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Why There Was No People's Rebellion Against a Fascist U.S. President: Nine Reasons



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

“Indeed a Fascist”

Last Friday's *New York Times* included Paul Krugman's elementarily accurate editorial observation that “Donald Trump...is indeed a fascist – an authoritarian willing to use violence to achieve his racial nationalist goals. So are many of his supporters. If you had any doubts,” Krugman rightly argued, the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol (by a frenzied mob of fascists directly instigated by Donald Trump and his Big fascist Lie that the 2020 election was stolen!) “should have ended them.”

Some of us lost our doubts about that long ago. In May of 2016, the liberal *New Yorker* commentator Adam Gopnik issued what turned out to be a prophetic warning seven months before Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton:

There is a simple formula for descriptions of Donald Trump: add together a qualification, a hyphen, and the word "fascist" ...his personality and his program belong exclusively to the same dark strain of modern politics: an incoherent program of national revenge led by a strongman; a contempt for parliamentary government and procedures; an insistence that the existing, democratically elected government...is in league with evil outsiders and has been secretly trying to undermine the nation; a hysterical militarism designed to no particular end other than the sheer spectacle of strength; an equally hysterical sense of beleaguerment and victimization; and a supposed suspicion of big capitalism entirely reconciled to the worship of wealth and 'success.'" (Adam Gopnik, "Going There With Donald Trump," *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2016.)

Riding the [neofascistic white-nationalist-extremist wave](#) that existed before his candidacy, Trump went on to be precisely the racist, nativist, sexist, and proto-fascist president we had every reason to expect him to be. I have documented President Trump's fascistic essence and conduct and the cult-like devotion of his most fervent supporters in [two](#) recent [books](#).

Trump and his fans and allies have responded to Biden's victory in precisely the ways one would expect fascists to react to an electoral humiliation inflicted largely by non-white voters: with Orwellian denial and violence. More fascistic violence is reasonably expected in Washington and many of the nation's state capitals in the next week.

All of which raises a disturbing question: how did this fascist president never once face anything close to a mass popular rebellion properly demanding his immediate overthrow?

This failure is about nine overlapping and interrelated obstacles to the understanding and action that was required.

Exceptionalist Conceit

The first such hurdle was the longstanding American- exceptionalist conceit that, in the ironic title of Sinclair Lewis's dystopian 1935 novel, "It Can't Happen Here." The "it" in Lewis's title was authoritarian fascism, falsely deemed impossible in the United States during and since Lewis' time because of the supposedly strong hold here of democratic and constitutional principles and institutions. Such authoritarianism has long been falsely portrayed as beyond the pale of possibility in a nation whose media and political authorities regularly and absurdly call the "world's greatest democracy."

Electoral Fetish/Madness

A second impediment is was deep hold of electoral fetishism on American political life, aptly summarized by Noam Chomsky on the eve of 2004 election:

Americans may be encouraged to vote, but not to participate more meaningfully in the political arena. Essentially the election is a method of marginalising the population. A huge

propaganda campaign is mounted to get people to focus on these personalised quadrennial extravaganzas and to think, “That’s politics.” But it isn’t. It’s only a small part of politics...The urgency is for popular progressive groups to grow and become strong enough so that centres of power can’t ignore them. Forces for change that have come up from the grass roots and shaken the society to its core include the labour movement, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women’s movement and others, cultivated by steady, dedicated work at all levels, every day, not just once every four years....in the election, sensible choices have to be made. But they are secondary to serious political action. The main task is to create a genuinely responsive democratic culture, and that effort goes on before and after electoral extravaganzas, whatever their outcome.

An equally trenchant analysis was advanced by the radical historian Howard Zinn in April of 2008, as “Obamania” spread across liberal and much of progressive America:

The election frenzy... seizes the country every four years because we have all been brought up to believe that voting is crucial in determining our destiny, that the most important act a citizen can engage in is to go to the polls and choose one of the two mediocrities who have already been chosen for us. It is a multiple-choice test so narrow, so specious, that no self-respecting teacher would give it to students...Historically, government, whether in the hands of Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, has failed its responsibilities, until forced to meet them by direct action: sit-ins and Freedom Rides for the rights of black people, strikes and boycotts for the rights of workers, mutinies and desertions of soldiers in order to stop a war...*Voting is easy and marginally useful, but it is a poor substitute for democracy, which requires direct action by concerned citizens.*

The dominant American definition of the nation’s supposedly democratic “politics” as voting once every four years, the notion that that “the most important act a citizen can engage in is to go to the polls,” militated against the immediate popular activism the Trump-Pence regime deserved and required. Again and again, the present author observed what Zinn called “Election Madness” prevent fellow Americans who rightly loathed the president and his administration from engaging in real popular resistance, claiming “I’ll vote against Trump” or, as the election season began, “I voted.”

Apathy/Demobilization/“Inverted Totalitarianism”

A third barrier was a critical ingredient of what the late left political scientist Sheldon Wolin considered to be America’s distinctive authoritarian “inverted totalitarianism” – the atomized demobilization of the populace. While what Wolin called the “classical totalitarian regimes” of fascist German and Soviet Russia aimed at the constant political mobilization of the populace, “inverted totalitarianism aims for the mass of the populace to be in a persistent state of political apathy. The only type of political activity expected or desired from the citizenry is voting. Low electoral turnouts are favorably received as an indication that the bulk of the populace has given up hope that the government will ever significantly help

them.” The second most common response to pleas to join popular movements against Trumpism-fascism (after “I’ll vote/I voted against him”) in my experience was a shrugging indifference to and/or disgust with any and all politics often combined with a sense that American political life is too ugly, boring, and/or impenetrable to merit attention.

Official Omission to Encourage Persistent Do-Nothing-ism

A fourth barrier to the kind of mass and dedicated anti-authoritarian popular action that the fascist Trump administration should have elicited was the sickening refusal of both the nation’s dominant media and the Democratic Party elite to speak with full candor about the terrible nature of the far-right menace that had taken hold of the world’s most dangerous executive branch. To speak the truth on what the nation faced would have meant calling for millions to turn off their televisions and get off the Internet long enough to take to the streets and public squares to build a transformative mass movement for regime change beneath and beyond the holy quadrennial election cycle. Militantly opposed to such a movement by institutional and ideological definition, the nation’s predominantly non-Trump corporate media kept up a steady diet of reporting and commentary on Trump’s latest transgressions that consistently hit on Trump’s outrageous conduct but deleted the broader fascist essence of his presidency. Routinely describing Trump and the racist and authoritarian major party he had taken charge as merely “conservative,” the thankfully and predominantly non-Trump media and the Democrats would not bring themselves to grasp or denounce the full horrific essence of Trump and Trumpism. Even “white-nationalist” and “authoritarian” were words too strong to describe Trump for most non-Trump media and political elites until the ugly summer of 2020.

As part of this great omission, these elites spent the first three years of the Trump administration trying to focus the populace’s anger at Trump on the dubious claim that he was simply a product of “Russian interference” in the nation’s supposed “great democracy” – this while dangling false hope for removal through constitutional impeachment first on grounds of treasonous collaboration with the Kremlin and then suddenly on his corrupt efforts to shakedown Ukraine in the fall and winter of 2019-20. The anti-Trump drumbeat in mainstream media and politics through early 2020 – when Trump’s viciously bungled response to the COVID-19 pandemic and his racist response to the George Floyd Rebellion took over – consistently focused on “Russia, Russia, Russia” and then (in October of 2019 and the next three months, culminating in Trump’s impeachment) Ukraine to the exclusion of Trump’s worst (fascistic and eco-cidal) crimes. Besides distracting the nation from Trump’s fascistic racism, sexism, nativism and (last but not at all least) environmental exterminism, the long and ultimately Trump-exonerating RussiaGate nightmare helped obscure the distinctly American origins and essence of the Trump phenomenon. Only as Trump’s virus-plagued White House went into obviously and transparently appalling space in the summer of 2020 did some outlier leftish segments of the corporate media (e.g. Chris Hayes and Medi

Hasan on MSNBC) come forward with the use of the “F’word” (fascism) to describe Trump and his backers. (The COVID-19 coverage, while properly and consistently critical of Trump, failed to connect his despicable fanning of the pandemic to his and his base and party’s underlying proto-fascism.)

Constitutional Fetishism

A fifth barrier to the popular anti-fascist movement and rebellion that the Trump years required was the fetish of the ancient, absurdly venerated 1788 U.S. Slaveowners’ Constitution. From Trump’s bizarre first week on, it should have been clear that the orange-brushed malignant one (Trump) was mentally (as well as morally) unfit for the demanding position to which he had been elevated. An immediate Vote of No Confidence should have been held in Congress, mandating the calling of a new national presidential election. But no such commonsense parliamentary procedure is permitted under the U.S. Constitution, which mandates absurdly time-staggered and strictly scheduled presidential elections just once every four years. That’s the ridiculously brief and spaced-out window when the corporate-managed citizenry gets its absurdly filtered (Electoral College) “input” on who sits in the nation’s most powerful job (the world’s most powerful job after 1945): two minutes once every 1460 days.

There is, it is true, a complex Constitutional procedure for the removal of a president on the grounds of incapacity – the 25th Amendment. But nobody took this remedy seriously, short of a finally crippling presidential stroke or some other event that might have rendered Trump unable to tweet. The Vice President’s active participation is required under the 25th Amendment and Trump’s Christian fascist monkey Veep was never going to 25th Trump. Pence can’t do it even after Trump sent armed fascist goons into the Capitol with Pence’s family in the congressional assembly last week! And besides, taking Trump out via the 25th Amendment would only have given the White House to a demented evangelical fascist. Who wanted Mike Pence’s apocalyptic fingers anywhere near the nuclear codes?

There was of course the chimerical impeachment path. Again and again, we were told, Trump could be properly disciplined and possibly even removed through the Constitution’s impeachment clause. As of January 13th, Trump has set a record by being impeached twice. The House of Representatives had no choice but to undertake the second one after the Attack on the Capitol. The fascist asshole deserves ten more before he’s done. Super, but so what? Actual removal (desperately required) has been blocked under the nation’s sacred parchment because the U.S. Senate has been majority Republican. The hallowed Constitution requires just a simple majority in the U.S. House of Representatives to impeach but a very high bar – two thirds – of the U.S. Senate to remove a president under “our” beloved Constitution. It might seem absurd that the U.S. Senate is majority-Republican given the fact the Trumpified Republican Party is widely hated and deeply unpopular in the United States. But this irrationality (from a democratic perspective, at least) is fully constitutional, for the

nation's unjustly hallowed charter grossly exaggerates the Senate voice of the nation's whitest, most reactionary, Republican, gun-addicted, racist, and proto-fascistic regions. The Constitution assigns two Senators to each U.S. state regardless of (steep) differences in state population.

Impeachment was never the answer to Trump that many Democrats and some moderate Republicans wanted us to think it was.

Fear

Sixth, we must include fear – very real concerns that many Americans had about (a) being physically attacked, possibly even shot, by armed right-wing extremists for coming out into the streets for Trump's removal and (b) getting COVID-19 in mass actions. It is true that record numbers of people came out to protest racist police brutality during the great George Floyd Rebellion in the summer of 2020 but we should bear in mind that these crowds were very disproportionately young, without large-scale participation from people over thirty partly for reasons of physical fear, with the pandemic as a major concern.

Fear of fascists and COVID-19 are a real and sometimes overlapping thing in America. When I have asked retail employees in Iowa why they don't say anything when an angry white anti-creep comes into a store without a mask on, the answer is always the same: "I don't want to get shot."

Excessively Localized and Identitarian Politics

A seventh barrier was excessively localized and identity-politicized activism. Again and again in Chicago, local Black Lives Matters activists refused to frame their issue in any national way beyond incidental and brief reference to the white-supremacist racist cop-loving and cop-backed Racist in Chief (and Kyle Rittenhouse fan) in the White House. They didn't want to think or hear about Trump and Trumpism-fascism, preferring to focus just on local demands like the chimerical quest for "community control of the Chicago police." A two-hour post-Kenosha "BLM" vigil on the Near West Side of Chicago could barely bring itself to mention the names of the two white anti-fascists the Trumpy teen fascist Rittenhouse murdered during protests over the racist police shooting of Jacob Blake. An excessive identity-obsessed reluctance and even refusal to hear from and coordinate with white radical anti-racist antifascists prevented useful dialogue on how to take righteous local struggles to a national level to confront the white supremacist regime in Washington – and even on how to build a powerful movement for defunding the racist police in Chicago itself. Anti-fascist activists tell me it was much the same in other locales, with the exceptions of Portland and Seattle.

No Real Left

Eighth, the continuing and longtime absence of any sophisticated, powerful, and relevant, many-sided Left of significance in late Neoliberal America is a significant part of the tragic equation. No such movement would have met the rise of Trump and Trumpism-fascism with

four years of avoidance, denial, passivity, and diversion. There are many factors in play behind this pathetic portside weakness but two that have struck this writer and activist as particularly relevant alongside excessive localism and excessive identitarianism in the last four years are (i) the crippling holds of sectarianism (an almost pathological refusal to reach across tribal-ideological and organizational lines to form a united anti-fascist front) and (ii) single-issue silo politics whereby group A cares about the climate, group B cares about reproductive rights, group C cares about a higher minimum wages, group D cares about teachers' working conditions and so on.

The Ridiculous Trumpenleft

Ninth, intellectuals and activists of all kinds flopped egregiously when it came to the task of grasping and explaining the real nature of the threat posed by Trump and Trumpism. At some point in the not-so distant future, I will write an essay on the failure of most of the academic and intellectual class (with notable exceptions like Jason Stanley, Anthony DiMaggio, Henry Giroux and perhaps Timothy Snyder among a few others) when it comes to understanding Trump and Trumpism as fascist or at least fascistic. (We now have the truly nauseating and comical absurdity of historian and noted "fascism expert" Robert Paxton [reversing himself and deciding that Trump is, yes a fascist after all on January 14!!!](#))

...In the meantime, can the Left, such as it is, have a reckoning with its oxymoronic Trumpenleft? A number of self-proclaimed lefties I know need to take a long look in the mirror and explain why they said and did so little against a fascist White House. Some of them actively aided and abetted the monster and his backers, sadly and absurdly enough given the fact that the neo-Bircher American Right would gladly lynch every Marxist and left anarchist they could get their hands on if they ever seize full state power.

When Obama was president and I was writing and speaking overtime against Obama's nauseating and murderous neoliberalism and imperialism, I didn't see comrades deflecting away from my radical critiques, saying "oh well, but what about George W. Bush?" (whose horrible presidency I also wrote and spoke against at length). That was appropriate. Bush's crimes didn't exonerate Obama any more than Tiberius's crimes exonerated Caligula.

Then we got an actual malignant pandemo-fascist president – *Donald J. "Go Back to Your Crime Infested Country" and "Let's Electrify the Southern Border" and "COVID-19 Effects Almost Nobody" Trump*. Drones of online Lefties met my consistently Marxist criticisms (generally combined with properly scathing critiques of the corporate and imperial Democrats' appeasement) of the demented fascist oligarch Trump with seemingly endless deflections to the undeniable awfulness (documented at no small length by the present writer) of Obama and Hillary Clinton, as if I hadn't regularly and systematically exposed and denounced that awfulness (like I did with Dubya and like I did with Bill Clinton when I first started publishing on current events in the late 1990s.)

What is this “Trumpenleft” (a term I seem to have invented)? For me it refers to the heartbreakingly large number of avowedly left thinkers and activists – I’d rather not name names (many publish in the same venues and platforms where my writing appears) – who dismissed, mocked, and smeared Leftists’, liberals’, and progressives’ concerns about Trump and Trumpism-fascism as “hysteria,” childish “wolf-crying,” stupidity, “virtue-signaling,” “identity politics,” “political correctness,” and collaboration with the corporate-neoliberal Democratic Party. For the many open and (more commonly) *de facto* Trumpenlefties in my orbit during the Trump presidency, it was more important to “own the libs” and smack down the Democrats than it was to fight white nationalism and fascism. They spent the years under Trump reflexively deflecting to the undeniable sins and culpability of the Democrats the minute a Left (or progressive or liberal) thinker dared to mention the dangerous conduct and trajectory of the Trump White House and its backers. Even I (author of at least four books and literally hundreds of radically critical Left anti-capitalist essays on the deeply conservative corporate, capitalist, imperialist, and objectively white-supremacist nature of the Democratic Party and its leading standard bearers) had to receive innumerable lectures on the evil of the Democrats nearly every time I criticized the in-power Trump, his party, and/or backers between 2016 and 2021. In some rare cases, I ran across “leftists” who actually embraced Trump’s election and presidency, absurdly positing Trump as a pro-working-class populist and anti-imperialist. For the Trumpenleft, the bane of my in-box and “social media” accounts for four years, it was as if the Democrats were the only ruling class party that mattered — this even as Trump committed one new outrage after another with the open assistance of the Trumpified Republican Party and the help of Democratic appeasement.

Some of the Trumpenleft’s key identifiers:

+ Constant deflection from the fascist Trump to neoliberal Obama and the Clintons and the dismal Democrats more broadly combined with constant false equivalence between Trump and the dismal Dems.

+ The recurrent false claim that the two major US capitalist parties are “the same,” *as if properly seeing them both as capitalist, imperialist, and white-supremacist organizations means to idiotically claim they are “identical.”*

+ Constantly rediscovery of something we all know on the actual Left — that the Democrats are capitalist, imperialist, and racist.

+ Absurdly inordinate energy focused on criticizing Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Bernie Sanders, the leftmost people in Congress, of all the people in elective federal office to hold up for criticism

+ An often Green Party-affiliated ballot-fetishist obsession with who you did and didn’t vote “for.”

+ The nauseating charge that you were an ally of despicable corporate Joe Biden because you didn’t want a second presidential term for the fascist Donald Trump.

- + Recoiling at the notion that Trump and Trumpism are at all fascist and claiming falsely that it has been mainstream liberal conventional wisdom to call Trump fascist all along — not true, actually.
- + Lack of reasonable specificity in the use of the word fascism, leading to the defense of Trump and Trumpism against the charge of fascism with the claim that the fascism-appeasing Democrats are themselves fascists.
- + Claiming that the Trump base is motivated primarily by economic grievance rather than mainly by white supremacy, nativism, and sexism tied in with authoritarianism.
- + The empirically false, statistically illiterate myth of Trump as a product of working-class support.
- + Undue enthusiasm for fascist propagandists like Tucker Carlson combined with a bizarre willingness to channel right-wing propaganda (e.g. the Hunter Biden charges that *the dodgy Trumpenlibertarian Glen Greenwald revealingly tried to make into a Comey moment for Trump on the eve of the 2020 election*).
- + Common overlaps with 9/11 Trutherism, Seth Richery, anti-maskery, anti-vaxxery.
- + Creepy respect for Putin, Assad, and the Hindu nationalist and militarist cult-member Tulsi Gabbard.
- + Claiming that Trump is/was just another corrupt neoliberal, no different than any other.
- + Calling Trump a populist, in a good way.
- + Recurrent mistaking of the episodic “lesser evil” imperialism of Putin’s Russia as some kind of principled anti-imperialism.

The online Trumpenleft hasn’t missed a beat just because Trump and his fascist minions physically and murderously assaulted the U.S. Capitol in support of Trump’s Big Election Lie. It is railing against government repression of the fascist right, against Trump’s banning at Twitter and Facebook in the wake of the Attack on the Capitol (the two social media giants had no choice after the failed putsch attempt) and even against the open fascist Steve Bannon’s banning at YouTube, which the 2016 Green Party vice-presidential candidate has (proving that the mostly older and Caucasian Trumpenleft is not 100% white) absurdly called the ultimate example of (you guessed it) “fascism.”

Numerous people with whom I share publication outlets and social media networks have opposed the impeachment of Trump for instigating a fascistic coup attempt that killed at least five people and seriously injured many others. How laughably pathetic and, in some cases, cynical. My eyes never stop rolling at the soulless buffoonery of these low-brow imbeciles and scornful charlatans on the red-brown edges of what remains of the American Left.

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