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The January 6 Insurrection: Historical and Global Contexts

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Abstract

The January 6, 2021 Trumpist insurrection is in continuity with centuries of white mob violence in the U.S., going back to the thwarted 1861 attempt to attack the Capitol in order to overturn Lincoln's election. At the same time Trumpism as a modern phenomenon also exhibits links and affinities to contemporary global neofascist and rightwing populist movements. Although small towns and rural areas were heavily represented among the participants on January 6, analysts need -- in the spirit of Marx -- to avoid the Lassallean trap of writing off rural populations as uniformly conservative. In this sense, we need to grasp the pervasive racism at the root of Trumpism and its analogues without falling into a view of rural areas as monolithic.

Keywords: sociology, political science, neofascism, lynch mob, Yellow Vests, 1861 attack on Capitol, Viktor Urban, Donald Trump, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle

Introduction: An Eerily Familiar White Mob

General Winfield Scott is best known as the leader of the U.S. military during the imperialist Mexican War, but not for his pro-constitutional actions. However, in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, historian Ted Widmer reminded us of an 1861 incident when Scott commanded troops that suppressed a pro-slavery rebellion against the certification of the electoral victory of president-elect Abraham Lincoln.

As Widmer demonstrates, the much-vaunted British attack that burned Washington, DC to the ground in 1814 was not -- as has been claimed widely since January 6-- the last time the city had been subjected to an armed attack before 2021. For another assault, eerily similar to the 2021 one, had occurred in 1861:

On Feb. 13, a mob gathered outside the Capitol and tried to force its way in to disrupt the counting of the electoral certificates that would confirm Abraham Lincoln's election three months earlier. The key difference between then and now is that the building was guarded by men who were prepared for the onslaught.... Virginia's former governor Henry Wise was openly calling for an invasion, and many diary accounts and newspaper articles of the time expressed fear that some kind of takeover was imminent.... (Widmer 2021)

Widmer continues:

But the militias had not reckoned with the determination of Gen. Winfield Scott, an aging war hero charged with the defense of the capital.... With military dispatch, he stationed soldiers around the Capitol and left no doubt what he would do to any violent miscreant who tried to come into the building to spoil the electoral count. Colorfully, Scott warned that any such intruder would "be lashed to the muzzle of a twelve-pounder and fired out

the window of the Capitol.” He added, “I would manure the hills of Arlington with the fragments of his body.” (Widmer 2021)

The 1861 confrontation ended without serious damage, either materially or politically:

On the morning of Feb. 13, large numbers of people streamed into Washington, determined to prevent the ceremony that would confirm Lincoln’s election. Already, they seemed dangerous, “a caldron of inflammable material,” ready for “revolution,” as one observer noted. But when they reached the Capitol, they were prevented from entering unless they had a special pass.... Through his careful preparation, [Scott] may have saved the Republic, even before Lincoln arrived to save it in his own way. (Widmer 2021)

Obviously, the attempted insurrection of February 13, 1861 by these Confederates *avant la lettre* was a harbinger of the Civil War, launched by the firing on Fort Sumter less than two months later.

But 1861 also helps us to grasp what happened on January 6, 2021. For while the recent insurrection can be regarded as an expression of neofascism, the attack also has roots in those defenders of slavery who tried to storm the Capitol a century and a half ago in an attempt to thwart Lincoln's election. The successors of the Confederates are of course exemplified by the southern lynch mobs that helped defeat Radical Reconstruction and that continued their mayhem up through the 1960s. Their echoes -- and more than that -- could be observed on January 6, 2021, as seen not only in the display of the Confederate flag by the mob inside the Capitol, but also in the erection of a gallows complete with a noose by the crowd outside.

In this sense, Jan. 6, 2021 exhibited deep continuities with 150 years and more of U.S. history, that is, of white, especially southern white, resistance to any form of empowerment of people of color. This kind of resistance waxed violent over Lincoln’s very limited opposition to slavery in 1860-61; it did so in the early twentieth century in order to relegate Blacks to second class citizenship; it did so with the mob violence against racial integration in the 1950s and 1960s. And, I would argue, this form of resistance emerged again on January 6, 2021 in opposition to the election of Joe Biden, whose victory was due to substantial support from Blacks, Latinx, Asians, and Native Americans. Also in this sense, January 6 had deep roots in U.S. history, in the white mobs that have suppressed democracy all these years and whose passions have been stirred up anew by Donald Trump’s demagoguery.

One thing that stands out about the January 6 mob is that it looks angry, but not at all frightened. Its members exude a confident, sometimes even joyful air of impunity, in this sense similar to almost all lynch mobs. This can be seen in their appeal to the Capitol police to join them, “You know we are right.” This sense of righteousness is undoubtedly rooted in notions of entitlement, of being “real” citizens and Americans, vs. so many (to them) dubious types. This also seems to spur the rioters to allow their photographs to be taken, to post and otherwise display them proudly. This was seen most dramatically with the smiling man who occupied and vandalized Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office. Overall, their look and feel are that of people who do not expect any real legal consequences, and certainly do not seem to fear violent repression by state agents. Again, this sense of impunity is a key part of the mentality of a lynch mob. And so far, the sentences seem to be pretty light and long appeals delaying incarceration will surely

follow in many cases. Moreover, were Trump to be elected again in 2024, he would almost certainly pardon the lot of them.

Such a relatively light hand on the part of the state contrasts with the harsh repression deployed against Black Lives Matter protestors in 2020. Not only did local police forces use brutal tactics, but the Trump administration called with increasing vehemence for even greater brutality. Trump's rhetoric took on concrete form during the photo op in June 2020, when he walked to a church near the White House after he had ordered the area cleared of peaceful demonstrators. This was carried with great violence on the part of police, a type of violence almost never visited upon white supremacists like the January 6 rioters.

The January 6 mob, as well as hardcore Trump supporters more generally, exhibited white, racist, traditionalist, misogynist, heterosexist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic sentiments. Many traveled from rural areas or smaller cities. Many were southern, but there were plenty from states like Michigan, where half of the political apparatus and a nearly equal proportion of the population remain pro-Trump.

Neofascism as a Global Phenomenon in the Twenty-First Century

Of course, Jan. 6, 2021 was no mere repeat of 1861. Nor could it have been. For one thing, the mob was not as overwhelmingly white as it probably was in 1861, as 2021 saw a smattering of Latinx and other people of color. And there were undoubtedly more women too. But this is mainly a reflection of the changing demographics of the U.S. population, where non-Latinx whites are soon destined to be a plurality, but no longer a majority.

Where 2021 differed the most from 1861 lay in the recent insurrection's links to international neofascist sensibilities and movements. In recent years, these movements have often been described as rightwing populist, but after January 6 in the U.S., the term neofascist is probably more appropriate, given the organized, cadre-like street thuggery employed on that day with wink-and-nod support, if not more, from Trump and his closest allies. In the discussion below, however, I will sometimes use both terms, in part because Trumpism is in some respects more militant, more authoritarian, and more violent than its international counterparts.

There are many examples of the international connections -- or at least affinities -- of Trumpism to similar movements and political ideologies around the world. In August 2021, for example, the journalist-entertainer Tucker Carlson traveled to authoritarian Hungary to commune with the majoritarian but avowedly "illiberal" regime of Victor Orban. Orban's regime, like the January 6 U.S. mob, espouses white (Eurocentric), racist, traditionalist, misogynist, heterosexist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic sentiments. Orban is the most successful of the current wave of neofascists, having held power for over a decade. He has also taken the paternalistic welfare state side of authoritarian nationalism further than Trump and his counterparts elsewhere have done. Of course, like the outright fascists before him, Orban strictly limits his social welfare measures to "real" Hungarians, to the exclusion of Roma and certainly migrants. In this sense, Orban exemplifies the possibility of an authoritarian, neofascist kind of regime that has moved decisively beyond neoliberalism. It is therefore of great significance that the U.S. far right has been, like Carlson, embracing Hungary as a model. Trump strategist Steve Bannon has also done so, among others. One key difference with Trumpism though, is that in addition to attacking immigrants, who are mostly people of color, Orban is fairly open about his anti-Semitism in his attacks on George Soros and "intellectuals" more generally. But even

Orban, like the U.S. far right, has retained close relations with the Israeli regime, especially toward rightwing former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Other groups with ideologies similar to those of Trump and Orban have gained considerable headway and have often set the agenda for national politics, although they have not been able to gain power at the national level. These include the French National Rally (formerly the National Front), the Alternative for Germany, the Sweden Democrats, the Italian (formerly Northern) League, and many others. Hardcore Brexit supporters in the UK exhibit many of these features as well, but have attained a measure of nationwide power through the very rightwing -- and somewhat populist -- Tory government of Boris Johnson. One thing that distinguishes all these tendencies from their predecessors during the Cold War is that they support and are supported by Russia, a support that has often included financial help and propaganda via social media. Affinities with Russia are also found among more mainstream conservative parties like the French Republicans (inheritors of the Gaullist tradition), the more rightwing parts of Christian Democracy in Germany, and the mainstream conservative People's Party in Austria. These various political tendencies, especially in Europe, tend to view Putin's Russia as a bulwark against LGBTQ rights, as a bastion of Islamophobia, and sometimes as an attractive example of authoritarian nationalist politics.

The more rightwing of these groups, here excluding the mainstream conservatives in France, Germany and Austria, can also be termed rightwing populist or neofascist to varying degrees. The same could be said of the Jaroslaw Kaczynski regime in Poland or that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. But the latter two variants of rightwing populism or neofascism retain Cold War attitudes toward Russia. Still, the Kaczynski regime has managed to combine social welfare measures, rightwing nationalism, Islamophobia, virulent heterosexism, and anti-immigrant politics into a stew that, with the exception of its stance toward Russia, is quite similar to Orban's Hungary.

Two things stand out here when one examines the U.S. case in the light of these international dimensions. One is that in the U.S. a major political party, the Republican Party, has evolved in just a few years into a far-right, nearly neofascist party, with a small "moderate" minority. These moderates are quickly purged if they express any explicit opposition to Trumpism. Moreover, the violent politics of January 6 was so extreme that even groups like the French National Rally publicly condemned such use of political violence. In this sense, the Trumpist Republican Party may be both more powerful within its own country -- except for the case of Orban in Hungary -- and even further to the right than most of its international counterparts. Shockingly, Trumpism can be seen as further to the right even when one compares it not to mainstream conservatives but to far-right parties in Europe. Of course, the virulent radicalism of Trumpism is connected, as discussed above, to the long history of white mob violence, state violence, and openly authoritarian rule that persisted in much of the U.S. South until the 1960s.

A second thing that stands out about the U.S. is that, because of the Cold War tradition and the U.S.'s position as the leading imperial power, with Russia continuing today as a military rival and China as an economic one, mainstream liberals and old conservatives continue to be shocked by Trumpist complicity with Russia. These traditional liberals and conservatives are even more shocked by how exposés of this do not seem to budge his support one iota. Thus, due to the power of habit and the persistence of old frames of reference that no longer fit the present reality, a section of elite opinion and the media (for example, MSNBC-TV) continue doggedly --

and ineffectually -- in their quest to “expose” what is already obvious to Trump’s own followers, that he is complicit with Russia. And in response, nostalgia on the left sometimes leads to defense or minimization of Russia’s agenda and its effect (for example, *The Nation*). I would suggest that we simply need to view Russia as on the whole a conservative, even reactionary, power. Nowadays, it is mainly allied to far-right groups around the world, with exceptions like its support for regimes with leftwing antecedents like Cuba and Venezuela. But this does not alter Russia’s fundamental impact or direction at a global level. It even seems to be lending some support to the Taliban, after its seizure of power in Afghanistan in the wake of the collapse of the U.S. client regime.

Interrogating the Rural-Urban Divide

Much ink has been spilled to show that Trumpism’s base lies in smaller cities and rural or exurban areas, whereas urban areas are fairly solidly anti-Trump. Much data and historical experience supports such patterns, going all the way back to Karl Marx’s time, and even before. In 1851, the French peasantry formed a mass base of support for the Bonapartist coup, as Marx noted in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Then, during the Paris Commune of 1871, the rival bourgeois parliament (dubbed the “rurales” by the left) gathered outside Paris at Versailles to organize its repression. In doing so, they drew upon troops from rural areas to fight against the “godless” working-class Communards. Similar events have been repeated, up through and since, as seen in the unwillingness of rank-and-file Chinese soldiers repress the student-worker uprising of 1989, whereupon troops from faraway rural areas with little knowledge of the ongoing events were brought in to do the job.

Even as he analyzed Bonapartism and the repression of the Commune as drawing upon rural support bases, Marx attacked any notion of an immutable rural conservatism or a permanent urban-rural divide. For that would have doomed the urban-based workers’ revolution to which he devoted his life. Instead, he called for a peasant uprising in Germany in the 1850s, saluting the publication of Engels’s 1850 essay, *The Peasant War in Germany*. As the U.S. Civil War loomed, Marx noted the initial opposition to secession on the part of poor southern whites from up-country rural counties, carrying out a careful analysis of voting returns to make his argument. He also wrote of possible class-based alliances after the Civil War between these poor whites and formerly enslaved Blacks, elements of which came about for a time during Reconstruction.

In addition, Marx theorized at a more general level the revolutionary potential of rural populations in his own time. In his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*, he attacked the notion, put forward by the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, to the effect that other social classes, including the peasantry, “‘form only one reactionary mass’ in relation to the working class” (Marx forthcoming).

Marx focused on this issue in a more specific way in his late writings, which explored village and Indigenous societies across the globe, from India and Russia to the Iroquois of North America. In these writings, he singled out the Russian communal village as a locus of resistance that could touch off a wider European communist revolution (Shanin 1983, Anderson 2010).

Previous generations of U.S. radicals certainly recognized at least aspects of this problem, which is why in the early years of the twentieth century, the Socialist Party established the headquarters of its newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, not in New York or Chicago, but in Girard,

Kansas. Unfortunately, the Socialists often courted rural and sometimes southern whites by downplaying their critique of racism. Thus, it was a step forward when -- despite other flaws emanating from its Stalinist orientation -- the Communist Party fostered both white folk singers like Woody Guthrie and Black blues singers like Leadbelly during the Great Depression. This was an example of the wide recognition of the need on the part of the socialist left to reach out beyond its bases in big cities and university towns, and to connect to progressive forms of populism in rural areas. This attitude may be in shorter supply today.

It is also important to note that in many countries, the U.S. included, rural areas contain significant populations of oppressed ethnic minorities. These minorities may constitute a sizable portion of the population in certain rural regions. These populations have often mobilized against the dominant classes of rural regions even when local members of the majority population have not. Thus, they can be important and reliable allies of the left. To take three prominent examples, the rural U.S. South has for centuries contained a large Black population (in some states and counties actually a majority), the West Coast agricultural belt has featured important populations of mainly Latinx farmworkers, and the upper Midwest includes a significant Native American population, all of them key social bases for the left. Similarly, the Russian Tsarist empire's grain belt comprised an important Ukrainian population, whose national aspirations became a crucial factor in the 1917 revolution. Again, in similar fashion, today's rural areas of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria contain large numbers of Kurds, another oppressed minority that has been at the forefront of many progressive movements in the region. Again, these kinds of social facts show that it is a distortion to speak of rural areas as uniformly conservative or racist.

Among the industrially developed countries of Western Europe and North America, one striking recent example of the mobilization for progressive change on the part of a rural -- or at least decidedly non-urban -- population was the Yellow Vests movement of 2018-19 in France. Initially a protest against higher gasoline taxes, its participants occupied the country's ubiquitous roundabouts, shutting down automobile traffic. President Emmanuel Macron, elected as a moderate alternative to the neofascist National Rally Party, responded with brutal and unrelenting violence to these "illegal" actions. At the same time, the Yellow Vests, who comprised many women, soon deepened the social character of their demands in order to feature issues like raising the minimum wage, smaller class sizes in the public schools, and a halt to the closure of public facilities like post offices and train lines in rural areas. At their peak, the Yellow Vests were able to shut down large sectors of the economy, at a level not seen since 1968 (Anderson 2018, Coquard 2018).

A somewhat similar dynamic emerged in the U.S. teachers strikes, also in 2018, which began in West Virginia but soon spread to Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona, which are hardly industrial, liberal, or very union-friendly states. As Lois Weiner writes, these strikes did not limit themselves to wage demands, important as these were in states where extremely low wages were forcing teachers into second jobs. She notes that "gender and race influenced the movement," which also exemplified "workers' self-organization" (Weiner 2018:4). Further, these strikes were "laying the ground for a new labor movement in the South" (Weiner 2018:12). Unlike the much larger Yellow Vests, who were eventually worn down by the harsh tactics of the French police, the U.S. teachers won some gains.

Conclusion

In sum, the Trump-dominated Republican party has moved in a dangerous, neofascist direction, with a mass base in rural areas and also among elements of the white middle and working classes, and with a huge financial base from wealthy donors. It is a constituency that has been created through a kind of overtly racist appeal that many thought had vanished after the 1960s. Trumpism is thus in continuity with older pro-slavery and openly racist movements going back to 1861, while at the same time forming part of a new, global surge of neofascism.

In the U.S., people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, most of the unionized working class, environmentalists, and many youths form a solid wall of resistance against the fascist threat. In responding to it, however, it is important to recognize that rural areas are not uniformly pro-fascist, that rural whites are not uniformly or permanently Trumpist, and that these areas comprise significant numbers of people of color. In this sense, we need to avoid the Lassallean trap of painting rural areas as uniformly “reactionary.” In analyzing the possibilities of resistance to Trumpism, and of neofascism more generally, Marxist and critical social theory needs therefore to focus on Bakersfield as much as Los Angeles, on rural Georgia as well as Atlanta, and on rural France as well as Paris.¹

The neofascist threat today in the U.S. is deep, and may be deepening as the Trump base moves increasingly toward attitudes that justify violence and other extralegal means. Second, the blatant attempts to suppress the vote in many states, disproportionately but not exclusively southern ones, show a dangerous slide toward openly anti-democratic politics. Thirdly, the advocacy of overturning electoral majorities via manipulation by state officials carries with it a real danger of civil conflict or even a slide toward civil war. All three of these developments are racialized, both directly and indirectly. This is what ties Trumpism to the 1861 pro-slavery mob that attempted to overturn Lincoln’s election. But as argued above, Trumpism also exhibits many features that might be called neofascism, a more modern phenomenon. How these aspects connect to each other needs to be specified more if we are to mount a successful challenge to Trumpism. At the same time, we should, as I have argued, avoid the Lassallean trap by focusing more on rural areas and by viewing them dialectically, not as monoliths but, like the rest of society, as riven by social contradictions. Thus, we need to recognize, on the one hand, the deep racism of U.S. society over the centuries and its connection to rural areas, while at the same time viewing those areas -- or at least significant portions of them -- also as potential sites of resistance to Trumpism. A truly dialectical analysis requires nothing less.

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ⁱ A personal note: The author of this article would not even have been born had his father, a U.S. airman who crashed into Nazi-occupied southern France in early 1944, not been protected by French villagers. At tremendous risk to themselves, the residents of several small villages in the Médoc region near Bordeaux spirited him safely into neutral Spain. Unfortunately, one of these Resistance activists was later tracked down and executed by the Gestapo.