

Interview – Maciej Bazela

Written by E-International Relations

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Maciej Bazela is an academic leader with over 15 years of experience in higher education, research, and international relations. He specializes in comparative politics, geopolitics, and sustainable development in Mexico City. As Founder & CEO of Applied Ethics Solutions, Maciej promotes ethical standards in business through tailored educational programs. He has served as Department Chair of Social and Political Affairs at IPADE Business School, leading curriculum development and fostering academic collaboration. Fluent in multiple languages, Maciej is dedicated to advancing ethical and inclusive education. He has a strong background in strategic planning and institutional modernization and holds advanced degrees in philosophy and international relations.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates in your field?

The 2020s have become a remarkable decade in global politics, marked by significant electoral events and a growing debate over the future of liberal democracy. In 2024 alone, over 4 billion people across 70 countries are voting in national elections, with surprising outcomes like Claudia Sheinbaum's victory in Mexico and the Labour Party's win in the UK. As the US presidential election approaches, the global democratic landscape could shift dramatically by 2025.

The rise of populism, driven by public frustration over economic and social issues, has challenged centrist parties and liberal democracy. Governments are centralizing power, reminiscent of the 1920s, with citizens increasingly willing to trade freedoms for state security. The success of hybrid political models in countries like China and the UAE further erodes the value of individual liberty. The shift away from liberal values and the resurgence of authoritarianism are troubling, echoing warnings from thinkers like Tocqueville and Hayek. Having witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union during my formative years, I am struck by how the debates on freedom and political systems from that era have faded. Newer generations show less concern for the distinctions between political ideologies. The struggle for freedom is becoming irrelevant in an increasingly bureaucratic world.

How has your understanding of the world changed, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have been following the unfolding political drama in Venezuela. It reminded me of Douglass North's idea of "historical junctures." Wrong turns and missed opportunities tend to have dramatic consequences. A historical pendulum does not exist. Things do not come back to "normal" after a while. It takes human agency. When I give the Venezuela case, I ask my students: "Do you think Venezuela has reached the bottom? Will it bounce back?". The unfolding discussion reveals how difficult it is to "turn a country around." Many domestic and international factors explain why Venezuela has been so much "path dependent" despite social, political and economic collapse. Returning to Douglass North, political institutionalism offers a robust analytical framework that helps understand what is happening in politics in comparative terms. And politics does not equal economic performance. This is why economic collapse is not a sufficient reason for a political transformation. This is why Venezuela, Cuba, and Russia keep offering valuable lessons to other countries that are playing with fire, electing illiberal democrats.

Based on my studies and international experience, I have also reaffirmed in the first person a rather pessimistic view of nature and the inner logic of the state, which is the starting point of modern political sciences. The state has its

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rationality, which cannot be reduced to merely representing different social groups and public interests. To begin with, the relationship between the state and the citizen has always been uneven. Today, it has become outright exploitative and rentist in many cases: citizens are obliged to fulfill their (fiscal) obligations, even if the State does not meet its own. As a result, citizens absorb multiple layers of direct and indirect taxation regarding healthcare, education, transportation and even security.

Governments also seem much less rational and practical than they might seem at first glance. Demographic politics in the EU is one good example of that. The data on EU demographics are straightforward: the birth rate is below 2.0 in most, if not all, EU countries. Many EU countries are shrinking demographically, and some are flatlining thanks to legal and illegal immigration. However, social and demographic policies have remained the same across the EU.

Another good example of State irrationality is the complexity of public administration. Despite the potential of digitization, public services still rely heavily on paper documents, static photocopies, stamps, translations, and verifications. Ask any international family that has dealt with birth certificates, marriage certificates, multiple passports, or immigration documentation. None of that is designed to put individual citizens center-stage. On the other hand, it puts state security and the government apparatus in the center. Migration policies offer a compelling case which shows that the world is much less globalized and barrier-free than we might think.

How do you define neo-fascism in the contemporary political landscape, and what differentiates it from historical fascism?

Neo-fascism is a social and political movement that is hostile to the political left and the center-right. Thus, neofascism sits on the extreme right of the ideological spectrum. Since fascism is a “burned” political etiquette, today’s neo-fascism is known as ultranationalism, nationalism conservatism or national populism. According to Kevin Roberts, the President of the Heritage Foundation, “It is national conservatism – and not the corporatist, secular, neoliberal establishment – that bears the standard of Thatcherism and Reaganism in the 21st century.”

Despite changing its name, neo-fascism has much in common with classical fascism of the 20th century. Both reject rational individualism as the foundation of the social contract and the Nation-State. To the opposite, both are statist. They put the State in the center as the primary organizing force of the political, social and economic order. Ideologically wise, they are anti-communist, anti-socialist, anti-liberal, and anti-globalization. They rely heavily on conspiracy theories and racial prejudice.

However, there are also some substantial differences. Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, contemporary hard-right leaders do not have imperial expansionist ambitions. Instead, they favour isolationism and international disengagement. Instead of totalitarian and collectivist public policies, they focus on antiimmigration measures, economic nationalism and social welfare. Finally, I think today’s extreme right leaders, in particular Trump and Orban, show a certain appreciation of traditional family, religion and private property. In that sense, they are closer to conventional national conservatism rather than fascism.

What are the key factors driving neo-fascist resurgence in Latin America today? According to your findings, what role do economic and social conditions play in the appeal and rise of neo-fascist movements?

Insecurity and lack of opportunities come to my mind as the top two reasons behind the rise of the hard right, not only in Latin America but also in Europe and the US. The rise of the “police state” in El Salvador and Ecuador is the best example of a heavy-handed State response to organized crime, violence, and the lack of basic public security. Sadly, Latin America has not been immune to the excesses of dictatorial power of the State. Military juntas in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile – to mention just a few examples – were supported by many on the political right. At the same time, they created fear and terror on the political left. In that sense, Latin America has gone through a social-political split with brutal political endings, like Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, we see a confident comeback of heavy-handed militarised States in Latin America. Surprisingly, Mexico is also part of that trend.

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The lack of economic opportunities is the second main reason for the rise of the far right. Milei's Argentina could be one example of that to a certain extent. However, the US provides a better case in point. Millions of young people are deeply disillusioned with the corporate world, academia, and government. They feel that education, meritocracy and hard work are not enough to have a good life in the US anymore. On top of that, they feel to be socially ostracised, silenced, and marginalized for being religious, socially conservative or even heterosexual. How do they channel their frustration? Since they cannot move to the extreme right, which is progressive and politically correct, they move to the political extreme right.

How do neo-fascist groups utilize modern technology and social media to spread their ideologies and recruit members?

Neofascist movements rely heavily on conspiracy theories and social misinformation, which are spread on dedicated social platforms such as The Gab, Daily Stormer, 4chan, and Discord. There are so many different theories circulating today on the Internet. Great Replacement, Birthism, Christian Identity Theory, The New World Order, and Pizzagate are the most popular. And yet, it is an ever-growing universe. For example, the assassination attempt on Donald Trump is already generating new conspiracies.

As you can see, modern technology and social media are an essential tool for the hard right. Social media come in handy to spread lies, hate speech and defamation campaigns to delegitimize opponents. It is far more effective than paper bulletins, post mails, and secret gatherings, which were the norm in the 1960s and 1970s. However, they also use offline means. They try to infiltrate and recruit among the military and the police. They radicalize students on campuses. They organize combat training camps and international conventions. All these tactics are well documented in Ware and Hoffman's excellent recent book titled *God, guns and sedition*.

Can you discuss any notable case studies or examples from your research that highlight the tactics and strategies used by neo-fascist movements to gain influence and support?

I would point to the return of "Grantism," that is, the spread of white supremacist theories among US political, economic and intellectual circles. To learn more about this problematic phenomenon, I refer you to an excellent article by A. Serwer in The Atlantic titled *White Nationalism's Deep American Roots*. Serwer describes the prevailing social and cultural climate in the US in the 1920s among the US elites. In the light of the evidence he presents, it is shocking to see how widespread "scientific racism" was among intellectuals and policymakers. And second, he shows how these dark tendencies are back with the rise of Donald Trump.

What effective countermeasures or strategies can governments, organizations, and communities implement to combat the spread of neo-fascism?

The spread of neofascism is a sharp critique, a reaction to the mistakes and shortcomings of the center-right and the center-left. Thus, to combat the spread of neo-fascism, public and private sector leaders should fix the errors of neoliberal centrist governments. To begin with, it is urgent to address the cost of the living crisis. Millions of (young) people are disillusioned with the political and economic status quo because they are unlikely to be better off than their parents' generation. The cost of education, housing and child-rearing have become prohibitively expensive. You see that especially in the European Union, which is shrinking demographically. It is hard to think about getting married and having a family if your monthly pay is barely sufficient for your rent.

Secondly, the center-right must generate serious value propositions favoring gender equality, environment, social diversity, healthcare, education, and social mobility. It is not enough to accuse the left of being "extreme," "progressive," or "woke." The right has become too comfortable and complacent, repeating old-style slogans about liberty, dignity, and the market economy. However, it has forgotten to form concrete policies that address the bread-and-butter issues of hard-working families and individuals.

The political right must recover a healthy, critical, mature conservatism combining faith and reason. It must reconnect with the traditional conservative values of limited government, solidarity, subsidiarity, individualism, and

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the common good. It is striking to see how all these classical values of the political right have been replaced by irrationality, conspiracy theories, “big state” and “big business” thinking.

Finally, civic culture is critical to strengthening the social contract. The US founding fathers were quite clear: the future of the Republic depends not only on the rule of law but also on the moral quality and high standards of conduct of the leaders and the country’s political culture. If that is the case, it is urgent to invest in human and social capital: the ability to process and understand complexity, to go beyond simplistic moral narratives. No society has a guaranteed destiny. Vigilance, participation and leading by example are necessary to defend the most cherished values. Instead of silent complicity, it is essential to investigate, publish, take positions, create networks, and speak up.

What is the most critical advice you could give young international relations scholars?

This is a challenging question, considering everyone has a unique role and pathway in life. It isn’t easy to give general advice that would apply to every circumstance. Nevertheless, I would suggest you be critical and reflective. I invite you to adopt a more philosophical approach to international relations. International relations tend to be very descriptive and focused on the geopolitical power struggle and state security. There seems to be little room for a deeper reflection on the “why” issues, such as the essence of the global order, the direction of history, the underpinning values, and the ethics of global affairs. In addition, I think it is important to maintain an interdisciplinary curiosity. It is difficult to “do” international relations well without a broad interest in history, philosophy, politics, leadership, social sciences, environmental sciences, and ethics. I would say read a lot, think a lot, and write a lot.