



Political extremism and hegemonic crisis: the case of far-right militias in the United States

Extremismo político e crise hegemônica: o caso das milícias de extrema direita nos Estados Unidos

Extremismo política y crisis de hegemonía: el caso de las milicias de extrema derecha en Estados Unidos

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Abstract

This article contributes to the discussion about the global far-right, by analyzing the sociopolitical transformations in the United States observed during Trump administration. The investigation selects

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the cases of three of the most nationally relevant American militias – the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys and the Three Percenters – to illustrate how the ascension of far-right groups and the contestation of liberal values in the United States transcend trumpism itself but are connected to weakened internal hegemony and the crisis of the liberal international order. Methodologically, the work relies on content analysis to investigate the manifestos produced by these organizations.

Keywords: Global new right; Militias; United States; Donald Trump.

Resumo

O artigo visa contribuir ao debate sobre a nova direita global, analisando as transformações sociopolíticas observadas nos Estados Unidos da América (EUA), durante a administração Trump. Os casos de três das milícias mais relevantes naquele país – os Oath Keepers, os Proud Boys e os Three Percenters – foram escolhidos para ilustrar como a ascensão de grupos de extrema direita e a contestação de valores liberais nos EUA transcendem o trumpismo, mas estão conectados com a hegemonia interna enfraquecida e a crise da ordem liberal internacional. Metodologicamente, o trabalho se alicerça na análise de conteúdo para investigar os manifestos produzidos por essas organizações.

Palavras-chave: Nova direita global; Milícias; Estados Unidos; Donald Trump.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a la discusión sobre la nueva derecha global, analizando las transformaciones sociopolíticas en los Estados Unidos observadas durante la administración Trump. Los casos de tres de las milicias estadounidenses más importantes -los Oath Keepers, los Proud Boys y los Three Percenters- fueron elegidos para ilustrar cómo el auge de los grupos de extrema derecha y la impugnación de los valores liberales en Estados Unidos trascienden el propio trumpismo, pero están conectados con la hegemonía interna debilitada y la crisis del orden internacional liberal. Metodológicamente, el trabajo se apoya en el análisis de contenido para investigar los manifestos producidos por estas organizaciones.

Palabras-clave: Nueva derecha global; Milicias; Estados Unidos; Donald Trump.





Introduction

Trump's government is in some respects an unusual case in contemporary American politics because, internally, it has undermined the hegemonic consensus by contesting election results and, externally, it has impaired the diffusion of democracy and liberalism as a guide for US foreign policy. Posen (2018, 21) has interpreted the administration's grand strategy as an example of "illiberal hegemony", meaning that it has sought to maintain US preeminence, but "has chosen to forgo the export of democracy and abstain from many multilateral trade agreements". In this context, analysis considering the connections among Trump's administration and the crisis of the liberal international order appeared (Ikenberry 2018 ; Norrlof 2018; Sanahuja; Burian 2020; Stokes 2018). However, the questioning of liberal values from the United States (U.S.) transcends Trump and has roots in social dynamics that predates and continues after this administration.

Furthermore, the Trump government is part of a phenomenon that transcends the U.S.: the global far-right movement. The far-right was able to win elections around the world, but its strategy is also built on a 'war of position' aimed at contesting hegemonic values in the spheres of civil society. Part of the analysis on the global right builds on the idea of a world order crisis, connecting it to the crisis of U.S. hegemony, however most analyses are focused on the investigation of governments practices and discourses. Hence, the analysis of the far-right movement should not be limited to the investigation of administrations, but internal groups and their transnational connections must also be investigated – since world hegemony has an internal dimension.

Hegemony was conceived by Gramsci to analyze relations of domination and subordination among social forces in a national context. It was thought of as a form of domination in which coercion and consensus combine, making the use of force appear legitimate⁴ (Gramsci 2007). Hegemony, therefore, holds an ideational dimension, diffused by instruments of public opinion, and is intended to credibly present class interests as national interests. The internal

4 According to Gramsci: "The 'normal' exercise of hegemony [...] is characterized by the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much. Indeed one tries to make it appear that force is supported by the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and associations [...]" (Gramsci 2000, p. 261).





hegemony of dominant classes in powerful states may expand globally, and an international hegemony relates to the creation and leadership of an international order (Arrighi 1990; Cox 1983). US hegemony – or world leadership, in a liberal reading – is connected to the creation of the liberal international order (LIO) in the post Second World War context (Ikenberry 2011). Nowadays, the crisis of U.S. hegemony connects both to the crisis of the LIO and to internal phenomena.

We aim to contribute to the literature on the connections between the far-right movement and the crisis of the LIO by analyzing social and political transformation in the U.S. which are connected to trumpism, but also transcends it. We argue that far-right elements and the contestation of liberal values in the U.S. has a long history and is older and deeper than trumpism, but the strengthening of such phenomena is related to weakened internal hegemony and the crisis of the LIO. Following Babic's (2020) proposition of three levels of analysis to understand the crisis of the LIO, which are i) global political economy; ii) the state-level and; iii) society-level, in this article we focus on the second and third levels, aiming to grasp some of the interconnections among them. With this in mind, we present some of Trumpism key mottos and analyze the opening manifestos of the three most known American militias with a national outreach. We have chosen to analyze the militias because they behave as organizations and have a hierarchical structure. The Three Percenters, Proud Boys, and Oath Keepers were selected because they are the only nationally relevant militias and there is empirical material produced by them that is available online. Therefore, among the extreme-right groups, they have a significant role in the “war of position” strategy, and it's possible to analyze their discourses.

These empirical investigations help us to present the liberal order crisis in broad terms, complementing the literature that evaluates this phenomenon regarding mainly the international level and presidents' narratives, and also showing the grassroots of the liberal contestation in the U.S., through these groups individually and in their connections with Trump's key political ideas. The article is divided into three sections: in the first, the conceptual framework is presented, as well as the contextualization of the global far-right, in the second, there is a discussion on trumpism and its social drivers and, finally, the third one follows a content analysis and discusses the militias in the U.S.





The global new right and the Liberal International Order crisis

Cooley and Nexon's (2020) description of the components of the liberal international order helps to organize the analysis. According to them, the LIO is composed of three pillars: i) political liberal governance (comprising democratic political systems and human rights), ii) economic liberalism (belief in free economic exchange), and iii) liberal intergovernmentalism (multilateral organization and cooperation). The LIO is led by the U.S., but it admittedly has been "unevenly, or inconsistently, liberal with respect to all three of these dimensions" (Cooley; Nexon 2020, 23). It has originated in the post-Second World War context, but, arguably, internal changes occurred in the following decades, such as the strengthening of financial liberalization – which connects to globalization and neoliberalism – and the incorporation of ideas relating to gender equality and multiculturalism. According to critical assessments, US leadership has instrumentalized the rhetoric on democracy, free trade, and multilateralism to promote their national interest, moreover, its acting is permeated with racist and class-based assumptions (Parmar 2018).

Nevertheless, political liberalism, free-trade and multilateralism compose the legitimization of the LIO . The defense of liberal values and their export has been relatively consensual in the context of US foreign policy. Hence, the election of former president Trump caused turmoil since it was based on a political platform critical to those liberal principles. The former president promoted economic nationalism and an anti-globalization narrative, as well as praised allied dictators and authoritarian foreign leaders who ruled in countries adversaries to the U.S., such as Vladimir Putin. Trump also undermined national traditions and questioned election results by claiming fraud without presenting evidence.

The Trump administration was not unique, but part of a global movement: the surge and/or strengthening of new political rights, that are diverse and heterogeneous but dialogue transnationally and share a critical narrative about the globalization process. From a liberal perspective, Cooley and Nexon (2020, p. 139) argue that "the transnational right, however fragmented and diverse, explicitly opposes important aspects of international liberal ordering". From an IPS standpoint, Abrahamsen et al (2020, p. 97) argue that thinkers from the global right developed a critique of globalization, based on a shared discourse in opposition to "elites" and global liberalism. From a Gramscian perspective,





Worth (2019) observes many ambiguities and contradictions on the far-right economic agenda, but clear contestation of cultural and social phenomena linked to globalization. Drawing from their critique of globalization, Sanahuja and Burian (2020) propose conceptualizing them as the “neo-patriotic” far-right.

Among the common characteristics is a critique of globalization, based on the construction of global liberal elites as the enemy (Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Worth 2019). For their understanding of globalization, culture and identity are central elements and they oppose multiculturalism and fear a homogenization of culture. Among the specificities of the far-right in the U.S. is the “fear of big government”, reflecting a “belief that there was a need to protect the Constitution from the forces of government”, expressed mainly by armed militias (Worth 2019, 34). In the country there is both fear of the federal government and international institutions that presumably operate above that government. Therefore, the global far-right contest especially liberal intergovernmentalism, the third pillar of the LIO, several far-right groups contest aspects of political liberal governance, especially when it comes to human rights from diverse minorities, and some of them also contest economic liberalism.

Far-right movements also promote a similar narrative when it comes to contesting globalization and multilateral institutions. Their exchanges are established via study networks, book editing, conferences, and the digital world. They also share tactics and agendas such as the defense of tradition, a nationalist discourse, and an aesthetic of their own (Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Drolet; Williams 2022; Mudde 2019; Sanahuja; Burian 2020). Moreover, they represent a form of reactionary internationalism, rejecting globalization, which in the view of such groups, promotes decadence of tradition and community (Sanahuja; Burian 2020, 30). They recover a nationalist rhetoric, conceiving the multilateral institutions as impediments to national sovereignty. Nativism, or ethnic nationalism, is also part of their shared worldview. It relates to a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, in which those who are not perceived as natives (such as migrants and their descendants) are seen as a threat to the nation’s homogeneity (Mudde 2019).

The global far-right is part of the current international order crisis of legitimacy, a multidimensional crisis involving inter-state and intra-state phenomena. This crisis is related not only to the decline of US power and the rise of non-Western states but also to the impairment of norms, values and institutions. Drawing from a critical perspective, the far-right movement signals an interregnum, meaning a long period of instability and uncertainty that may extend for decades. Babic calls





us to understand this crisis “as a distinct and decisive period for world affairs” (Babic 2020, 768). Drawing from Gramsci, he points out that the crisis is defined not as a shock, but as a process originating in the contradictions of the existing order and relates to a “mismatch between represented and representatives”, which surfaces at the election of leaders who contest apparently consensual values (Babic 2020, 772).

The crisis of authority was discussed by Gramsci as the period of transition, when the system of rule is declining, but has not been surpassed. According to a known affirmative by him “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci 1999, 556). In other words, we experience a crisis of the LIO, but there is still no replacement for it. The existence of morbid symptoms does not necessarily represent the end of the liberal world order, but its increased instability (Worth 2019). According to Babic (2020, 773):

If we translate this pattern to the level of world order, we can see a number of phenomena—for example, the rise of political leaders who undermine existing institutions and rules; an open hostility towards principles such as multilateral cooperation; and an emptying of core values such as democratic solidarity—as moments of morbidity that cannot be captured by the logic of the LIO itself. They represent problematic developments that erode the LIO without offering a new stable equilibrium that could replace the old order.

In addition to helping understand the current crisis, a Gramscian perspective brings two other relevant contributions: it helps understand the connection between internal and external issues and it also contributes to analyzing the strategies of far-right movements. Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks were mainly concerned with the Italian context, but he made some suggestions about international relations, many of them reinterpreted by Cox (1983; 1981). One of such ideas is the deconstruction of a separation between internal and external phenomena. According to the Italian politologist, the drivers of international relations are in social relations, therefore international developments cannot be disconnected from internal politics⁵. As Cox (1983) pointed out, hegemony was thought of as a concept to understanding the leadership of dominant classes internally, but this is internationalized. International hegemony is built through the expansion of

5 As he states: “Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow.” (Gramsci 1999, p. 398).





ideas and institutions promoted by the dominant classes in an internal context and involves the construction of an international order (Cox 1983).

Moreover, the concepts of ‘war of movement’ and ‘war of position’ contribute to understand the strategies of the contemporary global right. A ‘war of movement’ was thought of as a strategy based on ascending to power by taking over state apparatus, traditionally through a revolution. A ‘war of positions’ is a strategy based on acquiring ground at civil society institutions, such as the media, schools and universities, and non-governmental bodies (Cox 1983). It aims to question the ‘common sense’ and win hearts and minds (Worth 2019).

The global right is following this second strategy, aiming to acquire ground not only by ascending to executive position, but also diffusing its narrative in the social apparatus. This is done by appropriating Gramsci’s analysis for their own ends (Abrahamsen et al. 2020). They aim to contest principles that constitute the aspects of the world order, by questioning aspects of liberal governance, globalization and multilateral organization, even when maintaining ambiguity in their economic agenda. Therefore, studying administration’s actions and behavior is relevant, but insufficient to fully understand the global far-right, since this movement also aims to expand its influence and world view via grassroots movements. In the following sections, we provide a more detailed assessment of Trumpism and bring a panorama on the US militias.

The structural transformations in the United States

The election of Trump raised profound questions and concerns regarding the resilience of the LIO. More importantly, it brought serious doubts about American willingness to preserve its relevant and historical role, as the administration promoted rhetorical and concrete actions against international treaties and institutions, such as NATO, the Paris Climate Accords, and the United Nations. In different contexts, Trump criticized these multiple multilateral organizations for being, in his words, “obsolete”, “unfair” and, above all things, for imposing costs and restrictions on US capabilities that ultimately made possible the combination between what was perceived as the expression of the American decay and the consolidation of the so called “revisionist” (The White House 2017) powers such as China and Russia. Trump also diminished the relevance of defending democracy as an organizing concept for U.S. Foreign policy discourse and has





praised authoritarian leaders. Although one might consider such claims as mere rhetorical exaggerations, the “anti-globalist” fervor resonated profoundly amongst Trump supporters.

Many mediatic assessments on the 2016 presidential elections painted Donald Trump medium voters as a group of nostalgic “left-behind people” – mostly white, middle aged middle-class men, who supposedly felt excluded from the main social transformations observed in the country during the last five decades. However, these individuals cannot be considered as a homogeneous group. As pointed out by Crothers (2019), what came to be labeled as the “right wing” in the United States political scenario, especially after Trump’s election is actually a very “polyglot group” (Crothers 2019, 1) including: i) traditional conservatives that didn’t feel represented in the Republican party, ii) white supremacists (such as the so called “Alt-right” movement), and iii) the armed militias.

In such a diverse environment, Trump’s successful political strategy consisted in organizing elements around which those groups seemed to converge, described by Restad (2020) as the main pillars of the “America first” foreign policy motto: a) resistance to globalization; b) opposition to liberal internationalism; c) and ethnic nationalism. Combined with “anti-globalism”, Trump supporters have found in globalization their explanation for some of the social “evils” that in their perspective haunted American society, namely immigration, organized crime, drug abuse and, more recently, terrorism.

Globalization was also concretely connected to income inequality and the deteriorating economic conditions, observed since the 1980s and aggravated after the 2008 financial crisis and one expensive “Global War on Terror”. In more precise terms, Stokes (Stokes 2018, 146) recently stated that:

[...] income inequality in the United States has grown considerably and wage stagnation is widespread. The data show that in real terms the average wage peaked more than 40 years ago, with the top 1 per cent of wages growing by 138 per cent since 1979, while wages for the bottom 90 per cent grew by just 15 per cent.

In this context, Trump received support from those groups and regions – mostly in manufacturing states – that felt more deeply affected by the rising economic competition in global markets and were equally “deluded” by the unfulfilled Democrat promises of hope and change elaborated during the Obama





administration (2009-2017). These complexities were also portrayed by Stokes (2018, 147) as it follows:

Among the non-college-educated white working class (the so-called ‘precariat’) Trump won 67 per cent of the popular vote (to Hillary Clinton’s 28 per cent), with one in four of President Obama’s 2012 white working-class supporters shifting from the Democrats in 2016[...]. Trump also received support from those manufacturing states that were most at risk from outsourcing and increased global manufacturing competition [...] Trump’s discourse explicitly tapped into these voters’ sense of economic insecurity and their desire to reverse globalization. Americans, he explained, ‘must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs’: protection, he asserted, ‘will lead to great prosperity and strength’. In so doing, he appealed to the rational self-interest of those who have often been left behind by processes of globalization.

By vaguely promising to restore American national industry, wages and “glorious” past, Trump did more than just reaching out to the “hearts and minds” of those socially and economically excluded from globalization. One of the main triumphs of his political strategy was the instrumentalization of the contradictions that seemed embedded in neoliberal globalization and the reinforcement of their connection to the institutions that sustained the LIO.

In the U.S., the debates regarding what international role should America play are not new. In fact, the most common narrative in US foreign policy opposes two main political strands, the “liberal internationalist” tradition, and the “isolationist” one. The former became predominant in the post-1945 context and represented America’s compromise to the promotion of liberal values and institutions, perceived as the most efficient way of preserving its international leadership.

On the other hand, the isolationist tradition, generally interpreted as the rejection of permanent alliances until the 20th century (Rosati; Scott 2011), has been sometimes associated to unilateral, protectionist or nationalist sentiments that became more present in American domestic realm since the 1970s and after the erosion of the so called “bipartisan consensus” (Kupchan; Trubowitz, 2007). The consensus was characterized as a tacit agreement between Republicans and Democrats when it came to foreign policy issues, despite their domestic differences. In other words, it was the affirmation of the political motto “politics





stops at the water's edge", meaning that even when the parties would diverge in domestic issues, these divergences shouldn't affect America's mission abroad or, more importantly, its liberal inclinations well defined by Restad (2020) as the "American creed".

The increasing polarization and the social transformations observed more intensely after the Vietnam War (1955-1975) brought the end of the bipartisan consensus and strengthened more dissonant and often extreme political voices which, in the most recent context, led us to the so called "Trumpism" meaning that Trump is more a symptom than a cause of these complex historical patterns. Regarding specifically the LIO, such patterns gradually intensified the domestic disbelief about its benefits and advantages and nurtured far right conspiracy interpretations that associated liberal institutions to a phantasmagoric "shadow government" (Crothers 2019) that supposedly connected America liberal elites to the international organizations in order to submit the country to the "new world order". This idea has been incorporated by groups such as the Alt-right and QAnon, but also by the armed militia as explained by Crothers (2019, p. 12):

This shadow government is believed to serve the interests of some "other"- the United Nations, the international banking community (and thus, according to some militia rhetoric, the Zionist conspiracy of Nazi ideology), or the preferences of some other international elite. The rulers of this shadow government have hired the agents of the U.S. government to enforce their will [...] For alt-righters, problems like crime, or illegal immigration, or global economic competition are the result of policies and programs actively promoted by liberals and progressives. Liberals and progressives are believed to be working to undermine the "American way" in favor of some cosmopolitan, "politically correct," diverse future.

One last aspect regarding Trump's "America first" policy and its domestic consequences should be noted: ethnic nationalism. For Restad (2020), "ethnic nationalism" contradicts the main liberal principles that have guided US nation-building since the 20th century such as the ideal of the American society as a plural, multicultural, multiracial "nation of immigrants". These principles and narratives have historically embodied "civic nationalism", the domestic mirror for liberal internationalism abroad.

On the other hand, "ethnic nationalism" promoted by Trump and his supporters represented the rejection of all kinds of cultural and ethnical integration





reinforcing the exclusionary Western and white supremacy. As pointed out by Restad (2020) even though the tensions between the imagined multicultural nation and the materially segregated one were always present in American history, Trump seriously weakened the hegemonic liberal narrative by openly attacking immigrants, racial minorities and being at the same time complacent to the white supremacist groups, as illustrated by the presidential reactions to the Charlottesville violent episodes, in 2017⁶. Conversely, Trump's actions and the mobilization of supporters were facilitated by an already existent ideological terrain in which racism and exclusion were present, even if not openly claimed.

The presidential endorsement for those domestic groups not only disseminated undemocratic values but also are virtually opposed to all the main pillars which sustain US hegemony abroad. As interpreted by Restad (2020) these groups represent a reactionary force against the ideals of progress and modernity usually associated with liberal values. By defying these ideals, the reactionary movement violently discloses the contradictions identified in the liberal system (Parmar 2018) but does so in a clearly authoritarian manner. Ironically, by promoting violence and ethnically based hierarchies, right wing groups seem to reproduce, openly and without boundaries, the same violent, unequal and racially based structures that have sustained the liberal order and US hegemony in the last decades.

When it comes to militia groups, this association is reinforced by Crothers (2019) who solely affirms that “contemporary militia is not alien or exceptional” in American political life. The same values and ideologies that have informed militia actions are the ones that have always been part of the American sociopolitical fabric, namely the reification of freedom, liberty and the promotion of violence and self-defense as a private right. In fact, these groups search for justification for their actions by portraying themselves as the legitimate protectors of the traditional American values and culture, or of what they think these values and culture should be (Crothers 2019). For these reasons, we understand the militia groups to be a useful case of analysis regarding the impacts of domestic factors and actors in the transformation of hegemonic orders. In the next section, we will present the main contemporary features of these groups.

6 The episode involved violent clashes between white supremacist groups and left-wing protesters over the removal of a statue representing the Confederate general Robert E. Lee from Charlottesville, Virginia. On the occasion, Trump refused to condemn the armed white supremacist groups and affirmed that there were “very fine people” on both sides.





Militias: institutional distrust, private violence, and ethnic nationalism

Currently, there are three major militia groups in the U.S. with a national outreach: the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, and the Oath Keepers. To understand the crisis of LIO and show the interconnections among Trump's America First main mottos, here understood as the state-level of analysis, and the ideas proposed by right-wing militias in the U.S, the society-level of analysis, we evaluated each of those group's political manifestos and other statements made by their founders. The manifestos were selected because they represent the most important document through which their founders present the group's ideas, motives, and *raison d'être*. Our investigation was held with a content analysis, in which we map out the groups' discursive topography and main antiliberal arguments, utilizing three categories of analysis: the nostalgia of a past without liberal (political and cultural) values, a distrust towards international and domestic institutions, and ethnic nationalism, and correlate them with Trump's main political mottos, presented in the previous section.

In general, regarding this debate's specificities, private militias are distinguished from the other right-wing organizations in mainly two fields: their hierarchical militarist structure and the promotion of violence as their preferred means for political action. In the first case, contemporary militia inspiration and origins can be clearly traced back to the proto-military units established in the American War of Independence who were responsible for the country's protection until the late 19th century, when the first professionalized military units became predominant. Contemporary militia resembles the main principles behind the early-stage militia formations, more specifically, the volunteerism symbolized by the "citizen-soldier" or, as described in the traditional historical narrative, the "common", brave and loyal citizens that, in some circumstances, chose to sacrifice their lives in order to defend nation's freedoms and security from the threats coming from the domestic or external "others" – usually represented by hostile nations, immigrants, black enslaved communities and native indigenous people.

However, the main difference between the "new" and the "old" militia lies in the fact that the old formations were governmental organizations, and the new ones are private structures. Still, the modern paramilitary militia searches for legitimation by attaching its identity to legendary militia units such as the "Minutemen" who fought for US independence in 1776. But the historical narrative is not the only





source of legitimacy instrumentalized by the movement: they also rely on the Second Amendment of the US Constitution which states that: “A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” (United States of America 1787).

Even though one might argue that the “well-regulated militia” refers to the above-mentioned federal units, the modern paramilitary units generally appeal for the Second Amendment to justify their actions and, more profoundly, to defend the rights of private civilians to bear in arms to protect individual freedoms from the excesses of a hypothetical authoritarian government (Rogers 2021). Conversely if the US Constitution does not incentivize the formation of paramilitary militia, it also does not forbid their existence either.

According to Crothers (2019), the contemporary militia became stronger in the 1990s, and after a long period of political ostracism, began to rise again, during the transition between Bush and Obama administrations. When it comes to their social background, militia-member are usually male and many of them have a past in the armed or security forces. One of the main motivations behind this “militia re-birth” was the rise of the Tea Party, a far-right political movement that won political expression in the 2008 presidential elections by electing Sarah Palin as the vice-presidential running mate for the Republican candidate John McCain.

The other relevant reason was the internet: the social media became the most prominent recruitment channels for paramilitary organizations; this relevance became especially clear during the 2020 elections and the Covid-19 pandemic (Thompson-Deveaux; Smith 2020). For instance, members of the militia organizations that supported President Trump such as the so called “Three percenters” and the “Oath keepers” used social media not only to spread fake news about the Democrat candidate Joe Biden but also to disseminate “operational” plans of action, involving physical training and preparation allegedly aimed against left-wing political movements such as the Antifa and the “Black Lives Matter”. Moreover, the same organizations engaged in election monitoring activities after the several and groundless presidential accusations about electoral fraud in the 2020 vote counting.

Although not all private militias are self-identified to right wing extremist groups (Rogers 2021), the most prominent contemporary armed organizations that showed support for Trump administration seem to share with right wing representatives some relevant political platforms such as: the exclusionary nativism; the promotion of conservative values and ideals often expressed in nostalgic





claims for the reconstruction of an idealized American “glorious past”; lack of trust in federal government; and the association between left-wing parties and traditional liberal elites to what is perceived as the “perversion” of true American values and ideals (Crothers 2019). The anti-government and anti-elite populist sentiments were highly mobilized by Trump’s presidency enhancing the identification between these groups and the Republican commander in chief.

The Proud Boys militia, founded in 2016, is an example of a group that gained considerable new members after Trump’s presidency. In an article announcing the founding of the militia in the far-right *Taki’s Magazine*, its founder, Gavin McInnes, presented some of the group’s values through its process of membership. The hierarchical structure and the tasks demanded to evolve in it, thus becoming a senior – known as third-degree proud boy – reflects some of the aforementioned political platforms. For instance, to enter the group one must publicly declare to be a Proud Boy, which means to “make [one’s] Western chauvinism public and (...) don’t care who knows it” (McInnes 2016). According to McInnes (2016), the Western chauvinism means longing for “the days when girls were girls and men were men” and for a time when there were no social justice warriors, constantly promoting progressive, left-wing or liberal values, such as feminism, civil rights, and multiculturalism. McInnes (2016) proclaims the members diversity, denying the accusation of belonging to a “white supremacist organization”, but he is bluntly open in arguing that the Western culture is superior to other cultures, and he denies the responsibility of the white men in existing inequalities.

When McInnes mentions in the group’s first manifesto that Proud Boys have “absolutely no respect for feminists but venerate the housewife so much” (McInnes 2016) and that to reach a second-degree membership the candidate must endure a beating until he mentions five breakfast cereals, he not only reinforces a stereotypical image of men and women imbued in the social construction of the patriarchy, but also brings the nostalgia of better old days when so-called modern values had not perverted American and Western society.

This nostalgia is also identified in both Three Percenters, founded in 2008, and Oath Keepers, founded in 2009, manifestos when they mention specific moments of U.S. history. For instance, the opening statement of the Three Percenters blog justify the group’s name by affirming that “during the American Revolution, the active forces in the field against the King’s tyranny never amounted to more than 3% of the colonists” and the group “today identify with this 3% because they were true patriots fighting for the freedoms the nation we love and honor was





founded upon” (Vanderboegh s.d.). The American Revolution is then epitomized as a moment of courage and patriotism, in which citizens took in their own hands the fight for freedom. The Three Percenters objective was to “maintain their God-given natural rights to liberty and property” (Vanderboegh s.d.) and because “history itself, for good or ill, is made by determined minorities”, the U.S. government should not “underestimate the power of a small group of committed citizens to change the world” (Vanderboegh s.d.). The Oath Keepers recur to the same point in history to construct their manifesto called “Orders we will not obey”, also regarding the American Revolution as a glorious moment against tyranny.

In these two groups, this nostalgia is combined with a distrust towards international and domestic institutions, especially the U.S federal government. In debates over gun control, all groups not only manifested their contrary opinion, but also defended violent measures against political figures, or simply against “the government”. In their view, those laws are unconstitutional and a clear illustration of an overbearing government that wants to subjugate all citizens by extinguishing their “natural rights (...) to keep and bear arms” (Rhodes 2009). Whereas Steward Rhodes, the Oath Keepers founder, in the group’s manifesto affirmed the group would not obey “any order to disarm the American people” (Rhodes 2009), in the “Doctrine of the Three Percenter” the group declares “we will not disarm” (Vanderboegh s.d.). This anti-government sentiment comes attached to a sense of urgency and duty to defend the Republic. For instance, the Oath Keepers manifesto starts affirming that a time such as the American Revolution “is near at hand again. The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this Army” (Rhodes 2009).

The right to armed resistance against perceived abuse of power/or tyranny by the federal government is considered a fundamental right in the Three Percenters manifesto. It claims the existence of “domestic enemies of the Constitution” while locating the militia movement as “the guardian of, and the true expression of the will of, the people.” It also asserts that “we are committed to the restoration of the Founders’ Republic, and are willing to fight, die and, if forced by any would-be oppressor, to kill in the defense of ourselves and the Constitution” (Vanderboegh 2014). The Three Percenters view politics as a corrupt terrain while conceiving armed resistance as a way to restore the original Republic. Similarly, the first order the Oath Keepers promise not to obey is to disarm the population, arguing that people should be able to self-defend their “natural rights” and retain “[...] effective final recourse to arms [...] in the face of tyranny” (Rhodes 2009).





In this sense, the complex and unfinished debate regarding gun control in the country transcends the militia organizations, but it seems reasonable to assume that by defending the private right to the use of force these groups may find strong margins of support between those sociopolitical movements who oppose gun control and had also endorsed Trump's election, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA). Therefore, the use of force and violence against political opponents – who are depicted as enemies – becomes one of the most important features of today's militia organization, reinforcing its undemocratic nature. The other one, as mentioned above, is related to its militarist and hierarchical structure. In some circumstances, the international institutions or a so-called global elite, formed in the connections between the American political elite with its international counterparts, is perceived as another enemy. The eighth order the Oath Keepers assert they will not obey is “to assist or support the use of any foreign troops on U.S. soil against the American people to ‘keep the peace’ or to ‘maintain control’” as they “consider such use of foreign troops against our people to be an invasion and an act of war” (Rhodes 2009).

Whereas the conservative nature of the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters are mainly related to their contestation of political liberalism and liberal intergovernmentalism, especially in Oath Keepers case, in Proud Boys' presentation statement Gavin McInnes stresses the cultural and moral conservative components of the group. To become a second-degree proud boy, besides the beating, the candidate is only allowed to watch “porn only once every 30 days” (McInnes 2016). According to McInnes (2016), the “#nowanks” policy is what mostly improved the life of the group's members because “it gets young men off the couch and talking to women [...]” (McInnes 2016). This requirement in combination with the group's contempt for feminism, civil rights, and multiculturalism shows their contestation of liberal values and the “globalism” process that helped spread them.

The ethnic nationalism is another component in these groups' manifestos and their founders' statements, and they appear in multiple formats: from blatant examples of racism and xenophobia to subtle though problematic ones. Apart from the emblematic “10 Things I Like About White Guys,” published by McInnes (2017) at Taki's Magazine in 2017, the Proud Boys founder affirmed in an op-ed piece to American Renaissance that “they insist America is a racist hellhole where ‘people of color’ have no future. This does way more damage to Black youth than the KKK” (McInnes 2014) because when “you strip people of culpability and tell





them the odds are stacked against them, they don't feel like trying. White liberals make this worse by then using affirmative action to 'correct' society's mistakes" (McInnes 2014). Following on his argument, McInnes (2014) complements:

The white liberal ethos tells us Blacks aren't at MIT because of racism (...) When Blacks are forced into schools, they aren't qualified for they have no choice but to drop out. Instead of going back a step to a school they can handle, they tend to give up on higher education entirely. Thanks to the Marxist myth of ubiquitous equality, this 'mismatch' leaves Blacks less educated than they would have been had they been left to their own devices.

Racism is also combined with a fear of the left. This link is usually perceived by these groups in a chain of cause and effect: as the national elites get in touch with liberal and Marxist values, they socialize them internally and internationally, producing not only an international consensus over those values, but mainly a homogenization of national societies, supplanting traditional values. In Rhodes words commenting on immigration to the U.S., "this is a military invasion by the cartels and a political coup by the domestic Marxist controlled left, which sees open borders and mass-illegal invasion as their ticket to permanent illegitimate political power" and "This invasion/coup must be stopped" because "This is a matter of national security [...]" (Rhodes 2018). These statements are illustrative of how the aforementioned three pillars of Trumpism – resistance to globalization; opposition to liberal internationalism; and ethnic nationalism – are articulated throughout most far-right American militias. In brief terms, the globalization and the political elites engaged in this process are perceived as responsible for advancing liberal and left ideas, thus imposing values that erase patriotic, national, and traditional values in the name of so-called common international values.

Another interesting characteristic of the Oath Keepers is its requirement for membership. Differently from the Proud Boys that only accepts men, the Oath Keepers do not have a restraint on the criteria of sex. Instead, to be a member one must already have taken an oath to the U.S. constitution when becoming part of law enforcement or military personnel. This characteristic speaks directly to the American extreme-right milita's relation with the use of force and their hierarchical structure. Even though the internet has increased the horizontality in such groups, their very nature still resembles the hierarchies observed in military formations, often presenting military ranks and titles, such as "colonel" (Crothers 2019) between their members. The militarist traces are intensified by





the fact that, in many cases, militia members are also retired military officials, as especially in the case of the Oath Keepers. Narrowly speaking, the paramilitary formations tend to encompass a very specific type of military, mostly special forces veterans, such as the Green Berets and the Navy Seals.

This distinction becomes relevant if one considers that a growing body of literature on US armed forces has described the special forces battalions not only as the leading forces behind America's "shadow wars" (Scahill 2013) – covert operations conducted all over the globe allegedly justified as counterterrorism efforts – but also as the most violent and insubordinate factions in today's US military forces. Since special forces are not submitted to the same rules applied to the conventional troops, their members tend to despise what they interpret as the bureaucratic inefficiency of traditional military ranks (Murray and Quainton 2014). Therefore, it seems not inaccurate to affirm that special forces units are designed as paramilitary forces inside US conventional forces. As such, their shared sense of community and loyalty are strongly directed to their fellow soldiers rather than to the formal governmental institutions. Uncoincidentally, the same disdain for federal authorities and faith in "community" that work as the backbone for the modern right-wing militia organizations.

As presented above, the militias analyzed in this article were created before Trump's administration, which indicates that the armed militia is not unique to the Trump era, but his presidency has certainly provided a new breath for the paramilitary "renaissance". More importantly, Trump openly endorsed their actions, as it became clear at the end of his administration, when many right-wing protestors (militias included) broke into the Capitol Hill to manifest their opposition against President Joe Biden. The strengthening of far-right militias in the last decade show how liberal values, which compose the legitimization of ruling classes hegemony, are contested internally. They represent some of the "morbid symptoms" which reflect the crisis of authority in the U.S.

Final Remarks

In this article, we have argued that the crisis of the LIO connects, among other phenomena, to internal dynamics in the U.S., such as the contestation of liberal values by political actors and grassroots movements. Even though these phenomena do not represent a novelty, their empowerment challenges





the legitimacy of the American dominant classes' hegemony, internally and externally. Trump's government benefited from and reinforced anti-globalization narratives, ethnic nationalism, and opposition to international liberalism. Armed militias contest the liberal values that legitimize the LIO, such as democracy and pluralism, and weaken the internal hegemony of U.S. dominant classes by reproducing an anti-government and anti-institutions narrative.

For instance, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters leaders claim the legitimacy of armed resistance by a minority against perceived tyranny and promote an organization that is hierarchized and based on violence, equating liberty to the right to bear arms. Proud Boys' leadership reaffirms ethnic nationalism and contests the cultural and moral progressive values present in the LIO by reaffirming patriarchal and racist worldviews. The ideas proposed by these groups as well as some of its members were directly connected to the Capitol Hill invasion in 2020. With the empirical investigation of each of those group's political manifestos and other statements made by their founders, this article was able to present each group's key ideas and correlate them with the debate on the LIO crisis and the wakening of U.S. hegemony.

As a response to the January 6th event and the perception that these group's narrative are at the bottom of this phenomenon, the new Democrat administration issued the first edition of the "National strategy for countering domestic terrorism" (published in June 2021). The publication refers explicitly to racial-oriented violence as well as to the fear provoked by white supremacist groups that have been present in US history such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In addition, "domestic terrorism" is defined, among other components, as activities that "appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping" (The White House 2021, 8).

Moreover, the Department of Justice has been conducting investigations on the individuals present in the invasion of the Capitol Hill and on Trump's responsibility. One of the most prominent trials was Stewart Rhodes', the founder and leader of the Oath Keepers, who was accused of many conspiracy charges but only convicted of seditious conspiracy. The National strategy for countering domestic terrorism, plus efforts to charge and eventually convict individuals present at the invasion, especially the ones that are key members of right-wing militias, as in the case of Rhodes, show that Biden's administration is willing to not let this event go unpunished. The investigation against Trump, however, is





still underway. Although charged with four crimes, no former American president has ever been indicted for criminal conduct. Plus, even if Trump is convicted, he might still run for office in 2024.

This political moment's unprecedented character aside, the new governmental strategy seems to reinforce the perception that Trumpism goes well beyond Trump. The same might be affirmed when it comes to the militia organizations and the other right-wing social movements that despite their differences seem to share one single clear message: the liberal hegemonic institutions that we once knew as the main expressions of the US international leadership do not speak for everyone in the country. What voices will be able to speak loudly and, more importantly, what kind of visions they will bring regarding the future of the American power are still a matter for the unknown.

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