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The Trumpism Virus



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Barring unfortunate and unlikely developments, a year from now – or sooner, if all goes better than it has with the Trump administration bollixing up the vaccine distribution process along with nearly everything else — the covid-19 virus, though still around, should be no more disruptive of ordinary life than other potential causes of serious disease.

But, by the time we reach that point, that virus will have caused more deaths to more Americans than any of America's wars, except perhaps the Civil War. It has already surpassed all of them except World War II.

How much other long lasting damage it will have done, and how much it will have changed “normal” life, remains to be seen. It is already clear, though, that anyone looking forward to a restoration of the old normal will be disappointed mightily.

Donald Trump, his minions, and the numbskulls, knuckleheads, and low-life thugs who have fallen for his con, who believe his lies and who are at the ready to follow his commands, are on the same course as that virus.

With Trump on the way out (and perhaps, before long, headed for prison) and with most Americans' appalled by the January 6 "insurrection" he launched, MAGA politics too will soon be in decline. It will remain dangerous as well. Like the virus whose ill effects Trump has done so much to exacerbate, Trumpism will have to be reckoned with for a long time to come.

In the immediate future, this will involve dealing with the fact that the vaunted Trump base, still largely intact, is becoming more militant. This poses a clear and present danger, especially inasmuch as Trump got more than seventy million votes in the election he lost.

To be sure, not all Trump voters are imbeciles or sadists or white supremacists, but many of them are. After all, millions of miscreants crawled out from under the rocks he (metaphorically) overturned, and there were tens of millions more that had been out and about all along. In the short run, their desperation and therefore their fervor are bound to become, if anything, even more extreme.

Though distressed about having to endure an African American president, proto-fascist Americans were comparatively quiescent before Trump and his trophy bride descended that infamous gilded escalator in Trump Tower. The Tea Party movement had rattled their cages and gotten their juices flowing, but the Republican establishment had the matter under control; they were even able to nominate one of their own, Mitt Romney, to run against Obama in 2012.

But Romney lost and the establishment he personified therefore lost as well. Four years later, Jeb Bush, formerly on track for becoming their next Romney, could do nothing about it; neither could any of the other dunces seeking the 2016 nomination. Fecklessness, it seems, is no match for Trumpian odiousness.

Under Trump's aegis, the rot, already deeply entrenched, has taken over, and there is no turning back.

The genie is out of the bottle now; Trump's most ardent supporters are not about to recede back into the darkness from whence they came. Neither are they about to become a "silent majority"; not right away, and perhaps not ever.

It is even less likely that more than a few of them will change their stripes. Our political scene is too fractured for that; and American society has become too inegalitarian, too venal and self-seeking, and too much in the thrall of pernicious theological and secular ideologies to pull itself back up.

Therefore, the task ahead is not to welcome the errant back into the fold, but to contain the damage they do.

That this was coming has been clear for some time, though many chose not to see it. By now, however, the problems brought to the fore by the Black Lives Matter movement and by the Trump administration's mishandling of the pandemic raging all around us have become too obvious for even the willfully blind to ignore.

Not that this has stopped the talking heads on the liberal cable networks and in the quality press from looking forward to a post-Trumpian future in which “moderates” make the Republican Party “great again.”

No surprise there; Trump has been a boon for corporate media. Until that changes, they will not change, no matter what is staring them in the face. Thus, even as their pundits badmouth the Donald, they will go on enabling him — by giving him an abundance of free publicity and by treating what he says and does as if, on the merits, they are worthy, if not of respect, then of serious consideration.

Just as it would now be premature to speculate about the extent to which the covid-19 virus will change daily life forever, it is too early to tell how broad and pervasive the harm that Trump and his underlings have done to the ambient social and political scene in the United States and elsewhere will turn out to be.

There are, after all, no reliable points of reference. How could there be? After all, Trumpism is not much like any of the devils we know — say “Reaganism,” say, or “Clintonism.” It is not a comprehensive or partial ideology, though it can include ideological positions when Trump believes that he has something to gain by doing so. And although a personality cult has coalesced around Trump himself, Trumpism has little to do with Trump’s thinking, such as it may be, or with his reptilian and unlovable personality.

Few, if any, of his followers admire him — what is there to admire? Few of them even like him; and he plainly despises them. They may be dense as can be, and he is anything but subtle, but even so, a few of them must surely realize that. No matter, though; they consider him their tribune, and forgive all the rest.

Thus, for bringing Trumpism into the world and causing it to flourish, Trump the man has functioned more as a catalyst than an inspiration.

A catalyst for what? It is hard to say because there is no word in English (or, I’d wager, in any language) that directly captures what Trumpism is. The phenomenon is *sui generis*, in a class by itself. We therefore need a definition longer than a word or two.

I would suggest this: that Trumpism is a mean-spirited, profoundly toxic political outlook and attitude, born of insecurity and grievance, that echoes readily perceivable aspects of Trump’s pathetic way of dealing with the world. I would say too that, despite its importance in real world politics, Trumpism is ultimately of greater clinical than political interest.

I would also venture that its mass appeal and therefore its virulence will diminish in the months ahead, just as the covid-19 pandemic will. However, a year from now and perhaps also many years on, there will still be millions of Americans keeping the faith.

Like that damn virus, Trumpism will remain a peril for a long time to come.

Viruses mutate. I wouldn’t expect Trumpism to change much on that account; there isn’t enough there there for evolutionary mechanisms to work their course.

It can be instructive, though, to think of Trumpism itself as a mutation — of a longstanding affliction of late capitalism.

There was a time, within the living memory of persons at the head of the line waiting for covid-19 vaccinations, when, after the more or less official demise of Communism (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), Western foreign policy elites proclaimed “the end of history.”

By that, they didn’t mean that, from that point on, nothing of major political consequence would follow. They meant that the historical dynamic that was, as Marx and Engels put it, a history of class struggles – a process structured by an endogenous (internal) dynamic that would, unless interfered with by exogenous (external) forces, culminate in a regime of uncoerced cooperation where “the condition for the free development of each is the free development of all,” in other words, in (small-c) communism — had in fact culminated in American-style liberal democracy or, more precisely, in the comparatively benign and self-glorifying view of democracy that prevailed throughout the “free world” (wherever that is) in pre-9/11, pre-Trumpian America.

The irony is palpable.

For Hegel, philosophical understandings of History culminated in the idea of a *Rechtsstaat*, a state based on principles of equal and impersonal rights, in which the rule of law prevails. According to Hegel’s account of History’s trajectory, that idea, born in Greek antiquity, was brought to fruition in classical (Kantian and post-Kantian) German philosophy and was made materially real in the French Revolution.

“Superseding” Hegel, Marx, is said to have turned the Hegelian account on its head (or to have stood it on its feet), providing it with a sound materialist foundation. In his view, it is under communism that the endogenous, materialist dynamic he identified terminates, and therefore that the idea that Hegel theorized culminates. The *Rechtsstaat* is only History’s penultimate stage.

Those who called liberal democracy “the end of History” were, in a way, kicking Marx out and bringing Hegel back in; not by adhering literally to the intricacies of the arcane positions and arguments involved — they were neither equipped nor interested in engaging that “conversation” — but in defending the rational intuition underlying Hegel’s and Marx’s views.

They were saying, in effect, that the driving concerns of the past have finally been left behind –not forgotten but resolved in the institutional arrangements of liberal democratic societies.

That conceit didn’t last long; it was soon overtaken by events. Thanks to Trump, American-style liberal democracy is by now in peril even in the United States.

But unless the point of calling liberal democracy the end of History was purely facetious, having nothing to do with underlying rational intuitions, the consensus view nowadays does not so much reject “end of history” thinking as deepen it, at least insofar as it is effectively

assumed, though almost never acknowledged, that Marx was right in maintaining that “legal and political superstructures” rest ultimately upon economic foundations.

Put that way, the demonstrably false contention that American-style liberal democracy is the end of history is not at all out of line with the more general contention that capitalism is.

Before 1989 that notion would have seemed more problematic than it now does, inasmuch as there is now general acceptance of the idea that capitalist ways of organizing economic life will always be with us; that a society’s means of production will and ought always to be privately owned, and that market arrangements – sustained, but not directed, by the state — will and ought always to determine the course of economic development and therefore ultimately the trajectories of superstructural matters as well.

In the United States, the idea that there is no alternative to a capitalist future is a deeply held “bipartisan” conviction.

Even “democratic socialists” of the Bernie Sanders type are on board. The Sanders movement in the 2016 and 2020 electoral seasons brought talk of socialism back into the political mainstream. This was among the very best things that has happened in American politics in many years.

But because he shies away from supporting fundamental changes in property relations, Sanders’ socialism is essentially what he says it is; an up-dated version of Scandinavian social democracy with American characteristics or, in other words, capitalism with a human face and an openness to reforms achieved in other capitalist countries with social democratic governments decades ago.

When the issue was raised during the 2020 campaign season, Elizabeth Warren, the only progressive other than Sanders who was running for the Democratic nomination, declared herself an unabashed pro-capitalist. This distinguished her from Sanders, but it was a distinction without a difference.

To be sure, in some respects, Sanders’ policy proposals were more far-reaching than hers. But, laid out side by side, it would take an uncommonly keen eye to discern any light between them on issues bearing on private ownership and market relations.

Thus, except at the fringes and in sectarian circles where old ideas linger on like the tails of comets, it would be fair for anyone for whom politics is a vocation to say: “we are all capitalists now.”

What a strange turn of events! Not long ago, it was taken for granted that, barring a successful counter-revolution or a military defeat, countries where “actually existing socialism” prevailed would never voluntarily jettison socialism altogether, much less morph into kleptocracies and savagely inegalitarian capitalist regimes.

Neither did anyone expect that the Soviet Union would wipe itself off the map.

And even capitalism’s most ardent defenders were pessimistic about its prospects for surviving long term.

That sense of things has now been stood on its head, or set properly on its feet, just as surely as the liberal democratic triumphalism of the last eighties and early nineties has, to paraphrase Shakespeare, strutted and fretted its hour upon the stage only, before long, to be “heard no more.”

Thus, when Trump and Trump Party toadies call Joe Biden, of all people, and Democratic Party leaders “radical socialists,” whatever that means, all they are doing is demonstrating their ignorance.

Most of them haven’t a clue what “radicalism” and “socialism” are – historically, conceptually, or in any other way. All they know is that for those as ill-informed and thoroughly indoctrinated themselves, these words have negative connotations that can be helpful to right-wingers pursuing nefarious agendas.

They therefore have no inkling of what once seemed almost commonsensical — that capitalism is not and could hardly be the end of history; that, quite to the contrary, its status is precarious and its future grim.

There used to be lively discussions of the merits and shortcomings of socialism and capitalism. That debate has largely subsided. This is understandable; what is the point, after all, of debating the inevitable?

But thanks to Sanders and the squad and their co-thinkers – now, considerably more numerous at the national level than before the November election – the idea that there are alternatives to a capitalist future is rebounding back.

Thus, “socialism” is back. Its proponents have even established beach heads, as it were, in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

However, at a policy level, very little of this has registered. This can and likely will change, the more obvious it becomes that the way to deal with Trumpism is to squelch it, not to try to bring it into the fold. There is neither a need nor a place for it there.

Better Trumpism tamed than, as the whole world has seen, Trumpism running amok. Best of all, though, would be to undo the condition that made it all but inevitable.

Genuinely progressive Democrats, younger ones especially, are up for this in their hearts and minds, and there is every reason to expect the movement they are leading to evolve in a good way, especially if they leverage its power, just as the Tea Party leveraged its power within the GOP a decade ago.

Capitalism’s mission, in Marx’s view but also, allowing for different ways of articulating essentially the same idea by nearly everyone who has ventured thoughts on the subject, is to massively develop productive capacities in ways that would make it possible for them to be rationally deployed – that is, used not just to generate profits for their owners, but to advance human freedom, well-being, and social solidarity.

When bolder and more robust understandings of socialism's nature than those that have come to the fore in the United States still flourished, and before awareness of capitalism's weaknesses and historical impermanence went missing, it was widely assumed in left-leaning circles that capitalism successfully discharged this mission more than a century ago.

Thus, there was talk of overripe or "late" capitalism, and of its blatant irrationality.

That sense of things began to subside when it came to be believed that humanity has no post-capitalist future; that capitalism is here to stay because there is no viable alternative to it. Fortunately, though, the pendulum is now swinging back.

With capitalism comes political turmoil – not just because its developmental logic generates crises, but also because diplomatic and military developments and setbacks within the capitalist ambit tend to force the otherwise inevitable march of history off track.

Failed revolutionary ventures have been particularly consequential, especially in circumstances in which ostensibly successful revolutions cause panic in ruling circles. For a good part of the twentieth century, there was a decent amount of that around.

Thus, the Bolshevik Revolution became a point of reference for the entire Left all over the world; it remains so, to some extent, to this day.

This was obviously the case throughout the Soviet bloc and within the ambit of the Third International and its successors. Its effects have been a good deal more far-reaching than that, however.

The Chinese, Cuban, and Vietnamese revolutions became poles of attraction in their own right, but they too would not have been what they were but for their historical and conceptual ties to Bolshevism. In more attenuated ways, this was also true of nearly all Third World anti-colonial and national liberation struggles around the world.

They all seemed to accord with history's drift, motivating the ruling classes to become more aggressive pursuing their own interests. In crisis situations, often the best way to do this was to fund veterans of failed revolutionary endeavors with a view to bringing out their counter-revolutionary sides.

But for the failure of efforts in Eastern and Southern Europe to continue what the Bolsheviks began, the classical fascism of the interwar period would not have taken the shape it did; it might not even have come into being at all. Italian fascism in its early days is the clearest case in point, but it was not alone.

Fascism enabled capitalists to maintain their power. For the past hundred years, it, or some functional equivalent, has arisen and flourished wherever old regimes could not continue, but where socialist movements lacked the capacity to replace them. It arises when the old order is finished but viable substitutes do not yet exist.

A new order is what the United States and other late capitalist countries desperately need now – because whatever Trumpism's immediate future may be, and whatever happens to the Trump base or that wretched gaggle of miscreants, the Republican Party, in the months and

years ahead, it has become plain, like it never was before, that “it can happen here”; that, in the absence of socialism, the United States is no more immune from the kind of barbarism that emerged within the axis powers during World War II than they were themselves.

Efforts to rid the world of the Trumpian virus – or whatever it mutates into in the years to come – will never entirely succeed if the best we can do is fight it with a restoration of the conditions that preceded it, making it all but inevitable.

This is why the main struggle ahead, even for those for whom Trumpism remains the principal enemy, is a struggle in and over political means for opposing it. In practice, this means the Democratic Party — at least for the time being, and for as long as we can get nowhere better without it.

Biden and Pelosi and Schumer and their cohort have always been on the wrong side of that intra-party struggle, but perhaps some of them can to some degree be prevailed upon not to block progress and perhaps even to encourage it.

It would be wonderful right now to be able to say: “all power to the squad” (and to those who think like it, its bona fide co-thinkers and allies). But, to put it mildly, that would be premature. A more apt slogan would therefore be: “don’t mourn for America, organize.”

Trump was good for that. With the Democratic Party establishment having chosen a personification of all that was deleterious in the pre-Trump era as a standard-bearer, Trump might well have been reelected, were he not his own best enemy.

Biden beat Trump but Democrats suffered grave losses down-ticket. What better indication could there be that Biden didn’t beat anybody, after all; rather, that Trump beat himself. Trump did much too to help Democrats in the Texas runoff elections.

And now, as he goes stark raving mad, he is starting to look like the Left’s best weapon for overcoming the last best hope for conquering the Trumpism virus in the months and years ahead.

But, to paraphrase Nixon, we may not always have Trump to kick around anymore. In view of the harm Trumpism does and threatens to do, that news now can only be greeted with ambivalence.

We need a better weapon than that, the political equivalent of a vaccine.

To that end, we need to continue to organize with the zeal displayed this past week in Texas, to build a broad progressive base everywhere, to set Democratic pusillanimity aside, and to struggle sharply and audaciously not just against Trump and Trumpism but against the real world conditions that keep the Trumpism virus, and disease vectors like it, alive.

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