

Is It Midnight in the Century or a New Dawn?

written by Kevin B. Anderson | August 27, 2024



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It has become a commonplace to call out the burgeoning fascist threat, as seen in Trumpism in the U.S., the “tropical Trump” Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the vicious neoliberal Javier Milei in Argentina, the high-handed Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, the racist Marine Le Pen in France, and so many others. In all too many places, hard-won gains on the part of women and racial or ethnic minorities have come under attack in ways thought inconceivable only a decade ago. Think of the U.S. under Obama or Brazil during the first Lula administration, the era of the Pink Tide, when some forms of oppression seemed to be receding. Today instead, a murderous frenzy is being whipped up against immigrants and sexual minorities, especially transgender people, and environmental science and even basic human rights principles are being ignored or opposed outright. All of this has also caused misdirection at an ideological level, disorienting not only intellectuals but also parts of the working and lower middle classes. It has turned their attention away from how four decades of neoliberal economic restructuring and attacks on labor have led to a vast polarization of wealth and declining living standards. Many are warning that our situation is comparable to the 1930s/1940s in Europe.

In the spring of 1940, the vaunted French army collapsed suddenly before the onslaught of Nazi Germany, giving the fascists effective control of Continental Western and Central Europe. At what amounted to the nadir of the twentieth century, the Jewish Marxist German refugee Walter Benjamin took note of the naïveté of leftist intellectuals during the rise of fascism. In a searing declaration penned only weeks before his suicide in the face of capture by the Nazis, he declared, “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century” amounted to an attitude that was, above all, “not philosophical” (Benjamin [1940] 1968, p. 259). The retrogression of the 1930s had deep roots, and not only in European antisemitism or capital’s fear of the socialists. It led the French writer Victor Serge, also a refugee from France after the Nazi takeover, to ask famously, “Is It Midnight in the Century?”

After the war, the Black writer Aimé Césaire declared that the Nazi genocide “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘n—’ of Africa” ([1955] 1972, p. 36). Looking from this side of the Atlantic, one could add that fascism was also rooted in the politics of race and slavery in the U.S., an issue I took up in an essay on Donald Trump’s fascism-tinged attempted coup of January 6, 2021 (Anderson 2022).

None of this is reassuring, especially concerning the U.S. It is certainly true that most of us – at least in those countries dubbed “liberal democracies” – are not (yet) living under the type of fascism faced by Benjamin. But it should also be noted that today’s authoritarian and neofascist upsurges are rooted not only in the politics of race, colonialism, misogyny, and heterosexism, but also in the failure of global capitalism to truly recover from the shock waves emanating from the Great

Recession of 2008. The continuing slide – always relative if not absolute – in the living standards of working people is connected to a persistent slide in the profit rate of capital, each experiencing a sense of desperation, albeit at very different levels of society. In addition, today's fascist threat goes hand-in-hand with widening environmental disaster and the ever-present threat of pandemics. Moreover, as a result of Russia's Ukraine invasion, the world is probably closer to a nuclear war than at any time since the 1960s. The fact that Putin's Russia is repeating, two decades later, the disastrous 2003 U.S invasion of Iraq in no way lessens the danger. Nor, of course, does Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in 2023-24, supported to the hilt by the U.S., and which also carries with it the danger of a wider war.

In short, we live in a time of extreme danger, where not only hard-won democratic and social rights, but also human existence itself, hangs in the balance.

All this needs to be approached dialectically, however, for the dangers outlined above do not constitute the totality at the present juncture. We also need to hone in on the possibilities – and realities – of positive change and revolution that have also burst forth in the first decades of this century.

Over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed a number of revolutions and uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa. Looking at these and other creative, world-shaking upheavals, among them the Arab Revolutions of 2011-12 and their aftermath; the massive Iranian upheavals of 2009 and especially the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022; Sudan's partial revolution of 2019 and the impasse of post-apartheid South Africa; Ukraine's 2014 uprising and its amazingly unexpected resistance to the 2022 Russian invasion; the parallel struggle for national existence in the face of Israeli genocide on the part of the Palestinian people; and the incessant class struggles in France up through the 2023 strike wave and the uprising of marginalized youth that same year. All this led to the New Popular Front, which was able to stop – at least for now – the neofascist drive to take over the government through electoral means. What stands out in 2024 most of all is not only Israel's genocidal war against Gaza, but the new revolutionary student movement it has kicked up, the strongest and most widespread since 1968.

I hope these examples will serve to illuminate the situation that faces all of those fighting to replace the oppressive realities of the capitalist order with a new, human one founded on the deepest democracy, the overcoming of production for value and profit under worker self-rule, and the elimination of all forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and environmental destruction. But that is not enough. We have to find a way to cut through the despair that not only leads some into Trumpist and other forms of fascism but also discourages and demobilizes members of those social groups that form, at least potentially, the sources of real opposition not only to the right, but also to capitalism itself.

Going back to 1940 and the midnight of the century once again, I want to mention a terrific article last January on the present crisis by French sociologist Edgar Morin, writing at age 102! Morin begins by asking Victor Serge's question, "Is it the midnight of our century," the 21st century, what with two genocidal wars taking place, in Ukraine and Gaza, plus the ecological crisis. Circling back to his youth in 1940, when the Nazis had occupied France and he joined the Resistance at an early hour, Morin noted that the biggest obstacle they faced then was "The absence of any real sense of hope," this after not only the Nazi victories but also the fact that the Hitler-Stalin Pact meant that even the Communist Party was refusing to resist fascism. (Morin 2024).

Over 80 years later, we too have to deal with despair, which confronts us from two angles. First and most obvious is the sense of things going backward, of retrogression, as seen in how Trump and his ilk have already done things like banning abortion, enacted a legal framework making a presidency

immune from prosecution, or directly attacked gains in racial justice going back to the 1950s. Often, we feel helpless to stop these developments.

But there is also a second type of despair, the one Morin lived through as well when, after the first Popular Front in France lost power, after the fascist victory in the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union betrayed the global left by making its 1939 pact with Hitler, and even joining him in dismembering Poland. These raised the question: Why struggle if even those who lead the fight for social justice end by betraying the movement? Of late, we have experienced this type of despair based upon betrayal and other internal contradictions as well, albeit less dramatically. Most importantly, we have seen the rollback of the Arab revolutions of 2011, where in Egypt the coming to power of General Sisi involved not only outright repression, but serious misjudgments by the secular and leftist forces. We have seen even Bernie Sanders temporize about supporting the Palestinians, or worse, liberal Zionist hawks like the clownish Senator John Fetterman of Pennsylvania for whom progressives campaigned hard in 2022, or the “radical” law school dean at Berkeley, Erwin Chermersky. Most dramatically, we have seen Sean O’Brien, the reform leader of a post-Hoffa Teamsters Union, whom Teamsters for a Democratic Union supported, betray labor and so many other constituencies by speaking at the Republican Convention and thus giving them a veneer of connection to organized labor, in contravention of his own members’ views, especially workers of color.

How to combat this? One, we need to simply continue and deepen the struggle, not always as easy as it sounds. Did the Abolitionists give up after the Dred Scott decision, or did Gene Debs do so after the patriotic wave of World War I? Two, we need to analyze better in real time, using Marx, critical theory, and above all the dialectic. As Benjamin reminds us, we can never take for granted any so-called progress under capitalism, which can always, always be rolled back, plus a turn toward fascism is always possible. But nor can we allow ourselves to fall into despair. This is what Morin surely meant when he said we lacked a sense of hope in 1940, but also note that his biography shows that he joined the French Resistance as soon as that became possible.

This is clear as day when one considers the magnificent campus occupations for Palestine of today’s youth. They have created a really revolutionary movement for which they are willing to be jailed, to lose job prospects, even to be deported. They are not strong enough to stop the genocide, but they are fighting the good fight, not only against the Trumpist right but also against the Zionist right in this country. One of these fascist streams has spawned the Proud Boys, and the other the pro-Zionist mob that was allowed to attack the UCLA encampment with impunity on May 1, 2024. Their encampments have also exhibited forms of mutual aid that have incipient communist dimensions and in my own work I’ve linked to the late Marx’s notions about indigenous communism and its relationship to the Western labor movement. If we need to theorize fascism, we also need to theorize these new types of resistance, and to bring our theoretical and strategic insights into dialogue with the movement.

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