

We failed to stop the rise of fascism. What comes next?

How to navigate the future without a map.

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I don't know where we go from here. Neither does anyone else.

On the morning I wrote this I woke up groggy from my chemically assisted sleep to a barrage of horrors. Donald Trump signing anti-trans legislation into law. Donald Trump, attempting to end birthright citizenship. Donald Trump, saluting and dancing with the Village People. Proud Boys tramping through the streets of our nation's capital reveling in their newfound impunity.

The dark days have come again because they never really left. All the battles and street-fighting and organizing from 2017–2020 bought us four years of badly negotiated peace while the rot continued unabated.

Rot. It's a term I see a lot these days. My colleague and friend Ed Zitron refers to the hell our tech Oligarchs continue to force upon us as the "rot economy". Charlie Angus, a member of the Canadian Parliament, used the term "rage rot" to refer to now-President Trump's Christmas Day message suggesting Canada should become the 51st state. Over the last year I've seen a slew of articles bemoaning "democratic decay", "the rot plaguing democracy" and the "deep rot" at the heart of our political system.

One thing I have done over the last four years is learn how to efficiently process the carcasses of wild animals. Some I hunt or raise and slaughter but many are roadkill, harvested from the side of the road. My family comes from rural Oklahoma so perhaps some epigenetic hillbilly memory makes this so satisfying to me. But it's also changed the way I understand the word "rot".

Rot starts from the bone. If you look at the back leg of an animal that's been hit by a truck you'll see it spreading, a deep black bruise, from the ball-and-socket joint out. If your goal is to preserve good meat then the key is to remove those limbs from the body and the meat from the bone, sooner rather than later. When I think of rot, and how to arrest it, I think of dismemberment.

This seems to be the one thing almost every political person in the country agrees with: the United States as it is must be dismembered, disassembled, sliced from the rotten bone and changed into something more palatable for whoever holds the knife. Joe Biden and the Democratic Party failed primarily because they refused to start cutting. Their successors will not make the same mistake.

On the opposing side of the aisle today I see a lot of angry people arguing about what the knife ought to be cutting, and how much better they'd use it if it passed into their hands. That doesn't help any of us right now. Migrants are dying of thirst while vigilantes destroy water drops left by activists likely to be criminalized soon. Homeless Americans trying not to freeze to death at night may soon find themselves arrested, forced into camps where they'll be made to labor for pennies. Neo-Nazis cheer as the billionaire behind the throne makes fascist salutes from the White House with smirking impunity.

The knife is so far away from our hands I find myself distrusting anyone who wastes time bemoaning how it ought to be used. Where does that leave us, though? Is there anything to do in this deep winter besides listen to the jackals howl outside our doors?

I have an answer to this question: Yes. Now is the time to try. To test the boundaries of our collective cage. Now is the time to experiment.

Since the time of the Founding Fathers, this country and its system have been referred to as "the American Experiment". One could see the very term as narcissistic, yet another solipsistic gasp of American exceptionalism. But I tend to think the appellation is one we've earned. This country is and always has been a test tube for new, often bad, ideas about how a society ought to run. American civilization's only core value is "throw shit at the wall and see what sticks".

That also happens to be the only real way to fight back against authoritarianism.

There's a scientific paper I often bring up, "The evolution of overconfidence", which set out to explain why people so often badly over-estimate their own abilities. The authors pondered:

"...overconfidence also leads to faulty assessments, unrealistic expectations and hazardous decisions, so it remains a puzzle how such a false belief could evolve or remain stable in a population of competing strategies that include accurate, unbiased beliefs."

The conclusion they came to was that, when significant resources are contested between two organisms, the organism most willing to TRY to take said resources, even if it is not the strongest, tends to succeed often enough to make overconfidence evolutionarily beneficial. This is the most basic explanation for how fascist movements continue to arise and, improbably, take power.

Put simply, they always go for it.

January 6th provides us a fine example. It was a ludicrous, idiotic, reckless burst of stupidity mocked for years by everyone except the perpetrators, who four years later find themselves with ultimate power. They didn't win because they were the strongest. They won because they kept trying. The people who should've stopped them feared bad press, the pushback of looking "unfair", and so stood back while they made smaller grabs, gobbling up bits of the media, local school boards, narrative oxygen around issues like immigration.

And now we're here.

The coming days will be ugly. Yet I feel it's my job to remind you that, bad as this is, we are not Weimar Germany, and this is not 1933. Trump and his lieutenants aren't battle-hardened trench fighters, they're Elon Musk and a coterie of half-enthusiastic half-frightened billionaires who got rich gambling on apps to let you rate your classmate's tits. Their foot soldiers are used car salesmen from Encino, not Freikorps. The United States is not starving to death and crippled by war, it's irritated and anxious because its working people have been robbed blind by those same billionaires.

The one thing we do have in common with Weimar is that our fascists now find themselves at the head of a state that capitulated to them not out of enthusiastic consent but exhaustion, cowardice and above all a feeling that it didn't really matter.

That last one, the feeling that nothing matters, the system is fucked, there's no point in engaging or organizing- that is the most powerful weapon they have right now. Because that feeling stops you and everyone else from opposing them. From interrupting as they reach out, yet again, to take something you love or need.

But there's a danger here too. In moments of stress and anger the desire to DO SOMETHING, ANYTHING can be intense. And when we're swept up in that mood the natural tendency is defaulting to the things we know best. The things we've done before. The marches and chants and poster-boards we've been walking and shouting and carrying all century long. Going back to those old tactics without iteration or acknowledgement of their limitations is a road to failure.

I've been to a lot of protests, starting at Zuccotti Park in 2011 and ending last year in Chicago, at the DNC. One of the most dispiriting moments of my life was listening to young anti-genocide activists vow to shut down the DNC, to "make it great like '68". This was a reference to the 1968 DNC. Mass protests were ignited when the preferred anti-war candidate, Eugene McCarthy, was rat-fucked by Democratic party insiders in favor of Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. The protests were quashed violently with tear gas and truncheons. Protesters chanted, "The whole world is watching."

It may have been then. But the war went on. Nixon won election, then re-election, and then finally pulled U.S. troops out of Vietnam after dropping enough bombs on South-East Asia to have ended several Third Reichs.

During one particularly bad night at the 2024 DNC, miles away from the event itself, a march of self-described "radical protesters" confronted the police while chanting "the whole world is watching" and I can say, unequivocally, it was not. The only people watching were me, several other journalists, and a handful of folks on Twitter. The police, as they kettled, maced and arrested members of the crowd, barely seemed to care. The DNC didn't shut down. Kamala Harris was made the nominee. There wasn't even a real anti-war candidate for party insiders to rat-fuck in her favor.

Garrison Davis, my colleague and friend, remarked to me afterwards that the DNC had been somehow much more depressing than its Republican counterpart a month earlier. He was right.

On the stage floor all the Democrats had to present were aging celebrities and Bill goddamn Clinton, drooling out the same platitudes that led us to the Trump era in the first place and doing their best to ignore delegates who walked out and slept in front of the convention center to protest the genocide in Gaza.

Meanwhile in the streets a lot of very nice, earnest people (alongside a handful of grifters) did the only thing they could think of doing after months of imbibing footage of war crimes. They walked around and shouted. The police and city largely let them, because they knew none of it was going to change a damn thing.

I'd felt tremendous optimism right after Joe Biden resigned, not because I loved Kamala but because it was something shocking, an upset, an experiment. Or at least it seemed that way at first. The DNC made it clear that Biden's advisors and consiglieres, the powers behind the throne, still ran the show, and would not allow any real change. The rot had spread too far, spoiling the meat, spoiling everything.

It was my accurate belief in 2020 that the Democratic Party, broken as it was, had the numbers and organizational capacity to slow the spread of fascism for a short time. It was my inaccurate belief in 2024 that this might still be the case. I had hope because I'd lost any sense of actual productive optimism. We lean on hope when we have no ideas to brace ourselves against.

Hope, as George Miller reminded us, is a mistake. If you don't fix what's broken, you'll go crazy. That's where we are now, going crazy. Committed Democrats, the decent regular people who fill the party not the soulless shoggoths of capital who run things, are going crazy because they got what they thought they wanted for four years. We returned a "decent" normal politician to office, he kept the economy humming along, got us out of Afghanistan...and everyone still hated him.

Leftists are going crazy for different reasons. In 2020 this country saw the largest sustained uprising of its modern history and nothing, fundamentally, changed. In its aftermath, the oligarchs who control social media set to tweaking, buying or outright inverting their algorithms to ensure no similar movement would ever gain that kind of steam again. Their efforts have been largely successful.

And yet many organizers, be they progressive social democrats, communists, anarchists, whatever, are still stuck in the same loops. Behind each march to nowhere and tired chant is an equally tired hope. The social democrats dream of a giant, continent-sized Denmark, with cyclists replacing Ford Trucks, universal healthcare, good schools and a bevy of other lovely things both political parties will fight tooth and nail to prevent. The authoritarian Communists dream of a new October Revolution, but *this* one will work rather than just creating a new dictatorship that ages and dies within the space of a single human lifetime.

Anarchists tend to be very good at seeing the flaws in the logic and futility of the hopes of the previous two groups, but they are just as bereft of ideas for how to stop what's coming. Some tendencies dream of collapse, of an end to industrial society and either living in the woods eating berries or some sort of solarpunk daydream, wildflowers sprouting from rubble. The latter is a nice dream but try offering either future to a single mom who can't afford her 5-year-old's insulin and see how she reacts.

Most of the anarchists I know define themselves as "helpers" before anything else. They'll cheerfully admit they don't know how to solve the big problem but they do know how to provide free eye exams to homeless people once a month, or do water drops down at the border so migrants don't die of dehydration, or crowdsource insulin from their friends to help that single mom through a bad week or two.

If you are where we all are right now, bereft of ideas, staring down the barrel of a nightmare, those are good folks to know. Like everyone else, they're defaulting to what they've been doing, but at least what they've been doing helps people.

The larger solutions to our common woes, if they ever arrive, will be something new. Something we haven't tried yet. I feel very confident they won't take the form of another march or involve everyone finally agreeing to be the same kind of communist/anarchist/whatever. Shawn Fain, chief of the United Auto Workers Union, has called for a General Strike in 2028, and that so far is the only clear plan I've heard anyone make that feels like it has a ghost of a chance.

It's an audacious plan, and I recommend reading what Shawn's laid out about it. But half of why I support the idea is because it IS audacious. The religious right got to where they are right now in this country by being bold. As I laid out earlier, fascists win because they always try, and this is something we need to copy.

Shit can be different, but not unless we're willing to try different shit.

Many pundits and columnists were shocked and horrified by the massive and instant support for Luigi Mangione when he assassinated the CEO of United Healthcare. Both the tutting gatekeepers of traditional media and the actually-sweating oligarchs characterized this as evidence

of bloodthirstiness. Some leftists did the same and interpreted support for Mangione as proof that the body politic did, indeed, have energy for an uprising.

I saw something different. More than the actual killing itself I think people were excited to see someone try something new. Luigi adopted a novel tactic, carried it out in a novel way, and in doing so he did more to punish one of the oligarchs bleeding us dry than the entire Occupy movement.

Novelty is the one thing that ties Donald Trump and Luigi Mangione together. The enthusiastic public response to both men's actions and the simultaneous revulsion of traditional elites are mirrors of themselves. In 2024, Trump still had enough novelty to convince people that he might upset the apple cart in some way that benefited them. He rode a global anti-incumbent wave back to the White House.

The consequence of this is that he and his are now on their way to becoming the new establishment. This is an underappreciated downside of the fact that most legacy media outlets have started moderating their coverage of Trump, if not embracing him outright. He is being normalized. His toadies, Musk chief among them, are now our legitimate powers. What novelty remains will fade rapidly.

I suspect the same thing will be true of the copycats who follow in Luigi Mangione's footsteps.

Most of his plagiarists won't be good at what they do. At best newly heightened security will see Luigi's plagiarists dropped before they can pull a trigger. At worse, innocent people will be killed or maimed by bullets and bombs that fail to hit their intended targets or do but with a lot of collateral damage.

I don't know what the next new thing will be. But between Trump and Mangione there aren't many old norms left to shatter. We are in a time of enormous potential. Many new things are about to be tried and as awful and bloody as the fallout from some of them will be we all have no choice but to strap in and roll some dice of our own.

The present is ugly, the future unwritten. The only way we'll make it a better one is if we embrace boldness, creativity and, perhaps, a little overconfidence of our own.

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