

United States: The Invasion of Capitol Hill

Monday 11 January 2021, by [TUGAL Cihan](#) (Date first published: 11 January 2021).

Decaying Institutions, Rightwing Insurrection, and the Need for a Mass Movement.

On January 6, 2020, radical right-wing militants stormed the powerhouse of market capitalism's world leader. This not only puts to rest arguments regarding American exceptionalism, but adds to events that signal liberal capitalism's terminal crisis worldwide. From this day on, nobody will be able to say, "It won't happen here." Right-wing occupation of the top representative institutions took place in the US before any other advanced capitalist nation. Moreover, all the talk about the US now resembling a "Third World" nation or a "banana republic" is also very mistaken, for what those countries usually witness is US-backed military forces storming their parliaments. Paramilitary and ideologically-driven civilian invasions of centers of power have interwar European origins and are more likely to be seen in aspiring or declining imperial powers, not extremely dependent ones.

Much of mainstream analysis of the insurrection itself is misleading. The mainstream focuses on the "fact" that the insurrection has failed to prevent the "peaceful transfer of power." Democracy, we are then asked to believe, is still in good health. This "failure," however, is almost inconsequential, since it is dubious that the organizers really believed they could prevent Biden from becoming the next president. This was rather a show of force. And even more important than that, the radical right demonstrated it can go as far as occupying the Congress with little ideological unity and organizational coherence.

What allowed the radical right to walk into even the House Chamber was not its own power, but the cooperation of the police forces. It is very possible that the collaboration goes much deeper, as it is hard to imagine that intelligence services were not informed of this occupation plan and of the willingness of the police to cooperate. Actors within the Republican Party, as well as some of the more "respectable" right-wing civic organizations, must have also been aware. As important is the weakness of non-right-wing mainstream institutions. Liberal media keeps on saying they knew this was going to happen. How do they explain, if such is the case, the inaction of authorities sympathetic to them? Were parts of the civil and military bureaucracy involved in this knowing inaction?

What is lacking in the widely shared insistence that the insurrectionists should be brought to justice is attention to the authorities who knowingly allowed the insurrection, as well as the rebels' funders. Isn't it significant that many of the rebels arrested at Capitol Hill participated in the Charlottesville clashes? The people who really need to be brought to justice are not only these murderers, but those who let them walk away from Charlottesville, get more organized in the subsequent years, and come back for more violent action.

The most significant aspect of January 6, then, is not that the radical right stormed the Congress. It is rather that the authorities allowed them to do so. Both the militants and the authorities must have been aware that this action was destined to be short. It was not meant to have a transformational effect. Its result is symbolic and strategic. It shows that liberal institutions cannot protect themselves, or rather, would not have been able to survive if the radical right had a national, effective, ideologically sturdy organization. Given the dispersed and individualistic legacies of the

radical right [1], it would not naturally evolve in an effective and ideologically vibrant direction, under normal circumstances. But January 6 will give it the spirit and inspiration to at least strive for that: the allegedly “failed” invasion shows what a putsch can achieve if prepared and led smartly.

Such a putsch cannot happen next month or next year. The radical right needs years to catch up with the decades it has squandered. Still, the US is likely to experience several financial, climate, and other disasters over the coming years, as well as left-wing mass responses to these. Each of the system crises and popular responses will be further fuel for the radical right. Its real source of strength, though, will not be these crises and responses themselves, but the growing feebleness and disorientation (and occasionally, collaboration) of mainstream institutions.

In the coming years, how the FBI, and state and city-level police forces, react will be very important. Following Trump’s first election, the FBI disbanded many Nazi bands. During BLM protests, they didn’t touch them much. The same is true for the police forces of even the most liberal cities [2]: they cracked on BLM and/or Antifa protestors, but were hands off when it came to racists. The liberal state could just recoil if the Left gets too strong, as we have seen in 2020. This is a worrisome indication that more and more mainstream institutions will be tolerant of right-wing violence as they feel a left-wing threat.

Nevertheless, the dark scenario sketched above has a big assumption: that the Left remains disorganized. As I have argued before, the rise of the radical right is based on interrelated but distinct dynamics: market capitalism’s destructiveness; the Left’s failure to respond to market capitalism; and the Right’s ability to sustain the belief that the Left is still a threat (despite the latter’s obvious shortcomings) [3]. There is good reason to believe that an unshackled Biden presidency would usher in more market-capitalist destruction, and that the Right would cunningly exploit this. Luckily, we do not have to stick to the assumption that the Left will remain disorganized as all of this happens. It can influence the Biden administration and render it less market-capitalist. It can also organize the masses, not with the sole purpose of fighting the coming, more serious cases of rightwing insurgency, but definitely with an eye on that.

The result of the Georgia runoff elections is thus as significant as the fascistic storming of the Congress. The centrist Democrats have lost their major excuse for blocking progressive legislation: they have control of the Senate, the House, and the presidency. They will, however, still strive to base their strategy on “reaching across the aisle” to make peace with people who are not interested in peace. It is clear that for the left, the next two to four years present an historical opportunity. Yet, it cannot count on Democrats to do much, if the latter are not pushed in a certain direction.

What can push them in a desirable direction? Strikes, boycotts, petitions, and other actions are needed to secure jobs, climate legislation, penal and police reform, and the beginnings of a new economy. Serious advance on at least some of these fronts could lead to growing mass organization on the Left – masses who would have clear stakes in preventing coups, instead of standing by as they did in much of interwar Europe, where most promises of the immediate post-WWI years ultimately fizzled away.

The broader task of mass organization, it should be granted, says nothing on what exact action the left needs to take when the radical right attacks minorities or institutions. The past years have witnessed a growing Antifa movement, composed of some anarchist and Marxist tendencies. The movement has certainly prevented rightwing militants from terrorizing certain towns, while it has proven insufficient in others. Incidentally, Antifa and other leftists did the best thing by avoiding the circus on January 6. If they had been there in large numbers, they would get a good chunk of the blame. Echoing Trump’s Charlottesville line (“there are good people on both sides”), much of the mainstream would say, “There are violent people on both sides.” The siege of the Capitol constitutes

perfect proof that the right doesn't need anti-fascists to get violent, even if it is true that socialism and anti-fascism are great excuses for extremists to spread their hatred.

Is broadening and deepening the Antifa movement the way forward, then? That partially depends on how we define the movement. Black bloc-type tactics have their places in the struggle against right-wing extremism. Yet, relying heavily on such tactics by small bands of highly dedicated people would be suicidal in the face of a mass-organized fascist movement. It might be occasionally fine for masked leftists militants to stop extremist advances in certain localities and events. These types of encounters become unavoidable especially in instances where police forces, intelligence services, and courts refuse to act.

However, most of the Antifa's tactics do not seek mass consent. Small bands are good enough only when they confront small bands. What if the radical right goes beyond its current state of dispersion to become a coordinated mass movement? Only militant masses can stop a mass-based extremist movement. Neither America's decaying mainstream institutions, nor organized but moderate masses would be sufficient to block a truly fascist tide.

In sum, the left is encumbered with a very difficult task, with many layers. Building a mass organization requires frequent moderation and pragmatism, yet an exclusively moderate and pragmatic mass organization would be silent in a truly fascistic context, as social democrats (and most of the time, official Communists) were in interwar Europe. The forces to the left of official Communism were not sufficiently pragmatic, and did not have the opportunity, time, and desire to build mass organization. They were therefore as ineffective as social democrats and official Communists. Learning from the mistakes of both ends of the spectrum, the left needs to infuse the pragmatically built mass movement with militancy and autonomy as it is being built. Anti-fascism cannot be a beginning point for sustainable mass organization, but the mass organization of the future must be militantly anti-fascist. Although the previous two sentences sound self-contradictory, people who do not want to see further right-wing success in this country indeed need to deploy militancy, mass consent, moderation, and pragmatism in appropriate doses depending on the locality, the event, and the specific issues at hand. We need to build the broadest mass organization possible, while keeping it autonomous from the crumbling system.

Posted Far Right, Left Politics, United States

Cihan Tuğal

P.S.

- New Politics. January 11, 2021:
<https://newpol.org/the-invasion-of-capitol-hill/>

- Cihan Tuğal is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California (Berkeley) and an expert on the radical right. He has published many books and articles on Turkish, American, Egyptian, and Iranian right-wing movements and regimes.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2801-alt-america>

[2] <https://www.tempestmag.org/2020/11/the-fight-against-the-far-right/>

[3] ESSF (article 55836), [United States: The radical right after Trump](#).