

Come on, man. Oh, oh.
I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe.
They'll kill me. They'll kill me.
I can't breathe. I can't breathe.
—George Floyd (R.I.P.)

Beautiful black bodies
Drowning in sorrow
From America's sin
—“Jesus and the Black Body,” Linda Wiggins-Chavis

In Cold Blood

The murder of George Floyd shall be recorded in history as the first post-modern lynching publicly perpetrated by the administration of Donald J. Trump. The context of this pandemic has moved from the horrific rising death toll laboriously tracked by the Center for Disease Control to the single languishing body of a beautiful black man. The

only justice that can possibly redeem the conscience of America is to turn the racial murder of George Floyd into the electoral assassination of Donald J. Trump. This is a possibility only, one that has to be politically actualized. The tragedy is that, instead of being replaced by a righteous man, Trump might be replaced by another senile white man, thanks to the liberal democrats.¹ Like life itself, we will have experienced

Trouble with Donald J. Trump

Alex Betancourt

the world during the last four years first as tragedy and then as farce.² Justice is the tallest of all orders, and to exact it means cutting off a pound of flesh from America's body politic, with the blood included. James Baldwin's (1963) epigraph to his *The Fire Next Time*, a book that includes his “My Dungeon Shook,” reaches today's black youth as a message in a bottle: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!” Donald J. Trump and liberal democrats,

as well as the MAGA nation, have been feeling the heat of this country's racial fire. Since liberal democrats refused to feel Sanders's “Bern,” now seems to be the right time for a proper one.

The injustice of George Floyd's murder has the depth and severity of a Greek tragedy. We shall be kept waiting for Trump to gouge out his eyes, and Christian America will have to wait for his redemption for as long as a theater audience will have to wait

for Godot's arrival. Justice, like democracy, is a fugitive experience that has to be wrested from power rather than asked of “polite society.”³ The most difficult and despairing thing to grasp is that the president, like Arendt's Eichmann, is not an evil man but rather a banal one. However, we must not confuse banality with ordinariness since Trump's banality has grave consequences. Wiggins's profoundly moving poem rings true for everyone in this country. It breaks my heart

² Slavoj Žižek (2009) identifies the first decade of the twenty-first century as following this logic, with 9/11 as tragedy and the 2008 financial collapse as farce.

¹ As long as capitalism remains the driving force of American power, liberal Democrats will always-already choose a Christian liberal over a socialist Jew. Marx (2009) knew this better than anyone, and “On *The Jewish Question*” serves as his purloined letter to the United States. See Derrida (1987).

³ For the idea of “fugitive democracy,” see Wolin (2016).

every time I think of those eight long minutes that it took for the police to murder George Floyd. Differently from Wiggins's beautiful verses, rather than drowned, Floyd was choked with malicious intent. It is malice that makes murder a capital crime, not sinfulness. The cry for justice by Black America could be heard loudly in George Floyd's dying breath as he called out for his mama. This cry may leave liberals heartbroken, but liberalism cannot assuage America's guilty conscience. That can only be accomplished by socialism and participatory democracy.

Mis-encounters

This essay is an attempt to explain the ideological character of Trump's presidency, his mishandling of the global pandemic, and the recent insurrection against racial injustice.⁴ My argument may prove somewhat difficult to hear for many progressives. Even when we take into consideration the incredible catastrophe that Donald J. Trump's presidency has caused, I argue that the problem has a proper ideological basis. This thesis means that, in order to comprehend the political reality of Trump, we have to take Marx at his theoretical word. Taking Marx seriously, and rethinking Marxism for our times, means that we have to begin by discarding the idea that seeks to explain Trump's actions as those of an evil

Donald J. Trump is a calculating and insatiable power-hungry man. There is nothing he is unwilling to do to get what he wants. He is the perfect capitalist, the incarnation of an idea. This is part of the reason his followers are enthralled with him and his persona. Their infatuation is the political result of reified consciousness. By reified consciousness, I mean that Trump's supporters do not perceive a moral world that requires an ideological justification for the president's blatant political perversities.

man. The pathologizing of Trump is a symptom of the ideological bases of social analysis, not a political explanation for Trump's decisions. The characterization and constant derision of the president's ridiculous behavior produces an epistemological breach that has ideology at its base. The liberal world doesn't understand Trump. This has to be the biggest irony in history, given that no other president has been under as

heavy scrutiny as Trump has been. The misrecognition suffered by Trump is a properly Marxist ideological problem. The reason no one seems to understand Trump is the same reason why many socialists don't seem to understand him, either. That is, they don't get what Marx really meant by "ideology." To put it simply, Trump's mind works the same way that a Fidelity Investment commercial works. It doesn't matter if the stock market is collapsing and everybody is watch-

ing it collapse; as far as they are concerned, there is no better time for an investment! We must not forget that in the mid-90s, catastrophe bonds emerged (CAT bonds), which means the monetization of disaster. This is the true nature of ideology as Marx theorized it.⁵

Let's start with some of the material conditions of existence of the president. Donald J. Trump is a calculating and insatiable power-hungry man. There is nothing he is unwilling to do to get what

⁵ Marxist interpretation is a properly socialist enterprise, and ideology doesn't work alone. To have a comprehensive view of Donald J. Trump, we also need to look at commodity fetishism and reified consciousness. Once this triad is put together, we can see the dialectic at work. I am going to focus on ideology in this essay. A subsequent piece will tackle the other two.

⁴ The global and all-encompassing character of the pandemic means that its effects are being felt by every single person on this planet. The COVID-19 catastrophe is a proper universal Hegelian phenomenon. This means that it has also affected Trump. For an excellent political reading of the pandemic see Vázquez-Arroyo (2020).

he wants. He is the perfect capitalist, the incarnation of an idea. This is part of the reason his followers are enthralled with him and his persona. Their infatuation is the political result of reified consciousness. By reified consciousness, I mean that Trump's supporters do not perceive a moral world that requires an ideological justification for the president's blatant political perversities. The fact is that Trump has objectively achieved everything he has set out to do in life. As far as he is concerned, he is the most successful man in the American twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The problem is that liberals have a hard time acknowledging this simple fact. Trump is all he claims to be: an all-around successful man. More importantly, Trump's racist, xenophobic, misogynist comments and insinuations are cheap tricks made to order. They are having and will have severe consequences for this country. However, they are not his guiding principles. Trump becomes a racist whenever racism favors him politically. We must not forget that, when it suited him, Trump was pro-choice and immigrant friendly. This is because Trump has no "guiding principles" in the common moral sense of the word. Actually, he has no policies; he simply has an agenda that may seem cynical but isn't. Whenever his agenda overlaps with the GOP's, he is happy to oblige all of their policies.

There are no secrets about Trump's agenda, either. That's the other reality that seems to baffle liberals. Trump has always been very open and clear about what he cares about. Liberals don't understand him because they cannot conceive a way to be honest about themselves. This is their cynicism, not Trump's. Hence, they think: how could Trump, who is a morally corrupt individ-

ual, be honest about his ambitions? Trump must be lying; he did not mean it when he said years ago that after he made all the money he could as a businessman he would become the president of the United States. Liberals cannot take Trump at his word simply because they do not want to be taken at their own. If liberals were to be taken at their word, we would have to ask them what happened to closing Guantánamo, fighting poverty, passing meaningful immigration reform, properly funding Social Security and the Post Office, and expanding Medicare. We would also have to ask what happened to passing legislation to end colonialism in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. Moreover, what happened to every other progressive promise liberals have been making since the foundation of the republic? Liberals have turned their eyes away from the severity of the racial and class problem in the United States for decades. Political liberalism's soup de jour is to pose as politics (Reed Jr. 2001).

Ideology Critique

Since economic success is the ultimate moral virtue for capitalism, success is one of the strongest ideological goals in American society. This is why Trump can't comprehend the liberal news media's war against him. They loved him for years; what the hell happened? Donald Trump wants people to like him because successful men are likeable. He sees how his political base loves him, so it follows that others should love him, too. Therefore, as far as he is concerned, the liberal news media has to be "fake news." This is particularly true because they loved him for

⁶ An excellent discussion regarding the liberal matrix within which the disagreement between Trump and liberal democrats takes place can be found in Madra and Özselsçuk (2019), who show that the opposition between neoliberal global cosmopolitanism and neomercantilist nationalist populism is a false dichotomy. Moreover, the historical nature that makes it a form of government is expressed as a transitioning form of domination in the corporatization of the sovereign nation-state. At the end of the day, it's the political economy of domination that characterizes a capitalist regime.

a very long time before he came to ruin their financial political dinner.⁶

Another thing Trump has been very clear about is that he wants to get away with whatever he wants to do. Who the hell doesn't want that? He's been doing it for over seventy years with impressive results. Not once has this man ever been arrested. Hence, it's perfectly understandable for him to be disconcerted at all the complaining. A Marxist look at Trump doesn't focus on his character flaws, improprieties, personal malfeasance, or ethics. A Marxist look explains Trump's ideology rather than complain about it. This is part of what Marx meant when he said that philosophers had interpreted the world when the point was to change it. Marx wasn't scorning philosophy as such; he was sneering at alienated philosophy—that is, philosophy performed as an ideology. In contemporary parlance, Marx was saying that liberalism as philosophy was useless because rather than helping to explain the world and uncover its perversities, it rationalizes the world through commodification. The idea that Marx was anti philosophy is, properly speaking, liberal propaganda. The fact that this propaganda has taken hold of the “woke” generation in contemporary socialist activism only speaks to the ideological strength of liberalism.⁷ This

antitheoretical streak has always been a mark of left-wing infantile activism, although with different intensities. We should remember that in the debate related in Marx's (2009) “On *The Jewish Question*,” Bauer wanted *political* emancipation while Marx wanted human emancipation. This is the fundamental difference between a progressive liberal (or a “woke” socialist focused on identity politics) and a Marxist. As Slavoj Žižek

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(quoted in Aqeel 2020, 4) has aptly pointed out, “Those in power today love identity politics. It means each of us will cultivate their cultural identity and nobody will be excluded from the global market ... multiculturalism perfectly fits global capitalism.”

Liberal and progressive news media keep insisting on covering Trump's moral flaws, as if that were politically meaningful. Socialists should stop judging Trump's moral character, especially since it has been proven that it's politically ineffective to do so. Trump has to be dealt with politically, not morally or ethically, and especially not psychologically. That is a game of which Trump is a grand master, if only for the simple reason that he pays no mind to anything that doesn't follow his worldview. Liberals simply cannot deal with this, particularly the news media.

⁷ On race and politics, see Reed (2020) and Reed Jr. (1999).

There are many recent examples of this ideological shortsightedness. Two prominent writings will suffice. First, let's take Ronald Brownstein's (2020) article for the *Atlantic*. Brownstein's analysis shares several traits with other progressive media. Most saliently, he thinks the political outcome of this pandemic is Trump losing the election in November. At the time of his piece, the forecast was more wishful thinking than political reality. Even right now, with the intensification of social protests throughout the country, Trump still has a good chance of winning if only because his opposition is senile and laughable in a way that Trump isn't. Walter Shapiro's (2020) recent piece for the *New Republic* suffers from the same ailment. According to Shapiro, Trump has been able to get away with his many lies "either because they are too inconsequential or because they would require too much effort to disprove. Voters, for example, would have to know something about the events in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, or the more recent history of McCarthyism to be able to debunk Trump, the Martyr, every time he wails that he is a victim of a historical 'witch hunt.'" This is pure ideology talking, even now when Trump's lies are anything but inconsequential. Here, Shapiro absolutely reveals the nature of progressive liberalism. Assuming that the extraordinary effort that requires disproving Trump has to come from voters (one guesses that Bernstein and Shapiro would hope they were not being called to task as journalists), Shapiro's statement presupposes that Trump supporters don't know that he is a compulsive liar, as Brownstein also hints at in his article. However, everybody in the entire world knows that Trump is a compulsive liar! There is no American "Matrix"

in which Republicans took the "blue pill" and are somehow blissfully ignorant about the qualities of their president. The fact that everybody knows the truth but this knowledge has no political effect is what makes it an ideological problem of liberalism! The important political question is to ask why, in spite of this and many other well-known things, dozens of millions of Americans still support him. Thinking that somehow Republicans suffer from the biggest case of collective false consciousness recorded in history would be silly. One can only say that if this kind of thinking is what constitutes the liberal democrats' strategy for November, Trump's chances for reelection are much better than what liberal democrats may think.

Nonetheless, Shapiro makes a point worth considering, regarding the effect of the failed operationalization of the federal-aid package. He thinks the troubles with aid distribution will have a strong impact on American voters. This is also the central argument in Brownstein's piece for the *Atlantic*. He concludes by saying that "a divergence in the economic recovery of urban and nonurban areas—coming after a comparable split in their experience with the disease itself—could put Trump in a difficult position." However, this is something for which Trump may be able to avert responsibility, as he will try to do with racial injustice and police brutality. Even Shapiro has to admit that "not all problems with the stimulus payments are Trump's fault." Shapiro's closing argument suffers from the same ailment as his first. Presumably, in November "collective amnesia and sensory overload can no longer be his escape route." Trump does not escape political punishment because people for-

get how awful he is but does so because his base doesn't care about his moral failings. Moral failings are easily remediable things for Christians; all you have to do is ask for forgiveness. God commands them to give you a second chance. This is something that Republicans learned a long time ago. However, Republicans do care about many other things not easily forgivable, and the federal package will be one among others. The question will be whether the failures of the administration will be carried by Trump or whether, as he has done so many times before, he'll be able to displace responsibility for the death toll to civil servants who preceded him or to his advisors for betraying the American people. Trump's prospects on this score are very good, for the simple reason that much of the disaster with distributing federal monies have to do with the gigantic bureaucracy that is the federal system.

He will have a harder time explaining the thousands of deaths American families are suffering. And if Trump loses, it will probably be because of the depth and gravity of state-sponsored murders. However, even the social unrest taking place in the United States right now is a political momentum that has to be harnessed and given social direction and political purpose. Unfortunately, as of today, the only leader that could have given this country what it desperately needs (justice) was voted off of this November's ballot.

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Les Enfant Terribles!

On that last note, another ideological phenomenon we are witnessing is the liberal chastising of young socialist democrats for being socialists! This is something that Osita Nwanevu (2020), writing for the *New Republic*, had the good sense to point out: "The notion that an organization set on abolishing capitalism would have otherwise had a meaningful place inside the tent of the Biden campaign is entirely too silly to merit an earnest response." Nwanevu was responding

to a tweet by *Tablet's* Yair Rosenberg, who argues that Bernie lost "in part because some on the left prioritize self-righteous symbolism over political power and influence."⁸ This is another significant ideological misrecognition from liberals regarding the political nature of socialism. Rosenberg, like many liberal democrats, believes that socialists scoff self-righteously at Washington's political

power and influence. However, the very point of socialist democracy is to destroy the structure of that political power and influence, not partake in its perpetuation. Chastising socialists for not supporting Joe Biden is like chastising Roman Catholics for not supporting abortion, or chastising Jews for not adoring Jesus. The latter is not only antisemitic, it goes against Jews' core political principles and beliefs!

This maybe a good opportunity to point out a few

⁸ Y. Rosenberg (@Yair_Rosenberg), "Why did Bernie lose?," Twitter, 12 April 2020, 1:04 p.m., https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/1249382799389360135.

“small” differences between liberal democrats and socialists. While liberals march and protest, socialists organize and unionize. While liberals defend free speech and freedom of assembly, socialists speak up and assemble. While liberals vote for the status quo, socialists run to beat it. It’s time for liberal democrats to realize that the other “small” narcissistic difference socialists insist on is that they are not capitalists, while liberals are. The latter difference has gotten particularly lost for people of my generation and for baby boomers: basically, progressives in their forties to liberals in their late sixties. A whole class of progressives is having some kind of sadistic *jouissance* chastising socialist democrats for not endorsing Joe Biden. And now we are supposed to believe that a senile, rich white man is going to bring racial justice to the United States of America. Please!

A sociologically impressionistic glance at the type of people who are going for the “endorsement package” that Biden has offered young socialists looks exactly like me, only about a decade or so older. They are middle-class, educated defined-benefit pension holders with good health coverage. Many also had an affair with socialism in their youth but seem to have come to their political senses and know exactly the mistakes that young socialists are making. They have become well-intentioned liberal democrats and abortion-supporting free-speech activists. This is all good, but the problem is not a question of the narcissism of small differences. The problem is the huge political gap that exists between socialism and liberalism as worldviews, or *Weltanschauung*, as the Germans call it.

Understanding the difference between one worldview and the other is not rocket science. Liberalism is about the centrality and priority of the individual bearer of rights. Socialism feels the same way but is about society, not just individuals. Today, the battle between them has been taken to a different stage. The litany of liberal complaints goes something like this: “The primaries are over, Trump is the enemy, and all our forces must come together to defeat him. You gave a wonderful fight; you built a movement that will, in time, develop into a larger movement for (liberal) justice; but the most important political goal right now is to defeat Donald Trump, because as Bernie himself has established, Trump is the worst thing that has happened in American political history. So, now, grow up, take the defeat like a man, stop complaining about what you cannot get, because this is not some Freudian game of instant gratification.” Something along these lines captures the essence of progressive liberal chastising, as exemplified by the open letter in the *Nation*.⁹

The only problem is that every single argument supporting the endorsement of Biden is either politically misguided or simply wrong on its own merits: “We shouldn’t be blithe about the claims of the ‘old’ New Left. These are intelligent and solidary comrades who fought valiantly for this country and our cause. It is both politically unwise and immature to be contemptuous of their concerns. The fact that today they are wrong, politically speaking, should have no bearing on the debt socialists today owe those of yesterday.” But the idea among progressives that young socialists’ radicalism is going to hurt the Democratic Party is ill-conceived. Young socialist

⁹ See “An Open Letter to the New New Left from the Old New Left,” *Nation*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/letter-new-left-biden/>.

democrats are not the radical wing of anything. They just want a piece of the twentieth-century dreamworld that we had (Buck-Morss 2000), even if it's the piece in which our hopes and political expectations went to die. The postmodern logic of late capitalism is what has destroyed the twenty-first century for our youth (Jameson 1984). They were never allowed to share in my generation's twentieth-century dreamworld. Where we had unions, they have professional service contracts; where we have pension plans, they have 401(k)s that go bust with the market; where we have tenure, they have flexi-time; where we had the GI Bill, they have crushing student debt; where we had single-parent incomes, they have multiple low-paying jobs. They have a reasonable and just platform everyone should support.

But that is not the way politics is played in this country. To suggest that young socialists are destroying democracy's prospects by refusing to support Biden is not only an insult to their political struggle but to history itself, to what real suffering and commitment looks like. If Biden can't defeat Trump, tough luck. The country is going to be in for another bumpy ride, but please do not go around blaming socialists like you have no responsibility for Trump making it to the White House in the first place.

To suggest that young socialists are destroying democracy's prospects by refusing to support Biden is not only an insult to their political struggle but to history itself, to what real suffering and commitment looks like. If Biden can't defeat Trump, tough luck. The country is going to be in for another bumpy ride, but please do not go around blaming socialists like you have no responsibility for Trump making it to the White House in the first place.

Conclusion

That said, there are some lessons that socialists do need to learn from Trump. The first one is that you cannot be dismissive of religion, and much less of religious people's concerns. Hiding behind the veil of ignorance to what matters to people has been political liberalism's solution for avoiding this conflict. John Rawls (1993) termed this an "overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice." But while the Judeo-Christian tradition has a lot to say about redeeming the poor and a lot more to teach about punishing the rich, the whole liberal defense of the separation of state and church has mostly served to guarantee the interests of only the most retrograde sector of Christianity.

A second lesson has to do with socialists being self-righteous from time to time simply because they are right. Contrary to those who think that socialism is just a college phase for young kids, socialism is all that socialists have, because the other option went to hell. And that is where the democratic part of the Democratic Socialists of America comes in. Socialist democrats have the best proposals in the world right now about work, health, economy, environment, immigration, electoral reform, and many other fundamental issues like faith and racial justice. But

the problem for socialists is not about having the best political platform, since that doesn't win elections in this country. The problem is how to sell this platform. On this score, socialists can learn much more from horrible Donald J. Trump than from progressive liberals. How's that for irony!

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