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Kanye West's fascism and the crisis of American society and culture



The open embrace of anti-Semitism and Hitlerism by rapper-millionaire Kanye West is an abhorrent episode, but it should not come as a shock to anyone who has observed the unfolding crisis of American social and cultural life. West, or Ye as he now likes to be called, is a product of that terminally diseased society and culture. His present positions cannot be understood without grappling with broader issues.

On Thursday, in an interview with ultra-right talk show host Alex Jones and accompanied by fellow fascist Nick Fuentes, West asserted that the “Jewish media has made us feel like the Nazis and Hitler have never offered anything of value to the world... But [the Nazis] did good things too. We gotta stop dissing the Nazis all the time.” He continued later, “Every human being has something of value that they brought to the table, especially Hitler.” West also insisted that the Nazi leader “didn't kill six million Jews. That's just like

factually incorrect.” Later on Thursday, West tweeted the image of a Nazi swastika inside the Star of David, leading to his being banned by Twitter.

One of the most prominent and supposedly “influential” figures in American popular culture in the 21st century, with over 160 million records sold, has come out as a defender of the greatest mass murderer and the most heinous crimes in world history. The advocacy of generally right-wing views by entertainment industry figures in the US, often when they would get rich and old, is nothing new, but this is unprecedented.

West’s outburst comes in the context of a pronounced increase in the number of anti-Semitic attacks and hate crimes. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reports that such crimes in the US rose to an all-time high in 2021: 2,717 incidents, a 34 percent increase over 2020. Attacks on Jewish institutions increased by 61 percent over the year before.

Who is Kanye West, and what does he represent? Despite claims that rap artists are the tribunes of the very oppressed, West comes from a comfortable middle class background, like numerous other performers in the genre. His father was a former Black Panther, a photojournalist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and, later, a “Christian counselor”; his mother served as chair of the English Department at Chicago State University.

West doesn’t speak for the oppressed or any section of the working class. To the extent he emulates lumpen elements in society, that expresses the essentially inauthentic character of the hip-hop world. The latter’s almost obligatory degradations have been seized upon by the billion-dollar recording industry for its own financial purposes.

West’s emergence as a full-blown anti-Semite is not an isolated phenomenon. After all, he and Fuentes were only recently guests of the former president of the United States and leader of one of its two major political parties, Donald Trump. Various Republicans are now furiously attempting to erase the social media evidence of their support for or connections to West, but the evidence is indelible.

The American media and political establishment is currently waxing indignant at West’s comments, but the usual liberal handwringing and cure-alls will not make this go away.

The condemnations of West in the US media and from Joe Biden and Democratic Party politicians are intensely hypocritical given that the Biden administration is currently in alliance with a Ukrainian regime infested with fascists, who regularly celebrate the history of Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with the Nazis. The hip-hop performer’s proclamation of support for Hitler coincides with a general relativizing and trivializing of German fascism’s crimes.

In reality, it is impossible to oppose fascism successfully without opposing capitalism. This was true for Germany in the 1930s and it remains true in the US.

Anti-Semitic filth arises inexorably out of the crisis of capitalism. Modern anti-Semitism emerged in the late 19th century as part of the response of the ruling elites to the growth of the mass working class (especially in the aftermath of the revolutionary Paris Commune in 1871) and the threat of socialism. “The privileged classes—the bourgeoisie and still substantial landowning interests—sought to cultivate a mass base for the defense of the existing social order,” Marxists have explained, particularly among middle class elements threatened by the development of industrial society.

The American ruling class, besieged and terrified by the growth of opposition to its rule among extensive layers of the population of every ethnicity and background, desperately needs to distract attention from war, the pandemic and social inequality. In this effort, it secretes ideological poison from every pore. To organize a fraudulent “national unity” across class lines, the bourgeoisie seeks to whip up social backwardness and create false enemies in the form of Muslims, immigrants, recalcitrant workers and now, once again, “the Jews.”

If this is the general framework within which the surfacing of anti-Semitism in the American entertainment and sports world (Kyrie Irving) occurs, there is also the specific degenerated state of culture to take into account.

For decades, the American establishment has nourished social backwardness with virtually no opposition. From the late 1970s onward, a process given renewed vigor and “purpose” by the dissolution of the USSR in late 1991, official US society has directed its energies toward denigrating elementary social solidarity and encouraging individualism in its most rancid, anti-social forms.

At the same time, paradoxically, facing up to the “real world,” the population has been told a thousand thousand times, involves never sticking one’s neck out, worshipping the “free market” and bowing down before celebrity and success.

Patriotism, chauvinism, militarist violence, religious bigotry, political conformism, anti-intellectualism, nothing foul has been alien to the ruling class. The catch phrases became “Greed is good” and “Force works,” and the condition of the oppressed was blamed on their lack of “personal responsibility.”

With greater fervor than Henry Ford could have summoned up, the powers that be declared once again that history was “bunk” and deliberately fostered ignorance, including of the great tragedies of the 20th century such as the Holocaust. To justify their endless

series of bloody, neo-colonial wars, US political leaders adopted the technique of the Big Lie and the language of the underworld as never before.

The extreme right made its specific contribution to the degeneration of the society and culture, but the Democratic Party and its “left” orbit assisted the process by their turn to race and gender tribalism, bringing out the most self-centered and egotistical qualities in the upper-middle class.

Under these conditions, American culture has suffered grievously. Numerous deplorable trends have appeared, including pornographic sadism, some more accepted by the media than others. In any case, hardly anyone blinks an eye at the most savage brutality, often identified with “realism” and even “radicalism.” Certain film directors have vied with one another to see who could achieve the greatest degree of coldness and matter-of-factness in the face of human suffering.

Hip-hop and rap came to life in these unfavorable circumstances. Although there was no doubt an anti-establishment element in the earliest rap music in the 1970s, the genre soon outgrew its radicalism for the most part. Again, various social trends played a part. For one thing, the official Civil Rights leadership had turned to the right and repudiated any program to ameliorate the conditions of the poor. Portions of the African American and other minority petty bourgeoisie threw their lot in with the profit system and scrambled for a share of the spoils. Selfish “affirmative action” schemes and dreams of successful “black capitalism” dominated the black upper-middle class. Inequality *among* African Americans has grown exponentially and malignantly since the 1970s.

In the atmosphere of Reagan-Thatcherite reaction, and later, post-Soviet capitalist triumphalism, hip-hop came under very bad influences. Observers have pointed out that by the early 1980s, sadly, aspiring rap artists were among the most mercenary to be found anywhere.

Pitchfork magazine observes, a little shamefacedly, that since its inception, “rap has always had money on its collective mind. The accumulation of wealth and aspirational living are central themes in rap because, of course, it’s the music of America’s marginalized communities.” Rap isn’t, “of course,” simply the music of the “marginalized” and, more crucially, there is no preordained reason why the downtrodden should become obsessed with the acquisition of wealth. On the contrary, under the right conditions, as history demonstrates, the oppressed become gripped by the desire for progressive, even revolutionary social change.

In any event, notwithstanding the undoubted talent and even occasional scintillating skills of various hip-hop performers, the overall trajectory of the genre was determined by the prevailing regressive social and cultural trends.

This was covered up by media pundits, academics and the pseudo-left, who apologized for hip-hop's sins to a reprehensible degree, glorifying backwardness and retarding the development of genuinely anticapitalist consciousness.

One can find a hundred articles and essays claiming that rap is “the voice of an otherwise underrepresented group,” extolling “Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance,” and boasting that forged “in the fires of the South Bronx, New York, and Kingston, Jamaica, hip hop became the clarion call of youth rebellion and a generation-defining movement.”

West himself first emerged politically as a self-proclaimed spokesman for African Americans, along the lines of a run-of-the-mill race politician, asserting, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, that George W. Bush “doesn't care for black people.” That brought him praise from the International Socialist Organization (now dissolved), which asserted that it could “never be forgotten that Kanye is indeed a Black man living in a white man's world. He is a performer in an industry that is greatly dominated by exploitation and oppression.”

In fact, the black nationalist movement has always had about it the odor of anti-Semitism. As recently as April 2022, long after West had entered the Trump camp, *Jacobin* magazine was still defending the performer, insisting that his “turbulent antics and generalized disorder” were “an essential piece of the remarkable—and remarkably chaotic—career he has built.”

West's anti-Semitic and pro-Hitler remarks have rightly provoked widespread disgust and outrage. They speak to the vast social, cultural and moral polarization occurring in the US and globally. The ruling class and its hangers-on are lurching ever more dramatically and grotesquely to the right, in the process dredging up all the filth and depravity to which they have had recourse in their history of oppression and class dictatorship. The capitalists will stop at nothing.

At the same time, however, the same state of advanced crisis is producing a mass, molecular radicalization among tens and hundreds of millions. That movement will reject racism and race politics, anti-Semitism, the politics of despair, ignorance and backwardness. It will base itself on what's best in humanity.