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Liberalism, Class and the Politics of Austerity

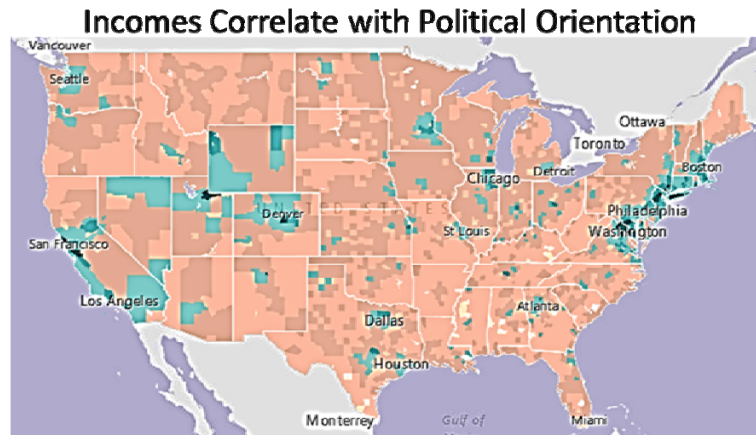


Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

It's Groundhog Day, again...

With the restoration of the neoliberal order that preceded Donald Trump almost completed, remarkably little attention is being given to the role that this order played in making Mr. Trump's rise possible. This is partly a function of the denial of culpability that Democrats have maintained since 2016. And in fact, the coalition to oust Mr. Trump that arose in the early days of his administration was premised on blaming voters for his rise. That this coalition came from a nearly unified class position was hidden by differing ideologies. This self-same class blindness currently hides differences in material conditions that will be the likely catalyst of the next stage of political crisis.

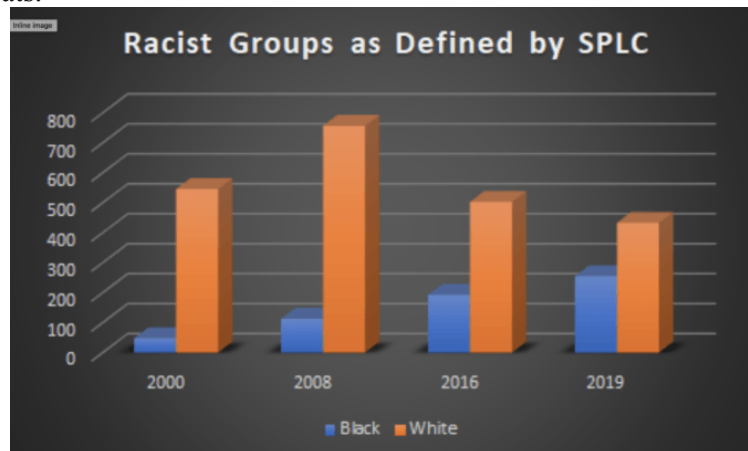
The map of income distribution provided below ties quite closely to political divisions between self-described liberals, which now includes much of the bourgeois Left, and a coalition of those dispossessed by neoliberal economic policies, industrialists, and rural conservatives. In Gramscian fashion, liberals insisted that views that were crafted and framed by political operatives working for the national Democrats were both authentic and descriptively accurate, even though they were crafted and framed by political operatives working for the national Democrats. They were manufactured dissent if you will. As such, they were an expression from power, not against it.



Map: the blue-green areas represent high incomes and the pinkish areas represent lower incomes. The map could just as plausibly be claimed to represent concentrations of the #Resistance versus ‘fascists,’ if not the precise distribution of voters. The ‘new economy’ of finance, technology and the war industry, is concentrated in the blue areas, providing some degree of nuance to the relationship of income to class. Through their close ties to government, these industries are closer to the corporate-state nexus in which power is concentrated. That Democrats aspire to represent the people who are already represented leaves only the ‘fascists’ without representation. Source: arccgis.com.

The contrived hysteria that had dispossessed industrial workers, farmers, and workers in resource industries posing a political threat to the finance- technology-national security-surveillance- military industrial establishment was belied by the reserved calm of establishment Democrats as they concentrated new policing and surveillance powers in the hands of Donald Trump throughout his term in office. As detailed below, the numbers of deportations of immigrants and racist and neo-Nazi organizing fell from the day that Mr. Trump took office. Again, the unified front of the establishment press, the intelligence agencies, the rich and the PMC represented a united class view from corporate-state power. The political short-sightedness of the class alliance that had the Left siding with the rich and managerial-class liberals against the working class and poor was reflected in the outcome—the rich and PMC liberals got what they wanted from the relationship: the ouster of Mr. Trump and the restoration of the neoliberal order under right-wing Democrats. The

celebration of Joe Biden’s electoral victory recalled the elections of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, where relief that oh-so deserving Republicans were being ousted from office was quickly met with the more politically capable passage of the Republican political program by liberal Democrats.



Graph: throughout the first three years of Donald Trump’s tenure in the White House the establishment press reported on a resurgence in White racist and neo-Nazi organizing that simply did not take place. The number of White racist and neo-Nazi groups, as defined by the SPLC, declined throughout Barack Obama’s two terms, and it continued to decline throughout Donald Trump’s tenure in the White House. It was a rise in Black Nationalist groups— added to the count of racist groups by the SPLC, that led to the headline increase in racist organizing. However, this was not the explanation given in the establishment press. Source: SPLC.

The source of class differences in different, and only marginally related, economies bodes poorly for political alliances premised in national interests. The threat posed by unified class interests for power from power, like the alliance between #Resistance and the intelligence agencies, is that it looks a lot more like fascism than a few dozen middle-aged yahoos giving Heil Hitler salutes. How will environmental decline and unhinged militarism be addressed when the only potential allies are the people you have spent the last four years calling ‘fascists.’ The role of the political establishment, with whom the #Resistance made common cause, is to manage political outcomes for their capitalist benefactors. Who does that leave in terms of people with a stake in environmental outcomes that don’t have a vested interest in perpetuating the problem?

Various efforts to naturalize and legitimate these class divisions rely on tautologies that are endemic to capitalist ideology. Since 2016, political antagonisms that are well explained through class interests have been *prima facie* dismissed by liberals in favor of moral arguments that assign responsibility for social divisions on the moral depravity of the working class and poor. ‘Merit,’ the legitimating strategy for differences in income and wealth, is Social Darwinism for the technocratic age. It is unprovable outside of first or

second order tautologies. Credentials are the quantum of merit, merit explains success, ergo credentials explain success, goes the theory.

Once the problem has been laid out in this manner, the path to success is clear to any who care to partake of it (goes the theory). Displaced autoworkers and those working cash registers at McDonalds or Walmart could get credentials, and then an investment banking job at Morgan Stanley or a coding job with Facebook, goes the logic. That there aren't enough of these jobs to accommodate the existing stock of qualified applicants leads to increasingly rococo explanations of cause and effect. Low class mobility is given cultural explanations such as 'a culture of poverty,' or a correlation between intelligence and social success that uses social success to define intelligence (tautology).

The strategy of placing class politics in a moral frame is an assertion of class power by the rich and the PMC to head off the economic redistribution needed to actually resolve growing class divisions. The 'God hands out the paychecks' premise of merit is intended to legitimate the growing concentrations of income and wealth. Likewise, the increasingly shrill moral authority claimed by the bourgeois and the rich is an effort to explain class differences outside of the concept of class. The four-year assertion-athon that racism was ascendant and that it explains rising social differences is contradicted by the steady decline in racist organizing since 2016 (graph above).

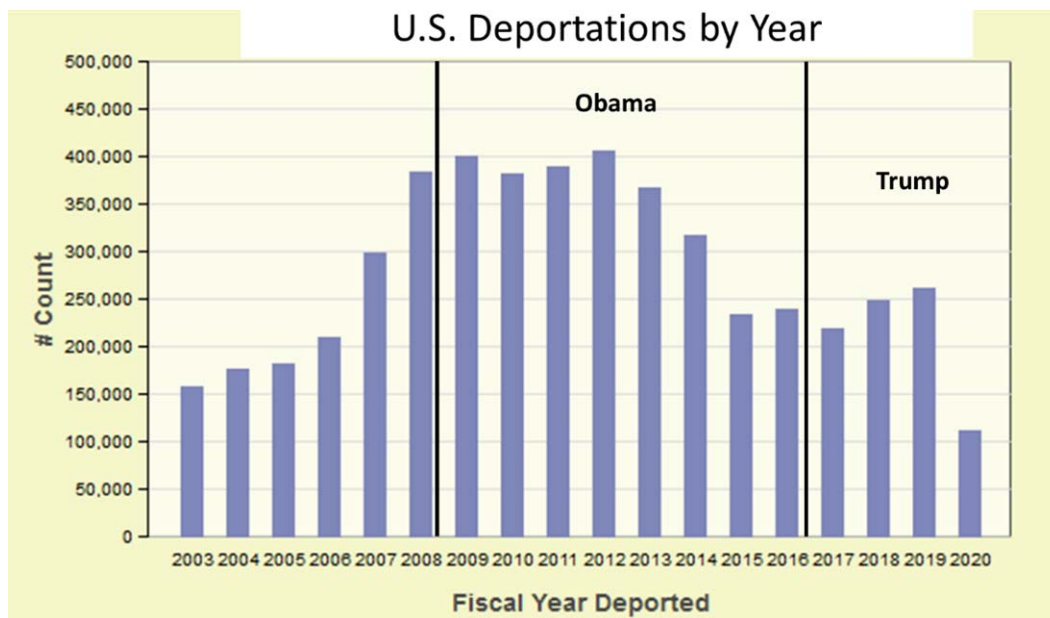
Likewise, the claim that rising xenophobia— a moral claim via sentiments, explains the harsh treatment and diminished lots of immigrants, looks past the intentional creation of super-exploitable classes that is part-and-parcel of the history of capitalist employment. What was the point of NAFTA if not to increase the power of capital to exploit workers? As the facts have it, Barack Obama deported twice as many immigrants in his first term as Donald Trump did (graph below). Was Mr. Obama twice as xenophobic as Donald Trump? Or did he have political reasons for reducing the supply of labor in the Great Recession. In moral terms, NAFTA was hardly kind to its working-class victims.

None of this is to challenge the sincerity of the millions of young protesters who took these issues to heart. It is to challenge the analytical frame being used to render economic explanations of social outcomes invisible while promoting those that serve the interests of the rich and powerful. What theory of social justice has it that the rich and the bourgeois are the good and righteous while the working class and poor are morally depraved (racist, fascist)? This is capitalist dogma 101. It is Victorian-era Social Darwinism that is doubly damnable because it hopelessly contorts Darwin's theories. However, getting Marxists to hate poor and working people is downright brilliant.

There is quite a bit of residual anger over the elevation of Joe Biden to be the Democratic party candidate, now president-elect, that is tied to analysis rather than political aesthetics. Mr. Biden has been a militarist, and paradoxically a deficit hawk, for the half-century that he has been in public office. The paradox comes through the social stability-ending practice of

starving the populace to fund the corporate-state business of militarism. Mr. Biden's hard and soft appointments of military industry hawks and austerians are in keeping with analytical rationales for why restoration of the neoliberal order is likely to be profoundly destructive.

This isn't to blame Biden for acts that he hasn't yet committed. It is to place his five decades in public office in the political and economic context of the present. Mr. Biden's announced and likely appointees all emerged from the bi-partisan neoliberal program of the last five decades. His use of 'diversity' to sell ideological uniformity illustrates the neoliberal logic of identity politics. The similarity of responses to the Great Recession and the Covid-19 pandemic— give billionaires and corporations a few trillion dollars and hope for the best, illustrates the point as well. This is neoliberal governance. The party is irrelevant.



Graph: for all of the righteous anger regarding the treatment of immigrants during Donald Trump's term in office, Barack Obama deported twice as many immigrants in his first term while using roughly equivalent methods. No moral argument regarding the detainment, treatment and deportation of immigrants would have substantively distinguished Mr. Obama's treatment from Mr. Trump's, meaning that cynical moral posturing was used for political gain by the very same people who created the outrage. Joe Biden spent three decades using racist and xenophobic slanders to promote equally savage policies on an even larger scale. Source: <https://trac.syr.edu>.

The descriptively bogus, if eternal, refrain that 'the U.S. is a center-Right country' ignores 1) that when asked using truthful terminology, the American people overwhelmingly support programs that are far to the Left of those settled on by liberals and 2) the recent election saw the largest contingent of self-described Socialists being politically engaged in most of a century. Taking the contest-of-personalities that sustains oligarch-friendly politics out of the mix, the election of Mr. Biden, plus his likely and announced appointments, is evidence that

the creation of Weimar-like conditions is a function of political economy rather than authoritarian tendencies.

Please think back for a moment to the geographic distribution of income (map at top). What ‘centrism’ means is the perpetuation of establishment interests under the premise that they are universal. The class divisions illustrated by the map point to the class character of ‘centrism.’ It is ruling class interests, not the center point between differing ideologies. The alliance of convenience to defeat Donald Trump was to re-establish political control by Wall Street and the technology and war industries. Neera Tanden, Joe Biden’s pick to head the OMB, led the #Resistance. She promoted the practice of labeling challenges to the Democrat’s orthodoxies ‘racist.’ Many of her policy positions were and are to the right of Ronald Reagan’s.

Following from his campaign rhetoric centered on passing the largest programs in the public interest since the New Deal, Mr. Biden is almost certainly anticipating a Republican win in Georgia. He has been a deficit hawk since the 1980s. Neera Tanden, his appointee to head the OMB, has been a deficit hawk since she entered politics. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has been a deficit hawk since the 1980s, and she commissioned the PAYGO restriction on public expenditures. In fact, in her role as Speaker, Ms. Pelosi distributes legal graft from the Democrat’s corporate benefactors to assure that their interests are all that matter.

The Democratic House led by Ms. Pelosi spent the two years between 2018 and 2020 passing symbolic legislation with a leftward tilt that it wouldn’t have touched if the legislation had any chance of being passed. The liberal press reported the effort in real time as if it reflected the intended legislation should Democrats retake the Senate and the White House. This, given Joe Biden’s actual legislative record to the right of Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama’s practice of describing his policies in terms that were unreflective of their actual intent and content. To this day, Democratic loyalists remember Mr. Obama’s policies from his descriptions of them, not from their actual content.

Given the existing class distribution as it regards race, the fiscal austerity on which Mr. Biden built his career has already diminished the economic lots of Blacks more than Whites. This wasn’t necessarily the result of racist intent. Poor and working-class people receive a larger percentage of their income from social spending than the rich. Bill Clinton’s cuts in social spending in the 1990s caused a large increase in deep poverty in the 2000s. The concept that the fiscal austerity that Joe Biden fetishizes produces disparate outcomes that disproportionately harm Blacks is apparently difficult for bourgeois Whites to grasp. But the failure to understand it will have serious consequences for economically vulnerable people.

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Rob Urie is an artist and political economist. His book [Zen Economics](#) is published by CounterPunch Books.