

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد      بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم      از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY RICHARD D. WOLFF

15.08.2024

## Capitalism, Mass Anger and the 2024 Elections



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

In the wake of his huge defeat on June 30, 2024, when 80 percent of voters rejected French “centrist” President Emmanuel Macron, he said he understood the French people’s anger. In the UK, Conservative loser Rishi Sunak said the same about the British people’s anger, as Labor leader Starmer now says as the anger explodes. Of course, such phrases from such politicians usually mean little or nothing and accomplish less. Such leaders and their parties just keep calculating how best to regain power when they lose it. In that, they are like the U.S. Democrats after Biden’s performance in his debate with Trump and like the U.S. Republicans after Trump’s loss in 2020. In both parties, a small group of top

leaders and top donors made all the key decisions and then organized the political theater to ratify those decisions. Even surprises like Harris replacing Biden are temporary departures from resuming politics as usual.

However, unlike Trump, the others missed opportunities to identify with an already organized mass base of angry people. Trump stumbled into that identification by saying loudly and crudely what traditional politicians treated as publicly unspeakable about immigrants, women, NATO, and traditional political taboos. That set the tone for Trump then doubling down by insisting he had won the 2020 election but had been cheated out of it. The mass anger of populations feeling victimized in their workaday lives found a spokesperson loudly claiming parallel victimizations. Trump and base grasped that together they might victimize their victimizers.

Whether or not they can politically exploit voters' anger, no mainstream leader in the collective West, including Trump, seems actually to “understand” it. They mostly see only as far as what they can plausibly blame on their opponents in the next election. Biden blamed Trump for a “bad” economy in 2020, while Trump reversed the same blame over the last year and will shortly adjust to blaming Harris. Presidential opponents blame the other for the “immigration crisis,” for inadequately protecting U.S. industry from Chinese competition, government budget deficits, and job exports.

No mainstream leader “understands” (or dares to hint or suggest) that mass anger these days might be something more and different from any collection of specific complaints and demands (about guns, abortion, taxes, and wars). Even the demagogues who like to speak about “culture wars” dare not ask why such “wars” are hot now. Angry “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) folks are notably vague and poorly informed as their critics enjoy exposing. Rarely do those critics offer persuasive alternative explanations for MAGA anger (explanations that are neither vague nor poorly informed).

In particular, we ask, might the anger that the MAGA movement enrolls express a genuine mass suffering that has not yet understood its cause? Might that cause be nothing less than the decline of Western capitalism and all it represents? If ideological taboos and blinders preclude admitting it, might that decline's results—anxiety, despair, and anger—focus instead on suitable scapegoats? Are Trump and Biden, Macron and Sunak, and so many others competitively choosing scapegoats to mobilize an anger they misunderstand and dare not explore?

After all, Western capitalism is no longer the world's colonial master. The American empire that succeeded the European empires has now followed them into decline. The

next empire will be Chinese or else the era of empires will give way to genuine global multipolarity. Western capitalism is likewise no longer the world's dynamic growth center as that has moved eastward. Western capitalism is clearly losing its former position as the self-confident, unified, ultimate power behind the World Bank, United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. dollar as world currency.

In terms of global economic footprints as measured by national GDPs, the United States and its major allies (G7) comprise a total, aggregated GDP now that is already significantly less than the comparable aggregated GDPs of China and its major allies (BRICS). The footprints of the two global economic power blocs were roughly equal in 2020. The difference between the two footprints has been widening ever since and continues to do so. China and its BRICS allies are increasingly the world economy's richest bloc. Nothing prepared the populations of Western capitalism for this changed reality or its effects. Especially the sections of those populations already forced to absorb the costly burdens of Western capitalism's decline feel betrayed, abandoned, and angry. Elections are merely one way for some of them to express those feelings.

Western capitalism's rich, powerful, and small minority practices a combination of denial and adjustment to its decline. Prevailing politicians, mainstream media, and academics continue to orate, write, and act as if the collective West were still globally dominant. For them and their ways of thinking, their global dominance in the second half of the last century never ended. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza testify to that denial and exemplify the costly strategic mistakes it produces.

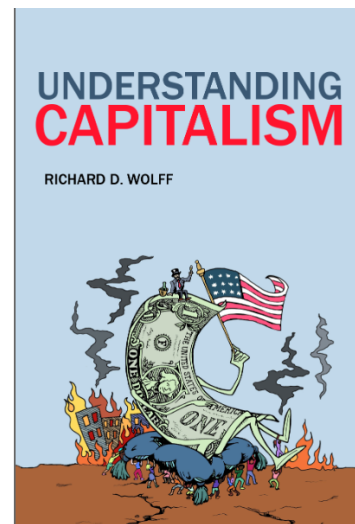
When not denying the new reality, significant portions of Western capitalism's corporate rich and powerful are adjusting their preferred economic policies away from neoliberalism toward economic nationalism. The chief rationale for that adjustment is that it serves "national security" because it may at least slow "China's aggressiveness." Domestically, the rich and powerful in each country use their positions and resources to shift the costs of Western capitalism's decline onto the mass of their middle-income and poorer fellow citizens. They worsen income and wealth inequalities, cut governmental social services, and harden police behaviors and prison conditions.

Denial facilitates the continued decline of Western capitalism. Too little is done too late against problems not yet admitted. Deteriorating social conditions flowing from that decline, especially for the middle income and the poor, provide opportunities for the usual right-wing demagogues. They proceed to blame the decline on immigrants, foreigners, excessive state power, the Democrats, China, secularism, abortion, and culture war

enemies, hoping thereby to assemble a winning electoral constituency. Sadly, left-wing commentary focuses on refuting the right's claims about its chosen scapegoats. While its refutations are often well-documented and effective in media combat against right-wing Republicans, the left too rarely invokes explicit, sustained arguments about mass anger's links to declining capitalism. The left fails sufficiently to stress that government regulators, however well-intentioned, have been captured by and subordinated to specifically private capitalist profiteers.

The mass of people therefore became deeply skeptical about relying on the government to correct or offset the failings of private capitalism. People grasp, often just intuitively, that today's problem is the merger of capitalists and government. Left and right increasingly feel betrayed by all the promises of center-left and center-right politicians. More or less government intervention has changed too little in the trajectory of modern capitalism. To

growing numbers, politicians of the center-left and center-right seem equally docile servants of the capitalist-government merger that constitutes modern capitalism with all its



failures and flaws. Thus today's right succeeds if, when, and where it can portray itself as *not* centrist, its candidates explicitly anti-centrist. The left is weaker because too many of its programs seem still linked to the idea that government interventions will correct or offset capitalism's shortcomings.

In short, mass anger is disconnected from declining capitalism in part because left, right and center deny, avoid, or neglect their link. Mass anger does not translate into or yet move to explicit anti-capitalist politics in part because too few organized political movements lead in that way.

Thus, Rachel Reeves, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Britain's new Labour Party government—its top financial officer—blithely announces, "There is not a lot of money there." She prepares the public—and preemptively excuses the new government—for how

little the new government will even try to do. She goes further and defines her key goal as “[unlocking private investment](#).” Even the words she chooses mirror what the old Conservatives want to hear and would themselves say. In declining capitalisms, electoral changes can and often do serve to avoid or at least postpone real change.

Chancellor Reeves’s words assure major corporations and the 1 percent they enrich that Starmer’s Labour Party will not heavily tax them. This matters since it is precisely in [major corporations and the rich](#) that “a lot of money” is located. The wealth of the top 1 percent could easily fund a genuinely democratic rebuilding of a seriously depleted post-2008 UK economy. In stark contrast, the typical Conservative programs prioritizing private investment are what got the UK to its present sad state. They were the problem; they are not the solution.

The Labour Party was once socialist. Socialism once meant a thoroughgoing critique of the capitalist system and advocacy of something totally different. Socialists sought electoral victories to win government power and use it to transition society to a post-capitalist order. But today’s Labour Party has thrown that history away. It wants to administer contemporary British capitalism just a bit less harshly than Conservatives do. It works to persuade the British working class that “less harsh” is the best they can hope and vote for. And British Conservatives can indeed smile and condescendingly approve such a Labour Party or else quibble with it over how much harshness today’s capitalism “needs.” Macron, also once a socialist, plays a similar role in France. Indeed, so do Biden and Trump in the United States, Justin Trudeau in Canada, and Olaf Scholz in Germany. All offer administrations of their contemporary capitalisms. None have programs aimed at solving modern capitalisms’ basic, accumulated, and persistently unsolved problems. Solutions would require first admitting what those problems are: cyclically recurring instability, increasingly unequal distributions of income and wealth, monied corruption of politics, mass media, and culture, and increasingly oppressive foreign policies that fail to offset a declining Western capitalism. Insistent denial across the collective West precludes admitting those problems, let alone fashioning solutions to them woven into programs for real change. Alternative governments administer; they dare not lead. Would a Kamala Harris-Tim Walz regime break with this pattern?

Their administrations will experiment with and perhaps oscillate between free-trade and protectionist policies—as past capitalist governments often did. In the United States, recent GOP and Democrat steps toward economic nationalism remain vote-seeking exceptions to still widespread commitments to neoliberal globalization. Western

megacorporations, including many based in the United States, welcome China's new role as the global champion of free trade (even as it retaliates moderately against tariffs and trade wars initiated by the collective West). Support remains strong for negotiations to shape generally acceptable global divisions of trade and investment flows. The latter are seen as profitable as well as a means to avoid dangerous wars. Elections will continue to include clashes between capitalism's free-trade and protectionist tendencies.

But the more fundamental issue of 2024 elections is mass anger in the collective West aroused by its historic decline and the effects of that decline on the mass of average citizens. How will that anger shape the elections?

The more extreme right wing recognizes and rides the deeper anger without, of course, grasping its relationship to capitalism. Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, and Trump are all examples. They all mock and deride the center-left and center-right governments that merely administer what they depict as a sinking ship that needs new, different leadership. But their donor base (capitalist) and long-standing ideology (pro-capitalist) block them from going beyond extreme scapegoating (of immigrants, ethnic minorities, heterodox sexualities, and foreign demons).

The mainstream media likewise cannot grasp the relationship of mass anger to capitalism. Thus they dismiss the anger as irrational or caused by inadequate "messaging" from mainstream influencers. For many months, mainstream economic pundits have bemoaned the "strange" coexistence of a "great economy" and [polls showing mass disappointment](#) at the "bad" economy. By "strange" they mean "stupid" or "ignorant" or "politically-motivated/dishonest": sets of words often condensed into "populist."

The left is jealous of the extreme right's significant mass base now in working-class areas. In most countries, the left has spent the last many decades trying to hold on to its working-class base as the mainstream's center-left movement pulled it away. That meant a greater or lesser shift from communist and anarchist to ever more "moderate" socialist and democratic affiliations. That shift included downplaying the goal of a comprehensively different post-capitalism in favor of the immediate goal of a state-fostered softer, humane capitalism where wages and benefits were greater, taxes more progressive, cycles more regulated, and minorities less oppressed. For that left, what mass anger it could recognize flowed from failures to achieve such a state-fostered softer capitalism, not from Western capitalism's decline.

As capitalism's dynamic center moved to Asia and elsewhere in the global South, decline set in among its old, more-or-less abandoned centers. Old center capitalists participated in

and profited greatly as the system relocated its dynamic center. Capitalists, both state and private, in the new centers profited even more. In the old centers, the rich and powerful shifted the burdens of decline onto the masses. In the new centers, the rich and powerful gathered the new capitalist wealth there mostly into their hands but with enough trickling down to satisfy large portions of their working classes. That's how capitalism works and always has. For the mass of employees, however, the ride upwards when capitalism's dynamic center is where they work and live is far more pleasant and hopeful than when decline sets in. The ride down provokes depression and traumas. When they fester without admission or discussion, they often morph into anger.

*Richard Wolff is the author of [Capitalism Hits the Fan](#) and [Capitalism's Crisis Deepens](#). He is founder of [Democracy at Work](#).*

AUGUST 14, 2024