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We Have a Fascism Problem



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

To admit the truth about Trump and authoritarianism then means they have to do something about it. Many people do not want to take that leap.

** Ruth Ben-Ghiat, July 23, 2020*

We have a Nazi problem in this country...They don't, for the most part, wave swastikas and salute Hitler, but we have a Nazi problem in this country ...They carry the torch of slavery, genocide, and Jim Crow terror. Gunned up and mask-less, they exalt above all the right to kill

** Coco Das, November 23, 2020*

I've received the expected post-election lecture about how there's no real fascist threat in the United States from an older affluent and white male friend who is a veteran of the New Left and tells me that's he's read a lot of Italian and German history. I've been sent the anticipated

reflections from snooty academic know-it-alls on how Joe Biden's victory "proves" that "boy who cried wolf" worries about the menace of proto-fascistic white nationalism were and remain silly, even "hysterical." I've been referred to the latest commentaries from pseudo-Marxist online Trumpenleft charlatans who have spent the last four years disgracing themselves by arguing that one is an ally of the neoliberal and imperialist Democrats – and an agent of bourgeois identity politics! – if one dared to observe, denounce, vote against, and (imagine) go into the streets to resist the white-nationalist proto-fascism of Trump, his cult base, and his party.[1]

The election of Joe Biden and its aftermath, including the obvious absurdity of Trump's effort to overturn that election, is proof that America doesn't have a fascism problem connected with Donald Trump and the Republican Party, I am told.

"They Want A Moron to be a Permanent Dictator"

What despicable bullshit. If anything, the election and its aftermath *prove the opposite*. Between 2016 and 2020, after four years of turning the world's most powerful office into a breeding ground of white nationalist hatred, the demented oligarch Trump *added 11 million votes*. Trump *expanded his base* despite the nightmarish and mass-murderous, pandemic spreading "presidential" performance. This was no small or comforting matter, as the Black, Philadelphia-based civil and human rights lawyer Michael Coard [reflected two weeks ago](#): "Those 74 million are absolutely frightening. They want a moron to be a permanent dictator. That's what they want. They want to go back to the Jim Crow era. They want to disenfranchise Americans. They want to go back to the anti-science era of the Dark Ages. They want to go back to or create the Handmaid's Tale. This is not hyperbole."

While it is ludicrous for Trump to claim that he won the election because he had "almost 74 million votes," it was a depressingly cold fact that almost 74 million Americans actually voted to give a second apocalyptic presidential term to a malignant fascist (see the opening chapter of [this book](#)) who was accurately identified by the world's leading intellectual [Noam Chomsky as](#) "the most dangerous criminal in human history" even before he spread the killer virus whose lethality he [privately understood \(early on\) but publicly denied](#).

"The Fascists are Saying 'F*#k Ballots'"

Worse, many of those 74 million Americans have been led by their leader Trump, most of the Republican Party, right-wing media (FOX News, the One America Network, Newsmax, right-wing talk radio and more) to falsely believe that the election has been stolen. Fully 70 percent of Trump voters believe without the slightest hint of evidence that "radical Left Democrats" and anti-Trump election officials have nefariously denied their Fearless Leader victory through various forms of "voter fraud" including Venezuelan voting software and counterfeit mail-in ballots. That is 51 million deluded and cynical Americans careening cluelessly and bitterly into the future with political opinions based on open and absurd defiance of evidence, truth, and *elections that don't go their white-nationalist, sciece-defying*

way. This is a significant matter laced with cold authoritarian implication. As the Sri Lankan coup-veteran [Indi Samarajiva noted](#) in a chilling post-election reflection:

“Trump...and the Republican Party are destroying trust in elections in general. This is catastrophic. The tragic thing which you do not understand — which you cannot understand — is that you’ve already lost.... Your Republicans have set forces into play they cannot possibly understand and certainly cannot control. And they don’t even want to. To them, chaos is a ladder...This is the point. You have taken an orderly system balancing a whole lot of chaos and fucked with it. I don’t know how it’s going to explode, but I can promise you this. It’s going to explode...This is precisely why we have elections, and why both sides accept the results. To keep the chaos at bay. The whole point is that you have a regular, ritual fight rather than fighting all the time. Once one side breaks ritual then you’re on the way to civil war. Once you break the rules then chaos ensues. What exactly happens? I don’t know. It’s chaos...One side has stopped believing in elections. This is very bad...This year America had fascism on the ballot and nonwhite people mercifully said no. The fascists, however, are now saying fuck ballots. And enough of the population is like fuck yeah!..This is a major problem, and it won’t just go away on a technicality. I’m telling you, as someone that’s been there, you’ve already lost (emphasis added).”

The Beast Overhead, Proud Boys on the Ground

Four days after Samarajiva issued this warning, 20,000 fervent [Trump supporters rallied](#) in Washington DC behind Trump’s bogus claim of a stolen election. They swarmed his presidential limousine, known as “the beast,” as he rode by the crowd on his way to one of his golf courses. Among the leading participants in this “Million MAGA March” were the openly neo-fascist and paramilitary Proud Boys, infamous for street violence – a group Trump had ominously told to [“stand back and stand-by”](#) during his first and insanely unhinged “presidential debate” with Joe Biden the previous September. Among the speakers at this ominous gathering was a conspiratorialist QAnon supporter recently elected to the U.S. House, who expressed racist sentiments and told participants to march on the Supreme Court to demand that it install Trump for a second term.

How fascistic was all that?

One month later, on the weekend before the Electoral College voted after dozens of failed and openly absurd Trump campaign and Republican lawsuits meant to stop Biden’s election, the Proud Boys were back in the streets of Washington with many thousands of their “conservative” allies in tow. They beat liberal and left counter-protesters, stabbing at least four people. They [tore a Black Lives Matter flag](#) down from the Asbury United Methodist Church, a majority-Black but mixed congregation founded in 1836 and located a few blocks from the White House. The fascists burned the flag, reminding the church’s pastor of racist “cross-burnings,” in the name of “real Americanism.” They made the “OK” hand gesture, adopted by those on the far-right as a signal of white supremacy. At one point during their

rampage, their beast was signing back overhead. Their president hovered above Marine One, the presidential helicopter, in a chilling demonstration of taxpayer-funded solidarity with his fascist supporters on the ground.

Pretty fascistic that was. (Never forget that Trump went on the very last night of the election campaign to Kenosha, Wisconsin, where he had earlier gone to defend the paramilitary teen fascist Kyle Rittenhouse, who murdered two Black Lives Matter Protesters in August).

This is exactly how one would expect fascists to respond to an election loss. That they cannot and will not succeed is not the point. Nobody seriously concerned about America's big, arguably growing fascism problem thinks fascism has taken over the country.

“We Have a Nazi Problem”

Indi Samarajiva's reflection was perhaps too dark. It is excessively fatalistic to say “you've already lost” But Samarajiva's warning merits serious consideration as the [pandemo-fascist Trump death cult](#) nears its final days. Refuse Fascism's Coco Das was right to issue a [dire warning](#) three weeks after the election:

“We have a Nazi problem in this country... They don't, for the most part, wave swastikas and salute Hitler, but we have a Nazi problem in this country ... They carry the torch of slavery, genocide, and Jim Crow terror. Gunned up and mask-less, they exalt above all the right to kill... Trump lost the election. They lost. We poured into the streets to celebrate but they will not go quietly into the night. Fascists have and can come back from defeat, and when they do, they are stronger, more prepared, and more filled with vengeance. With his unhinged audacity, Trump still dominates the airwaves, *turning an election that was decisive into a debate*. Every day that he remains in power is an unrelenting barrage of lunacy. Every day is another day of the unthinkable and unprecedented said out loud and acted upon. Every day is a thousand more deaths from COVID. The humanity and morality of a portion of the 73 million people who voted for Trump is so hollowed out they can't even mourn the dead. And what of the rest of us, who did not want this but learned to live with it?... America has a MAGA problem. Millions of them believe that people who are by their very existence criminal – Black people in the cities of swing states – stole this election from their leader with the help of a band of evil conspirators, and this will be their rallying cry as they regroup to exact revenge and return to power. Hiding from them when they show up in your town, refusing to call it what it is, humoring them or failing to condemn their bigotry will not make them go away... The people won a victory by voting Trump out of power. Imagine the nightmare if he had won. But we have to stand on this victory and go all the way to bringing this fascist program to a halt. They are fighting for a future of unchallenged white supremacy, misogyny and theocratic patriarchy, and America First xenophobia, enforced by terror and violence. There is no decency in what they want. We cannot cede the public square and public discourse to fascists to air their false grievances and spread their lies, death, and hatred.”

America's "Nazi problem" is being directly encouraged by one of the nation's two leading political organizations, not just by the defeated president but by 126 Republican House members who signed their names in a black book of historic infamy by joining an absurd lawsuit filed by 18 Republican state attorneys general asking the US Supreme Court to negate Biden's clear and clean election victory. Including the majority of Republican US Senators who refuse to acknowledge Biden's win, most of the nation's top elected Republicans are on board with an openly authoritarian, arguably treasonous effort to subvert the will of the voters. Even the nation's right-leaning Electoral College is insufficiently reactionary for these Republifascist criminals.

Thanks to our Nazi problem, the "collegiate" Electors had to deliver their votes to state legislatures under armed guard two days ago.

"This isn't a Minor Thing"

One does not have to be an anti-fascist leftist like Samarajiva, Das, or the present writer to worry about how Trump's unrelenting Orwellian war on the elementary truth (on part with $2+2=4$) of his 2020 electoral defeat is undermining a central tent of democratic faith: willingness to honor elections that don't go your way. As the centrist CNN commentator [Chris Cilliza reflected](#) eight days ago:

"What Trump is doing is actively working to undermine one of the central tenets of democracy: the belief that — whether or not your preferred candidate won — the presidential vote was conducted fairly and safely, and accurately reflects the will of the American public. *This isn't a minor thing. Because if some decent chunk of the population is so convinced — facts be damned — that Trump won and the election was stolen from him, it leads to events like we saw in Michigan on Saturday night: A group of armed protesters surrounded the home of Democratic Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson demanding that she 'stop the steal' of the election from the President.*"

"...Appalling displays like that one need to be laid directly at the feet of Trump...[and] the 88% of elected Republicans in the House and Senate who refused to answer the *Washington Post's* question on who won the election ...The longer these Republicans allow Trump to publicly engage in this political fantasy, the more frequent incidents like what happened this weekend will grow. That is just a fact...*This silence has consequences. Dangerous ones.* Which is why every Republican member of Congress who has so far refused to say who won the election should be asked that same question — over and over again — until they actually answer it."

This is nothing to take lightly looking forward to life under the corporate neoliberal Biden regime. The noxious "heartland" *volk* that lined up behind the nation's openly malignant 45th president is a good candidate to discover new and more serious and disciplined champions in the wake of Malignant Orange's loss.

"This Didn't Happen Overnight"

How surprising is this Nazi problem? Not very – not to those who have close attention to the ever more mainstreamed radical right over the years. The terrible, tyrannical, and Twitter-tantruming Trump tumor could not have oozed into the White House without the previous existence of an underlying proto-[fascist, and eliminationist base](#). As the incisive anti-fascist journalist and author [David Neiwert wrote](#) in the aftermath of Trump’s 2016 election: “This didn’t happen overnight – Trump is the logical end result of a years-long series of assaults by the American right, not just on American liberalism, but on democratic institutions themselves. With Trump the long-term creeping radicalization of the right has come home to roost.”

Trump’s [relatively affluent base](#)^[2] and movement was well into formation by the 2008 election. It expanded from the Sarah Palin’s rallies through the Tea Party and Birther movements and the rise of Trump. We have every reason to expect it to latch on to a less clownish, less transparently venal, and more competent, literate, numerate, and self-controlled Dear Leader in coming years. It has a deadly life beneath and beyond the election cycle.

Yes, Trump’s ridiculous coup “plans” have collapsed. He failed to persuade the Republican leaders of contested state legislatures to violate the will of their state’s voters. The federal judge presiding over his preposterous challenge to the Pennsylvania tally wrote that the orange criminal’s “claim, [like Frankenstein’s monster](#), has been haphazardly stitched together” and lacks merit. The 6-3 right-wing Supreme Court created by Trump’s grotesque appointments refuses to put Humpty Trumpy back together as president again. But while most Americans are relieved to see the malevolent president departing, in six weeks (six hours would be far better and more appropriate), it is clear that Trump and his allies and followers are nurturing and spreading a toxic, [classically fascistic “Stabbed in the Back” narrative](#) that could help fuel future white-nationalist and arch-authoritarian menaces going forward with or without Trump. The [homegrown hard-right Amerikaner](#) base is not going to simply disappear because its five-year Dear Leader got booted out of Washington. It is likely to expand in number and deadliness with Trump headed back to Mar-a-Lago and on perhaps to a Trump television network. With Trump out of the picture, or not, the Amerikaners could gravitate to a new (fascist mafia) Don, likely one more serious than the old Don – or perhaps to some supposedly new and improved version of their “cheated” Tangerine Daddy.

Normalization

Also among the many factors that should throw some cold December water on any celebration of Biden’s win is the distressing normalization and trivialization of the fascistic president’s authoritarian madness in defeat. It has been demoralizing to behold U.S. media normalize and naturalize the twisted Trump’s efforts to overturn the election. Responsible journalists and commentators should be calling for the monster to be removed from office immediately. Tens of thousands of people are dying every week from the ballooning

pandemic that “our” herd-immunitarian Antichrist of an anti-resident has lied about and fanned across the nation.

Trump never cared to implement a real strategy to stem the COVID-19 body count. Now he is actively undermining efforts to enable the incoming Biden administration to develop one. While the nation’s intensive care units and morgues burst at the seams, he has spent his “lame duck” time on the golf course and insanely commanding his running dog lackeys to figure out some last-ditch way to pilfer himself a second disastrous term. Impeachment and removal? 25th Amendment? Send in the 82nd Airborne to remove the mass-murderous pandemo-fascist to an undisclosed dungeon? How about call for millions in the streets demanding OUT NOW? Hello?

The media won’t say a peep about these options as vast swaths of American humanity continue to needlessly perish, but MSDNC recently brought on the arch-neoliberal conciliator and fascism-appeaser Barack Obama to lamely intone that Trump has a “flimsy relationship to the truth” (an absurd understatement) and to mildly tell Trump’s Republifascist enablers that “some things are bigger than partisanship.” National “Public” Radio hosts and guests have talked about how it’s “just taking the president some time to absorb and grieve the fact that he lost.” Trump’s attempted coup was treated as some kind of television psychodrama or soap opera, like he was just some poor dude having a hissy fit after Maury Povich came back with the test results showing that “you ARE the father of this baby!” The story was presented *as if Trump wasn’t a wannabe fascist strongman determined to tear up the last shreds of American democracy and take the whole country down with him if he can’t have a second fascist term, for God’s sake.*

“Your media,” Indi Samarajiva writes, “are covering this like a high school dance...See this headline in the *New York Times*: ‘Who’s Going to Tell Him? Republicans Shy From Asking Trump to Concede.’ It’s wildly irresponsible. All your coverage is. *No, you fools, they’re supporting a coup.... ‘Who’s going to tell him’? Bitch, who’s going to tell you? An illegitimate leader has got all the guns and 40% of your population is down to use them. And y’all got jokes*

The Democratic Party, having just won the presidential election, has been pathetically reluctant to talk forthrightly about the fascist madness of Trump’s post-election conduct. By focusing almost solely on preparing for the Biden presidency, they have become all predictably complicit in the normalization of the dangerous insanity. This pathetic silence about the what the nation has really faced with Trump, his party, and his base, continued the Democratic “politics of appeasement” and “inauthentic opposition” that had helped put Trump in the White House in the first place – and helped him stay there with a RussiaGate obsession that ignored his worst crimes.

Then You’d “Have to Do Something About It”

So go ahead, know-it-all/above-it-all fascism-deniers of liberal and/or left persuasion – just keep laughing it all off. Good for you. The historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat had your number last summer. As [she told Salon's Chauncy de Vega](#) (who has been correctly describing Trump and Trumpism as fascist since 2015) last July: “Now, if we start explaining how America is in fact in an authoritarian situation with Donald Trump and his administration, then another question arises. One of the reasons so many people are scared *is that to admit the truth about Trump and authoritarianism then means they have to do something about it. Many people do not want to take that leap.*”

People who couldn't bother to get up off their asses and leave their privileged enclaves and computer stations to fight Trump and his backers while the orange menace held the White House can naturally be expected to claim validation with his electoral defeat and the collapse of his farcical yet nonetheless menacing coup effort – and to drag out their sneering “boy who cried wolf” charge against those of who have been trying to warn people about the danger of the far right...this even as Herr Donald president flies above fascists wreaking havoc in support of utterly bizarre and conspiratorial claims of a stolen election in the streets of the nation's capital.

On Farce, Tragedy, and Boys who Decided Wolves Don't Matter

This is a very bad mistake. Here we might turn Karl Marx on his head and advance the possibility that authoritarian and fascist presidential history might be appearing the first time as farce, the second time as tragedy. As the incisive observer [Zeynep Tufekci brilliantly reminds us:](#)

“When Biden takes the presidential oath in January, many will write articles scolding those who expressed concern about a coup as worrywarts, or as people misusing terminology. But ignoring near misses is how people and societies get in real trouble the next time, and although the academic objections to the terminology aren't incorrect, the problem is about much more than getting the exact term right...Alarmism is problematic when it's sensationalist. Alarmism is essential when conditions make it appropriate... The boy who cried wolf is a familiar parable. But what of the boy who saw an approaching wolf scared off by a thunderstorm and decided that he didn't need to worry about wolves, instead of readying himself for its return? Fortune favors the prepared; catastrophe awaits those who confuse luck with strength.”

When exactly has humanity been damaged by extreme vigilance in monitoring, analysis, warning, resisting, and preparing for authoritarian menace?

The entire world, humanity itself, had better hope the wolf of fascism never fully triumphs here. The destructive power of the United States makes the classic historical fascist regimes of the 20th century (Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and Hirohito's Japan) look minor league by comparison.

Paul Street will participate in a [Refuse Fascism panel discussion](#) on “COVID: A Case Study with Life & Death Stakes: Science, Epistemology, Conspiracy & Fascism” Wednesday, December 16th at 8 pm ET.

Endnotes

1. As the author of more than 200 essays and five or more books criticizing the neoliberal Democrats from the radical Left, I am living proof of the abject falsity of this claim. My most recent one of these books is *Hollow Resistance: Obama, Trump, and the Politics of Appeasement* (CounterPunch Books, October 2020).

2. It would be nice if people on the left would stop repeating the idiotic, quantitatively unsupported Trumpenproletariat narrative. “The exit polling data,” writes the political scientist Anthony DiMaggio – a rare thinker with reasonable statistical skills on the shockingly innumerate intellectual Left – “should be enough to hammer the final nail in the coffin for the ‘Trump is a working-class hero’ narrative that first emerged in 2016, and which has persisted over the last four years. This narrative depicts Trump’s support, and reactionary political values more generally, as springing from mass rage over the economic losses associated with outsourcing, downsizing, and mass financial insecurity. This narrative has always suffered from an almost total lack of empirical evidence, as I’ve exhaustively documented through a mountain of studies of available survey data, and which you can find [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), and in my last two books, [Rebellion in America](#), and [Unequal America](#).”

DECEMBER 16, 2020

Paul Street’s new book is [The Hollow Resistance: Obama, Trump, and Politics of Appeasement](#).