny Pirate*; Jonathan Neale, 2021, What Do We Do after the COP? *Anne Bonny Pirate*.