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### Violent Inertia

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## **Violent Inertia**

"So we see that drag queen story hour and 'family friendly drag shows', have two purposes. One from the drag queen's perspective is to satisfy their fetish for cross-dressing in front of children. The other on a more macro level, is to indoctrinate children into queer theory...

...According to the left, the drag queen child combination has become dangerous. They say it's a lightning rod for violent backlash, right?

...if it's causing this much chaos and violence, why do you insist on continuing to do it if, according to you, it's putting people's lives at risk. If the effort to have men cross dress in front of children is putting people's lives at risk, why are you still doing it?"

Matt Walsh of The Daily Wire on the Club Q shooting via [podscribe.ai](#)

The last decade and a half has seen a significant increase in violent right-wing activity around the world. Despite a lagged public perception, the right-wing has surpassed its Islamic counterpart as the most significant threat of extremist violence in the US and is catching up in the rest of the world. While this has been a seemingly rapid transformation, the underlying movement is not novel. Its causes are multifaceted, international, and go back decades. It is perpetrated through a variety of means and actors, from political parties to so called "lone wolf" terrorists. Its final cause is expressed by Matt Walsh: to reinforce identity hierarchies which have, to some degree, lost institutional support over the last century.

It is only within the last seven years, with the rise of Trump and other protofascist leaders, that this movement has borne mainstream fruit. Aspiring political actors are now far less constrained by the language of dog whistles and can explicitly indulge their white nationalist bases. Political actors in democratic systems increasingly draw their legitimacy from cults of personality. In response, an unprimed population and political system proved unable to act in a way that minimized the threat to democracy- opting to pray for a fever break and a return to Bush-era conservatism. The ensuing period of fascistic growth culminated in often violent attempts to take over democratic systems, whether that be January 6<sup>th</sup> in the US or Brazilian highway blockades. While immediate crises in the world's major democracies have been largely forestalled, this is due primarily to fascistic own goals such as the beforementioned events of January 6<sup>th</sup> or covid denialism. We will see that this setback should not be taken as permanent. The current right-wing wave is "violent inertia" caused by the activation of key features of American society by political developments. Although the wave is happening around the world, it is most felt in the US, and will therefore be the focus of this paper.

## **ANXIOUS TIMES**

The economic crisis of the Weimar Republic was the driving force of the Nazi party's ascension to power. WWI destroyed a third of the nation's wealth and severed its industrial capacity. Plagued by hyperinflation and unemployment for its entire existence, republican government failed to deliver basic material conditions to such a degree that made democratic values subservient, in the eyes of the public, to the resolving of the economic crisis. This

dynamic reached its logical conclusion during the Great Depression, as the already weak economic infrastructure of Germany made the country among the most affected by the global crisis. This created an opportunity for out of power parties to ride the wave of backlash against the incumbent system and into power. The Nazis, for their part, used this opportunity to weaponize underlying German antisemitism by making the Jewish population the scapegoats of the global capitalist crisis of the time. The Nazis made significant electoral gains in the early 30's, wedging their way into a coalition government, securing Hitler as chancellor, and eventually gaining full control of the government.

It is tempting to draw from the history of the Weimar Republic to come to conclusions about the relationship between the ongoing rise of global neo-fascism and what Robinson and Barrera (2012, 5) call a "crisis of humanity" caused by the emergence of a transnational capitalist class since the 1970's. The emergence of transnational capital, whether by technology or political decisions, has ushered in a second enclosure movement. Previously constrained by barriers to exit, capital is now freely moved around the world, window-shopping in a new international market for the cheapest labor and raw material available. Meanwhile, the public domain has been sacrificed to the temple of the free market, raising living prices by the commercialization of pharmaceutical drugs and selling economic mobility through the privatization of higher education. The ensuing global inequality culminates into this 'crisis of humanity', tempting social upheaval and global rebellion. In the face of this crisis, Robinson and Barrera identify three competing responses: elitist reform, popular leftist uprising, and fascism.

It should not be controversial that the global capitalist system is causing the sort of economic tensions that Robinson and Barrera describe. Since the birth of transnational capital, productivity of workers in the US has more than doubled. Despite this, real wages have remained stagnant. Broadly speaking, any new income that has been generated in the last fifty years has been to the benefit of the capitalist class. Combined with a steadily increasing cost of living in the same time frame, the transnational system of capital functions to redistribute wealth from the majority to a small minority, relying on increased levels of working-class debt for short term survival. What is less obvious, however, is the role that this crisis plays in the development of modern fascism. Robinson and Barrera portray this economic crisis as its formal cause. Much like in the Weimar Republic, the worsening economic condition creates a desperate population which pursues increasingly desperate means by which to address the economic crisis. This perspective fails to differentiate between the nature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist crisis and that of the modern world.

The most significant difference between these crises is their intensity and duration. The economic deprivation of the Weimar Republic was a deliberate political decision by the allied powers to debilitate the state with intent to make the waging of another great war impossible. As such, the economic hardships were obviously detrimental to everyday life, punitive, and quickly imposed. Add the immediacy of the Great Depression, one could easily connect the dots between a destitute, resentful voting population and the rise of the Nazi party. The crisis caused by transnational capital, on the other hand, was more gradual in its development. NAFTA, the capstone of the state's alliance with the transnational capitalist class in the global race to the bottom, came two decades after the crisis was initiated by more decentralized factors, whether that be increased automation, de-unionization or the development of information technologies. As a result, the economic consequences of this crisis were introduced to the population in a

departmentalized fashion. The public does not perceive the current economic condition as the consequence of deliberate political decisions or of systemic rot.

As such, the model of a desperate population highly motivated to find political solutions to their economic problems does not fully explain the rise of fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After all, those who attended January 6<sup>th</sup> were not overwhelmingly destitute, but disproportionately financially established middle-aged men- often small business owners. The ongoing crisis of capitalism should be thought of as a state of *permanent* economic crisis. Not permanent in the sense that it will last forever, as no economic system lives forever- never mind its crises. Rather, the economic conditions of global capital have become internalized in the psyche of the majority and created a permanent sense of anxiety. The economic crisis is not obvious to large swaths of the population, and those who do sense a lack of mobility often fail to identify its sources- looking inward for individual or generational moral failings. Millennials find homes to be unaffordable, according to many, not because of the necessity of a graduate degree, but because of the lavish spending of individuals. This sense of downward mobility plays a role more akin to that of antisemitism in the Weimar Republic than the economic crises of the time and should be thought of as a permissive rather than formal cause. It is an underlying tension that can be used by malicious actors to direct rage towards Mexican migrant workers or Syrian refugees but will rarely bring people to the brink of violence or political revolution by itself. There is a fourth kind of reaction that Robinson & Barrera fail to recognize, which is to “do nothing”.

## **A POCKET FULL OF SHELLS**

Right-wing violence, particularly the white power movement, has always been closely linked with the agents of state violence. The KKK was founded in part by former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest and relied heavily on the participation of sheriffs as well as other former Confederate soldiers. The resurgence of the white power movement in the 1980s was fueled by Vietnam veterans who became radicalized after fighting an aimless war and experiencing a less than triumphant return home. Stewart Rhodes, founder of the Oath Keepers, followed in the footsteps of his father by serving in the Army before moving on to Yale Law School and working in federal courts.

To understand why military personnel are so drawn to the fascist movement, it is necessary to understand what Michael Mann (2004, 25-26) calls the “core fascist constituencies”. Of the three social groups Mann identifies, military and law enforcement personnel fall most squarely in those constituencies who favor paramilitarism and nation-statism. The necessity to moralize violence in the military and law enforcement leaves its members prone to believe in paramilitarism as a legitimate means of political action. This is not to say that veterans are inherently violent people- their experience in service in many aspects lingers into their post-military lives, “The dehumanization that soldiers are trained to embrace as a battlefield tactic, for example, may not automatically turn of on one’s reentry into civilian society” (Miller-Idriss 2022, 62). Combined with a high chance of experiencing posttraumatic stress and feelings of betrayal by the country they risked their lives for, veterans are highly vulnerable to the kind of radicalization that white power groups rely on. The insurgence of extremist groups in the US is, in part, a consequence of the waging of large-scale, broadly defined, unwinnable wars and the upkeep of hundreds of military bases across the world as informed by private military interests, delusions regarding the extent of American world policing capabilities and nationalistic fervor.

Military and law enforcement presence also helps shape the nature of fascist groups. Mann (2004, 28), discusses the importance of baking a “social cage” into the structure of fascist groups for the socialization of recruits into the movement,

...fascist parties and paramilitaries were especially powerful socialization agencies. These movements were proudly elitist and authoritarian, enshrining a pronounced hierarchy of rank and an extreme cult of the leader. Orders were to be obeyed, discipline to be imposed. Above all, they imposed a requirement of activism. Thus militants experienced intense emotional comradeship.

This socialization process is not unlike the one that happens in military and law enforcement. Their experience in intense hierarchies makes military and law enforcement members suited to set up similar hierarchies in fascist movements, promising status and respect for those who succeed in them. Furthermore, the credibility from service makes military and law enforcement members highly effective recruiters and a better public face for the group, allowing them to quickly climb the ranks.

The link between the military and the right-wing violence goes beyond the radicalization of individual soldiers. Military action is directly responsible for some of the conditions which have acted as fascistic formal causes around the world. As Miller-Idriss (2022, 61-62) points out, US military intervention is responsible for the displacement of millions of people in Iraq and Afghanistan who sought refuge primarily in nearby European countries. This, along with refugees from other countries like Syria, created an intense political backlash in Europe animated by white nationalist groups and ideology. This gave momentum to some of the most significant protofascist movements in Europe, whether that be Viktor Orban in Hungary, Golden Dawn in Greece or the Front National in France. In the US, this is best exemplified by the militaristic reaction to 9/11. Up to this point, white nationalism had a serious branding problem. White nationalist groups were still based primarily on Nazi style antisemitism which was incredibly limited in its appeal. It could attract highly motivated adherents but was not suitable for public consumption. According to Miller-Idriss (2022, 56), 9/11 gave white nationalists a new foil for their racist ideology: brown-skinned, Muslim foreigners who would proudly murder Americans. The decision by the US to prosecute a broad war on terror served to further entrench this dynamic. While even George W. Bush was careful enough to say not all Muslims were the enemy, the nuance seemed to be lost on white nationalists and Americans at large. War makes Manicheans of a society; it instills in the population a sense of good vs. evil. Islamophobia became a cottage industry, whether that be musings on the Great Replacement, bumper stickers or jingoistic country music. 9/11, aided by a sustained militaristic response, created a social environment that white nationalism thrived in.

## **A RELIGIOUS TWIST**

The wave of Islamic terror which preceded the current right-wing wave was, of course, religious in nature. The exact role religion played, however, is not necessarily obvious. The debate around this topic has largely been a false one: idealists on one side try to draw a direct line between quotes from the Quran and terrorist actions, while more materialistic explanations expunge religion in favor of political and sociological factors. This debate assumes an overly simplistic relationship between religious motivation and actions. Most people experience religion

in a way that is completely divorced from the scripture of their particular holy book or its “true teachings”- but they still experience it. As Simon Cottee (2017, 448) puts it, “The serious intellectual and political task lies in understanding how it [Islam] matters and in what ways it intersects with the other things, including especially politics and human emotions...”. While even the most openly religiously motivated political actors do not behave in a way that aligns perfectly with scripture, it does not mean they are unaffected by the cultural or psychological pulls of religion. There is no doubt that opposition to abortion in the US is motivated by religion, for example, but very few could point to a line in the bible to back that view up. More likely, this opposition is the result of a broader culture that has been built around the church in the US which both influences and is influenced by religious teachings.

The link between right-wing violence and Christianity, both historically and currently, is a mixed bag. The beliefs of the Nazis were not based in Christian theology but thrived on the antisemitism of Christian societies and cooperation with the Catholic church. In modern Europe, the extreme-right has experimented with religiosity, but often favors alternative religions or paganism to Christianity. Even though American right-wing violence has up to now been based mostly around anti-immigrant sentiment, there is potential for a uniquely Christian strand of right-wing violence in the US due to higher levels of religiosity and the importance of Christianity in American public life.<sup>1</sup>

We are already starting to see this potential realized in the US, particularly around the gradual but nonetheless marked acceptance of transgender people into the broader society. The public transition of Caitlyn Jenner is an indicator of this trend. Transgenderism was a fringe concept- it would not be surprising if most Americans did not know what it was beforehand. Caitlyn’s transition became the leading news event for months in the US, and a Hollywood-led push for transgender acceptance started. This transformation has what the transnational capitalist crisis lacks: a singular watershed moment that could spark a response. This struck a chord among the American right-wing, and anti-transgenderism has become a cornerstone of conservative messaging. In the last couple of years particularly, the Christian right has taken on the cause of anti-trans violence, seeing the issue as a threat to the traditional Christian hierarchy, which places Christianity near the top. Ironically, the New Testament was written in Greek, a language which uses three genders. Hebrew, for its part, has six. Combined with a lack of bible verses on the transgender issue, the link between Christian teachings and anti-trans hate is not clear. Nonetheless, the development is clearly religiously motivated. To understand why this may be, we must consider the concept of cosmic war and the role of emotion in political movements.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2018, 126-128) introduced the concept of cosmic war to explain the religious appeal of ISIS and similar terror groups. Cosmic war is an imagined religious struggle against evil forces. The fighters of cosmic war engage in winner-take-all conflict on the behalf of God and are uncompromising in their end goal. Cosmic war becomes both a means and an end to religious virtue: fighting it is an expression of commitment to one’s religious belief, and victory is necessary to live a life according to God. The promotion of cosmic war is an effective tactic to recruit members for an extremist group and ensure their commitment.

American evangelicals are particularly vulnerable to this sort of propagandizing. The idea of an eternal struggle against evil on the behalf of God is foundational to Christian evangelical belief. God created man in his image in the beginning, and as society develops, we inevitably stray further and further away from that image. To prevent societal moral decay and widespread

eternal suffering, evangelicals are taught that they are responsible for instilling their religious virtues, as determined by their religious leaders and institutions, into their own personal lives and surrounding environments. The sudden acceptance of transgender people is a striking example of this moral decay and must be counteracted. The speed of this development makes the evangelical desperation greater, and so more serious action must be taken, resulting in anti-transgender violence.

Secondly, it is necessary to take emotion seriously as a motivating factor. In a field like political science which attempts to systemize societal-wide phenomena, explanations relying on individual psychological factors can seem deterministic and narrow, especially in the light of some of the less-than-robust attempts by early evolutionary psychologists to understand aspects of social organization as immutable phenotypes of human nature. No such sweeping statements are necessary, however, to posit that human decision-making is a process not only of rational calculation, but of emotional filtration- and that this has implications on a macro scale. Fattah and Fierke (2009) formulate an emotional logic that helps explain the rise of Islamist government in the middle east. By this logic, Arabs have a sense of historical greatness going back thousands of years in the middle east as evidenced by large empires and scientific advancements. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely secular societies in the middle east failed to stave off creeping western domination, capped off by the ascent of the power of the Israeli state. As a result,

"Interactions at all levels in the Middle East, that is, the national, the regional and the international, have been experienced in terms of humiliation and betrayal. On the one hand, Islamists shaped a narrative around these emotions, giving coherent meaning to the failure of secular nationalism and the wide- spread suffering of populations. On the other hand, the sedimentation of these emotions over time, through the ongoing experience of suffering in the region, has created the conditions in which transnational militant Islamism has had increasing appeal and legitimacy"

Fattah and Fierke (2009, 80)

Fattah and Fierke show we can recognize emotional predispositions and conditioning as being a motivating factor for ideology and action without being deterministic about which direction any particular aspect of the human psyche will pull.

This emotional logic, however, is not unique to Arab or Muslim populations. In fact, it has implications on the cosmic war of American evangelicals. To be in a constant state of cosmic war requires serious emotional buy-in. It entails believing that one is constantly under attack- as the cosmic war is presumably a defensive one. One must be constantly on the lookout for forces of evil attempting to subvert the traditional hierarchy which is necessary for salvation after the rapture. Especially considering the young age at which most people are socialized into these traditions, this instills a deep sense of paranoia and fear in believers. When societal changes occur which go against the traditional evangelical hierarchy, as they inevitably do, individuals must look inward and evaluate whether their own faith is strong enough to counteract these developments and whether their own salvation is on the line. Unlike the anxiety stemming from the crisis caused by transnational capital, this fear has a built-in scapegoat and is therefore actionable. One response is the logic Matt Walsh lays out: make the expression of transgender identity dangerous enough that some may think twice about doing so, artificially preserving the hierarchy.

Some may be tempted to characterize this evangelical violence as part of the religious terrorist wave and distinct from the right-wing wave. As Auger (2020, 91) argues, however, it may be case that right-wing radicals like to use Christian language to promote their ideas. Regardless of how genuine people are in their Christian motivation, the increase in evangelical anti-trans violence is closely tied to broader political developments, as we will see in these next few paragraphs.

## **MINORITARIAN RULE**

The three discussed elements of the spike in right-wing violence are all long standing aspects of American society and vary in their proximity to violence. As underlying permissive causes, they need, to varying degrees, an organizational force to activate their potential for violence. In the US, this organizational force, or formal cause, is the necessity of minoritarian rule by the Republican party.

In the face of shifting social dynamics, the American two-party system has become one that is based overwhelmingly on identity factions. As Rachel Kleinfeld (2021, 164) notes, the Republican base is generally white, Christian and male whereas the Democratic base is more heterogenous in most ways except in the rural urban divide. This was not always the case but has developed as democratic participation became accessible to broader portions of the population, and as working-class political organization lost steam during the crisis of transnational capital. As a result, Republican messaging needs to appeal to a very narrow audience compared to the Democrats. Kleinfeld cites a political psychology study which shows higher propensities of violence in homogenous groups due to aligned interests.

Simultaneously, the demographic makeup of the US has shifted further and further away from that of the Republican party. In the last few decades, the percentages of Americans who are Christian or white have decreased substantially, while those living in urban areas or identifying as LGBTQ have increased. The American voting base is becoming less favorable to traditional Republican politics. The logic of democracy would suggest that the Republican party would have to respond by restructuring in a way that appeals to the American population. In practice, Republicans do not need to appeal to a majority of the population to have political power. Between the structure of the Senate, the end of apportionment in the House and political lobbying of the Supreme Court, there is plenty of structural support for Republican minoritarian rule.

This strategy affects not only *who* the Republicans appeal to, but *how*. A minority of the population can reliably win elections only when they are highly motivated to go out and vote. As such, a major aspect of Republican electoral strategy during the last thirty years has been to motivate their smaller base of support with sensationalistic narratives in the leadup to elections. Most of these distortions involve foreign threats to American society; whether that be the Ebola scare tactics of 2014 (obviously disingenuous when compared to the Republican approach to covid), the migrant caravan of 2018 or the transgender moral panic of 2022. These narratives are created to stoke fears, as Kleinfeld (2021. 163) puts it, "...that white Christian men in the United States are under cultural and demographic threat and require defending—and that it is the Republican Party and Donald Trump, in particular, who will safe- guard their way of life". This



rhetoric artificially raises the stakes of competitive elections, which Kleinfeld recognizes as a risk factor for election violence.

To be clear, the problem is not that all elected Republicans are racist bigots who support right-wing terror (although the party does have its David Dukes, with and without baggage). More broadly, there is a symbiotic relationship between their rhetoric of white oppression and the surge of right-wing terror. The motives of the perpetrators of various mass shootings, whether that be in Buffalo, El Paso or Colorado Springs, can be tied directly to the rhetoric of high-profile Republicans and their media allies, as evidenced by the manifestos they leave behind detailing the “invasion” of immigrants into the US, great replacement etc... The actors who constitute the effective cause of right-wing terror feel empowered by, and in many cases are a product of the cottage industry of Republican hysteria- whether that be QAnon songs played at Trump rallies or self-doubting teenage boys who become radicalized through the right-wing YouTube rabbit hole.

In this way, we can think of the current surge of right-wing violence as a sort of violent inertia. In the long run, changing social dynamics may force the Republican party to change its appeal. This would be a painful process however, alienating the old base on a chance of maybe reaching new voters. To avoid that short-term loss, the Republicans can rely on the political institutions that allow them to govern with a narrow base. This necessitates, however, energizing some of the permissive causes of right-wing violence.

Perhaps not all is lost, however. The minoritarian strategy that fuels violent inertia in the US contains the seeds of its own destruction. The end goals of minoritarian rule are, by definition, unpopular. For the last fifty years Republicans have campaigned on ending abortion in the US, fueling its base while *serious* conservative thinkers assured the rest of the country that this would be impossible, and having Republican Supreme Court nominees tell congress that Roe v. Wade was settled law. When Republicans finally got what they wanted, it was a political disaster which the party survived only by an early leaking of the decision. The party’s underperformance in the midterms was undoubtedly due in part to the Dobbs decision as well as skepticism of the party over January 6<sup>th</sup>- fascistic own goals. Realizing the ends of minoritarian rule entails disempowering the means, as the majority voting population becomes enraged and turns out to vote in higher numbers. This will continue to be the dynamic until a less inflammatory strategy is devised- maybe making changes through state legislators or incrementally stripping citizens of their rights in the courts rather than all at once. More likely, minoritarian rule can survive by never delivering on its more ambitious goals despite what it says to its base, who largely perceive themselves to be at cosmic war.