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## “Interesting” Times: Capitalism Kills Everything



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

We could stop being surprised by terrible things if we paid more attention to past and current history.

We could also remember that we are part of Nature and cannot survive much longer in a state of capitalist war on the web of life.

**Shocking, Yes; Surprising, No**

*No Empathy Joe*

Yes, it's terrible that Joe Biden has refused to forgive more than a pittance of student debt. But do we not recall him telling a *Los Angeles Times* host that he had “no empathy, give me a break” for the plight of Millennials in the savagely unequal and environmentally unsustainable world he'd helped create over decades of Congressional service to corporate and financial America? No surprise.

### *Fascists Doing Fascist Stuff*

The Trump-instigated January 6th fascistic Attack on the Capitol was shocking. Contrary to the “*oh my God I can’t believe this is happening in America!*” response of dismayed cable news talking heads, it was [hardly surprising](#). As the historian [Timothy Snyder noted](#) in its aftermath, “When Donald Trump stood before his followers on Jan. 6 and urged them to march to the United States Capitol, he was doing *what he had always done*. *He never took electoral democracy seriously nor accepted the legitimacy of the American version.*”

That’s because Trump was and is [a fascist](#), as was clear well before he was elected. So are many of his backers. Nobody who paid attention to the real record of this white-supremacist racial- nationalist authoritarian and his Amerikaner base (please see my chapter on “the Trumpenvolk” in [this excellent volume](#)) should have been astounded by January 6<sup>th</sup>. It was the final crazed act in [a rolling coup campaign that had been underway for months](#).

### *A Predicted and Predictable Pandemic Nightmare*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been shocking. It should never have been surprising. Public health experts had been [warning](#) about such an event for many years from their observation of global capitalism’s encroachment into new geographic and biological spheres and the remarkable speed and scale with which the world capitalist system spreads people and germs across planetary space.

The special virulence with which the virus hit the United States is shocking but unsurprising. It was to be expected given the nation’s [extreme attachments and captivity](#) to corporate power, extreme class disparity savage racial inequality, and military empire. The [U.S profits and war system](#) is incapable of protecting public health. American “[democracy](#)” is about the upward concentration of wealth and power, with disastrous consequences for the common good. The terrible outcomes include a for-profit health care system wired to serve only the rich and a poisoned food system and environment that feeds rampant co-morbidities across the land. The steepest health price is paid by poor people of color, who have died to a disproportionate degree.

Of course COVID-19 made the U.S. its most favored nation. It’s the extreme capitalism, the over-the-top individualism, and the related acute racial oppression that made this predictable.

### *Capitalogenic Ecocide*

The ongoing [collapse of livable ecology](#), whose symptoms include [ever more extreme weather](#) (like the recent and ongoing polar cold snap within and beyond the U.S. South) is shocking. It is proceeding as predicted by environmental scientists who have warned for many decades about [the exterminist consequences](#) of unrestrained capitalism. The climate we used to know is being blown up by carbon capitalism, as predicted [even by Exxon-Mobil](#).

The capital order is addicted to perpetual “growth,” that is accumulation, to [sustain its rate of profit](#) and to [paper over its inequalities](#). It’s an environmentally unsustainable dependence. If

we don't break our dependence on capitalism, we are done for (we may already be done for). [Capitalism is wired](#) for the termination of livable ecology.

### **This Kills Everything**

On this last point, this would be a good time for us to stop avoiding the little mater of ecocide, *the biggest issue of our or any time*. I enjoyed the esteemed Marxist economist Richard Wolff's [recent reflection](#) on how the accumulation and investment centers of global capitalism are "migrating away from the U.S., Europe, and Japan." By Wolff's analysis, which strikes me as correct:

The blunt truth of modern economic development is this: capitalism is leaving its old centers and *relocating to its new centers*. About this leaving we can and should borrow the phrase: *this changes everything*.... On the one hand, the movement of capitalism from old to new centers plunges the old into a long-term decline evident in decaying industries and cities. Politics shifts away from *prioritizing growth*, adjudicating internal conflicts in ways that reproduce growing capitalism, and shaping the world into a distinctive center-periphery pattern. Instead, policies shift toward maintaining the global status quo against the many forces eroding it. For many politicians that shift of focus degenerates into scapegoating amid cascading social divisions and decay...On the other hand, capitalism finds profitable new territory in its new centers. *Growth* there offsets a decline in the old centers. The global 1 percent get richer because they draw increased wealth from both the old and *new centers* (emphasis added).

After reading this, I had two reactions. First: "brilliant, this helps us demystify a lot of recent economic, social, and political history." Second: "fine but guess/so what?" Wherever its leading control, investment, and growth centers are located, capitalism has now so completely polluted and cooked the entirely planetary ecosystem that we will be fortunate to survive another half century as a species if we don't get off this lethal growth-/accumulation-/profit-addicted system.

I might feel less compelled to offer this criticism if Wolff hadn't referenced the title of the leading environmentalist Naomi Klein's important book [\*This Changes Everything: Capitalism v. The Climate\*](#).

Here's a little secret about capitalism: *it kills everything no matter where its leading centers are located*. It's not Marx's midwife to socialism; it's a malignant cancer ready to bring about "[the common ruin of the contending classes](#)."

### **Interesting, Even Exciting Times!**

More disturbing on this and related scores was the brilliant and (I think justly) celebrated American historian and political commentator Rick Perlstein's [recent dialogue](#) with Salon's Chauncy de Vega, who deserves special recognition for having properly identified and denounced Trump was a fascist from the start:

De Vega: “How are you feeling given the Age of Trump and all that mayhem and pain, a pandemic and an overall surreal state of affairs? How are you making sense of this?”

Perlstein: “For all the horror of seeing one of America’s two major parties descend into fascism, the fact is that I am a writer and a historian. That we are living in the middle of a time that people will probably be talking about in a hundred years is interesting and exciting to me.”

Where to begin in responding to this? To start with, Perlstein might have wanted to tell de Vega, “hey, I was wrong and you were right about Trump” since Perlstein engaged in some brilliant but (as it turned out) wrongheaded denial of Trump’s fascist essence in the [fall of 2015](#), by which time de Vega was correctly identifying the orange monster for what it really was.

Then there’s the horrific candor of Perlstein finding recent American fascist politics and history “interesting and exciting” (on an intellectual level). Perlstein’s comment struck me as an elegant version of Tourette’s Syndrome. This is something you don’t say even if you think it. “Interesting and exciting” (to a well-off white professional American author)? Tell it to the immigrants penned up in Amerika’s concentration camps, the parents whose children were stolen from them at the southern U.S. border, and the survivors of the 450,000-plus Americans who have died from the pandemic Trump fanned across the nation, dismissing its significance (he said it “affects virtually no one” even after he survived it with the help of the best taxpayer-funded socialist medicine and treatment available). Tell it to the survivors of people murdered by white-nationalist killers triggered by Trump’s hateful rhetoric (e.g., Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, the victims of the El Paso Wal-Mart massacre, and the Tree of Life killings in Pittsburgh), and the people of Puerto Rico, who Trump left to suffer without adequate federal relief (while downplaying the extent of death and destruction) in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Tell it to the people of Iran. Tell it to the Muslims and others from Muslim countries who were unable to visit loved ones because of Trump’s racist travel ban. Tell it to the survivors of the hundreds of prospective migrants who have died in the southwestern U.S. desert (including [227 people whose remains were found](#) along the U.S.-Mexico border last year) thanks to Trump’s intensified border enforcement and partial wall construction.

### **Mad Max if We’re Lucky**

As my fellow historian and journalist Terry Thomas comments: “I think one might place more emphasis on the ‘horror’ of the Republican Party’s descent into fascism than the business about it being a time people will be talking about in a hundred years. ... in a hundred years it could be something like a Mad Max movie, because we failed during this historical juncture. I don’t know how ‘exciting’ that is.”

But back to the environmental matter: it does not look good for a 22nd Century historian being able to look back smartly on the “interesting” and “exciting” times experienced in the

US during the Trump years and their aftermath. There's this little problem of the Antarctic melting around 2050 or 2060, under the pressure of growth-addicted global capitalism, whose key centers shift across geographic zones and nation states while rain forests are felled, arctic ice sheets collapse, and methane bubbles up in mass quantities from melting permafrost.

That changes everything.

I'd say its *Mad Max if we're lucky*, to partly paraphrase Istvan Meszaros who (thinking of the environmental crisis) updated Rosa Luxembourg by writing "it's socialism or barbarism if we're lucky" two decades ago.

On a small but happy note, the epic fascist hate machine Rush Limbaugh has finally been silenced by Mother Nature. Vatican geologists report one of the fastest descents into Perdition on record.

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