The radical right after Trump

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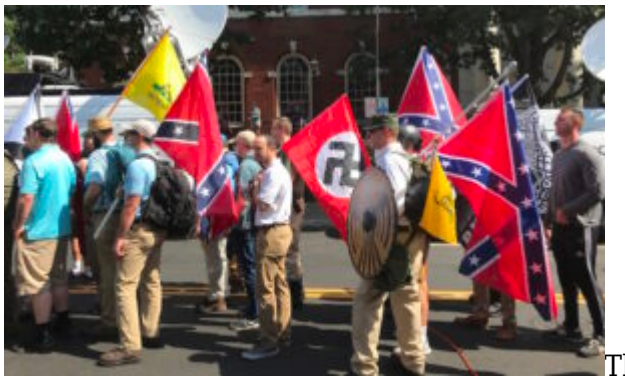

The nature of the American right was ill-understood during the Trump regime. The word "fascist" frequently circulated in liberal and left-wing circles. Yet, the only potential fascist was ousted from the White House before the Trump administration turned one. Now, the risk is forgetting that we still live under conditions favorable to right-wing extremism. The left needs to learn to operate in this Trumpism-prone world without, however, mischaracterizing it.

The radical right lost the day Trump fired his "chief strategist" Steve Bannon. It will not have the capacity to decisively change this country unless it cultivates more Bannon-like figures, the counterparts of which have secured more sustainable regime change in countries such as Hungary and Turkey. The differentiating characteristic of Trumpism was not simply Trump's incompetence, but his lack of cadres. Such cadres and the movement they built, not only the skills and charisma of Erdoğan, produced the longest lasting of the radical rightist regimes of the 21st century. How likely is the far right to manufacture an Erdoğan-like transformation in America?

Any meaningful evaluation has to start with the "heartland." The Rust Belt determined the fate of the presidency once again. The ex-industrial states of the Midwest had swung from the Democrats to the GOP in 2016. In 2020, they mostly went blue. One reason for this switch was Trump's failure to deliver on his promise of jobs.

The misleading employment figures of the last years fostered the impression that Trump was living up to his campaign message, at least before the pandemic. However, these jobs – scattered over the country rather than concentrated in the Midwest – were nothing like the jobs destroyed by the free market policies of the last forty years. Trump's tax cuts created many fleeting, insecure jobs. Those could not deliver the 1950s-style America that the MAGA hats yearned for. Trumpism handed white workers the exclusion (of competitors and scapegoats) they desired, but could not include and mobilize them sufficiently.

Within the Trump administration, the only person who consistently pushed for an alternative policy package was Steve Bannon – the far right nationalist who wrote the "American carnage" speech that sent chills down the spines of many. Especially after his exit from the White House, Bannon openly called for what he termed "economic nationalism," laying bare what he was conspiring to do while he was a part of Trump's close circle. He wanted the state to act as an entrepreneur and planner – not to abolish capitalism, but to take it under the control of an ideologically motivated government. The public spending spree he envisioned required higher, not lower taxes. He attempted to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans in the summer of 2017. He was soon fired without getting an opportunity to fight for this plan. After that event, Trump's promise of a "huge" infrastructural

overhaul was reduced to dust.

Only a massive economic transformation could decisively sever the Rust Belt from the Democratic Party and turn it into an unshakeable part of the Republican Party. However, business interests hold the GOP's reins too tightly to permit any such overhauling of traditional Republicanism. As importantly, the radical right does not have sufficient organization, let alone a clear policy and ideological direction, to counter-balance entrenched commercial interests. Such were the social forces that bought America some time against a sustainable radical right wave.

Yet, the problem remains. An atomized, racially fragmented, demoralized working class will always be prone to Trumpism (by any other name). If Biden and the Democrats stick to the policies they have implemented and backed ever since the late 1970s, disorganized workers will either further shift to Trumpism or (as is more likely with Blacks) simply abstain. These policies have rendered the Democratic Party an empty shell, without a loyal base in the working class. Trump's hatred-driven presidency drove many people to the polls in 2020, both for and against him. But make no mistake. In the absence of an immediate perceived Trumpist threat, another lackluster four years of conservative liberalism (of the Bill Clinton-Obama variety) will keep minorities home more successfully than any campaign of voter intimidation, while the right gets more energetic.

The question is: will the radical right be in a good shape to react to the increasing misery of the Midwest in a formative way? So far, the signals are mixed. The right-wing street is getting more and more active, without any transformative impact. After Bannon's dismissal, the far right first fell silent, then had three bursts of activity that created the false impression of a fascistic threat. All crammed into an election year, the gun rallies, the anti-shutdown demonstrations, and the anti-BLM protests in 2020 did not take one step away from the conventional Republican line in the realm of economics. They only made it more viscerally racial. These bursts smacked of election year opportunism and did not feature any ideological agenda. They served Trump more than Trump served them, despite the liberal and left belief to the contrary. Having missed every opportunity to transform the Republican Party, the far right is once again, at the end of 2020, mobilized to save the presidency of a person who is mostly interested in himself and couldn't care any less about their cause.

The radical right needs two major dynamics to render it a real regime-changing force, one negative, the other positive. First, it needs an imaginary or overblown left-wing and/or racial threat to organize against. That is the negative dynamic. Second, it needs policies that can solidify a material base: a coalition of people with economic investment in regime change. That is the positive dynamic. With traditional conservatism so much in control of even the most violent of radical right waves, economic nationalist policies that would expand the GOP's militant base are quite unlikely. Many workers can swing between the two parties and occasionally support right-wing fanatics, but that doesn't make them fascistic militants. The lack of a positive ideological agenda leaves anti-left mobilization as the right's safest bet to think and act outside the box.

There is still a palpable menace that militias and other organizations can expand their constituency by mobilizing in response to the post-election legal process, and other crises that will surely unfold in the next four years. Many people are truly worried that BLM protestors and alleged "socialists" are taking over the country and wreaking havoc. Prior to the vote, commentators believed that such perceptions were restricted to ultra-conservative whites, as well as Cuban-Americans and Venezuelans, but the increasing Black and other minority vote for Trump now shows how influential the red/black scare is. Conservative Democrats are stoking these fears too. This conspiratorial thinking might indeed pull many people to the streets, and into violent organizations, in the coming years.

However, just like it wasn't anti-Semitism or the paranoia of "Judeo-Bolshevism" on their own that consolidated fascist regimes in interwar Europe, hatred and fear of Blacks, Mexicans, Muslims, or socialists cannot lead to sustainable regime change. Nazis provided secure jobs and other material benefits to the German people (at least for a while), not just a romantic "utopia" of racial purification. Their racial and political extermination of opponents and minorities was embedded in a larger project of popular economic transformation. The sustainability of contemporary extremist regimes too requires a mass base that has economic interests in the perpetuation and deepening of coercive authoritarianism, as the economic nationalist regimes of Orbán and Erdoğan show.

Nevertheless, Turkey and Hungary are dependent on world markets and their economic nationalism has devastating limits. In the less dependent US, a similar regime would have a very late expiry date. If Bannon-like figures rise to the helm of the upcoming street action, the results would be disastrous. An institutionalized Bannonite mobilization, however, would necessitate not just an authoritarian politician more agile than Trump, but strategically seasoned cadres who can guide street action, and then keep the next authoritarian president under close scrutiny to prevent him from firing their ideologues. Although it is dubious that the American radical right has this capacity, the danger cannot be written off. So, even if the emergence of right-wing economic nationalism is not an immediate possibility, once it does emerge, there might be no chance of reversal for a very long time. What can we do to prevent such a scenario?

For racial and ideological hatred to congeal into institutionalized mobilization, the left threat needs to be imagined and exaggerated more than real. When there is a truly organized left-wing alternative, many people who can become far rightists join the left. In other words, left-wing organization would halt the pendulum swing of the Rust Belt and once again make it a wall against reaction. That could start to happen even before there is comprehensive policy change – if and when the left can build solid organizations on the ground and propagate an agenda that clearly shows a way out of the mess of the last four decades – even though an unbreakable Midwestern-left coalition would require actual economic regime change.

An organized left also has the potential to stop right-wing radicalization in its tracks. As sociologist Michael Mann has demonstrated, the Nazis became the strongest when the upper classes still feared losing their property and privileges, but when such loss was far from a realistic possibility. It is far from certain that there ever was a possibility of radical social transformation in Germany, but if there was, it was unquestionably over by 1923. We only know that thanks to hindsight. The German upper classes, not aware of how weakened the revolutionaries were, lived in perpetual fear for a decade, which pushed them to fund, logistically support, join, or at least tolerate the Nazis. By contrast, where there was solid organization on the left, anti-Semite death squads were put down even in the most culturally anti-Semite of the European cases of the time – the Russian Empire. Organized workers had started to repress these (quickly spreading) death squads as early as 1905 – twelve years before the left came to power.

Among contemporary cases, Erdoğanism became truly radicalized as the Turkish people got more disorganized, but the further organization of the Kurds created the unfounded fear that Turkey was about to be Balkanized. Even if not as dramatic as Nazism and Erdoğanism, recent years are full of comparable examples. And let's not get too carried away by apparent left-wing victories, or their fleeting possibility. A Sanders presidency in the absence of trained cadres could have led to more authoritarianism, as the Corbyn case indicates. If a radical government (or, as in Britain, a radical leadership of the main opposition party) is not backed by cadres and movements on the ground, it can easily prepare the scene for its mirror image. This applies to the radical right as much as it does to the radical left. An organizationally weak right-wing storming of the White House could hold its ground only for four years and now left its place to an unprepared liberal party; and an organizationally weak left-wing ascendancy in Britain created unnecessary panic among liberals,

further solidifying the tenure of the Brexiteers who lack any vision for the country. The rise of the authoritarian, but ideology-free, populist Bolsonaro too is traceable back to Brazilian cadres' and movements' abandonment of political training, base-building, and strategizing after years of demobilization under the country's increasingly corrupt leftwing government. In short, a disorganized left and a red scare conjointly pave the way for a shift to the radical right.

We are, then, confronted with two realities that are only apparently contradictory: the far right needs to have a left-wing bogeyman to grow and root itself, and the current American left does not have the strength to stop right-wing militancy. This apparent contradiction dissolves in light of the analysis above, which carefully underlines the implications of an *imagined* and a *real* threat of social transformation. Ignoring this complexity, conservative Democrats insist that we should give up progressive demands in order to appease right-wing anger.

On the surface, the liberal-conservative fantasy of uprooting any talk of socialism seems to make sense: in the absence of challenges to wealth concentration and white privilege, the far right would lose one of its motivations to organize. However, this objection to any mention of socialism ignores two important factors. First, there is so much frustration with the existing system that if the left does not organize it, the far right will, even if an imagined leftwing threat does not quicken that organization. Led carefully by ideologues and cadres, such organization could lead to an irreversible undoing of fundamental democratic rights. Second, as long as centrists keep on discouraging leftists from mobilizing, they are contributing to the disorganization of people who could fight the increasingly militant right-wing forces.

It is not really possible to predict whether a new Bannon will emerge to give the far right a more consistent ideological direction. But we do know that organizing a real left, rather than letting the radical right further spread the mirage of a so far non-existent socialist threat, would definitively block any chance of a right-wing regime change.