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## Capitalism and Fascism



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The revolutionary nature of capitalism goes far in explaining the political turmoil of recent years. Neoliberalism destroys social networks when it destroys economic relationships. Decades ago, autoworkers in Michigan and peasant farmers in Chiapas were faced with figuring out how to get by after their livelihoods were taken away. A fundamental question emerged: how was having these changes forced on them not political? Low and behold, several decades later these are battle lines in renewed political struggle. On one side the motivating logic is economic self-interest. The other is reactive, the loss of community, and with it place, from a position of relative powerlessness.

The purpose in going down this path is to suggest that the current liberal insight that getting the rich and powerful to give a little back and to do a better job of at least pretending to give a shit about the rest of us would go a long way toward reducing political tensions. However, it isn't the attitude that is the problem. Three or four decades have passed since Michigan autoworkers and Chiapas farmers were left to their own devices. Every year and decade since have seen social and economic degradation rise on the part of the powerless, as it falls on the part of the architects and engineers of this process.

The 'American' insight currently on display— that history has been one long cobbling together of short-term fixes, faces the challenge back that the last five decades of neoliberalism were planned and systematically implemented, not a cobbling together of short-term fixes. The short-term fixes were to smooth the path for more neoliberalism. The creators of neoliberalism understood that their project was political. It is a politics that one group of people— the rich and their agents, have unilaterally imposed on the West.

The politicians who serve this power are the salespeople of empire. As salespeople, they work with what they have to work with. If bullshit is what they have to sell, they sell bullshit. In the world where one group has almost everything as the others scramble for crumbs, politicians are selling crumbs. The distance between what is being proposed and what is likely to be enacted represents the size of the crumbs. The problem is, as it has been for a long while now, that the crumbs aren't enough to sustain the lesser two-thirds of the nation.

The coitus interruptus represented by the SALT Tax 'debate' has the proud soldiers of empire in Congress going to the mat for a tax cut for billionaires while they can't be bothered to set a floor under wages with a minimum wage. The point here isn't policies, but the distribution of power. Depending on how you count them, the U.S. is currently down 11,000,000 – 18,000,000 jobs compared with pre-Covid-19. Employers are back to where they were 2009 – 2017, complaining that unemployment benefits are too rich and that workers lack skills. The minute that labor market conditions tightened in 2017, they shut up and started raising wages.

Rainbow economist John Maynard Keynes made the point many years ago that if the prescriptions of capitalist economists were ever implemented, the result would be profoundly anti-democratic. In fact, the only way that neoliberalism can be claimed to have been democratically chosen is through the improbability that American representative democracy somehow represents the interests of the people. The answer

back is that the current heroes in Congress care more about tax breaks for the rich than about the minimum wage.

In many of the ways that matter, the U.S. is an oligarchy / corporatocracy managed by the PMC (Professional Managerial Class) that is cobbled to a 'shithole country.' Depending on where you fit in this schema, this means either 1) that the U.S. is a great nation being dragged down by a wasteland of marginally literate hicks or 2) five decades of neoliberalism have hollowed out the economic heart of a once thriving nation for the benefit of a wastrel class that is incapable of governing. As fate would have it, there has been only one governing class over these many years.

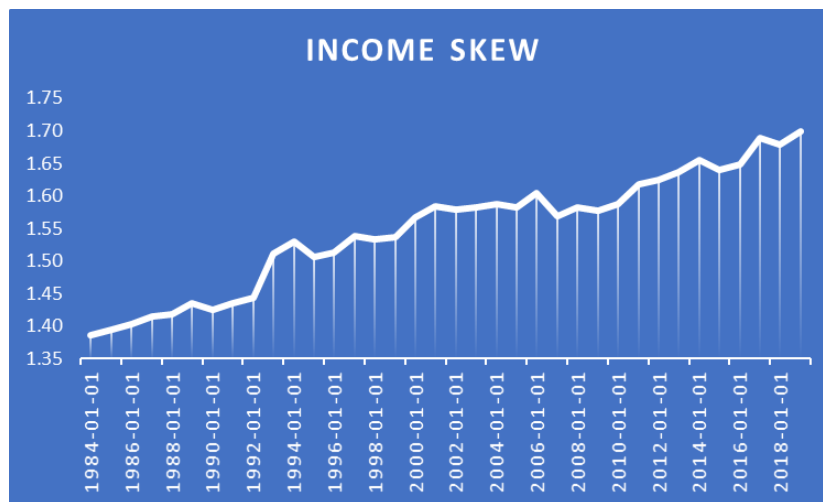
The American conception of authoritarianism, garnered from the liberal conception of society as an unfortunate gathering of individuals who only want to rob one another, is based on the idea of a strong leader. In fact, an alternative conception is that authoritarianism is a system of political economy that sometimes features a strong leader. The claim has been made by the very Americans who built the largest carceral system in the world that Russia, with Putin!, and China with a centralized people's congress, are both authoritarian.

In fact, the U.S. has a much larger prison population in both absolute and relative terms than either Russia or China. In terms of police killing of citizens, the U.S. is far ahead of these nations plus Nigeria, El Salvador, South Africa, Mexico, and a long list of 'suspect' nations from the official perspective. The U.S. is the most militaristic nation on the planet. In terms of psychopathy, American militarism is a business— vacation homes are paid for every time an Afghan wedding party is slaughtered. And lest confusion be sown, the reference year is 2021, not some distant past.

Graph: the (neo)liberal contention that Americans have higher propensity toward criminality than do the citizens of other nations must be true. The U.S. has the largest absolute and relative prison populations in the world. The view must be that the U.S. is so free that even people whose lives are constrained down to the minutest detail live lives that aren't constrained down to the minutest detail. Source: <https://www.prisonstudies.org>

The rationale for attaching pensions and health insurance to employment was to monopolize labor. If employers control your ability to retire and get healthcare, your ability to quit your job is limited. Neoliberalism revived the explicitly economic function of policing as a way of funding public services so that property taxes could be cut. And warehousing politically inconvenient populations in prison is both a cautionary tale for would be revolutionaries and a form of social landscaping for the more docile populations.

The point here is that as plausible an explanation for all of this as ordinary human folly is, the build out of the American carceral system and the militarization of the police were, and still are, tied to the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. The conceptual challenge of considering the politics of policing and incarceration in economic terms, as well as the economics of policing and incarceration in political terms, proved to be too much for the technocratic class. While ‘super-predators’ reads like a meeting of business leaders it in fact references children as described by a professional psychologist.



Graph: in the statistical distribution thought up by an actual guy named ‘Normal,’ average family income would be the same as median family income. Illustrated above is average family income divided by median family income. This is a measure of how rich the rich are relative to what the median family earns. Interpretation is that the rich have gotten richer relative to the typical family since neoliberalism was launched four plus decades ago. Source: St. Louis Federal Reserve.

The term ‘woke imperialism’ is entering the usage to apply the concept of diversity to the ordinary workings of empire. The insistence that diversity will vanquish White Supremacy from American institutions will more probably follow the model of racially integrating the Los Angeles Police Department. The basic insight is that not-White cops didn’t change the institutional mandate of the LAPD. The LAPD changed them. Now you can have your head cracked open by a virtual Rainbow Coalition of cops.

To be clear, the problem here isn’t with diversity, but rather with the dubious premise that institutions like corporations, colleges and universities, and NGOs will have their mandates redirected from below. One might imagine that PoC would want to work for Goldman Sachs or ExxonMobil— or not, for the same reasons that White people— whatever that means, would— or not. The mandate of both corporations is to use the

corporations' political and economic power to earn profits and make those at the top rich. If this is the motive for wanting to join these organizations— or not, why would diversity be imagined to change it?

The relevance for current purposes is that 'woke fascism' may not be the contradiction that it seems. Progressive writer Thom Hartmann recently took a whack at explaining what he calls American fascism, as corporatism. Mr. Hartmann didn't reference woke ideology in the piece, and I don't want to give the impression that he did. In class terms, corporatism has autocratic leadership, a managerial layer, and a working class that while employed by the predator corporation, itself is the prey. The predator class are the owners / oligarchs who use the managerial class to prey on workers.

This frame describes the political structure of corporations outside of the mediating power of organized labor. The first major project of neoliberals was to destroy organized labor. And neoliberalism is the merging of corporate with state interests. Outside of the racialization that motivated the Nazis, neoliberalism shares its primary characteristics with fascism. Of relevance is that fascism is political economy, not a transhistorical belief system. Communists were the first to be put into Nazi Concentration Camps. And those who survived were the last to get out.

Neoliberalism was conceived shortly after WWII as integrated state support for business and markets. Through this view, the perceived moral problem with fascism was that it was militaristic and racialized. However, as economic historian Adam Tooze argued, Nazi militarism was American-style resource imperialism run amok. And as argued elsewhere, the Nazi's racial theories were based in American eugenics and Jim Crow. Core aspects of fascism were, and still are, present in American political economy.

To consider the question of fascism without racialization, the U.S. provides a useful backdrop. The myth of liberalism is of social openness, tolerance and an amorphous sense of freedom that becomes more incoherent the harder one looks. From this sensibility, it doesn't follow that the U.S. would have the largest carceral system on the planet, that the police can—and do, kill citizens with near impunity, that the police are militarized to act as an army to protect the rich from the poor, or that U.S. militarism has been used to violently crush every democratic movement it has encountered.

This distance between theory and fact is only partly explained by ignorance and hypocrisy. As described above, the U.S. is an oligarchy / corporatocracy managed by the PMC, cobbled to a 'shithole country.' The temporal passage from past to the present was of neoliberalism being applied by the PMC at the behest of the rich to turn the U.S. into a

‘shithole country.’ Woke is the corporate ideology needed to proclaim that capitalism produces just economic distribution. As long as there is equality of opportunity, defined through diversity, capitalism is just political economy, goes the logic.

The conspicuously missing axis from this formulation is economic class. The poor are unwaveringly poor and the rich are unwaveringly rich. How can a society be just when a few people have great wealth and the majority have little to none? The second-order question is how did this state of affairs come to be? The rich have been serially bailed out by the Federal government over the entirety of the neoliberal epoch. Not only did the rich begin this epoch with state power in their pockets through their economic control of government, it was used to build their own power while crushing competitors.

If those pushing the liberal view that woke reforms make capitalism fair believed their own bullshit, they would redistribute power, not ‘access.’ As long as power is concentrated, and concentrated economic power serves to concentrate political power, capitalists will do what they have done for centuries—use their power to eliminate their competitors and lower wages. Again, this is what ties capitalism to fascism, the use of state power merged with corporate power to control economic outcomes. If woke capitalism is just, so is fascism as described by Mr. Hartmann.

To tie this together, five decades of neoliberal reforms created the social and material conditions that explain the political unrest of the last fifteen years. On one side are the rich and their agents who promoted neoliberalism and have been its primary beneficiaries. On the other are the poor and working-class populations of the West who have seen their lives upended in a never-ending process that has shifted the power of self-determination away from them. The managerial class, which sees its lot tied to the fortunes of the rich, has produced a simulacrum of social justice through woke ideology that is itself a restatement of the base precepts of capitalism.

Great effort on the part of establishment interests was put into elevating neoliberal political managers to negotiate a social and political truce. However, the operating premise is that racists and malcontents were combined with the Covid-19 pandemic to create temporary political turmoil that will dissipate without having to give very much away. In fact, five decades of neoliberalism have left tens of millions of people with very little to lose and the promise of a perpetual low-wage, neoliberal, dystopia won’t quell public disaffection. The current liberal government has already delivered most of what it is capable of delivering, and it isn’t enough.

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