

It Could Happen Here

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A deepening crisis pervades Pax Americana and with it a rising interest in fascism and the fear that it may be coming or is already here. While some observers are alarmed at the prospects of fascism, others dismiss the topic as conspiracy theory or just plain rubbish. In the most absurd recent use of the term, George W. Bush has declared America at war “with Islamic fascists seeking to destroy freedom loving societies.” It is hard here not to invoke Huey Long’s famous idea that fascism would come to America clothed as anti-fascism.

The fact that more is being said about fascism in America indicates that a thorough and ongoing debate is now in order. Yet discussions of this sort will inevitably take us into a virtual minefield, especially given the commonplace perception of fascism as a form of totalitarianism that occurred in the past and can never happen again.

We propose that the current talk about fascism has arisen from conditions that can be best summed up as a general crisis of Pax Americana. By general crisis we mean a convergence of developments, long-term and short, pervading the social order that have rendered much of it dysfunctional and dystopian. Stated in another way, the concept of a general crisis describes Pax Americana in economic, political, social and cultural decline. Its long-term causes are rooted in the mid-1970s, where we see the beginnings—brought on in part by the oil shocks to the American economy attributed to the rise of OPEC, and the military defeat in Vietnam—of the dissolution of U.S. economic hegemony over the global capitalist system. These proved costly to U.S. credibility around the world and suggested that the idea of American invincibility was indeed a myth. Despite the so-called triumph over communism trumpeted as a victory by the Reagan administration, the heralding of a New

World Order by George H. W. Bush, or the hollow economic boom brokered by Bill Clinton’s neoliberalism, the crisis of Pax Americana deepened throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Then, the terrorist attacks in September 2001, made the crisis acute, setting into motion a chain of events that have brought the Middle East to the brink of wholesale regional war and exacerbated the economic, political, and ideological contradictions within the totality of the American Empire. From the current vantage point, past troubles pale in significance when compared to:

- the geopolitical nightmare in Iraq;
- the barbarous Israeli invasion of Lebanon undertaken with U.S. support;
- the growing belligerence of the Bush administration toward Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Venezuela and the threat of conflict with any or all of these countries;
- mounting public and private debt in the United States;
- global currency wars that threaten the stability of the dollar;
- the steady and seemingly irreversible deterioration of U.S. living standards causing an unprecedented polarization between wealth and poverty;
- the growing power of the disciplinary state and the parallel weakening of the welfare state;
- the near total loss of international credibility;
- the whole package of threats to civil liberties with the passage of the Patriot Acts and the creation of Homeland Security;
- the supreme court’s decision eroding protection for whistle blowers;
- the increasingly routine references to “clash of civilizations” and World War III.

In short, the general crisis of Pax Americana becomes acute with 9/11 and the U.S ruling class response to it. We suggest that this acute stage of the crisis may become the basis for what we call a fascist trajectory in the United States.

Amid the complexities characterizing the general crisis, current discussions about the threat of fascism today are largely reduced to the dangers of Christian fundamentalism and neoconservative extremism in the Bush administration, along with their synergies. Furthermore, such discussions have generally focused on political, ideological and cultural factors split off from the dynamic context of class rule within the changing particulars of capitalist crisis, in this case the general crisis of Pax Americana. While they do not ignore political economy, most analyses distort its crucial role by reducing it to a concern with plutocracy. Representatives of this genre include the recent writings of Chris Hedges, Mark Crispin Miller, Davidson Loehr, Lawrence Britt, Lewis Lapham and socialists such as Carl Davidson and Jerry Harris.(1) Some of these writers offer astute observations on the “fascist” character of religious fundamentalism. Others see the possibility of fascism coming in the form of a neoconservative coup or rogue ruling class at the top which, aided by a mass base, destroys the electoral process through multifaceted mechanisms of corruption.

Our interpretation contests such assumptions. We oppose the idea that fascism or an intensification of fascist processes could emerge through a fundamentalist movement, a rogue ruling class, or both.(2) While recognizing that current conditions are fueling the idea of fascism via a neoconservative hijacking of American democracy, we argue that the intensification of fascist processes will come—if it does come—from the ruling class as a whole.

In this article, we defend a class analysis of fascism in general and regard it as a methodological introduction to a larger work, where we chart the origins and development of the general crisis with special attention to its acute post 9/11 phase. On the basis of this

more extensive treatment, we will propose with some trepidation that fascism is a plausible response by the U.S. bourgeoisie to the general crisis of Pax Americana. Put another way, if the various components of the acute phase of the general crisis converge in any number of ways, then fascist processes will certainly intensify. In the larger work, we will respond to prominent interpretations of fascism coming from what we describe as the left liberal camp. We then defend our position against one version or another of the view that the general crisis can be solved by recourse to a “new New Deal.”

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To begin, we view fascism as a functional (structural, intrinsic, causal) property of monopoly capitalism in crisis. As we will see, everything turns on understanding the particular, i.e. historical, character of the crisis. Our view is close to the classical or orthodox definition proposed by R. Palme Dutt in his 1934 work *Fascism and Social Revolution*. While we are somewhat sympathetic to Dutt’s position, we differ as well in important ways. For example, although Dutt correctly recognized fascism as a particular crisis-ridden form of capitalist class rule, he insufficiently characterized the particulars of capitalist crisis in the 1930s. This led him to define the New Deal as fascist. In retrospect the presumed inability of class analysis to distinguish between Nazi Germany and the New Deal has occasioned much mirth among so-called nonvulgar Marxists. Nevertheless, we think that a more fine-grained analysis of crisis can account for such differences quite well.

Some theoretical comments are in order. To view fascism as a structural tendency of a predominantly capitalist form of class rule in crisis, we must avoid taking past definitions as constituting the meaning of fascism in general. It is interesting to note that Marxian functionalism is relatively uncontroversial among Marxists as an analysis of the changing forms of dominant ideology, the changing forms of racism and racial inequality, and changing

forms of imperialism. Let us consider imperialism. Marxists argue that capitalist imperialism is a property of capital, a consequence of the laws of capital accumulation. Imperialism has taken many forms, from outright territorial conquest to current forms of neoliberalism, which until recently did not involve territorial conquest but other processes – outsourcing, financial domination through debt, restructuring, etc. Now we have a new form, what John Bellamy Foster calls “Naked Imperialism.”(3)

Were we to define imperialism based on nonfunctional, i.e. merely descriptive criteria as many liberals and conservatives are wont to do, we are led to the position that imperialism may have existed in the past—British imperialism, U.S. imperialism in the Philippines, the Belgian Congo, other examples of territorial conquest and their affiliated ideological justifications (white man’s burden, the superiority of western civilization, etc.)—but no longer exists or would only exist if it repeated these past forms. No Marxist accepts such a definition, in part because it rules out the possibility that forms of imperialism change in response to changing configurations of class rule in the context of the class struggle and interimperialist rivalry. As with imperialism so with fascism. If we define fascism in terms of its past forms or its nonfunctional or non-causal properties, we come up with a plethora of fascism’s more descriptive components: corporatism, extreme racism, anti-Semitism, militant and organic nationalism, the transcendence of class conflict, a form of rule with relevance only to the particular context of the war against Bolshevism, Christian fundamentalism in the present case, the requirement of an explicitly fascist party, charismatic leaders, paramilitary formations, etc.

When descriptive definitions or causal definitions based on past fascisms take the place of a functional definition, what happens is that one form of fascism then stands in for all forms, and fascism’s changing historical character and role in capitalist development become obscured.

For example, consider the approach by Jurgen Kocka. In his analysis of the emergence of National Socialism in Germany, Kocka stresses the role of traditional elites, including:

the great power of the Junkers in industrial Germany and the feudalizing tendencies in the big bourgeoisie; the extraordinary power of the bureaucracy and the army in a state that had never experienced a successful bourgeois revolution and which was unified from above; the social and political alliance of the rising bourgeoisie and the ever resilient agrarian nobility against the sharply demarcated proletariat; the closely related antiparliamentarian, anti democratic and anti liberal alignment of large parts of the German ruling strata.(4)

For Kocka, this is not one form of fascism but fascism per se. In other words, this convergence of traditional elites is prescribed as a general formula for fascism, at least implicitly. Alan Dawley was quick to recognize that definitions such as Kocka’s “automatically rule out fascism in liberal democratic regimes such as the United States.”(5) From Dawley, we see the shortcoming of Kocka’s approach: without traditional elites in crisis, one cannot have fascism.

Even Paul Sweezy committed a version of this error when in *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, he stated that the rise of fascism was “the product of the impact of imperialist wars of redivision on the economic and social structure of advanced capitalist nations.”(6) Sweezy’s analysis here was constrained by the specific, historic examples of Italy and Germany. As we will see later on, however, Sweezy’s comments and insights on fascism went well beyond what he says here about historical fascism. Interestingly, Sweezy’s long time partner Paul Baran, writing in 1952 under the pseudonym of “Historicus” noted, in discussing the disturbing tendency of the left to deprecate “the threat of fascism in America,” that such views are “based on the following rather simple reasoning.” Baran continues:

For a political system to qualify as fascist, it has to display the German or Italian

characteristics of fascism. It must be based on a fascist mass movement anchored primarily in para-military formations of brown shirts or black shirts. It must be a one party regime, with the party headed by a Fuhrer or a Duce symbolizing the principle of authoritarian leadership. It must be violently nationalist, racist, anti-Semitic. It must be frankly illiberal, intolerant of opposition, hostile to civil liberties and human rights.(7)

Arguments like the one Baran here criticizes, along with those of Kocka and even Sweezy lead us to “concentrate on the forms of political events and pay insufficient attention to their social content and historical significance.”(8) They confuse the form of fascism with its ongoing functionality under capitalism. Fascism and fascist processes take many different forms in different periods, waxing and waning with changes in configurations of class rule. And they spread during moments of capitalist crisis, but not just any capitalist crisis.

The point here is that it would be wrong to define fascism as requiring, let us say, a state racism in which racism is the official state policy. On the contrary, we hold that a contemporary U.S. fascism could in fact come in multicultural garb, accompanying or even serving as the alibi for a deepening racism. In the same vein, it would be wrong to equate fascism with corporatism or corporatist ideology. Conversely, we would argue that not all corporatisms are fascist. We would distinguish between corporate liberalism and fascism. The focus on corporatism blurs such distinctions and can lead to the utopian view of fascism advocated by Lawrence Dennis in the 1930s, where corporatism presumably transcends class conflict. Or, despite the very different perspective, it can lead to Bertram Gross’s “friendly fascism,” which viewed fascism in America as the logical outcome and perfection of U.S. corporatist rule, a form of total integration, the triumph of one-dimensional society. More recently, a similar view has been put forward by Lewis Lapham.

Our view is consistent with the trenchant observation made by George Jackson when he says that “[w]e will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class.”(9)

We would make two further points of clarification. One, while our functional definition allows us to see fascism’s changing forms under capitalism, what does not change is, of course, this very function itself! Two, we must recognize that there are different kinds of functionalism and our class-analytic-functional definition needs to be distinguished, to take an important contemporary example, from Robert Paxton’s version in his recent book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

Paxton treats classical fascism correctly as a crisis of class rule. Accordingly, he concludes that the ruling classes in both countries, regardless of their differences, ultimately united in order to prevent social revolution from below; in both, he says, conservatives and liberals were the “two principal coalition partners.”(10) Paxton criticizes what he understands as the orthodox Marxist definitions of fascism – “the instrument” of the big bourgeoisie against the proletariat when the legal means of the State proved insufficient” or “the open, terrorist dictatorship of finance capital.”(11) But his analysis reflects a basic Marxist tenet that fascist movements in Italy and Germany by themselves did not bring about fascism. At any rate, Paxton’s “functional equivalent” of fascism becomes disconnected from class analysis when he speculates about possible contemporary fascisms, including the United States.

Paxton maintains that the language and symbols of an authentic American fascism would have little to do with the original European models; rather they would be as familiar and reassuring to loyal Americans as the original symbols and language were to Italians and Germans. For Paxton, American fascism will mean:

No swastikas, but Stars and Stripes (or Stars and Bars) and Christian crosses. No fascist salute but mass recitations of the pledge of allegiance. ... Around such reassuring language and symbols and in the event of some redoubtable shock to national prestige, Americans might support an enterprise of forcible national regeneration, unification, and purification. Its targets would be the First Amendment, separation of church and state (crèches on the lawn, prayers in school), efforts to place control on gun ownership, desecrations of the flag, unassimilated minorities, artistic license, dissident and unusual behavior of all sorts that could be labeled antinational or decadent.(12)

Paxton offers valuable insight into the possible forms of American-style fascism, but his “functional equivalency” operates purely on an ideological and cultural level. Protestant fundamentalism becomes “the functional equivalent of fascism to regenerate and unite a humiliated and vengeful people.”(13) Here, fascism is principally about fundamentalism as expressive of some deep anthropological impulse, not crises of capitalist rule.

It is important to emphasize that we are not offering the definition of fascism. For example, our thesis about fascism and the ruling class would not hold for many instances of what is commonly called third world fascism, in part because these fascisms often contain weak ruling classes whose divisions can be sown and/or used by ruling classes and governments in the imperialist core. This is regularly the case in the examples drawn from Chomsky and Herman’s *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* and would describe the processes of class formation and fascist rule in a country like Pakistan. In such countries, fascism emerged through one section of the ruling class disciplining or smashing the other. That sort of process, we argue, cannot happen here.(14)

One of the central criticisms of a class analysis of fascism is that it is reductionist, one consequence of this reductionism being that Marxists cannot explain theoretically the differences between the New Deal and Nazi Germany. The general argument goes

something like this. If fascism is the expression of monopoly capitalism in crisis, then given that both Germany and the United States went through economic depressions of similar magnitude, why did we get the New Deal in one place and fascism in the other? As Alan Dawley put it, “fascism and New Deal liberalism represented alternative solutions to the same problem of restoring political legitimacy undermined by the Great Depression.”(15) Dawley suggests that the difference in the two solutions is explained neither by the personalities of Hitler and Roosevelt—though he says there is something to this argument—nor by “impersonal economic trends.” “Economic contours alone,” he asserts, “could not have caused such different political outcome. ... Similarity can never explain difference.”(16) Marxists who cut their teeth arguing with postmarxists about reductionism know where this is heading even if Dawley, himself a Marxist, won’t quite go there. The Great Depression is “monopoly capitalism in crisis” which, however, produced vastly different outcomes. Class analysis, equated with the “economic” or the explanatory power of “impersonal economic trends,” is perhaps necessary but clearly insufficient. So if class is part of the analysis, other causal categories are needed.

However, if we reduce class analysis in this way—splitting the economic from the political and equating class with the former—we will have to import other causal categories to explain the differences. From the Marxist standpoint of totality, however, the crisis, as Dawley and critics of class reductionism see it, is too narrowly defined. While Germany and the United States went through similar economic crises, they were met by quite different alignments of class forces. Economic crisis alone does not necessarily lead to fascism.

The Great Depression in America emerged from the Hoover years of plutocracy. This plutocracy followed a period of intense class struggles in which the ruling class brought to bear the full force of a “racist antiradicalism” to thwart class struggle, antiracist struggle or

their union. It was predicated on the smashing of labor and so racist was the period that Dawley deems it “the biological republic.”(17) As Pem Buck notes, a more appropriate parallel – though by no means exact – to the situation producing the Nazi seizure of power would be the early twenties in the United States, with the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan paralleling the rise of the Nazis.(18)

The first Roosevelt administration, with its famous hundred days, faced an economic crisis but not a crisis of class rule, as was clearly the case in late Weimar. As David Abraham argues in his superb book *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*, the fierce stalemate that undermined the coalition between capital and labor (*sozialpolitik*) resulted from “an economic crisis that was in good measure a profit crisis engendered by a militant reformist labor movement.” Put another way, the crisis was a “structural problem” that “went well beyond the pressure of reparations and high interest rates.”(19) Furthermore, Abraham argued that this crisis of class rule resulted from the Social Democrats’ assumption that democracy could overcome capitalism on its own terrain, a terrain guided by the logic of capital accumulation. But the assumption produced the paradox whereby “the best that can be accomplished is the worst that can be done: paralyzing capitalism without transforming it.”(20)

While we cannot do justice to Abraham’s complete analysis, it is crucial to note these summary comments: “Just as industrialists—without much enthusiasm—collectively compromised with the socialists in 1918 in order to maintain what was theirs and improve their future prospects, so they did the same with the less threatening national socialists.”(21) As Abraham shows, individual members of the ruling class had diverse feelings about the Nazis, ranging from enthusiastic support to grave distrust. These feelings bore some relation to the tensions between ruling class fractions, i.e. export oriented versus heavy industry that characterized the Weimar period. But by late 1932, according to Abraham, “there were no

longer any real alternatives to a leading Nazi role in the new government.”(22) Another crucial point is that the same members of the ruling class who supported the coalition with labor, however vulnerable, as a form of social control, often later supported the Nazis for the same reason. The class fractions that were divided at one stage of Weimar united in helping to bring about its collapse. A parallel process took place in the United States with one notable exception: the order was reversed as the class fractions, despite much complaining and considerable opposition, united behind the New Deal.

This point is important for two reasons. First, it shows quite clearly that class analysis does not involve the domination of big business defined as a collection of malign, conspiratorial individuals (this was the view of George Seldes, an often astute observer of fascist tendencies in the United States in the late 1930s). Second, it helps us to understand how ruling class fractions during the New Deal era overcame their divisions on behalf of Roosevelt’s drive toward a war economy, which provided jobs for labor and a strengthening of ruling class power. Both points are central to combating a rival liberal interpretation of a fascist trajectory in the present.

In the case of Nazi Germany, understanding class analysis in this way, with fascist processes waxing and waning in response to different alignments of class forces, shows what is wrong with well known critiques of Marxist analyses of fascism like those issuing from the pen of Henry Turner, in his *German Big Business and the Rise of Fascism*. To savage Marxist analysis, Turner makes full use of the ideological apparatus of positivism, with its distrust of structures of power, to equate class analysis with conspiracy theory on the one hand—evil bosses planning fascism from 1918 to 1933—while on the other hand rescuing the ruling class by trusting everything they say. If Marxist analysis turned on the requirement that Big Business was united for Hitler, secretly funding him from the start, an analysis perhaps in fact suggested by taking too seriously John

Heartfield's famous montage of Hitler's small hand in the form of a fascist salute taking money from the large hand of Big Business, then Marxist analysis would indeed be in trouble. Ironically, liberals and left liberals in fact tend to treat business in this manner. For example, George Seldes sees big business and one of its policy-making arms, the National Association of Manufacturers, as essentially fascist.(23) For Seldes, this was true even during the war, when he then referred to them as fifth columnists.

As we will show, this view leads in the present to the rogue ruling class hypothesis, with a possible fascist trajectory solved by voting democratic or, in Michael Mann's view, throwing the militarists out. Various historians have shown in the New Deal years that a significant split in the ruling class developed between the New Dealers who thought corporate liberalism might stabilize capitalism and those represented by the Liberty League and subsequently the America First Committee. These organizations temporarily called for isolationism and even an alliance with Germany against the Soviet Union as part of constructing a "Fortress America." This contradiction was largely solved by the war, with Roosevelt's attempt to prosecute certain isolationists for treason coming to naught. For example, Sears Roebuck's Leonard Wood was one of the architects of the America First Committee, yet it was Sears' Donald Nelson who played a crucial role in consolidating the direction of the war production board. As late as 1936, Roosevelt himself was open to proposals emanating from Hitler that might keep the peace. According to Kees van der Pijl in his book, *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class*, this reflected the continuing strength of the sphere of interest policy in international relations, with its connection to Germany. But such a stance came to an end with Roosevelt's 1937 speech that called for a quarantine of the aggressors. Van der Pijl notes that during the brief social redistribution phase of the New Deal, which culminated in the Flint sit-down strike (sit-downs were soon made illegal), well-known

liberals like Will Clayton and James Warburg joined the Liberty Leagues, which called for the smashing of labor—similar to what took place in Nazi Germany. But with the primacy of industrial capital established and coupled to an internationalist, expansionist thrust, (the corporate liberal synthesis), "men like Warburg and Clayton rejoined the Roosevelt regime and became missionaries of the corporate liberal ideal."(24)

This economist reduction of class analysis mentioned above has also been central to the work of Michael Mann, who has written *Fascists*, a major work on fascism between the wars, and an important book on the current crisis, *Incoherent Empire*. Mann's books are well respected on the left so it is all the more important to point out his mischaracterizations of class analysis, mischaracterizations that are typical and that lead him and others who follow this trajectory to misunderstand both past fascism and present fascist possibilities.

Mann largely rejects class analysis by equating it with economic reductionism. For Mann, class analysis is reduced to a scenario whereby fascism results from "economic deprivation, unemployment or declining wage levels."(25) But as he puts it, that's part of it, but not all of it. So, he says, economic crisis is necessary but not sufficient for explaining fascism. He also argues there must be ideological crisis, political crisis, cultural crisis, and military crisis, no one category reducible to the others. These separate crises follow from his analysis of social power. Mann's causal pluralism separates out as autonomous centers of social power what Marxists understand as functioning in the service of the dominant class. At least at the level of the system as a whole, for a Marxist it would be very odd to divide categories up in this way since, however complex the system can be, it is hard under relatively normal conditions of class rule to see how the ideological would be autonomous of class or the military, etc. Though Mann offers his pluralist model in response to Marxism's supposed economic reductionism, Mann's artificial splitting of political from military from

economic distorts the character and function of class rule. For example, in the case of Germany in the 1930s, the ruling class cannot be equated with economic powers alone. As Franz Neumann noted of Germany's ruling class:

the ruling class is composed of those who command the means of violence (physical and moral) and the means of production, and those who possess the administrative skill. There are thus four groups: the Nazi leadership, which controls the police and propaganda; the army leadership; the industrial hierarchy; and the high civil service.(26)

Mann's multi causal model lets capitalism off the hook. The autonomy of the political for Mann is cashed out in two complementary theses as relates to fascism. One, that the main rival to fascism is not labor, socialism, communism, etc., but the old regime. According to this interpretation, fascism succeeds or fails, is able to get beyond the movement stage or not, in inverse proportion to the old regime's strength. Fascism succeeds in Nazi Germany because the old regime is weak—oddly enough for Kocka, it is strong—whereas fascism does not succeed in Hungary because the old regime retains power.

Two, the presence of the old regime, whether strong or weak, is connected to the absence of a well developed parliamentary regime, which for Mann blocks fascism. In turn, this developed parliamentary regime is associated with the domination of enlightenment values—science and instrumental reason. For Mann, this ideological character of mature parliamentary regimes discourages fanaticisms, which he sees as based on adherence “to substantive values,” to be distinguished from instrumental reason's commitment to procedural values. If the presence or absence of the old regime is an example of the autonomy of politics, here we have the supposed autonomy of ideology.

Mann's analysis relating the emergence of fascism to the breakdown of the old regime

raises significant questions. Why not analyze the Hungary/Germany difference in terms of the presence or absence of a powerful but vulnerable capitalist class in crisis, one vulnerable to a working class movement? One reason Mann does not go in this direction is due to the fact that in Hungary and Romania, home-grown fascists (leftists had been previously smashed) represented the proletarian interest against the old regime dominated status quo, so presumably that example undercuts a Marxist thesis. But the Marxist view does not focus primarily on fascist mass movements because they are not primary engines of fascism. Marxism analyzes fascism as a form of class rule dominated by a monopoly capitalist fraction that turns to fascism when its normal options are no longer available.

With respect to the distinction between instrumental values and substantive values, Mann asserts without argument that “[s]ocial and political ideologies do not require and cannot obtain scientific validation.”(27) This point is, to say the least, highly contentious and in fact almost surely false, based on a fact/value dichotomy that has been undergoing deconstruction for some time now. Values like racial equality, or so moral realists argue, are rooted in facts about human capacity and, to take another basic example, recent discoveries that “race” is an illusion carry moral implications. As Hilary Putnam notes, there are moral facts, and facts and values are often entangled.

Mann's adherence to this outmoded distinction allows him to assert that the dominance of instrumental reason facilitates the moderate give and take of parliamentary regimes. The distinction simultaneously allows him to rule out radical and progressive alternatives committed to substantive values of equality, in part by tacitly equating these values with fundamentalisms. Ironically, though, if substantive values cannot obtain validation, neither can instrumental values and so his preferences for instrumental values cannot be justified. Mann's contradiction follows strictly from his own fact/value split. His claims about

old regimes' causal connections to fascism rule out the possibility of a fascist America, while allowing it for fanatical (rooted in substantive values) third world regimes.(28) But as we suggest briefly above, while there is certainly such a thing as third world fascism, it cannot be separated from imperialism in the core, a separation, it seems, encouraged by Mann's analysis.

When Mann turns his model of social power on current conditions, it leads to his thesis of the United States as an incoherent empire driven by a rogue Bush regime—senseless, fanatical, the result of a “neoconservative chicken hawk coup.”(29) Mann clearly demarcates the neoliberalism of Clinton from Bush's neoconservatism, viewing them as distinct primarily on an ideological plane. It is clear that he sees the Bush administration as an irrational throwback, a version of the old regime we might say, an anachronism, a move away from the “mild and democratic nation states” they are supposed to be. Mann does not talk about anything like a fascist trajectory in the United States simply because he views the political system as an example of well entrenched parliamentarism. For Mann, fascism in the United States could only come from outside this system, meaning a coup.

Mann of course sees this parliamentarism as a pure and simple democratic advance and not as an advanced form of class rule. So Mann sees the collapse of the Weimar republic resulting in part from a democracy deficit. But, according to Abraham, the weak parliamentary setup or tradition in Germany enabled a political pluralism that could not be sustained precisely because it was too much democracy—for example, the SPD's insistence on increasing sozialpolitik at a time when capital needed to smash labor to restore profitability.

The differences between Mann's pluralism and our position are abundantly clear.

We would also note that if Mann's ideas about the relative maturity of parliamentary regimes underestimate the democratic potential in Germany, it overestimates that

potential in the United States during the same period. In the larger work to follow, we make several references to observers in the 1930s who believed that the United States might go fascist. That prediction turned out wrong. But on Mann's account, such predictions were foolish because they failed to recognize the maturity of U.S. democratic institutions, meaning that it couldn't happen then. Our view, of course, is that didn't did not mean couldn't. Had war spending and mobilization not opened up opportunities for capital, had the depression been worse than it was, had the alignment of class forces been slightly different, we doubt that Mann's so-called mature institutions would have saved the United States.

Oddly enough, fiction is more tenable than Mann's social theory. Consider Sinclair Lewis's novel, written in 1935, with its fictional timeline beginning in 1936 and ending in 1939. Lewis portrays America in 1936 as in a depression considerably worse than it was in fact, with the number of unemployed in the novel about double. Our view is that without rearmament and a second imperialist war, the nosedive of 1937-1938, where unemployment rates jumped from 14 to 19 percent, could have made Lewis's fiction a reality. In fact, this is more or less the scenario Lawrence Dennis foresaw in 1936 in his book, *The Coming American Fascism*. Dennis saw fascism as the only alternative short of anarchy to the utter collapse of liberal capitalist democracy.(30)

Returning to the present, we might agree that Pax Americana is an incoherent empire. But the incoherence is not the result, as Mann sees it, of the four autonomous social powers out of phase with one another—primarily due to the Bush gang fouling up a system which should operate rationally and in sync. Rather, the incoherence results from the contradictions of Pax Americana in decline. To return to the claim that Mann's categories, while including class in his scheme in a variety of error prone ways, let capitalism off the hook, here is the gist: fascism waxes or wanes in inverse proportion to the presence or absence of the old regime, and is blocked in societies with well entrenched

parliaments. However multicausal Mann's models claim to be, this example makes it clear that, for Mann, culture does most of the explanatory work. Further, Mann's discussion of the Bush administration as a kind of anti-modernist throwback opens the door to conceptually similar analyses coming ironically from the Bush administration itself, with its view of Islamic fascism, rooted in fanaticism and anti-modernism understood as largely autonomous processes.

Finally, we have this to say about Mann. In his discussion of the weaknesses of Marxism claims that fascism serves the interests of the ruling class, Mann notes how often ruling classes "go for the gun too quickly" and admits that he hasn't yet "solved the problem of hysterical overreaction." (31) He suggests that it might have something to do with "basic human sentiments of fear, hatred and violence" and perhaps "other basic human sentiments not to forgive but to kick our enemy when he or she is down, especially after he or she has scared us. But it may also be because of the role that ideology plays in defining 'interests' more broadly than rational choice theory suggests." (32) Here, Mann makes clear how the inadequacy of the concept of class interest requires the turn to "basic human sentiments," but also to autonomous ideological, political and military crises. But just as Mann facilitates his pluralism by equating Marxism with economism, he now repeats the maneuver by equating Marxist notions of class interest with rational choice theory. Admittedly, this is a difficult problem and the concept of class interest is often taken for granted and undertheorized, but a few comments are in order. When Mann suggests that the ruling elites have this tendency to pick up the gun too quickly, one meaning of "too quickly" might be that Germany between the wars was not in a revolutionary situation, or perhaps that the United States did not need to invade Iraq for oil-related reasons but could have cut a deal. But if ideology is meant to legitimate the illegitimate, then exaggerating the threat to class rule by normalizing the rulers and

demonizing enemies is paradoxically a necessity. Further, given that we are human beings with our basic human sentiments and not purely rational beings—class society would not be rational according to such beings—it would not be unusual for members of the ruling class to believe their own ideology. Still, Mann would be hard put to argue that crises of rule were primarily ideological instead of being rooted in properties intrinsic to class rule, like the contradictions of capitalism or the permanent desire of the masses to resist its ruling classes—a desire that expresses the substantive values he sees as at odds with modern democratic states.

If the general crisis of Pax Americana in its acute phase contains a fascist trajectory, it will result from a crisis of capitalist rule, as history reveals. Equally important, it will look quite different from past fascist trajectories. In the case of Pax Americana in crisis, the intensification of fascist processes would unfold in a bipartisan political context, liberals and conservatives acting in concert – the whole ruling class. Looking back to the 1930s, this was the view of Carmen Haider, an astute observer and analyst of fascist processes and possibilities at the time. (33)

On a cautionary note, however important class fractions are to understanding the world, they must not be split off into autonomous groupings: unilateralists versus multilateralists; national capitalists with desires for empire versus internationalists; reactionary capitalists versus liberal capitalists. Of course, such people and the forces they represent do exist. But for purposes of understanding fascism, capitalism and crisis, it is better to understand these forces as moments of capital, moments of a paradoxical unity that cannot be transcended and cannot be fetishized. In this sense, we see unilateralist and multilateralists as bearers of contradictory social relations, and not as people with fully independent wills.

While seeming initially to equate fascism with the conditions producing it in Europe between the wars, Paul Sweezy noted that the seeds of fascism are always present in

capitalism and he saw it also possibly taking other forms in response to different crisis situations. Sweezy wrote: "So far as history allows us to judge—and in questions of this sort there is no other guide—a prolonged and 'unsuccessful' war is the only social phenomenon sufficiently catastrophic in its effects to set in train this particular chain of events." (34) Such a war might lead to conditions ripe for fascism, especially if they occurred at a time when capitalist structures were, as he put it, "severely injured and not yet overthrown." (35)

Let us for a moment follow Sweezy's thinking because it helps us to put the current situation as we see it in its proper historical perspective. For Sweezy, it was not inconceivable that a prolonged economic crisis alone could produce "substantially the same results," meaning fascism, though only if "the structure of capitalist rule [had] already been seriously undermined." (36) But Sweezy seemed uncomfortable with leaving it at that, since he was clear that capitalism always carried the potential for fascism. It seemed unlikely to him that World War II, a war fought against fascism, would usher in fascism in the United States. In 1942, it was clear to Sweezy that the structure of capitalist rule in the United States was indeed far from undermined. But Sweezy was aware that things could change, writing that: "To be sure, if we had to anticipate an endless succession of wars in the future, matters would almost certainly turn out differently." (37)

We propose that the general crisis of Pax Americana in its acute phase represents the historic convergence of Sweezy's two main criteria (in 1942) for fascism in the future: a "profound and long-drawn-out" economic crisis—one that Sweezy and Harry Magdoff later deemed "irreversible"—accompanied by an "endless succession of wars." (38) Further, Sweezy contended that a possible fascism was "not a question of a single nation but rather of the world economy as a whole." (39) In other words, fascism would likely reappear in forms differing from their historical predecessors given the changing structures of world

capitalism. If fascism between the wars reconsolidated the nation states of Germany and Italy, readying it for imperialist expansionism, a U.S. fascism emerging from multiple crises would flow from an empire in decline—in some way corresponding to what István Mészáros has called capital's structural crisis. (40)

We recognize how uncertain and volatile matters now stand with Pax Americana. But evidence is mounting for what we are calling a fascist trajectory. We will discuss the details of the general crisis, especially focusing on the events and developments that have brought it to its current acute phase, in our follow-up to this essay. For now, however, we wish to close with comments on a recent article by Nafeez Mossadegh Ahmed. Ahmed, author of *Behind the War on Terror and The War on Freedom: How and Why America Was Attacked*, notes the seeming irrationality of Bush administration plans to use the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as prelude to a long envisioned invasion of Iran. The catastrophic consequences of the Iran scenario, Ahmed notes, are well understood by elite planners: "irreversible ramifications for the global political economy," "energy security in tatters" precipitating contingency plans for further resource wars in the Mideast, actions triggering "responses from other major powers with fundamental interests in maintaining their own access to regional energy supplies" – Russia and China. Ahmed adds that the dollar economy would be seriously undermined.

The question he poses to all of us is this: Why would the U.S. ruling class pursue its interests in this manner?

Because the "post-9/11 military geostrategy of the 'War on Terror' does not spring from a position of power but rather from entirely the opposite." Ahmed claims that the "global system has been crumbling under the weight of its own unsustainability... and we are fast approaching the convergence of multiple crises that are already interacting fatally..." These crises include peak oil and climate tipping points, and a dollar denominated economy on the verge, according to no less an authority

than Paul Volcker, of a currency crisis (the contradictory character of U.S. plans are indicated by the currency problem, both cause and consequence of a desperate strategy). Ahmed asserts that senior level planners in the policy making establishment have appeared to calculate “that the system is dying” but the last “viable means of sustaining it remains [sic] a fundamentally military solution” designed to “rehabilitate the system ... to meet the requirements of the interlocking circuits of military-corporate power and profit.”

Ahmed ends his very recent article (July 24) with Daniel Ellsberg’s warning that another 9-11 event “or a major war in the Middle East involving a U.S. attack on Iran ...will be an equivalent of a Reichstag fire decree,” involving massive detention of both Middle Easterners and critics of the policy, the latter deemed terrorist sympathizers. Ahmed is well aware of how contingencies can postpone such plans. Nevertheless, we must all be aware of these plans and the crises which might bring them into being.

We can begin, at least now, 50 years after Baran’s words, by turning around “one of the most disturbing features of the present political situation in the United States” – the “widely observable complacency concerning the danger of fascism in this country.”(41)

1. Chris Hedges, “Feeling the hate with the National Religious Broadcasters,” in *Harpers* (May 2005), 55-61; Mark Crispin Miller, *Foiled Again: How the Right Stole the 2004 Election & Why They’ll Steal the Next One Too* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Davidson Loehr, *America, Fascism + God: Sermons from a Heretical Preacher* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005); Lawrence Britt, *Fascism Anyone?* in free inquiry (Spring 2003); Lewis Lapham, “Notebook,” in *Harper’s* (October 2005), 7-9; Carl Davidson and Jerry Harris, “Globalization, Theocracy and the

NewFascism: the U.S. Right’s Rise to Power,” *Race & Class* 47, no. 3 (2006), 47-67.

2. We borrow the term “fascist processes” from Pem Buck, *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power & Privilege* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001). Buck’s emphasis on fascism as a process avoids freezing the term into its past forms and emphasizes, as we do, fascist processes as a property of capital that waxes and wanes with major organizational changes in class rule. She notes rightly that only the ruling class can institute fascist processes.
3. John Bellamy Foster, “Naked Imperialism,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 4 (September 2005), 1-11.
4. Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 257.
5. Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 525.
6. Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 329.
7. “Historicus,” “Fascism in America,” *Monthly Review* (October 1952), 181.
8. Historicus, “Fascism in America,” 182.
9. George L. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore, Black Classic Press, 1990), 118.
10. Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 22.
11. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 8.
12. Paxton, 202. Paxton adds that “an authentically popular American fascism would be pious, anti-black, and since September 11, 2001, anti-Islamic as well.”
13. Paxton, 203.
14. On Pakistan, see Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000).
15. Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 396.
16. Dawley, 397.

17. Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class & Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Chicago, Ill: Illinois University Press, 2003), 122-158.
18. Buck, *Worked to the Bone*, 155-164.
19. David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy in Crisis* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), xviii.
20. Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*, xxi.
21. Abraham, xvi.
22. Abraham, xxxvii
23. George Seldes, *Facts and Fascism* (New York: In Fact, 1943), 80-102.
24. Kees van der Pijl, *The Making of An Atlantic Ruling Class* (London: Verso, 1984), 105-106.
25. Michael Mann, *Fascists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19.
26. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 396.
27. Mann, *Fascists*, 79.
28. There is a voluminous literature that dismantles the fact/value dichotomy from a realist perspective. For one example of this work, see Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002).
29. Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), 252.
30. Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (New York: Signet, 1993); Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism: The Crisis of Capitalism* (Newport Beach, Calif., Noontide Press, 1993).
31. Mann, *Fascists*, 63.
32. Mann, 63.
33. Carmen Haider, *Do We Want Fascism?* (New York: John Day, 1934), 242-247. Haider, who earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University and worked for a time at the Brookings Institution, went to Italy to study labor conditions under fascist rule. After publishing a book about her findings there, *Capital and Labor Under Fascism*, she returned to the United States, where her studies and extensive tours of the country prepared her to write *Do We Want Fascism?*.
34. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, 346.
35. Sweezy, 346.
36. Sweezy, 346.
37. Sweezy, 347.
38. Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy, *The Irreversible Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988).
39. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, 347.
40. István Mészáros, "The Structural Crisis of Politics," *Monthly Review* (September, 2006), 34-53.
41. Historicus, "Fascism in America," 181.

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A fully annotated version of this article is available from the authors.

It Could Happen Here. 29 May 2019 Â. NEW EPISODE: One way or another, the United States as we know it is going to end. How can we make sure what comes next is better than what came before? One way or another, the United States as we know it is going to end. How can we make sure what comes next is better than what came before? itcouldhappenherepod.com. The End of the United States of America. One way or another, the United States as we know it is going to end. How can we make sure what comes next is better than what came before? One way or another, the United States as we know it is going to en It Can't Happen Here is a semi-satirical 1935 political novel by American author Sinclair Lewis and a 1936 play by Lewis and John C. Moffitt adapted from the novel. The novel was published during the heyday of fascism in Europe, which was reported on by Dorothy Thompson, Lewis' wife. The novel describes the rise of Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, a demagogue who is elected President of the United States, after fomenting fear and promising drastic economic and social reforms while promoting a return to