

Is Fascism Coming to America?

written by Bryan Palmer | November 12, 2024



Leonard Cohen, poet laureate of Canada's 1960s, offered a closing anthem to the twentieth century in his 1992 lament "Democracy." In an earlier year of revolt, 1968, Cohen had refused his country's most prestigious literary prize, the Governor General's Award. "The world is a callous place," he reportedly said, "and he would take no gift from it." He would later be the accepting recipient of many honours, including the Order of Canada.

Two decades later, confronted with the changing global landscape, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the crumbling Soviet Union, Cohen reflected on how and where democracy might be realized. Now a celebrated songwriter, Cohen looked to the United States, where his music was produced and marketed for world-wide audiences. He saw the "sorrow in the street" of working-class grievance; "the holy places where the races meet" that were never far removed from white supremacy; the gender difference scratched into human relationships expressed in "the homicidal bitchin'/that goes down in every kitchen/to determine who will serve and who will eat"; and the deserts created domestically and internationally by an America confident in its imperial dominance. Yet for all of this, 1992 seemed a bridge to a better future. "Democracy," yet to be realized, "is coming to the U.S.A." Cohen insisted. Amidst turmoil, tension, and recognition of revolt's righteousness, Cohen was nonetheless hopeful.

So, too, were others, albeit of a different bent. Proclamations of "the end of history" came from ideologues of the right and postmodernists of the ostensible left. Capitalism, finally victorious over its century-and-a-half nemesis - actually existing, and undeniably deficient, socialism - promised boundless prosperity and expansive profits for those pulling the now unrivalled levers of possessive individualism. Windows of political and economic opportunity opened widely, offering a luxuriating vision of a new world order.

"Third Way": Seemingly Progressive Populism

This was the moment of Democratic Party revival in the United States. Bill Clinton ushered in a new era of seemingly progressive populism, the slogan "It's the economy, stupid" propelling the Arkansas Governor into the White House. It was the beginning of a "Third Way." The polarizations of the past were supposedly swept aside as a politics of social amelioration and advance adjusted to market realities. The political project designated democratic, now tethered to an unbridled regime of accumulation, would ironically usher into being new imperatives of inequality, especially pronounced at the intersections of race and class. The new regime of accumulation, premised on the ideology of austerity's attack approach to social provisioning of all kinds, dismantled entitlements associated with the "Great Society" rhetoric of the 1960s, gutting the welfare state and undermining programs associated with health care, housing, and a host of other post-World War II liberal reforms. A prison-industrial complex and profit-driven mass incarceration criminalized poverty. The

war on the working class, proclaimed with such ferocity by Ronald Reagan's breaking of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) 1981 strike, continued unabated.

History, of course, did not end. The Soviet Union imploded, to be sure, but it bounced back, proving something of a *bête noire* to its competitors in the capitalist west. The once-Soviet collectivized economy was pulverized by market imperatives; the apparatus of the state overtaken by ensconced apparatchiks. The result was a plundering of the primitive accumulation of the Revolution of 1917, a socialized economy looted to establish an unregulated, predatory market society orchestrated by oligarchs umbilically tied to an authoritarian state. This proved an irksome thorn in the side of hegemonic capital and its global agendas. China, following a course less drastic than the upheaval inside the Soviet Union, refused to succumb to the impulse of capitalist restoration that proved so destabilizing in the demise of the Soviet Union. As the People's Republic kept a firm political grip on authority but opened the floodgates to enterprise and internationalization of trade and commerce, it surged economically. Planned economies, however compromised, remained a threat to capital's quest for unimpeded dominance globally.

Moreover, as the 1990s progressed and transitioned into the twenty-first century, social democracy's fading sun finally set. Faith in the infallibility of capitalist markets (now dubbed neoliberalism) decimated the politics of a moderate, parliamentary left and did little to resolve problems of wealth's disproportionate distribution. In Britain, Tony Blair's Labour Party gave up anything resembling the socialist ghost. The political economy of the new millennium wrote *finis* to the moderate, reform-oriented parties and programs of a left that had clearly lost its moorings.

The economic foundations of largesse on which democracy's post-World War II promise rested precariously certainly wobbled. At times, they seemed to sink. The calendar of capitalist crisis took a quantitative leap forward. From 1945-71, the world's capitalist economies suffered 38 economic recessions, downturns, and panics, but in the period 1973-97, this almanac of attack rose to 139. The regime of accumulation continued apace, concentrating wealth and power. In a crude capitalist variant of social Darwinism, periodic crises weeded out weaker, individual capitals. Businesses fell by the economic wayside. Authority and its material blessings continued to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Democracy was apparently not forging ahead in the advanced capitalist nation states of the west, of which the US was first among un-equals. Instead, an economy increasingly recognized as unstable derailed it.

Financial Crisis of 2007-10

This mercurial, downwardly spiraling materiality culminated in a 2007-10 financial meltdown. It rocked the global economy: revelations of reckless financial practices at the pinnacle of corporate power and within seemingly secure state-backed institutions exposed just how vulnerable the well-being of masses of people had become. Their safety net of owning a dwelling, an asset with seemingly never-ending rising value that had provided the one protection many working families retained against decades of deteriorating economic well-being, suddenly disappeared. A sub-prime mortgage meltdown collapsed the housing market, wiping out what constituted many working-class families' only substantial equity. Decades of ceding capital a free reign left the majority of the privileged nations of the Global North vulnerable, the façade of well-being behind which their lives unfolded perilously unhinged.

The crisis of 2007-10 revealed this and more. It cracked the edifice of the European Union, and convinced many who proclaimed Karl Marx and the socialist project dead with the 1989 demise of the Soviet Union to rethink their optimism of the capitalist will. A much-needed dose of intellectual pessimism appeared necessary. Perhaps the acquisitive, accumulative drive of the profit system was not all that it was heralded to be.

This kind of thinking had to be marginalized and sidelined, however. Capitalism's infinite capacity to overreach in pursuit of profit was somehow different than those many households crumbling in debt and despair. This latter group could be left to pick individual selves up by their solitary bootstraps; large economic interests, however, were judged too big to fail. The bailouts for capital exposed the big lie at the core of neoliberalism. Markets could not govern. Corporations needed to be rescued from themselves. Less than a decade later, a pandemic-initiated economic recession dealt neoliberalism's cherished repudiation of Keynesianism a final blow: money needed to be pumped into the market to save the capitalist system from collapse.

The political fallout from these years of escalating capitalist crisis registered in democracy – never historically realized – coming under increasing attack. Far right parties and authoritarian political sensibilities gained ground rapidly. An ideology of globalism, seemingly hegemonic, gave way to nationalisms of the most bellicose and xenophobic kinds. Much heralded advocates of free trade quieted under the ideological tsunami of protectionism. Capital's intransigence and state legislation took their toll on unions and working-class remuneration. Immigrants were vilified; racism ran rampant in the mainstreaming of white supremacy. The politics of right-wing populism, authoritarianism, shameless buffoonery, hucksterism, and audacious corruption were normalized, exemplified in the rise of figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Marine Le Pen in France, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, and Donald J. Trump in the United States. Explicitly and proudly defiant fascist movements, while undoubtedly galvanizing minorities, were on the march in many capitalist nation states. They even secured significant footholds in the now increasingly unstable political settings of what had been, prior to the political earthquake of 1989, homelands of actually existing socialism, however compromised.

Democracy Halted

Democracy, which Cohen thought on the march in 1992, seemed stopped in its tracks in the United States of the 2020s. Voter suppression gained a reinvigorated momentum. Riotous, threatening, and violent attempts to turn back electoral defeats of the political right sparked fears of insurrection and consolidated an undue faith in the rule of capitalist law that was itself destabilized by the robed authority of a now politically stacked and flagrantly unaccountable Supreme Court. A crescendo of conspiracy-driven theories and public demonstrations against attempts to ensure collective well-being, through combatting threatening public health crises with science-based campaigns of vaccination and the encouragement of socially responsible behavior, deformed political life. Many were fearful: it was not democracy coming to the U.S.A., but fascism.

Fear of fascism's tightening grip on mainstream politics has paralleled, and is now associated with, the rise of Trump and his opportunistic right-wing populism. There are certainly grounds for being apprehensive. Trump, now described repeatedly as a fascist, has long defied easy categorization. Everyone from one-time Trump Chief-of-Staff, John Kelly, to high-ranking Generals and those Republican Administration officials fleeing the nightmare of the disorderly Make America Great Again White House, have jumped on this bandwagon of designation. It has become a rallying cry of the Democratic Party and its hopeful candidates for political office, high and low, an indication that the two-party system is showing signs of collapsing inward into a monolith. Liberal media outlets mass market the branding of Trump as a fascist. Many on the left echo this consensus: Trump, routinely likened to Hitler, is the new and ubiquitous face of American fascism, the *lider maximo* of a totalitarian movement.

An admitted authoritarian, and a shameless, self-promotional huckster, Trump's eclectic mix of free marketeering, tax cutting, pop-culture alluding, isolationist nationalism certainly embraces much that fascism's fetid program feeds on. That Trump embraces and enables racist, misogynistic, rabidly anti-communist, anti-labour views, and offensively promotes the entitlements of the rich,

goes without saying. For many, this defines fascism: it is all that a progressive, mindful citizenry deplores. Trump is certainly deplorable. He is more than willing to pander to fascists - and virtually any political charlatan willing to bend the knee in loyalist supplication to his emperorship. Whether he dons the dress of a full-fledged fascist is nonetheless more of an open question than many are willing to admit, even as his recent rhetoric takes on more and more of the trappings of a "Blood and Soil" program.

Trump: Lining His Own Pockets

Trump's aspirations, however, do not seamlessly fit with a fascist agenda: they do not quite appear to be those of a Hitler or a Mussolini, since they are far more brazenly about lining his own pockets. It is difficult to imagine Hitler taking time out from building the Nazi state to market chintzy merchandise from trading cards to self-promotional medallions, flog overpriced Bibles and \$100,000 watches, or help launch a crypto-currency endeavor. Fascists traditionally utilized economic policy to prepare for and ultimately to wage war. Trump would prefer to avoid open war at all costs, although he is as bellicose as the next Republican hawk, not averse to dropping bombs on Afghanistan or engaging in the clandestine killing of those he considers the "terroristic" international enemies of his rule of the United States. But he banks on a message of withdrawal from orthodox foreign policy positions premised on America being a military leader of the "free world colossus" resonating with his mass base. Fascists abhor Communists, but Trump, who rhetorically follows suit in vilifying Marxists and wasting no opportunity to name-call his political rivals revolutionary leftists (and totalitarian fascists, as well!), is also willing to exchange "love letters" with heads of ostensible People's Republics like North Korea. To the extent that Trump has a program, then, it is surely insufficiently coherent and consistent to qualify as resolutely fascist. It defies even elementary adherence to the standard tenets of fiscal conservatism, to which Mussolini, after an initial short period of defiance, soon conformed. To be sure, there is much of the cult of the leader operative within Trumpism, but then this has always been a component of right-wing populism. Trump's leadership, however, is long on free-wheeling performativity, and short on the structured development of consistent, grounded, and organizationally stable authority that is surely a hallmark of fascism. Fascism, like all forms of bourgeois rule, is about many things. The one element that it cannot do without is decisive leadership. Trump is rhetorically bombastic to be sure, but he lacks constancy.



The point that needs stressing is perhaps not how Trump is bringing fascism to America, but rather that his brand of governance inevitably culminates in chaos and accelerates the tendency toward crisis that is already built into capitalism, accelerating as the profit system confronts its growing contradictions. What capital foments economically, Trump stokes politically. The result is unquestioningly repugnant and dangerous, constituting a political mish-mash, a pastiche that certainly contains overtures to fascism. There are similarities, for instance, between Hitler's "Beer Hall Putsch" of 1923 and Trump's incitement of a Washington mob on 6 January 2022. The fundamental difference irrevocably separating these events is also obvious: Trump was in power but could not carry through anything approximating a full-fledged insurrection (for all the hue and cry raised subsequently by the liberal media and progressives of all sorts), let alone an actual coup d'état. Can anyone seriously suggest that Hitler or Mussolini in power would ever have allowed their grip on political rule to be threatened by electoral niceties and, if it was, that they would have acted with the wacky hope of winning through recourse to bizarre reliance on unorthodox understandings of how to manipulate arcane constitutional practices? Would either of these fascist strongmen have exhibited the vacillating indecision displayed by Trump during a transition of power he clearly wanted to reverse?

Bonapartism

Trump certainly exploits the escalating crises that have become endemic under late capitalism. In this, he shares the ground fascists have always cultivated. He is less the archetypal fascist, however, than an example of what might be called twenty-first century bonapartism. This bonapartism was described in its mid-nineteenth-century origins by Marx:

"Driven by the contradictory demands of his situation and being at the same time, like a conjurer, under the necessity of keeping the public gaze fixed on himself, ... by springing constant surprises, that is to say, under the necessity of executing a *coup d'état en miniature* every day, ... [he] throws the entire bourgeois economy into confusion, violates everything that seemed inviolable ..., makes some tolerant of revolution, others desirous of revolution, and produces actual anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time

stripping its halo from the entire state machine, profanes it and makes it at once loathsome and ridiculous.”

Appearing as the benefactors of “all classes,” Marx stressed that bonapartists “cannot give to one class without taking from another.” With respect to the working class, bonapartism in the nineteenth century bears a striking resemblance to its equivalent in the twenty-first: “Dissolution of the actual workers’ associations, but promises of miracles of association in the future.”[1] This is Trump’s pledge to coal miners and service workers, with his simplified promise to restore the energy extractive industry and abolish taxes on tips.

There are, of course, *different* kinds of bonapartism. Their relations to fascism demand a certain nuanced assessment. As Leon Trotsky noted in 1934, however, bonapartists generally represent and appeal to “the strongest and firmest part of the exploiters.” This judgement surely goes a long way toward an explanation of Elon Musk’s conversion to Trumpism. The passage of bonapartism to fascism, in Trotsky’s view, was necessarily presaged by disorder and was “pregnant with infinitely more formidable disturbances and consequently also revolutionary possibilities.” The bourgeoisie, inevitably fragmented, seldom uniformly, relishes “the political victory of fascism.” But its disparate components can often coalesce to the point that they are more than willing to countenance a “strong power.” We are seeing this, in the current moment, in capital’s hedging of its bets on a potential Trump victory, as with Jeff Bezos moving to squelch an endorsement of Harris on the editorial page of the newspaper he owns, the influential *Washington Post*. Bonapartism and fascism can transition into one another, but Trotsky insisted it was necessary to distinguish the distinct forms that governing power might assume. Yet he was also adamant that these different methods of political management were hardly “logical incompatible categories” of bourgeois rule.

Many on the left have been prone to proclaim that with the arrival of Trump on the political scene, “Fascism is already here.” This kind of undiscerning labelling can be seen, in Trotsky’s words, as “an attempt to ... make easier” the appeal of social democratic/liberal elements that the “lesser evil” of bourgeois democracy, however craven, should necessarily command the allegiance of the masses. With Trump about to assume power and vanquish democracy, establishing fascism, the liberal order and the crisis-ridden capitalism that is its economic counterpart – having given rise to the very bonapartist politics paving the way to fascism – must be shored up electorally and a program of class struggle deflected.[2]

This seems remarkably applicable to the current conjuncture in the United States. In the progressive stampede to block access to Trump’s second bid for the presidency, left-wing elements align themselves too easily with the Democratic Party, embracing a “lesser evil” that is then often elevated to unquestioned virtuousness. The credentials of this compromised politics turn relentlessly on defeating an incipient fascism. Problems with this political practice are legion.

The Biden/Harris Democratic Party

Many were willing to bloc with Joe Biden, for instance, despite abundant evidence demonstrating his obvious incapacities. Biden’s bumbling blunders and seeming senility cost him dearly, squandering credibility with a mass electorate, especially the young and the seemingly left wing. The answer was to parachute Kamala Harris into the 2024 Presidential campaign at the eleventh hour, ensuring that her opponents had little chance to mount an alternative opposition. Has there *ever* been a candidate for the American presidency who faced less in the way of interrogation from the left? Obama, perhaps, but even that assessment might be open to question.

As a United Auto Workers leader proclaims Harris “one of us,” she offers organized labour *next to*

nothing, save for a continuation of the brokerage policies and practices of Biden's tired and tottering regime. Biden's approach to labour was of a piece with the Democratic Party's complacent capacity to take for granted support from constituencies that have good reason to fear the governance of the Republican right. Outfitted with a union jacket on Labour Day, Biden proclaimed himself a backer of trade unions, talk and the fashion of the moment being cheap. His record, however, undressed the politics of representation exposing the bare-bodied economics of class allegiance. A contradictory, but unequal, dualism summed up the Biden administration's labour practice: break a railway strike in 2022 and make a show of walking a picket line in 2023.

Harris, it is abundantly clear, will follow a similar class trajectory. She has now taken to proclaiming herself a proud capitalist. Small business and the ubiquitous if vaguely-defined "middle class," loom large in her speeches, the working class far less so. Fuzzy promises to hold down the price of groceries will almost certainly falter and fail in the face of stiff capitalist opposition to the kind of deep regulatory incursions in the marketplace that would send the retail sector into coronary arrest. Raising the minimum wage, as she has convinced some she will do, is also likely to be another promise broken. For how can Harris claim, on the one hand, to stand for these reforms, at the same time as she is unable to answer persistent questions as to how she offers the electorate something different than the Biden years? Her hopeful coalition, uniting the likes of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the Democratic Socialists of America with elements of the Republican Party notable for their past crimes against humanity, such as Dick Cheney, constitutes nothing less than a *regroupment* of the center-right political mainstream. Formed on the bedrock of Trump's capacity to imperil democracy, this realignment is notable for its exorcism of anything carrying the faintest scent of radical, left-wing sensibilities. It appears to be dragging much of the broad left along in its wake.

A group of "Historians for Harris," 400+ strong and many of whom undoubtedly consider themselves leftists, have recently prefaced a statement with the following, quite incredible, view of United States history: "As American historians, we are deeply alarmed by the impending election. Since 1789, the nation has prospered under a Constitution dedicated to securing the general welfare, under a national government bound by the rule of law in which no one interest or person holds absolute power." This, surely, is an understanding of the history of the United States that even Leonard Cohen, as contradictory as his lament for democracy in 1992 was, would have retreated from, even refused. Cohen could not have countenanced this - and the term is used advisedly - whitewashing of America's quest for democracy, forged from so much strife and struggle: "From the war against disorder/From the sirens night and day/From the fires of the homeless/From the ashes of the gay/...From the brave, the bold, the battered/Heart of Chevrolet."

It is mandatory to recognize that political/economic actions speak volumes over symbolic stands and public presentations of convenience. As war ravages Palestine, and Israel engages in mass destruction of Gaza, extending its assault into Iran and Lebanon, Harris holds firm to the American commitment to support the Israeli state. She offers the dead of the southern Levant her condolences. Israel receives arms and the military defense of its airspace. That support comes *carte blanche*. The United States administration urges restraint, concern for non-combatants, and apparently presses for a ceasefire, while Benjamin Netanyahu, facing allegations of war crimes by the International Criminal Court, is fêted in Washington. Upon his return to Israel, Netanyahu then thumbs his nose at Biden, Anthony Blinken, and Harris, and simply ups the ante in his aggressive crusade of mass destruction and obliteration. No matter how brazenly and disproportionately the Israeli war cabinet pursues vengeance against all Palestinian peoples for the October 2023 Hamas act of terrorism, those governing the United States refuse to stop the flow of arms to Netanyahu or to forcefully bring his genocidal campaign to a halt. The war-mongering reactionaries who prop up Netanyahu's leadership, keep him out of prison, and appear hell-bent on taking settler colonialism to

new heights of vindictive violent dispossession have a free reign. Domestically, Trump and the Republicans concoct wild stories about illegal immigrants, their responsibility for violent crime, and decry the rampant barbarism that inevitably results from an ostensibly “open border” policy. Harris responds by promising to use her prosecutorial experience – which is receiving almost no critical scrutiny – to get tough on transgressors and tighten up things at the southern international boundary.

To be sure, on abortion Harris has been firm. The dismantling of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court and the epidemic of state legislation outlawing abortion remains perhaps the singular issue on which Harris offers an unambiguous rejoinder to what is widely perceived as an attack on a fundamental human entitlement. Yet even on this decisive matter, where Biden was reluctant to mouth anything of substance, Harris tends to zero in on the extreme medical consequences of abortion bans and unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape, incestuous or otherwise. It is less common to hear Harris offer an unequivocal defense of the right to choose, a language from the past that has seemingly gone into hibernation in the current cold climate. Fascism’s coming is feared, and this structures political opposition in a particularly skewed way.



A politics of confused positionings proliferates, however much one side is undeniably preferable to another: the moralism of a progressive but programmatically deficient left runs headlong into the chaotic meanderings of a bonapartist right-wing populism, decried as fascism. This opposition, elevated to a clash of righteousness among reactionary right wingers and sanctimonious progressives, structures choice along a spectrum of evil/less evil. When the smoke and mirrors of our distorted politics in 2024 are eventually placed in the rear-view of a future, it is likely that fascism will not have come to America. What will have survived, to the detriment of a genuine democracy and the realization of social justice will be a strengthened bourgeois hegemony, in which a rhetoric of aspiration, hope, and freedom masks the barriers to a truly egalitarian order. The greater danger to the struggle for a better world will then perhaps be recognized to have been those ostentatiously dressed in the garb of the lesser evil.

Stopping fascism that some see coming to America is indeed both necessary and laudatory. But to do that we need to know what fascism is and what it is not. Decrying attempts to define it, opting instead to catalogue characteristics that can then be associated with Trump, is not an answer.

Moreover, if the means to stop what some claim is fascism proves to be a strengthening of the decrepit and crisis-ridden capitalism and its politics of championing a democracy yet to be delivered is the only way to turn back the far right, we need to seriously search out other ways of doing this.

If we are to sail on, in Leonard Cohen's words, "To the Shores of Need/Past the Reefs of Greed/Through the Squalls of Hate," it will not be in the sinking ship of capital, even if captained by a head of state singing loudly the praises of freedom and democracy. Flying flags of antifascism was once a dangerous occupation, undertaken by those willing to risk their lives in the armed struggle against totalitarianism in Germany, Italy, and Spain. Now the antifascist banner too often sags under the weight of bourgeois conventionality and the smug complacency it trades in. *Any* ship of state powered by the crisis-ridden profit system that has historically, if pushed to the brink, spawned actual fascist movements and elevated them to ruling regimes, will sink us all. The cost of sailing forward in this lesser evil vessel is likely to prove a bit of a Faustian bargain, a pricey proposition for any left worthy of the name. •

Endnotes

1. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 180, 178.
2. Leon Trotsky, "Bonapartism and Fascism," *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-35]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971), 51-57.

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