

# BOOK REVIEW

WALDEN BELLO

## **Counterrevolution**

### The Global Rise of the Far Right

Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019, 175 pp.

In the early to mid-2010s, populism was more associated with left-wing movements and parties, the most prominent of which were in Southern Europe (Della Porta 2015). Among these polities reeling from austerity measures that include Greece and Spain, it was only in Italy where a right-wing populist party has gained traction. By the end of the last decade, we saw a global rise of right-wing populism, both of those who have claimed power or were on its cusps. Currently, there is no shortage of extant cases where these movements and its personalities have managed to use social cleavages brought about by rapid capitalist transformation. For example, the shift of production to poorer countries has eventually led the Global North southwards (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Similarly, the long-standing inequalities in the Global South have also been made more complex despite varying degrees of macroeconomic growth. Furthermore, it appears that these right-wing regimes are proving to be robust and popular, partly due to weakened and discredited oppositions—itsself a product of the counterrevolutionary process.

Just as there is no dearth in terms of contemporary cases of right-wing movements, parties, and leaders, there has been an equal upswing in interest and writing on populism, authoritarianism, and fascism—or simply put, far-right politics. But despite this, there is rarely an examination of the rise of the far right that attempts to bring these cases together and go beyond current right-wing, populist governments and go further into counterrevolutionary movements



throughout history. With its use of a comparative historical and sociological lens, Walden Bello in *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right* examines capitalist development and its complex and contradictory effects on social fissures that have brought about counterrevolutions, bringing us right in the middle of six counterrevolutionary moments.

Influenced by classics such as Barrington Moore's revolution from above and Nicos Poulantzas's "state of exception" thesis as well as primarily drawn from ideas of Arno Mayer, Bello adopts an understanding of the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution as this volume's theoretical core. Understanding that there can be no revolution without counterrevolution because agents within the civil society and polity would continue to fight for survival, counterrevolutions emerge when revolutionary forces and the change it brings begin to threaten the interest of the reactionary, conservative, and counterrevolutionary blocs within society. In turn, these forces coalesce regardless of a political project (Bello 2019).

An explanation of this vein would have class conflict as one of its central concepts and, as Bello points out, may run the risk of class determinacy. For example, Moore identifies counterrevolution as coming from above, while Poulantzas posits that a political formation of intermediate classes such as the petit bourgeois and the middle class are the primary actors of counterrevolution. Aware of this, Bello (2019, 9) attempts to approach the cases with sensitivity to the "intricate interaction or synergy of class with ideology, culture, and religion," a lens that is evident in the narration and analysis of the six "country experiences" in this volume.

The cases presented in this volume are Italy, Chile, Indonesia, Thailand, India, and the Philippines, all situated to be under the midst of rapid capitalist transformation. While these cases are not necessarily connected or can be considered as in a continuum where a regime evolved from a precedent, the use of a historically extensive pool of country experiences enabled Bello to draw two types of counterrevolutions: first is the class-based counterrevolution more prominent in the first four countries, where economic change is characterized by rapid rural transformation. In these cases, the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic unfolds between a revolutionary underclass fighting for change in the social system and an elite bloc that seeks to maintain the structure of domination. In these cases, we see violent purges of the underclass: from one



that is carried out by an angry intermediate class tolerated by the state as in Italy to the indiscriminate use of state forces even against suspected communists in Indonesia. These classic examples display the centrality of the rural class struggle and its propensity toward a counterrevolutionary end. The second type is characterized as more comprehensive and is directed not toward an insurgent lower class but to an entire “liberal democratic regime that is perceived as corrupt, incompetent, and unable to deliver the goods . . .” (Bello 2019, 142). The cases of India and the Philippines belong to this typology, where liberal democracy is not only attacked in terms of its inability to deliver but is also framed as an order that privileges an undesirable group in expense of the “we.” It is noteworthy, especially in the case of the Philippines, that the counterrevolutionary movement occurred in the aftermath of a regime that promised sweeping changes toward good governance—itsself a liberal democratic discourse—and despite consistent macroeconomic growth.

What can be gleaned from these cases are undertones of structural strain and relative deprivation theories in the case of reactionary movements. Presenting the counterrevolutionary movement and the cultural factors that went in play for it to take root provided great insight into the deep-seated cleavages of these societies that were triggered toward a counterrevolutionary end. And it is in the narration of these tensions that we find the highly varied synergy between ideology, religion, and culture, which this volume successfully intended to provide. As presented in this manner, these cases lend an understanding to the different permutations of counterrevolution and an awareness that these factors, while possibly at play simultaneously, usually do not occur in equal degree and form across all polities. Additionally, this lends credence to the thought that these movements do not appear spontaneously but do originate from inequalities beyond the economic and are made more complex by existing ideological, cultural, and religious creases. While conflicts are structural in origin, counterrevolutions show that deprivation is relative, hence malleable. In moments when deprivations shift and turn into collective action and support for the far-right, it becomes evident that counterrevolutions are neither mere upsurges of anger nor are brief pathologies in democratic systems. Counterrevolutions, with its share of political acumen and arousal of social psychological factors, are political projects in themselves.

Notably, counterrevolution was the central theoretical concept used in this volume. In a way, this bucks the trend on contemporary



descriptions and analysis of the regimes in question. Usually seen as populist, authoritarian, fascist, or a combination of the three, Bello subsumes these categories under counterrevolutionary. This has provided this volume with a different analytical take from its contemporaries. One effect that this has had is with the selection of the country cases. This gave a greater focus toward polities that have experienced a degree or semblance of a revolution-counterrevolution dialectic. This achieves two things: First, what seemed to be a conceptual narrowing of cases toward the counterrevolutionary temporally expanded the selection of polities, going as far back as the Italy of post-World War I—a case that may have been missed if for example, a contemporary definition of populism had been used. Second, using counterrevolution to include variants of far-right politics set up a crux of comparison that bridged both historical (classical) and contemporary cases, enabling robust and extensive observations.

Bello's *Counterrevolution* superbly handles six cases of counterrevolution, giving us equally rich and nuanced accounts of class, culture, capitalist transformation, and social cleavages. Giving a comparative historical and sociological perspective to the rise of the far-right, this volume created a larger patchwork of the history of counterrevolutions in the Global South instead of viewing it as isolated movements. While covering a lot of ground through its methodological approach, it still compels those who will read it toward a further investigation of two concepts: the middle class and civil society. First, the middle class is pivotal in providing the mass base for both democratic movements and counterrevolutions—a possible indication of its ambivalence toward political movements. One can infer that the continuing capitalist transformation makes the middle class conceptually elusive despite having a hold on the methodological approach used in this volume, as their characteristics as an intermediate class continue to shift together with changes in the capitalist economy. For example, whereas we find a rurally rooted middle class in the classical examples, the contemporary cases see segments of the middle class as transnational laborers experiencing chronic underemployment abroad. Another key concept is civil society, particularly its optimistic conception as an indicator of vibrant democracy. However, in the Indian case it became a counterrevolutionary force that exerted pressure to the state. In a



different instance, it was co-opted in support of fascism (Berman 1997). Thus, if the civil society can be both an agent and a subject of counterrevolution, it might be of help to examine its formation, its potential influence, its instrumentality, and how it can possibly reflect class interests within a society.

By the end of this volume, we are provided with some measures to combat counterrevolutions. And just as they were able to “eat the Left’s lunch” (Bello 2019, 127), Bello posits that it has a lot to do with taking advantage of the rifts that counterrevolutionaries create within their ranks and their societies—that the supposed inclusion of the “we” still begets exclusion. That said, this volume is not only valuable to those who have academic and theoretical interests in social movements, counter-movements, class conflict, and civil society. It must also be read by those who see themselves as counteracting the advance of counterrevolutionary politics. As much as these readers would see these measures as insightful, a greater emphasis on the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic must be maintained. As it implies, the former has historically played a role in creating and complicating deep-seated inequalities that were merely stroked toward a counterrevolutionary end (Bello 2019). Thus, it might be a difficult yet necessary exercise to approach this volume with a critical position toward one’s politics, detaching from its normative and moral values. Bello’s *Counterrevolution* is not merely an affirmation of one’s observations toward far-right regimes. It is a positively unsettling volume that invites an objective examination of one’s political party, movement, and politics.

The global pandemic has made it more apparent for those living amid a counterrevolutionary movement that it has provided a situation for extant counterrevolutions to take deeper roots, a protracted opportunity to consolidate power outside prying eyes and relieved from the threat of consolidating oppositions. But it is also in our halted world where we are seeing the magnification of racial injustice particularly in the United States to a level that challenges a far-right regime, triggering action from the established opposition to supposedly-apolitical sportspeople, potentially stopping it from its tracks.



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