Can a Disoriented Storming of the Center Lead to Organizational Maturity?

written by Cihan Tuğal | July 19, 2021

Why was the American far right, the least organized among advanced capitalist nations, able to mount the (apparently) most threatening attack on the institutions of liberal democracy? The European far right, after decades of organization and ideological development, could not have even dreamt of storming a parliament in any Western European nation. How was this possible in a heavily weaponized and surveilled Washington, DC?

The ability of movements to impact institutions usually depends on their resources, organization, networks, and ideological coherence or motivation. With the possible exception of networks, the American far right had the least of these when compared to their European counterparts.

Was the American far right's apparent success the result of a possible Trump effect? No post-1945 Western democracy has so far witnessed four years of presidency by an allegedly far-right figure. His support might have changed the dynamics, and organized an erstwhile scattered and incoherent far right.

I will evaluate whether the far right is undergoing a radical change later in the essay, but it was not the transformation of the far right that made the Capitol invasion possible. The far right's (so far lacking) organizational or strategic wisdom was not a factor in this drama. Certainly, there was a lot of planning in the lead-up to the insurrection.[1] But, concocted as it was by dispersed, organizationally inexperienced groups and individuals, that planning could never amount to a Trumpist coup. One of the most interesting details about the invasion is that some top leaders of the far right sat it out. Along with Trump himself, *InfoWars* host Alex Jones, white nationalist podcaster Nicholas Fuentes, and far-right personality Ali Alexander incited the invasion and helped organize the march to the Congress, but all refrained from entering the building.[2] This suggests that these figures meant the invasion to be a show of force, a warning shot, without really believing it would result in a usurpation of power. The question is not so much what this invasion did for the far right in January 2021, but what it will do for it in the coming months and years.

Decaying Institutions

Collaboration by institutions—not far-right organization, ideology, or strategy—is the most immediate cause of the Capitol siege. This collaboration was spurred by the growth and weakness of the American left,[3] and the ease with which Republicans could falsely frame the increasing visibility of Black Lives Matter (BLM), Antifa, and Bernie Sanders as "impending socialism." Even though American far rightists are under-organized and dispersed, they are well funded; they are also egged on by institutions, and build on a fear of the left shared across the liberal–conservative divide.

These factors both enabled and crippled the far right under the Trump presidency: the same factors that permitted the institutions to open the doors of the Capitol to the far right perpetuated the latter's lack of organization and vision, and intensified its already-existing adventurism. Far rightists didn't even feel the need to build organization, ideology, or strategy, given how much influence they were able to yield during these four years in the absence thereof—a fact that further reinforced their disregard for organization and ideology. (And, as I discuss below, it is exactly this calculus that might be changing.)

We should underline the following, again and again: such adventurism could not have come anywhere near even a public "spectacle" or "farce" (as an editorial in one left-wing journal called it),[4] had the institutions not allowed it. The Capitol siege was more a sign of decaying institutions than of radical right-wing prowess.

How did institutions collaborate? All the intelligence and repressive apparatuses of the state were aware that far rightists were geared up and ready for violent action. They paraded, with arms, for several weeks before the invasion. It had been clear that the police forces would be overwhelmed on the day of the vote count. For example, the municipal DC police (not the Capitol police) had already been swamped by armed protestors during protests in November and December.[5] Despite this accumulating knowledge and awareness, no action was taken to prevent the violent protestors at the gates.

Police officers, most of whom fought the invaders outside the building (i.e., in the presence of mass media), fraternized with them once they were inside. Police officers let the invaders steal some senators' files. Fraternizers included even officers who were hurt or injured. Even though many soldiers individually participated in the Capitol siege, we cannot say that the military, as an institution, shares the stance of the American far right in the same way. The collaboration by the police forces, therefore, is much more explicit, and presumably based on some shared ideology.

The game changer, however, was the inaction of repressive institutions that are perceived to be more centrist (such as the military), or even occasionally closer to conservative Democrats (such as the FBI). The inaction of the repressive and intelligence institutions cannot be explained away as incompetence; indeed, we know from the BLM protests how willing and "competent" they can be. It is quite unlikely that intelligence is trailing behind in monitoring the plans, intentions, and activities of the far right: there is every indication that the FBI and other agencies have deeply infiltrated all effective movements.[6] When the repressive apparatus does not prevent something as massive as an invasion of the Congress, therefore, ignorance or incompetence do not constitute full explanations.[7]

In addition to the panic caused by the leftward shift in the political scene, one reason for the unwillingness to intervene was the presence of pro-Trump figures in some key positions. The Pentagon officials who stalled the deployment of the National Guard comprise a mix of Republicans and nonpartisan military commanders.[8] So, the inaction during the Capitol siege was not a party, but a "state" indecisiveness. During the congressional hearings of March 3, the Pentagon's official explanation regarding restrictions put on the National Guard on January 6 was—wait for it—"'lessons learned' from 'May and June 2020,' when the National Guard's heavy-handed response to protests 'drew public concern.'"[9] The American state has effectively declared that it did not crack down on fascists because its harsh repression of the left had raised eyebrows! In other words, the military's Capitol inaction was, at least partially, an official boycott. It was most probably meant to alert the public that they are needed for democracy's survival. This boycott did not happen out of sympathy with the far right's cause (unlike in the case of police collaboration), but out of the fear that the growing left wave might marginalize them.

In the post-Capitol era, mainstream media have also helped build up a "sense" (rather than an

explicit narrative) that repressive apparatuses were too severely criticized throughout the 2020 BLM protests. Security and intelligence forces therefore ended up suffering from undue restrictions, mainstream media argued, which allegedly tied their hands during the Capitol invasion.[10] The handling of both the invasion itself and its aftermath, in short, became the mainstream's weapons against a perceived left-wing threat to institutions.

However, there are signs that the Capitol invasion might change the very dynamics discussed above. The shift from a pro-police to an anti-police stance among some groups, too, hints that the American far right might be at the threshold of a radical transformation.

The latter in itself, to be sure, does not necessarily mean that from now on the far right will be more organized and ideologically coherent. But its leaders might draw lessons from the Capitol siege to make such a change possible. The Capitol drama has shown two things: that the institutions lack the will to weather a right-wing storm; and that in the absence of solid fascist organization, such a storm results in nothing more than chaos. Coupled with a growing anti-police stance, an organizational solidification would herald a new age in the United States.

Reorganization of the Far Right

The rise of the so-called boogaloo movement, which has quite different dynamics than earlier militias,[11] attests to the growing anti-systemic sentiment among right-wing activists. The movement derives much of its strength and dynamism from denial: much like left-wing Nazis in the interwar era, and their contemporary counterparts such as the National Bolsheviks in Russia, it diverts attention away from its core agenda by insisting that it is neither on the right nor on the left, but simply against the government and the police. This deflection not only attracts more adherents, but clouds public debate and state response. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security backs the self-presentation of the movement,[12] arguing that it is neither leftist nor rightist.

The boogaloo movement is inspired by the paramilitaries of the 1980s, and militias of the 1990s, but its activists find the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and other patriot militia groups too passive. An observer paraphrases their perception of these other groups thus: "They just sit around with their guns all the time, acting like they are tough, and they never do anything."[13] The boogaloo activists, by contrast, desire to do serious harm to the government, even overthrow it—regardless of who is in office, including Trump.

Boogaloo activists explicitly put on their agenda that they want to harm police officers. In May and June 2020, they killed or aimed to kill police officers in several U.S. towns, but the larger aim of their murders of both civilians and police officers is to incite an all-out civil war.[14] In response, mainstream social media institutions kicked them off of their platforms. While migrating from one social media platform to another, they organized mostly on the anonymous bulletin board site 4chan.

Boogaloo activists joined BLM protests and sought to push them in a violent direction.[15] One might think this was sheer provocation of the kind that had allowed the FBI to sabotage the left in 1968. But the boogaloo activists have a different agenda than former anti-leftists, whether of the civilian or official variety.

The social media channels of the movement have been home to internal debates regarding white supremacy and whether they should support the BLM protests, since the latter are, after all, anti-police protests. Nevertheless, some analysts are quite suspicious of claims (especially those of the leaders) that they stand with the BLM protestors, seeing this as another tactic in the boogaloo activists' game of deflection.[16] Debates around the intentions of the individuals involved aside, the net effect of the rise of the boogaloo movement has been to pull the American far right in a much

more anti-police, oppositional direction. Participation in BLM protests has served not simply to confuse the public regarding its agenda, but as a training ground for armed, mass movement–based anti-government action.

The reorientation of the Proud Boys is also indicative. The Proud Boys were always more prone to violence than other far-right groups.[17] However, unlike the "boogaloo boys," they perceived their violent actions as reinforcements of police violence (especially against the radical left), not an alternative to it. This started to change only recently—arguably in December 2020, when the Proud Boys clashed with the police on several occasions.[18] Nevertheless, it is too early to tell whether this will turn into a stable, ideological anti-police stance mirroring that of the boogaloo movement.

The Road Ahead

The Capitol invasion might inspire the much more organized and ideologically mature European far right to take similar action, which would have devastating consequences. Copycat actions in European capitals might unfortunately induce more immediate institutional change. As for the United States, we need to carefully follow the broader far right, and see how much the anti-police stance of the boogaloo and the shaky anti-system stance of the Proud Boys will transform the broader culture.

That transformation depends not only on the course of action far right leaders take in the coming era, but also on responses from the Republican Party and the repressive apparatuses of the state. The more establishment conservatives and centrists are mired in a partially irrational fear of impending socialism, the more organized fascism will become. Luckily, the left-wing drift of the Biden administration, though still far short of a New Deal–like transformation, takes the wind from the sails of the far right—albeit in an unexpected way. Ironically, even though a major factor that feeds fascism is the growth of the left, the only sustainable resolution for the Democrats is to double down on their left turn.

Trump came to power by promising high-quality jobs and welfare to the white working-class marginalized by free trade, and he lost the election when he couldn't deliver. If social movements can push the current administration to live up to its infrastructural, welfare, jobs, minimum wage, and unionization promises, that would prevent the far right from becoming an electoral threat in the foreseeable future. The Republican Party would have to reorient itself to be able to compete in any fair election, and the anti-left bias of the repressive institutions would lose its mainstream legitimacy.

Extremist business families might support fascism even more ferociously in such a scenario. But the mass base of the far right would gradually melt away. Fascism could then only limp, with its left leg seriously crippled. Such a thorough transformation of the United States would highly circumscribe what the far right can accomplish in Europe, too. The radicalization of the Democrats' evolving agenda, therefore, would contribute to preventing fascism's maturation.

Notes

1. Robert Evans, "How the Insurgent and MAGA Right Are Being Welded Together on the Streets of Washington D.C.," January 21, 2021.

2. Luke Mogelson, "Among the Inurrectionists at the Capitol," *The New Yorker*, January 15, 2021.

3. See Cihan Tuğal, "The Invasion of Capitol Hill," *New Politics*, January 11, 2021.

4. "We Cannot Let Yesterday's Farce Become Tomorrow's Tragedy," *Spectre*, January 9, 2021.

5. “Reporter’s Video From Inside Senate On Jan. 6 Shows A Crowd Prepared For Violence,” *Fresh Air* interview with Luke Mogelson, February 25, 2021.

6. Dale Beran, “The Boogaloo Tipping Point,” *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2020.

7. See Charles Post, “Fascism, Capital, and the State Today,” *Spectre*, January 22, 2021.

8. Paul Sonne, Matt Zapotosky and Devlin Barrett, “D.C. Guard chief says ‘unusual’ restrictions slowed deployment of backup during Capitol riot,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2021.

9. William Ford and Rohini Kurup, “What Did We Learn From House and Senate Hearings on the Capitol Assault?,” *Lawfare*, March 25, 2021.

10. Dana Milbank, “Opinion: Did the Pentagon wait for Trump’s approval before defending the Capitol?,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2021.

11. See Emine Fidan Elcioglu, *Divided By the Wall* (University of California Press, 2020).

12. Lois Beckett, “White supremacists or anti-police libertarians? What we know about the ‘boogaloo’,” *The Guardian*, July 8, 2020.

13. A.C. Thompson interviewed on *UpFront*, February 3, 2021.

14. Dale Beran, “The Boogaloo Tipping Point.”

15. Shayan Sardarizadeh and Mike Wendling, “George Floyd protests: Who are Boogaloo Bois, antifa and Proud Boys?,” *BBC News*, June 17, 2020.

16. Lois Beckett, “White supremacists or anti-police libertarians? What we know about the ‘boogaloo’.”

17. Jane Coaston, “The Proud Boys, explained,” *Vox*, October 15, 2018. Updated October 1, 2020.

18. Jarrod Shanahan, “The Big Takeover,” *Hard Crackers*, January 7, 2021.