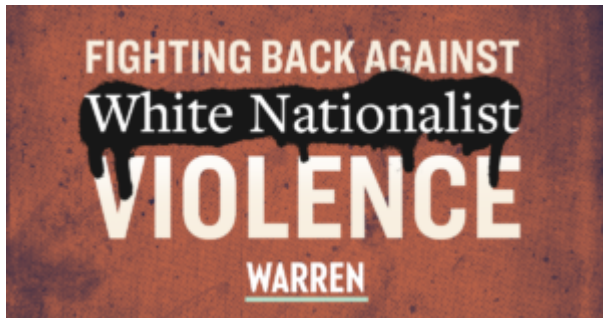


Warren's Plan to Address White Nationalism is an Expression of Neoliberalism: We Can Do Better



Last week, Senator Elizabeth Warren released her plan to address white nationalism as part of her Democratic primary campaign. The recent spate of terror attacks accompanied by a manifesto or video expressing commitment to white supremacy are, rightfully, concerning. As such, they have commanded the attention of concerned citizens and the federal government. The devastating material consequences of white supremacist violence only make the legislative response to it that much more important. The Massachusetts Senator's plan is an early attempt at expressing what such a response would look like.

In keeping with her reputation, Warren's plan demonstrates a keen understanding of the conversations about domestic terrorism abounding among those on Capitol Hill. In obedience of analysis from the Brennan Center, Warren argues against passing legislation to make a federal charge of domestic terrorism. In acknowledgment of organizations like the Arab-American Institute (AAI), among other nonprofit advocacy organizations, she supports better federal data collection procedures. In her calls for violence prevention and "early intervention", she also supports the national security industry lines about intervention, (de)radicalization, and securitization. In so doing, the plan reflects what Berkeley sociologist Loic Wacquant called in *Prisons of Poverty* the "penal common sense" under hegemonic neoliberalism, which we

can refer to as a “neoliberal penal common sense.”

What does this mean, and why does it qualify Warren’s plan as the proper subject for principled critique?

Origin and function of a “neoliberal penal common sense”

In their paper, “Political Articulation: Parties and the Constitution of Cleavages in the United States, India, and Turkey,” Cedric De Leon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Tuğal introduce a concept which can help to understand the reciprocative relationship between the penal system and neoliberal hegemony. Their analysis hinges on their deployment of “political articulation,” a concept signifying the “process through which party practices naturalize class, ethnic, and racial formations as a basis of social division by integrating disparate interests and identities into coherent sociopolitical blocs.” For De Leon, Desai and Tugal, each hegemonic period offers a different “logic” to political articulation, or to the “reproduction of social formations” which constitute hegemonic order. Under hegemonic Keynesianism – roughly the period between the passage of the New Deal era reform acts and the crisis of stagflation in the early 1970s – the logic of political articulation abided by state-intervention and mediation as a normative ethic. Labor grew in power relative to previous generations, as the Cold War and postwar industrial economy kept the U.S. honest in its efforts to crackdown on union organizing. Under hegemonic Keynesianism, the penal system was positioned as a salve to whoever might slip through the the state-mediated labor market and social welfare state.

On the other hand, hegemonic neoliberalism, understood in a broad sense as “a counterrevolutionary project ... [to] curb the power of labor,” effectively wedded “the “invisible hand” of the deregulated labor market to the “iron fist” of an intrusive and omnipresent punitive apparatus.” Under hegemonic

neoliberalism, political articulation abides by logics of optimization, managerialism, or risk prevention – whichever best encapsulates the disposition to treat all social problems as business problems. The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher once helpfully described this feature of neoliberalism as consisting in its formation of a “business ontology”; the now widespread belief “that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business.” We see this reflected in our current moment, from the nearly subconscious reflex to transactionalize and manage our social lives, to the assumption (which played a part in the 2016 election) that the country “should be run as a business.”

The creation of social and political institutions which reflect this neoliberal business ontology accomplishes three things crucial to neoliberal hegemony: by imbricating civil society within its managerial strictures, it interpellates citizens as neoliberal subjects, whether as functionaries within or objects of neoliberal institutions; by managing social problems in accordance with neoliberal logics, it reifies and naturalizes business ontology; by managing social problems, it reproduces the hegemonic order. The emergence of the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) amid the postindustrial transition to a financialized economy reflected this shift in articulatory logics. The resurgence of debates surrounding the ‘PMC’ as a term, with sides arguing either for its conceptual inadequacy or relevance, only underscores the importance of understanding its role in managing social and political problems. As a labor class, the social and productive function of the PMC is to manage vital institutions; universities, jails, hospitals, consultancies, nonprofits, etc. The neoliberal penal system is one such institution, and the ‘neoliberal penal common sense’ its managerial stricture. Neoliberal logics of political articulation spawned social formations like the industry of ‘counterterrorism’ and the sociopolitical category of ‘terrorists’ – both of which signify a pragmatically evolving

list of activities which, at bottom, function to select out and manage potentially counter-hegemonic activity.

Since the imposition of hegemonic neoliberalism in the 1970s, politicians have worked to disassemble the social welfare state entirely. Aided by the defeat and retreat of organized labor, the neoliberal penal common sense is positioned as a means of taming the excesses of unfettered neoliberal finance capitalism. It “aims to contain the urban disorders spawned by economic deregulation and to discipline the precarious fractions of the postindustrial working class.” It concedes the existence of a “surplus population” – individuals who go in and out of stable employment, are homeless, participate in the illicit economy, or are otherwise alienated – and turns the penal system toward them. Under a neoliberal penal common sense, law enforcement engages with community in order to manage the surplus population through violence prevention and securitization. Securitization is the punitive expression of business ontology through which certain subjects are rendered security threats and certain social and political problems are rendered problems of security.

This common sense was the foundation for the counterterror security industry treatment of so-called ‘radical Islamic terrorists’, a blanket term cynically used by pundits and so-called experts to justify surveillance and securitization of Muslims. The existence of terrorist violence was certainly real, as was the emergence of political Islam in discrete contexts, but the construction of ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ – as reflective of a latent social problem to be managed among American Muslim communities – was not. Nevertheless, jobs followed out of this construction, and with it a class of counterterror security experts materially invested in perpetuating terrorism as a specter. Most every application of counterterror security managerialism has bred distrust between law enforcement and communities. The Brennan Center and ACLU write that FBI-, DHS-, and DOJ-led joint terrorism task forces

(JTTFs) and fusion centers suffer from significant problems of oversight, accountability, and effectiveness. The FBI has a long history of spying on American Muslims, particularly in the wake of September 11th. Other reports have revealed their extensive and baseless surveillance procedures against so-called 'Black Identity Extremists', notable for its simultaneous occurrence with protests against police brutality.

Warren's plans keeps with the neoliberal articulatory logic to the development of social formations. It concedes the existence of a 'terrorist' faction of the surplus population and trains managerial activities of violence prevention, deradicalization, and securitization against them. It also concedes the prevalence of people amenable to narratives of hate and racial supremacy, and proposes to "establish a commission to work out ways to combat violent extremist content" and "[open] up competition that could improve privacy and security." It proposes an interagency task force to address white nationalist ideology and violence, despite similar proposals only exacerbating distrust between communities and leaders. Without a clear path to ensuring authentic community representation – even Warren's proposals for increased labor and union protections are undercut by her scant support among organized labor – Warren's plan to "establish a standing advisory board to convene state and local leaders nationwide" falls flat.

There are, of course, important components to her plan. The investment in better data collection procedures, education to promote compassion and tolerance, separation of law and immigration enforcement, and "evidence-based programs for victims' services, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice" would be helpful additions to any plan to address organized political violence. However, such proposals are necessarily insufficient when operant in accordance with a neoliberal penal common sense. This common sense not only

creates distrust, but also allows for targeted violence by the state, as well as increased criminalization through managerial logics and policies of carceration. Under hegemonic neoliberalism, the penal system has become a way to solve capitalism's contradictions, meaning that the surplus population will exist for as long as capitalism does. Therefore, envisioning a break from the discontents of a neoliberal penal common sense necessarily involves doing the same from hegemonic neoliberalism.

Toward a "democratic socialist penal common sense"

While Warren has called herself a "capitalist to the bone," Senator Bernie Sanders has been the lone candidate in the primary field to identify in a counter-hegemonic way: as a "democratic socialist." What might a 'democratic socialist penal common sense' look like? This will be an attempt to see a possible future within the contradictions at the heart of the contemporary neoliberal penal common sense.

While a neoliberal penal common sense concedes the existence of a surplus population left behind by the extant social and economic order, a democratic socialist penal common sense should be committed to ensuring that there is no such surplus population. A democratic socialist penal common sense would combine with good policy in issue areas relevant to both white supremacy and the proliferation of a disaffected population amenable to hateful narratives. Federal jobs programs, worker and union protections, universal healthcare, and a living wage, are all policy proposals which cut across hegemonic neoliberalism with respect to its concession of a surplus population.

Whereas engagement between law enforcement and community representatives under a neoliberal penal common occurs simultaneous with the state working to weaken communities at the level of organizing capacity, community engagement under a democratic socialist penal common sense would be law

enforcement engagement with the leaders of actually representative communities. That means the state working to ensure the development of communities of people constructed in virtue of their capacity to mobilize collective interests. Community engagement under a democratic penal common sense is not merely the state engaging with community representatives for violence prevention and securitization, but rather to ensure the material security of representative communities and the ability of people to organize in their workplaces and through larger trade unions. While it should not necessarily be the case that people find meaning through their lives in their work, people's work, or lack thereof, should not make their lives meaningless such that online subcultures premised on hatred serve as a viable alternative to authentic community building or identity construction.

Rather than breaking up Big Tech in order to reposition the logic of competitive capitalism – which, historically, gives way to monopoly capitalism – a 'democratic socialist penal common sense' should retain the public square as a normative ethic and instead work to subordinate its rules and functions to a democratic will. Punting hate mongers and white supremacists from social media platforms has a demonstrable good, but it also carries negative externalities, as competition for the disaffected (majority white) lumpen bolsters the popularity of newer platforms like Gab, Telegram, and Minds on the far-right. Those people on mainstream platforms have to go somewhere, and punting them from mainstream sites does not necessarily change that. Instead, a democratic socialist penal common sense would recognize the inherent good in monopolizing online spaces; the fact that they digitally reproduce the old-fashioned city square. The goal should be to ensure that this digitally repurposed city square function in the service of a democratic majority, not the corporate interests of, say, Facebook or Twitter. Doing otherwise serves to create work opportunities for members of the PMC who can help large social media platforms avoid

negative attention for allowing hate on their platforms.

A democratic socialist penal common sense does not work out of the cynical assumption that political violence is apolitical, or pathological. In the absence of authentic community representation, or nonprofits who have genuine community backing, both politicians and ostensible representatives of community are incentivized to reproduce a neoliberal penal common sense; in working out of neoliberal punitive logics, legislators look serious about the problem while nonprofits receive access to federal grant money. White supremacy then becomes an outlier problem only addressable by imposing preventative measures of deradicalization and securitization upon a movement incompatible with American values.

Warren's plan includes the line that white supremacy is incompatible with American values. While aspirational in intent, a democratic socialist penal common sense would reject this line in favor of an understanding that political violence carried out by American citizens is reflective of American values and that American white supremacy is one of many discontents of American political development. In this way, a democratic penal common sense would address the structures and institutions which engender those values, maintaining that no candidate is serious about addressing white supremacy if they're not serious about changing (capitalist class and) social relations. A neoliberal penal common sense obscures the source of social problems, but a democratic socialist penal common sense instead works to solve them at their root.