“Antifascism, Historically And In The Present”—An Interview With Shane Burley

written by Kevin Van Meter, Shane Burley | December 14, 2022



It has been three years of pandemic, before those three years of Trump, now months of inflation and a world in crisis. Nevertheless, as always, there are struggles emerging, there are possibilities. In this interview, Shane Burley, author of *Fascism Today* and *Why We Fight*, discusses their latest edited collection *No Pasarán!: Antifascist Dispatches from a World in Crisis*, an expansion and extension of antifascist organizing and ideas.

Kevin Van Meter: Last time we spoke, in the Spring of 2021, we began our conversation by addressing the “interregnum” period we were then living through. Have we moved from this into a new period? Has the incipient fascism of that period evolved?

Shane Burley: We are living in a period like all periods when fascist movements try to redefine themselves. What comes after the alt-right? With their formal organizations in decline, a broad multitude of people still make up these movements and are responding to changes in the way that social movement’s function. These changes are what I call the post-alt-right.

We are entering a period of attack on far-right organizations, which includes the January 6th Committee. De-platforming was relatively effective for a few years, today it’s less effective. But there’s been an attack that they must recapitulate around. Also, there has been the destruction of a series of organizations, figures, and ideas that bridge the conservative movement with white nationalism that was effectively destroyed after Charlottesville. At the time, this bridge, what we called the alt-light, dissipated the weight from the alt-right. After Charlottesville they had to pick a side, either to go full fascist or back to the GOP.

Now, following the Committee, we see the building of a new generation of National Conservatives, and they are filling the void that Paleoconservatives did in the 1980s and early 1990s. Also, we are seeing the development of Christian nationalism that is taking a very self-conscious role in the right and has offered a whole new series of dog whistles about their enemies. For example, the idea that LGBTQIA+ people are grooming children, which has been a very useful wedge for them. Christian

nationalists are continuing to spread myths about Antifa and Black Lives Matter in a kind of fantasy that has replaced Cold War anti-communism. With the decline of alt-right it has been replaced by new things. What's been more effective recently is the institutionalization of white nationalist ideas far beyond Trump.

White nationalist conspiracy theories such as "The Great Replacement" are absolutely part of the mainstream Republican Party. Conspiracy theories, including that the elections are being stolen, are used to define the far-right edge of the GOP and appear in the Texas Republican Party platform. I think that institutionalization of far-right ideas, conspiracies, and racism is part of the changing landscape of the last year. And there is going to be a lot of turmoil in the next few years when there is less distance between electorally minded Republicans and the revolutionary far-right.

I think we are at a point where fascism is going to change profoundly, grow and evolve into something new. What I as the editor, and all the contributors, are trying to communicate in the book is that antifascism is incredibly diverse, it is a sea of possibilities because that will be the hallmark of what comes next.

What does organized fascism look like at this moment in the fall of 2022?

SB: It looks like institutions such as the Claremont Institute building around the dissident parts of the GOP, it looks like Paul Gosar and Marjorie Taylor Greene, and this is a major part of the groundswell of the GOP.

One of the things that holds true about conservatism in general is that it has a moderating effect of the actual views held by its base. The base holds a more radical version of the same ideas, with much more extreme methodologies and is more focused on conspiracy theories. So, there's always been that continuity between the GOP and the far-right. And we have a new generation of Republicans who are either associated with extreme conspiracy theories or with National Conservatism, housed in the Claremont Institute, American Conservative, Heritage Foundation, and Federation for American Immigration Reform, which holds extreme anti-immigrant positions.

The National Conservatives represent white nationalist ideas, but not in a self-conscious way. Now, we have the American First Political Action Conference and the Groyper movement, which is restatement of the alt-right. A lot of the old school alt-right groups have backed down, but we have the continuation of American Renaissance and other kind of so-called "race realist" groups. With all these organizations, old and new, the Republican base can fight for dominance a way that MAGA couldn't; because the MAGA movement was limited by Donald Trump, it is no longer limited by him.

So, right now we're seeing white Christian nationalism as the vanguard of fascism. Previously, with aspects of the alt-light and alt-right, there was a countercultural version but now its branded as American. Some years ago you asked me if the alt-right was "Americanism with its sleeves rolled." The post-alt-right and fascism today is Americanism with its sleeves rolled up.

What effects have various failures—January 6th insurrection, internal splits within white nationalist groups such as the Proud Boys and Traditional Workers Party, for instance—had on organized fascism in the United States?

SB: We should note that the January 6th insurrections is not universally experienced as the dividing line on the American far-right.

The Traditionalist Workers Party, which had disintegrated before, represents a decline of American Neo-Nazism and in the aftermath of the insurrection the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, which were

large scale organizations, have been destroyed by the state. It does not mean that they're gone but the January 6th Committee was the vessel by which a certain liberal law and order decree was used to bust up these organizations. In fact, I think it's going to have a detrimental effect on antifascism because this decree assumes that America is controlled by Americans again. You can see this with groups like the "deep state dogs" who basically volunteered for the FBI to catch January 6th insurrectionaries, a move that implicitly suggests that the FBI can, if controlled by a liberal government, be used as an effective weapon against the right.

History shows us this will not be the case and martyrs have been created by the state's reaction, so basically the right is using this as a chance to brand itself and it has done little to thin their ranks. And now the GOP is simply shifting its rhetoric to the idea that the concept of insurrection was overblown, that it was an "antifa" plant, or simply that the rioters had their hearts in the right place. And you are seeing local candidates using their participation in January 6th and this rhetoric in their promotional materials.

So, I don't believe that the January 6th Commission is going to have the effect of destroying fascist movements. The specter of illegality does create instability around these mass actions. Arrests have historically taken down sectors of white nationalist movements and the far-right. But it is not necessarily the case any longer that the criminalization of the right will be effective because the GOP has now decided that illegality is totally reasonable, and this is the story they are going to tell.

In 1992 a well-known KKK leader and neo-Nazi proposed in an essay that the way forward for fascist movements in the United States was "leaderless resistance." How has this come to pass, especially when considering that nearly every mass shooting over the past few years has had white supremacist, settler colonialist, hetero-patriarchal, antisemitic, and anti-immigrant sentiment at its center?

SB: Accelerationist violence requires two things: one is a revolutionary white nationalist ideology and the other is the lack of a productive way forward for fascist social movements. When fascists can't see their ideas being manifested—when these movements rise and fall, then fail to meet expectations of adherents, then fail organizationally—that's when you see explosive violence.

The essay you are referring to inculcates adherents into a lone wolf style of attack. Actually, fascist thinkers don't have to argue for lone wolf attacks, its just implicit to their ideological predilections and the revolutionary ideologies that they put forward. Part of this model is that it's hard to take down organizations if there are no organizations. What is important about leaderless resistance today, is that all resistance is leaderless resistance because fascist organizations have started to decline.

Lone wolf attacked and leaderless resistance is usually interpreted as spontaneous acts of violence. It's never actually spontaneous, it has a history and no lone wolf acts alone, they're always connected through social networks and movements, online and in the real world. We are seeing a lot of individuals who wouldn't have engaged in violence as part of an organization, now have violence on their agendas. With the lack of fascist organizations adherents are engaging in a kind of leader resistance. And when this happens, the relationship to violence becomes more fluid.

Likewise, the specter of failure has become rampant. If your government is faking votes, taking away elections from your candidate, then violence just makes sense. For them, no reform is going to address this and the response to this mass experience of failure is strength through revolutionary violence. Masses of people are having the experience that previously led only a small minority of white nationalists to attack. Currently millions of people are being told by these bridge organizations I spoke about earlier as well as the fringes of the GOP that it doesn't matter what you do legally only

revolutionary action matters.

In late August 2022, President Biden traveled to Philadelphia—clearly to invoke the American republic and strength of the State—to argue that Trumpism and the MAGA Republicans were "semi-fascist." Beyond the term "semi-fascist," which provoked condemnation from the right and typical handwringing on the establishment Left, the analysis and calls to action were timid. What will the short-term results, if any, of this speech be for fascist movements and their Republican enablers?

SB: Well, I think it's just another way for the fringes of the GOP as well as mainstream Republicans to disregard Biden and his perceptions.

Even if Biden's assessment is accurate, what could Biden do about it? What could the state do about it? The state has been fundamentally unable to deal with fascist movements because it is constrained by the dictates of liberal democracy. A fascist movement by definition uses the organs of free speech and democracy against itself.

Biden is talking about MAGA ideology, he's not talking about tactics. You can't make an ideology illegal and if legality is the only mechanism by which you have to deal with fascists, then you're lost in the woods. This is one of the problems inherent in liberal democracy when it comes to address fascism.

Therefore, antifascism is more important now. We must compete with the illusion that a liberal democratic run state can actually deal with fascism, which it cannot. The notion that we can use a structured, ordered liberalism to defend against Trumpism and MAGA Republicans is false. For one, it never has been able to do that. And, two, we do not live in a structured, static world any longer. We live in a world of chaotic dysfunction, of crisis. That is what the future looks like. And because of this fascist movements must be dealt with in a much more holistic way that involves everybody.

Understanding that "Narratives 'make real' coherent subjects," how are Trumpism and MAGA Republicans constituting new, fascist subjects out of what are clearly conspiratorial narratives? And what is the purpose of this?

SB: In an interview I conducted with author Brendan O'Connor, he noted that conspiracy theories perhaps have a lot of overlap with false consciousness in general. What is the difference?

What MAGA Republicanism does is what a lot of the far-right does. It takes real experiences of class deprivation and retells them falsely. In this retelling the wrong actors are responsible and populism searches for anger to motivate those politics. And anger is easily pulled from bigotry because bigotry produces a guttural reaction.

So, what I think MAGA Republicanism is doing is that it is creating an opportunistic class narrative using the language of white identity. Identity narratives tell class stories all the time. What MAGA Republicans, conservatives, and the mainstream GOP is doing is telling a story about the white working class as white people and hinging their alienation on things like immigration, LGBTQIA+ people, and white people being replaced rather than real problems.

Fascism is about combining narratives as much as possible: you feel dislocated at your job, your upset about gay marriage, you hate modernity. It's combining things into one narrative that is illogical, but it creates cohesion. When we are talking about this as fascist ideology, we are about taking class angst and how it's being manufactured into this new subjectivity.

Older debates about materialism vs idealism float around this conversation because there is a way

that ideas have a profound shaping effect on the future. They take what Robert Paxton called "mobilizing passions" and channel them to nativism rather than the left, and so we need to deal with the implications of how ideas are reshaping action.

In a similar fashion to the last two questions, in your essay collection *Why We Fight* as well as the introduction to *No Pasarán!* you write about the "Antifa scare." Notably, this isn't addressed in Biden's speech nor has the establishment Left addressed it in any meaningful way. How do we address it?

SB: The great Antifa scare is simply the Red Scare repackaged, the Black Lives Matters scare is the same thing.

Anti-communism was an incredibly foundational and useful concept for the far-right. Americans feared the Reds and anti-communism coded their racism in general and their antisemitism, in particular. Anti-communism was such a foundational part of modern conservative coalitions, and it was the bridge into the far-right.

Since the early 1990s the right has struggled to figure that out what to replace anti-communism with and they have come up with various versions: feminism, the gay agenda, political correctness, and more recently the idea of "social justice warriors" and Black Lives Matter.

Antifa was incredibly useful because it was presented as a militant threat. It was likened to a military force, it was subversive, it behaved like the Vietcong, and they were in your town. Remember the Reds didn't just attack, they came after your kids' minds

If organized antifascist movements visibly decline, then the right might pivot to something else. But there's a lot of legs left in the Antifa scare. I've seen everything called Antifa: labor rallies, environmental rallies, they're all Antifa now. So, if they're going to call everything Antifa now, we might as well all be Antifa ourselves.

You open the new collection in Portland, Oregon, which historically and in the contemporary period has a robust antifascist movement. How have Portland antifascists defeated fascism, at least at the organized street level, in their city?

SB: Portland antifascists won by tearing out the roots completely and not leaving any to remain.

In the 1990s there was a white supremacist skinhead organization that was defeated by Rose City Antifa. And they did it by going after each member and completely destroying their lives until that neo-Nazi organization was so unstable and couldn't continue to function because their membership was so unstable.

Recently, antifascists have built coalitions and these coalitions were able to go after fascist organizations and take them out totally, completely. That is what tends to win and people in Portland, Oregon have had to be confrontational because fascist organizations have returned again and again. The ability to constantly overwhelm the fascists, not to ignore them or rely on the state, is what wins.

This is why Patriot Prayer, the Proud Boys, and other alt-right and fascist organizations aren't in the streets every day any longer, aren't in our state, as they were shut down so completely and effectively. Similarly, the Klan and Aryan Nations ended up being defeated because there was a large, organized contingent of people who were able to engage the fascists on multiple levels. Antifascists used pressure campaigns on employers. Antifascists worked in coalition with other organizations and movements. They did a lot of things, and they weren't afraid to rethink how they

were going to win.

As a follow up, the establishment Left, especially during the early years of Trumpism, heavily criticized street actions and confrontational tactics, claiming that this approach won't defeat fascism. In the 1980s and 1990s Anti-Racist Action declared "We Go Where They Go" and antifascists today have followed this charge. Were they right to do so?

SB: To answer directly, yes, in person rallies designed to protect the community have often been incredibly successful.

Street tactics should never be thought as ideological or even strategic. "We go where they go" only works if where they go, we stop them. If we cannot do that, it's not particularly useful. We can prepare organizations to block fascist rallies effectively and we should always think about those tactics. But they are only tactics and only one form of antifascism, and there is a whole diversity to antifascism.

There is an accusation made by the establishment Left that street tactics are performative. This has not borne out. Also, the establishment Left has a lot of problematic assumptions about politics. One, that the image of things is what's important. Two, that if we behave politely then we won't look bad. Liberals believe that symbolic pressure is what usually gets the goods. None of these claims are factually true.

Fascist movements that exist outside of liberal democracy and have no interest in those mechanisms. The reality is that disrupting the function of fascist groups disrupts their ability to meet their goals. That's the best kind of through line. So, anything that disrupts their functionality is what has been proved to be effective.

In the conclusion to *Fascism Today*, you argue that "antifascism, historically and in the present, is a sea of possibilities, defying simple characterization. The approaches themselves, building on community and labor organizations, social intervention and mutual aid, counter-institutions and community fortification, antiracist struggle and economic revolt, exposure and education, all create an interconnected quilt." In this expansive definition of antifascism, can you speak to the importance of all these struggles?

SB: Antifascism is just a part of a larger revolutionary movement from below. It needs and relies on all sorts of social movements because different movements rely on each other. It's not a surprise that the growth of the labor movement in the United States saw the growth of other social movements alongside it and dependent upon it.

Antifascism is a response to instability because the far-right grows on instability; as do working-class movements, as do the movements of marginalized peoples. And antifascism protects these other movements. It's a defense of the people. It's the defense against the far-right, who tries to use unstable conditions for their own benefit.

The labor movement is vital as it provides working-class people access to decent wages, food, and healthcare. Mutual aid is important, care work is important. Likewise, social movements can't organize without being protected from the far-right which historically busts up labor unions and mutual aid efforts. And as we enter a period of increased climate and economic chaos, the needs for all these movements from below will only increase.

This new collection expands upon antifascist organizing, theory and ideas, cultural concerns, and the like for the present moment. How does the book achieve that?

SB: The collection does this in several ways. We wanted to start thinking beyond the United States, we wanted to think beyond the white-centric view of antifascism. We have is notion that antifascism only exists in Western countries and too many on the Left don't acknowledge antifascist movements in Brazil, India, South Asia, Japan, and elsewhere. There are several contexts: movements against Bolsonaro in Brazil and movements against Hindu Nationalism in India should be thought as antifascist. The book tries to contribute to that understanding and tries to contribute to the antifascist movements internationally. The far-right collaborates internationally and so should we.

Another piece of it is the diverse ways in which antifascism is experienced by people and how it collaborates with other movements. The collection addresses the role of police abolitionism and antifascism, especially when considering the collaboration between police and the far-right. The collection addresses the experiences of trans folks who are being attacked by the far-right, and their experiences of identity as part of that resistance. The collection addresses the role of different subcultures: music, fitness, spirituality, and others. The collection addresses the experience of criminalization of antifascists and antifascism.

What happens when fascists are part of your family? What does antifascism mean then? What does it mean for formerly far-right people who want to rejoin society? What does antifascism mean then? The collection addresses these sorts of questions as well.

Thus far we have had an incredibly narrow understanding of antifascism. The contours and histories of antifascism are far more diverse than one might initially think.

One of the chapter sections in *No Pasarán!* covers antifascism and fighting the far-right internationally. How important is it to support this international struggle?

SB: There is absolutely no way to win as an antifascist without being a completely, totally internationalist. We live in a globalized world. Fascist and nationalist movements are distinctly international, they are collaborating internationally. They think of themselves internationally, both because white nationalism is about whiteness which crosses borders and because of the new rise in nationalistic populism.

Antifascists will need to be able to organize across borders to have any effective pressure campaign. We must think about the ways we can organize locally as well as internationally; and honestly, this is true of all forms of organizing. Now, I believe we can do that: we have technology, we have social and movement networks, and we must rethink how to make these effective.

What kind of pressure tactics can we use as part of our internationalism? We are going to have to continue to ask this question because climate chaos, ecological and economic collapse are going to create conditions by which these fascist movements can define themselves internationally as they seek to exclude immigrant's nonwhite peoples, LGBTQIA+ peoples, and so on from our communities. And because of the fascist threat we are going to have to organize internationally.

In your introduction to *No Pasarán!* and throughout your work you ask two important questions, always grounded in the moments and movements in which you ask them: How do we respond and how do we survive? How do we do both of those things today?

SB: How we respond and how we survive are the same thing. We survive by creating dynamic communities and organizing to meet the needs of the people. Meeting those needs means organizing workplaces, defending tenants, protecting the environment. There is no bifurcation between organizing and antifascist defense, you must do both to actually protect our communities.

Antifascism is required if we want our communities to continue to exist. We will have to create a sense of safety for our communities to prosper and grow. I believe we are entering a period of perpetual instability and our ability to withstand this instability will be determined by how successful we are in creating dynamic, responsive communities together.

There’s nothing in our economy or state system, nothing that will protect us in the future. We will be protecting ourselves and each other and figuring out the best ways to do that. Mutual aid networks are growing, tenants’ groups are growing, labor movements are growing. Antifascism is common sense to people. So is abolishing the police. I think people are creating lives outside of the state and capitalism, they are building the basis for a new society. Then, we will need to defend this new society and that means that antifascism will have to be a part of every vision of survival for the future.